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Two Old Ladies at Þváttá and ‘History from below’ in the Fourteenth Century

1. The Sources
The conversion of Iceland in 1000 was believed throughout the Middle Ages to have been, along with the settlement of the country, a landmark event in Icelandic history, as is evident from the multitude and diversity of mediaeval sources. In fact, a great majority of the Sagas of Icelanders includes a conversion episode. The most important sources are nevertheless Íslendingabók, Kristin saga, and Flateyjarbók – which stem, respectively, from the early 12th, the late 13th and the late 14th century. In addition, Hungsvaka, from around 1200, and some Sagas of Icelanders, Niðsl saga in particular, make for interesting comparison material.

Íslendingabók is the earliest of these narratives, in all likelihood composed between 1122 and 1133. Its author, Ari Þorgilsson the Learned (c. 1068–1148), begins by referring to the two current bishops of Iceland, as well as Sæmundr Sigfusson the Learned (d. 1133), as his advisors and patrons. This firmly establishes Íslendingabók as an official history, closely connected to the two bishoprics. This, in fact, is also clear by the very nature of the work, which relates briefly the settlement, the foundation of the Alþingi at Pingvelli, the discovery of Greenland, and the conversion. Finally, Ari lists all the lawspeakers of Iceland up to the year 1122, and includes a disproportionately lengthy narrative about the two first bishops of Iceland, Ísleifr Gizurarson (d. 1080) and Gizurr Ísleifsson (d. 1118). The latter may easily have been Ari’s patron and is described as a powerful statesman, in the vein of Bishop Adalbert of Bremen (d. 1072) who occupies a somewhat similar role in Adam of Bremen’s Gesta Hammaburgensis. Ari refers to Gizurr Ísleifsson’s brother, Teitr in Haukadalr (d. 1110), as his fosterfather, and even recalls being with him when he heard of the death of his father – Ari is much more subjective than later saga authors and uses the 1st personal pronoun a number of times. He also mentions Teitr as a source for the conversion narrative. Indeed he is the only source mentioned although later remarks about Teitr’s fosterfather, Hallr Þórarinsson in Haukadalr (d. 1089), indicate that he also is an important source, having been baptised by the missionary Þangbrandr a year before the official acceptance of Christianity at the Alþingi, i.e. 998 or 999.

The family of the Haukdælir (Hallr, Teitr, Ísleifr, Gizurr) thus stand out as Ari’s friends and benefactors. It also seems probable that they had a hand in the composition of Hungsvaka (from the first years of the 13th century), which relates the story of the five first
bishops in Skálholt. Members of the Haukadalur family keep popping up, even when they are not bishops or bishop-elects themselves. For instance, the third bishop, Þorlákr Runolfsson (d. 1133), is chosen personally by Gizurr Ísleifsson and credited with fostering Gizurr Hallsson (d. 1206), the grandson of Teitr. When the fourth bishop, Magnús Einarsson (d. 1148), perishes in a fire, Teitr's son, Hallr, is sent for and consequently elected bishop, although he dies before taking office. And when the fifth bishop, Klaongr Þorsteinsson (d. 1176), returns to Iceland after being consecrated, he brings with him the very same Gizurr Hallsson. Hungfrvaka is a history of the elite, with the focus on the Haukadalur and their allies, the Oddaverjar. It is thus perhaps not surprising that the author of Hungfrvaka should attribute the conversion of Iceland to the ancestor of the family, Gizurr the White: „er með kristni kom til Íslands“.

Kristni saga is usually dated to the latter part of the 13th century. Its author is unknown, although it is sometimes attributed to Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84). Its beginning and end suggest links with Landnámabók and Sturlunga saga, both of which are connected to Sturla, who was the author of one version of Landnámabók, as well as of Íslendinga saga, the largest individual saga of the Sturlunga collection. This, of course, would make Kristni saga a part of a very different kind of historical writing than Íslendingabók, and indeed the emphasis on Gizurr the White and Hjalti Skeggjason is rather less than in the work of Ari. Also, Gizurr Ísleifsson acquires a symbolic role: He is not only the powerful and just ruler, whom all obey, but also a guardian of the peace, whose death seems to bring on the quarrel between the chieflains Borgan Oddason and Hallfari Músson. The emphasis on a peaceful 'monarchy' would fit in with the point of view of the king's chief official in Iceland in the first years of royal rule (the 1270's), although this fact in itself is hardly sufficient to date it. If Kristni saga is a part of a grand project of Sturla Þórðarson's to compose a history of Iceland from the settlement to the 13th century, it could thus be contemporary to Íjólss saga, which can safely be dated to the last quarter of the 13th century, although its author remains anonymous.

