

‘Death in a Dread Place’:  
Belief, Practice, and Marginality in Norse  
Greenland, ca. 985-1450

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by

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# Abstract

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**Title:**           **‘Death in a Dread Place’: Belief, Practice, and Marginality in Norse Greenland, ca. 985-1450**

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This thesis examines and analyzes the extant archaeological, historical, and literary evidence for the beliefs and practices of the Greenland Norse, their influences, and their evolution over time. By critically examining previously held assumptions about the cultural, climatic, and religious conditions of Greenland during this time the available data is placed in its proper context and reveals the geoconceptual world of the Greenlanders and their place in it. This interdisciplinary approach illustrates the extent to which the physical environment and location of Greenland played a role in the transition from a collective of enterprising colonists to an established Christian community over the course of almost 500 years. Specific questions addressed within include: 1 - How does archaeology challenge, support, or augment the historical and literary narrative of Greenland’s transition into a Christian place?; 2 – What are the physical correlates of the Greenlanders’ beliefs and practices, and how have they been interpreted? This thesis finds that the development of Christianity was driven by the Greenlanders’ increasing perception of their place in the world as one of marginality and spiritual danger.

**Keywords:**   Greenland, Norse, Christianisation, Conversion, North Atlantic, Geoconceptual Marginality



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# Spelling Conventions

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English equivalent spellings have been used for Norse words, including personal and place names, adhering to the conventions established in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (Hreinsson, 1997:xvii). This is done out of a concern for consistency and ease of understanding, as translated spellings vary by time and language of composition. Rather than try to reconcile the various Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic spellings of these translations over time, modern English equivalencies are utilized whenever possible.

For example, *Eiríkr hinn rauði* is translated as Eirik the Red, and his farm Brattahlid is rendered as Brattahlid. This is primarily achieved by dropping nominative singular endings for in favor of stems, and by removing *ur/r* endings from personal names.

Certain place names, e.g. *Nordsetur*, retain Norse spellings when Anglicised translations are cumbersome or redundant, or when the word expresses a concept or aspect of the Norse world view, e.g. *obyggdir* & *seidr*. These are italicised in text.

## Chapter 1

### Research Theme and Aims

#### 1.1 Introduction

A thousand years ago there stood a small church overlooking a fjord now called Tunuliarfik in southern Greenland, but at that distant time it bore the name of the chieftain upon whose land the church was built – Eiriksfjord. Its wooden beams had been likely dragged up from the shoreline where driftwood had been harvested for only a few years. Curved turf walls in the style of its builders' Icelandic homes protected those attending the church from the chill winds blowing down from the ice covered inland mountains (Fig.1). It was a tiny edifice, with room for just a few worshippers, but it lay near Brattahlid, the farm of (famed) Eirik the Red and his family and thus it was a visible focal point for residents and newcomers to the farm alike. The church (of unknown dedication) stood for a generation, and the first of these settlers to die in North America was buried in its circular yard, facing east to await Christ's coming as was the Christian custom. A great deal has been learned about "Thjodhild's Church" in the millennium or so since it was built, but far less is known about what went on inside it and the minds of the Norse settlers who carved the driftwood and cut the sod, or those interred around and beneath it. To date, relatively little attention has been paid to the spiritual lives of the Norse settlers of Greenland. Historically speaking, Greenland has been viewed as a colonial pawn, a fallen society, even as a cautionary tale of ecological catastrophe (Bruun 1918; Hansen 1924; Diamond 2005). The Greenlanders and how they viewed their community, their culture, and even their cosmology have received attention only in recent years, despite offering unique opportunities for study. What has been studied, for the most part, is focused on the later years of the settlement, in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries wherein previous scholars hoped to find evidence that declining relations with Europe and the Church caused the settlements to wither and die.



Figure 1: Turf foundations of E-29a "Thjodhild's Church" in Qassiarsuk, South Greenland. (Photo: J.A. McCullough)

Very rarely have the claims of the sagas regarding the religious beliefs of the Greenlanders been questioned, and when they have providing an alternative narrative has not been a priority.

It is the aim of this thesis to explore this question. What did the first generation of settlers in Greenland believe, and how was this reflected in their practices, both spiritual and mundane? The question is significant because Greenland is the last of the Norse North Atlantic communities that has not been thoroughly researched in this manner. In the past decade new models of Christianization have been developed, and the archaeological study of Norse paganism has undergone a flowering as well. Greenland is ripe to have these new methods and ideas applied to its history.

