

Two Old Ladies at Þvátta 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.¹ In fact, a great majority of the Sagas of Icelanders includes a conversion episode.² The most important sources are nevertheless *Íslendingabók*, *Kristni saga*, and *Flateyjarbók* – which stem, respectively, from the early 12th, the late 13th and the late 14th century. In addition, *Hungrvaka*, from around 1200, and some Sagas of Icelanders, *Njáls saga* in particular, make for interesting comparison material.³

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 Sigfússon 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 Þingvellir, 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*.⁴ Ari refers to Gizurr Ísleifsson's brother, Teitr in Haukadálr (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 Þórarinnsson in Haukadálr (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 999.⁵

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 *Hungrvaka* (from the first years of the 13th century), which relates the story of the five first

¹ Cf. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære: Studier i islendingesagaerne*. Aarhus 1993, pp. 79–89.

² Katrín Jakobsdóttir, "Á mörkum gamals og nýs: Um kristnitökuna í Íslendingasögnum." *Mímir* 49 (2001), 44–55; Bernadine McCreesh, "Structural patterns in the Eyrbyggja saga and other sagas of the Conversion," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 11 (1978–79), 271–80.

³ There is an extremely useful discussion on the sources of the conversion in several recent works, including: Jón Hnefíll Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak: A Pagan Ritual Turning Point in the Conversion of Iceland*. Reykjavík 1999; Hjalti Hugason, *Kristni á Íslandi I: Frumkristni og upphaf kirkju*. Reykjavík 2000, 83–161.

⁴ See Ármann Jakobsson, "Nokkur orð um hugmyndir Íslendinga um konungsvald fyrir 1262," *Samtíðarsögur. Forprent. Niúnda alþjóðlega fornsagnafingrið á Akureyri 31.7.–6.8. 1994*. Rvík 1994, 31–42; Ármann Jakobsson, "Byskupskjör á Íslandi: Stjórnálagviðhorf biskupasagna og Sturlungu," *Studia theologica islandica* 14 (2000), 171–82; Else Mundal, "Íslendingabók vurdert som bispestolskrønike," *The Audience of the Sagas: The Eighth International Saga Conference*. Preprints II Göteborg 1991, 134–43. On Ari's ecclesiastical sources, see also Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, "Um kristnitökufrásögn Ara prests Þorgilssonar," *Skírur* 153 (1979), 167–74. On this type of bishop, see C. Stephen Jaeger, "The Courtier Bishop in Vitae from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century," *Speculum* 58 (1983), 291–325.

⁵ On the actual conversion year, see Ólafía Einarisdóttir, *Studier i kronologisk metode i tidlig islandsk historieskrivning*. Bibliotheca historica Lundensis 13. Stockholm 1964, pp. 72–82.

bishops in Skálholt. Members of the Haukdælir family keep popping up, even when they are not bishops or bishop-elects themselves. For instance, the third bishop, Þorlákr Runólfsson (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, Klængur Þorsteinsson (d. 1176), returns to Iceland after being consecrated, he brings with him the very same Gizurr Hallsson. *Hungrvaka* is a history of the elite, with the focus on the Haukdælir and their allies, the Oddaverjar.⁶ It is thus perhaps not surprising that the author of *Hungrvaka* should attribute the conversion of Iceland to the ancestor of the family, Gizurr the White: „er með kristni kom til Íslands“.⁷

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 chieftains Þorgils Oddason and Hafliði Másson. 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.⁸ 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 *Njáls 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 flættir in *Flateyjarbók*, i.e. from the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, which include some new material and may be regarded as representing the 14th century version of the conversion.⁹ 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 Þangbrandr the missionary. It simply says that King Óláfr 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 chieftains 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

⁶ See Ármann Jakobsson, “Nokkur orð um hugmyndir Íslendinga um konungsvald fyrir 1262”; Ármann Jakobsson, “Byskupskjör á Íslandi: Stjórnmalaviðhorf byskupasagna og Sturlungu”.