Although Kristni saga is concise, it is nevertheless far more detailed than any previous source. It is, however, complemented by some fleeting in Flateyjarbók, i.e. from the Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta, which include some new material and may be regarded as representing the 14th century version of the conversion. It is exactly this new material which will be the focus of our attention below.

2. Two Old Ladies
In Íslendingabók, there is not much information about Pángbrandr the missionary. It simply says that King Ólafr Tryggvason of Norway (d. 1200) sent him to Iceland, and that he baptised Hallr, Ari's fosterfather, at the tender age of three. Only three Icelandic chieflains are mentioned as having been baptised: Gizurr the White, Hjalti Skeggjason, and Hallr Þorsteinsson of Síða (Síðu-Hallr), who was elected to serve as lawspeaker for the Christians

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9 Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta has been edited by Ölafur Hallòrsisson in the Editiones Annamagnesae series (A. vol. 1-3, 1958–2000). I refer to the Flateyjarbók version in this article, but the episodes discussed are also to be found in the other main manuscripts of the saga.
and who made a deal with the heathen lawspeaker, Þorgeirr Þorkelsson of Ljósvatn, that he should settle this dispute. It is thus Þorgeirr who is the most important figure in the narrative, along with Gizurr and Hjalti. Síðu-Hallr is in the shadow of Gizurr and Hjalti in Íslandingabók, and in Hungvræka only Gizurr is mentioned as the founding father of Icelandic Christianity, even though four of the bishops who appear in the work are descended from Síðu-Hallr.

In Kristni saga (Ch. 5 and 7), the story goes as follows: þangbrandr plays a crucial role in the conversion of King Óláf, a fact unknown to the author of Heimskringla and other previous historians. In spite of his strong faith, he cannot stop brawling, and King Óláf sends him to Iceland as a missionary in order to test him. No one in Iceland wants to speak to þangbrandr until he meets Hallr of Síða. Hallr invites him to stay and is eventually converted to Christianity by his stories about Michael and other angels. A similar narrative is to be found in Njáls saga (Ch. 100) and in both narratives, the end result is that Hallr is baptised with all his household.  

In Kristni saga, it is made very clear that Síðu-Hallr is the first chieftain baptised by þangbrandr, followed by Gizurr and Hjalti and some other chieftains. Of course, Gizurr and Hjalti play their role in the conversion, just as in Íslandingabók. However, now they are surrounded not only by Hallr but by Kjartan Óláfrsson, Snorri góði, the Northern chieftain Þorvarðr Spak-Bjóvarsson, and Órrur KoðráNSSon, the brother of Þorvaldr the Traveller, the first missionary to Iceland, who is not mentioned in Íslandingabók. As the conversion narrative develops, the Haukkadalir family thus retain some of their share in the event, but their supremacy is challenged by other important chieftains.

In the first chapter of Kristni saga, there is a list of the most important chieftains in Iceland in the year 981. In the last chapter, there is a similar list of the notables in the year 1118. Parallel lists are to be found here and there in both the Hauksbók and Sturlubók versions of Landnámabók, most notably at the end. Kristni saga is thus certainly not ‘history from below’. Most its protagonists have göðor at their disposal, and are very well known from other sources. Therefore, it is not unexpected that, apart from himself, none of Hallr’s household are mentioned.

In the Flatjóvarbók version, there is a new twist to the narrative (Ch. 336 of Óláfr saga Tryggvasonar). þangbrandr does come to Iceland, is shunned by most people on account of his religion, until Síðu-Hallr takes him in. Hallr listens to him sing a mass in his tent, exactly as in Kristni saga, and starts asking questions about the archangel Michael. The style of the Flatjóvarbók narrative is much more florid and verbose than the terse prose of Kristni saga, but the essential storyline is the same, up until the point where Hallr is about to be converted. He suddenly gets suspicious and wants to put baptism to a test. Two old and decrepit women in his household are to be the guinea pigs in this experiment. If they can be baptised without suffering any harm, being hardly able to move anyway, Hallr and all his folk will follow suit. The old ladies are encouraged to do this and are baptised in water. The next day, Hallr asks them how they feel. They promptly replied that they are experiencing a second youth: Although old and infirm, they suffer no discomfort. Indeed they have lost the fear of death and have gained a new joy in expectation of a second life. Hallr is overjoyed and consequently baptised in Íváttá with all his people.