### *Defining Belief*

The modern West primarily approaches matters of the spirit as something personal and more importantly, intangible. The Reformation's rejection of the spiritual efficacy of good works marked a significant turning point in the perception of the relationship between the material world (the one in which a person could perform good works) and the spiritual one. Heaven and Hell became other dimensions,

wholly separate from Earth but inhabited by entities that could interact with the material plane if they so chose. The watchmaker God of Enlightenment Deism, for instance, was visible through the impeccable precision of measurable natural laws rather than visions and miracles. Medieval Christianity, and indeed many pre-Christian traditions, did not see these dividing lines so clearly.

This thesis aims to examine two concepts in this regard – belief and practice. To define ‘belief’ as a personal certainty of the existence of things that cannot be physically measured is a very modern approach and not well suited to the study of medieval Christians. The reality of a spiritual or non-material force that was a part of the world was so embedded into daily life during the timeframe of this study that such a definition may not even be addressing the same question. A useful way of framing such an obvious presence of spiritual entities comes from Neil Price: “The idea of the *supernatural* is also misleading here, because the fundamental presence of these beings in the landscape was *entirely* 'natural' and should not separated from the human and animal populations” (Price 2002:244). As such, this thesis takes it as understood by the Norse people of Greenland that their every day actions had spiritual or non-material resonance. This understanding is fundamental to this thesis’ definition of belief; that kneeling in prayer or carving a cross shaped owner’s mark was not a symbol of devotion, but that it *was* devotion.

If everyday activities – overtly religious in nature or not – were spiritually resonant, this allows the archaeologist to view the remnants of physical activity as simultaneously remnants of spiritual activity. Belief and practice were intertwined to the Greenlanders. The weft and warp, arguably, of their social fabric.

### *Christianization vs. Conversion*

Christianization is generally defined as a group shift in cultural practices, at times implemented by an authority figure or outside force and not necessarily related to a personal sense of religiosity. Conversion, on the other hand, is generally understood to be the process by which an individual may shift their cosmological view from one ontology to another. These approaches are discussed in more detail in section 3.2.

The difficulty in studying these shifts from the perspective of the present day lies in finding the appropriate balance between a Christianization model devoid of personal belief (i.e. the opportunistic monarch becoming Christian in order to have access to literate ecclesiastical bookkeepers) and the immeasurably personal experience of an individual conversion (i.e. the grieving family member experiencing a personal revelation).

To use a stereotypical example from the missionizing era of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries – if a marginalized member of the local indigenous population accepts baptism from a Jesuit missionary and in turn receives food and shelter is that person acting out of basic self preservation? Ambition? A rejection of the culture that marginalized them or recognition of a new ontology they find superior to the old one? Humans are not so single minded. A holistic understanding of that individual's motivations must take all of these concerns into account, and would likely conclude that each of these motivators played a role in that particular decision.

Just as an individual's actions are governed by a range of tangible and intangible motivations, so too are cultures and societies. This thesis adopts the approach that these models are not mutually exclusive, nor are they absolute definitions of what constitutes Christianity. As David Petts has articulated, "Christianity is what people who say they are Christians do" (Petts 2011:34). This thesis defines Christianization as the process by which a society comes to identify itself as Christian. If the end point of this process is a "Christian" society, the journey toward that destination is marked by a variety of motivators and practices of both the kind our modern sensibilities would define as sincerely devotional and materialistically political. The nuances and subtleties of such a process are kaleidoscopic, with each individual playing a role in how and why they identify as Christians.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

This thesis can broadly be defined as an attempt to understand the role that Christianity played in the Greenlanders' perceptions of themselves and the place they occupied in the world. Evidence of belief and practice from as wide a cross-

section of Norse Greenlandic society as current archaeology can provide has been considered – from an ivory crozier of a bishop to cryptic runic inscriptions from the laity, and from the earliest known burials to the last. The conclusions presented in Chapter 8 go beyond questions of conversion and present an overall arc of Christian practice in Greenland from approximately AD 985 to AD 1450. The key themes explored by my work are as follows:

### *1.2.1 What was the process of conversion like?*

This is to question the Christianization process in Norse Greenland itself; how did it occur and when? Was it similar in process to other North Atlantic or Norse communities? How can this worldview be reconstructed from archaeological sources? What other sources complement or conflict with the archaeological methods used? These issues are addressed by starting with what is assumed by written sources – primarily Icelandic saga and other contemporary historical sources. By comparison to the archaeological record (i.e. the progression of church construction and burial practices, the presence or lack thereof of religious inscriptions and artefacts), historical and archaeological studies of other North Atlantic communities, and contextual clues gleaned from broader conversion theory a conclusion may be formed on the basis of which of these assumptions are not corroborated.