⁷ *Hungrvaka*. In: *Byskupa sögur* I. Ed. by Jón Helgason. Copenhagen 1938, p. 75.

⁸ See Ármann Jakobsson, “Nokkur orð um hugmyndir Íslendinga um konungsvald fyrir 1262”. On the possible impact of Sturla's role as a royal official on his historical writing, see Ármann Jakobsson, “Samnyrti sverða: Vígaferli í Íslendinga sögu og hugmyndafyræði sögunnar.” *Skaldskaparmál* 3 (1994), 42–78; Ármann Jakobsson, “Hákon Hákonarson – friðarkonungur eða fílmenni?” *Saga* 33 (1995), 166–85; Helgi Þorláksson, “Sturla Þórðarson, mími og vald,” *2. íslenska sögufluging 30. maí – 1. júní 2002. Ráðstefnurit II*. Ed. by Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir. Reykjavík 2002, 319–41.

⁹ Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta has been edited by Ólafur Halldórsson in the *Editiones Arnarnagæzæne 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 Ljósavatn, that he should settle this dispute. It is thus Þorgeir 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 Íslendingabók, and in Hungrvaka 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 Óláfr, a fact unknown to the author of Heimskringla and other previous historians. In spite of his strong faith, he cannot stop brawling, and King Óláfr 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.¹⁰

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 Íslendingabók. However, now they are surrounded not only by Hallr but by Kjartan Ólafsson, Snorri goði, the Northern chieftain Þorvarðr Spak-Boðvarsson, and Ormr Koðránsón, the brother of Þorvaldr the Traveller, the first missionary to Iceland, who is not mentioned in Íslendingabók. As the conversion narrative develops, the Haukdælir 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 goðorð 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 Flateyjarbók version, there is a new twist to the narrative (Ch. 336 of Óláfs 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 Flateyjarbók 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 Þvátta with all his people.

So it all comes down to the two old women. In Íslendingabók, 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 Alþingi is added, culminating in Snorri goði's snappy answer to the claim that an eruption near the farmstead of Hjalli proves that the gods are angry at the

¹⁰ On the Þangbrandr episodes in the various sources, see Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, "Um kristniþóðsflætina," Gripa 2 (1977), 19–31.

Christians: „Hvat reidduz goðin flá, er hér brann hraunit, er nú stöndu vér á?“¹¹ In Flateyjarbók, there is yet 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 Þorgeir's later verdict at the Alþingi (in Ch. 351).

There was, of course, no place for two such old ladies in Ari's and Hungvaka's version of these events. Gizurr the White and the Haukdælir 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 Northerner Þorvarðr Spak-Þoðvarsson 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 Hjalti Skeggjason when they suggest an answer to the mannblót of the heathens: „Heiðingjar blóta enum verstum monnum ok hrinda fleim fyrir björg eða hamra, en vér skulum velja at mannkostum ok kalla sigrgjöf við dróttinn várn Jesum Christum, skulu vér lifa fívi betr ok syndvarligarr en áðr, ok munu vit Gizurr ganga til fyrir várn fjórðung 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 Þiðrandi.¹⁵ The main characters are Síðu-Hallr, his son Þiðrandi, and the prophet Þórhallr who is Hallr's friend and frequent visitor to his home at Hof in the Álptafjörðr.

¹¹ Kristni saga. In: Altordische Saga-Bibliothek 11. Ed. by B. Kahle. Halle 1905, p. 39. These words are also cited in the Ólafs saga en mesta/Flateyjarbók version. Paul Schach sees this a part of the Kristni saga author's strategy to introduce 'comic relief' into his tense narrative ("Antipagan Sentiment in the Sagas of Icelanders," Grippl 1 (1975), 105–31; p. 126).

¹² Op.cit., p. 40.

¹³ This narrative is also in the Ólafs saga en mesta/Flateyjarbók version.