So it all comes down to the two old women. In Íslandingabók, the only moment of tension is when Þorgeirr the lawspeaker is to give his verdict. In Kristni saga, a dramatic depiction of the friction at Alftingi is added, culminating in Snorri góði’s snappy answer to the claim that an eruption near the farmstead of Hjalli proves that the gods are angry at the

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Christians: „Hvat reidduz goðin flá, er hér brunnt hraunit, og nú stóndu véir á?”11 In Flateyjarbók, there is yet an another moment of tension: What will happen to the two old ladies? If reared on the Kristni saga version, everyone in the audience must have realised that Hallr’s conversion was crucial to the ensuing movement towards Christianity. And thus the answer of the two old ladies acquires an importance almost equal to Ófeigir’s later verdict at the Alftingi (in Ch. 351).

There was, of course, no place for two such old ladies in Ari’s and Hungyvaka’s version of these events. Gizurr the White and the Hauklaelir are in the foreground, along with the all-important institution of the Law, of which the lawspeaker is the symbol. In Kristni saga, the events get more complex. Most of the leading figures of the eventual conversion have their place: Þorvaldr the Traveller’s brother has a grand moment and the Northemner Þórarinn Spak-Bóðvarsson is there as well. The author obviously expects his audience to know Kjartan Ólafsson and Snorri goði from the sagas, and they to have their say. But the stage is nevertheless so full of aristocrats that there is no room for the common people. And the aristocratic attitude is evident in the words of Gizurr the White and Hjalfi Skeggjason when they suggest an answer to the mannhóf of the heathens: „Heiðingjar blóta enum versum mannum ok hrinda fleim fyrr bjorg eða hamra, en vér skulum velja at mannikostum ok kalla sigrgjof við dróttinu várn Jesum Christum, skulu vér lifa fúi betr ok synndarligar en áfr, ok munu vit Gizurr ganga til fyrr várn fjóðung sigrgjafarinnar.”12 So as an alternative to the human sacrifice of the heathens, eight chieftains – again chieftains – offer themselves symbolically to God as his servants in the future.13

In Flateyjarbók’s narrative of the baptism of the two old ladies, the lower classes get their share in the conversion of Iceland. The old women are poor and infirm, or else they wouldn’t have been chosen as guinea pigs. They are also old and women, of course. In short, as perfect an example of the underprivileged as you could get in 14th century Iceland.

3. The Young, the Poor and the Elderly

The role of the two old women in the baptism of Hallr is not the only example of the dispossessed having a function in the conversion, according to Flateyjarbók. Narrative episodes concerned with the Christianization of Iceland are spread all over the Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar, and the first ones are concerned with Christian settlers and the first missionaries of Iceland, Þorvaldr the Traveller and Stefnir.14 However, in Ch. 335, there is a new episode not found in the previous narratives. This is the episode of the death of Þórandi.15 The main characters are Stöð-Hallr, his son Þórandi, and the prophet Ófeigir who is Hallr’s friend and frequent visitor to his home at Hof in the Alftafjörðr.

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13 This narrative is also in the Ólafs saga en mesta/Flateyjarbók version.
Piörandi is a youth of eighteen years, described as being mild and humble to everyone. In fact, he is an ideal nobleman and knight, according to the clerical ideology of the 12th and 13th century onwards. He can also be seen as a figure for Christ or a noble heathen. At the autumn feast, just before the arrival of Þangbrandr, Pórhallr the Prophet has warned everyone against going out into the night, even if someone should knock at the door. Piörandi, however, disobeys this as he thinks it a great discourtesy and shame not to welcome guests. He goes out to receive the guests and sees nine bright and nine dark women. The dark ones get to him first and wound him fatally. He is then buried, and Pórhallr the Prophet interprets this as a struggle between heathendom and Christianity, the black women being the “fylgjur” or “dísir” of Hallr’s family, claiming their toll before their demise.

This is an intriguing narrative, and many interpretations are possible, as Merrill Kaplan’s recent article has demonstrated. But whatever the significance of the “dísir”, the notion of the sacrifice of the youth is important. The episode of Piörandi’s death introduces this theme to the conversion legend. The conversion is now seen as an event both of joy and pain, since it involves the sacrifice and loss of many good things, including such a fine youth as Piörandi, whose future would have been bright in the court society of the High Middle Ages. This accounts for Pórhallr the Prophet’s sad silence at the beginning, whenever he hears Piörandi praised: Praising the youth is dangerous, since his life is fragile. The “dísir”, good and bad alike, will also be disappearing, a necessary sacrifice for the advent of the power and beauty of Christ himself.

This is underlined at the end of Ch. 335, when Hallr has moved from Hof to Ævátta, devastated by his son’s loss. Early one morning when Hallr and Pórhallr both lie in their beds, Hallr notices the prophet smiling and asks him why. Pórhallr answers: “Af fli brosi ek, at marga hvoll opnað or hvirt kvikkvendi þyrr sum bagga, bæði smá ok stór, ok gera fardaga.” This is rather nice and perhaps even comic image: All the small and large heathen creatures, perhaps elves, dwarves, norns, trolls, giants, and “dísir”, are packing their things and getting ready to leave peacefully. Whatever the character of these creatures, the theme is yet again loss: When something new arrives, something old must leave.

In Íslendingabók and Kristni saga, the conversion is a tale of powerful men and their politics. Síður-Hallr has a role, but there is no youth who loses his life to the old and passing religion. In Flateyjarbók, however, the conversion involves not only the mighty but also the young and tender. And along with Piörandi the youth, we have a main character, Pórhallr the Prophet, who is a settler in Iceland, with no family. The implication is that he belongs to a lower class. It is this humble man who foretells the advent of Christianity, with all its necessary sacrifices. Thus in Flateyjarbók, both in the Piörandi episode and in the ensuing one about the baptism of Hallr and the old ladies at Ævátta, we get a strong notion that the young, the old and the low have some stake in the conversion, too: It’s not just the business of chiefains. This is perhaps underscored by the image of the multitude of creatures, both great and small, who are now preparing their farewell.

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17 On fylgjur and dísir, their possible cult, and connected motifs, see Folke Ström, Dísir, nomor, valkyrior: Fruktbarhetskult och sakralt kungagöme i norden. Stockholm 1954; Else Mundal, Fylgjumotiv i norden litteratur. Oslo, Bergen and Tromsø 1974.
18 See note 15.
It can be argued that these two episodes concern the effect of Christianity on the young and the old. The poor also get their own episode, the narrative of the cruel Svaði and the kind Arnór kerlinganef (Ch. 345 and 346). In the former, the rich and noble Svaði uses the opportunity in the midst of a famine and assembles a number of poor men to dig a deep hole near his home. After they have done this, he tells them that they are all going to be killed in the morning. However, the Christian Þorvarðr Spak-Bóðvarsson rides by and hears the weeping and wailing of the poor and sets them free. Svaði pursues them in wrath but ends up tasting his own medicine: He falls off his horse and ends up being buried in the very grave he intended for the poor men.

In the same famine, a resolution is passed at the local assembly that no old, crippled or sick poor people will be housed or fed that winter, which is extremely harsh. When the chieftain Arnór kerlinganef comes home from the assembly, he is admonished by his mother and ends up taking in the old people who have been driven out of other homes. In a second meeting, he makes a lengthy speech, suggesting that all farmers shall kill all but two of their horses as well as their dogs, in order to be able to feed everyone in the region. This is agreed upon but thereupon the harsh winter disappears and is followed by peaceful and sunny weather, and all are saved. Present at the second meeting is the same Þorvarðr Spak-Bóðvarsson, who points out that Arnór has been inspired by God. And after the change in the weather, Arnór and all the people in his godord embrace the new religion.

Both these episodes demonstrate that the conversion has a profound impact on the lives of the deprived. In the new order, mercy will be shown unto them. It is also interesting that along with the Christian chieftain Þorvarðr, it is an elderly woman, Arnór's mother, who becomes the spokesman of the new world view. In the late 14th century version of the conversion, women do have a role.

4. It Takes All Kinds
The main difference between the conversion as depicted in Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta and the previous narratives is the variety. The conversion now involves all sorts of people, not only respectable chieftains from good families, but also old and infirm women, promising youths, lame people, evil rich men, nagging mothers, prophets, and new settlers. And the heathen creatures are also of all sizes and shapes, as demonstrated by the vision of Þórhallr the Prophet. It is not only a question of exchanging Óðinn and Þórr with Christ. All sorts of creatures must leave.

Even though Flateyjarbók is a splendid manuscript, made for one of the richest men in Iceland, and possibly as a present from him to a young king in Norway, it offers a new image of the conversion of Iceland, one where there is room for all sorts of people, including the young, the poor and the elderly. In a way, it thus deserves the epithet 'history from below'.