¹⁴ On the sources on Þorvaldr's mission, and his partner, bishop Friðrekr, see Gryt A. Piebanga, "Friðrekr. den første utenlandske misjonæren på Island: En undersøkelse av pålideligheten i de islandske tekstene som beretter om ham," Arkiv för nordisk filologi 99 (1984), 79–94. Cf. Jenny Jochens, "Old Norse Magic and Gender: Þátr Þorvalds eans Viðforla," Scandinavian Studies 63 (1991), 305–17.

¹⁵ On the Þiðrandi episode, see Davíð Scheving Thorsteinsson, "Hvað varð að bana Þiðranda Hallssyni," Skirnir 111 (1937), 164–75; Dag Strömbäck, Tidrande och diserna: Ett filologiskt-folkloristiskt utkast. Lund 1949; Folke Ström, „Tidrandes död: Till frågan om makternas demonisering," Arv 8 (1952), 77–119; Merrill Kaplan, "Prefiguration and the Writing of History in Þátr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 99 (2000), 379–94; Ármann Jakobsson, "Kaupverð kristninnar: Um kristnitökuna í Þiðrandeflesti," Merki krossins vol. 1, 2000, 19–23.

Þiðrandi 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.¹⁶ He can also be seen as a figure for Christ or a noble heathen. At the autumn feast, just before the arrival of Þangbrandr, Þórhallr the Prophet has warned everyone against going out into the night, even if someone should knock at the door. Þiðrandi, 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 Þórhallr the Prophet interprets this as a struggle between heathendom and Christianity, the black women being the “fylgjur” or “ðisir” of Hallr’s family, claiming their toll before their demise.¹⁷

This is an intriguing narrative, and many interpretations are possible, as Merrill Kaplan’s recent article has demonstrated.¹⁸ But whatever the significance of the “ðisir”, the notion of the sacrifice of the youth is important. The episode of Þiðrandi’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 Þiðrandi, whose future would have been bright in the court society of the High Middle Ages.¹⁹ This accounts for Þórhallr the Prophet’s sad silence at the beginning, whenever he hears Þiðrandi praised: Praising the youth is dangerous, since his life is fragile. The “ðisir”, 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 Þvátta, devastated by his son’s loss. Early one morning when Hallr and Þórhallr both lie in their beds, Hallr notices the prophet smiling and asks him why. Þórhallr answers: „Af fívi brosi ek, at margr höll opnast ok hvert kvikvendi býr sinn bagga, bæði smá ok stór, ok gera fardaga.”²⁰ This is a rather nice and perhaps even comic image: All the small and large heathen creatures, perhaps elves, dwarves, norns, trolls, giants, and “ðisir”, 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. Síðu-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 Þiðrandi the youth, we have a main character, Þórhallr 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 Þiðrandi episode and in the ensuing one about the baptism of Hallr and the old ladies at Þvátta, 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 chieftains. This is perhaps underscored by the image of the multitude of creatures, both great and small, who are now preparing their farewell.

¹⁶ On this ideology and its origins, see C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939–1210*. Philadelphia 1985; C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950–1200*. Philadelphia 1994.

¹⁷ On fylgjur and ðisir, their possible cult, and connected motifs, see Folke Ström, *Diser, normor, valkyrior: Fruktbarhetskult och sakral kungadöme i Norden*. Stockholm 1954; Else Mundal, *Fylgjemotiva i norron litteratur*. Oslo, Bergen and Tromsø 1974.

¹⁸ See note 15.

¹⁹ See my “Kauþverð kristnimnar: Um kristniðökuna í Þiðrandaflieti”. Cf. Paul Schach, “The Theme of the Reluctant Christian in the Icelandic Sagas,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 81 (1982), 186–203.

²⁰ *Flateyjarbók* (1944), p. 468. Cf. *Flateyjarbók* (1860), 421.

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 Arnórr kerlingarnef (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-Þoðvarsson 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 Arnórr kerlingarnef 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-Þoðvarsson, who points out that Arnórr has been inspired by God. And after the change in the weather, Arnórr and all the people in his *goðorð* 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, Arnórr'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,²¹ 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'.

²¹ Ólafur Halldórsson, "Af uppruna *Flateyjarbókar*," *Ný saga* I (1987), 84–86.