### *1.2.2 What was the subsequent shape of Greenlandic Christianity?*

Outside assumptions about Greenland during the Middle Ages questioned the orthodoxy and sincerity of its Christian practice. The question to ask is why this was so and if there is any way to verify it. Christianity from its outset has been prone to innumerable variations in local interpretation and adherence. In the North Atlantic world, primary sources are full of tales of Norse people putting a uniquely Scandinavian, post-Viking spin on their new religion, so what was it about Greenland that prompted its dubious reputation? Earlier excavations have unearthed a significant number of artefacts, burials, and structures that may shed some light on the way Christianity was practiced in Greenland over the course of almost five centuries. How did the Greenlanders build their churches, and where? Who operated them? At what point did Christianity become a hierarchical,

formalized process instead of a piecemeal collection of beliefs and practices? By examining existing excavation reports for specific practices over this period it is possible to see variations in practice both geographically and chronologically. The resulting picture of belief and practice, while incomplete, can be compared to better understand contemporary practices in other parts of the world.

### *1.2.3 What was Greenland's place in the religious landscape of the Norse North Atlantic?*

Greenland has been all too often studied in a vacuum. While environmental archaeology is inherently unique to its own location, the study of something so culturally bound as religion must be viewed in the light of its surrounding influences. In order to form a cogent picture of belief and practice in Greenland the circumstances of the wider North Atlantic community must be considered. As the Greenlanders established what it meant to be a Christian community, their neighbors in Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Shetland, Orkney, the Hebrides and Scandinavia were also grappling with the same issues. While Greenland was settled later than its neighbors, questions and challenges related to conversion were being faced contemporaneously from one side of the ocean to another. The body of research relating to these neighboring communities provides an opportunity to put Greenland in its proper socioreligious context. Presented are several communities with a shared cultural background reacting to a religious shift at roughly the same time. The actions and reactions they did or did not share can provide us with a frame through which we can view Greenland.

## **1.3 Research Methods**

This thesis aims to provide a synthesis of the evidence for the beliefs of the Norse Greenlanders, a topic that has yet to be addressed in and of itself. The importance and value of this objective lies both in its conclusions and its method.

Archaeology as a discipline is still fairly young, especially when compared to history. As such, historical narratives established by written sources can be difficult to escape from. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century prominent historians such as Philip Grierson (who stated famously "It has been said the spade cannot lie, but

it owes this merit to the fact that it cannot even speak”) viewed archaeology as almost a subdiscipline of History (Grierson 1959:129). Even one of the founders of Historical Archaeology, Ivor Noel Hume, famously described it as the “handmaiden to history” (Hume 1964). Early archaeologists in Greenland like Poul Nørlund would likely have agreed in spirit if not in letter, consistently framing their excavations in relation to Icelandic saga sources.

The multidisciplinary approach taken in this thesis reevaluates both historical and archaeological sources regarding Greenland and analyzes them in the light of the most recent studies of Christianization and conversion archaeology. The problem does not lie in the source material, but in persistent narratives from which the field has moved on, i.e. Greenland’s “collapse” or how “historically accurate” the sagas are. These concerns, whilst now recognised in the field as being red herrings, remain some of the most recognizable narratives regarding Greenland’s past. New narratives are needed to supplant them. In the almost century since archaeology in Greenland began in earnest Greenland has become a field laboratory for outstanding work in environmental archaeology, but interpretations of what the Greenlanders thought and believed are still in need of updating. The conclusions of this work eschew functionalistic interpretations when possible, as the dominant theories of cultural evolution and ecodynamics have relied so heavily on them.

Additionally, the continued study of both geographically and conceptually marginal groups is integral to a clearer understanding of the past in general and the progression of religious change in the North Atlantic specifically. This thesis introduces the theory of Geoconceptual Marginality as regards senses of physical and psychic “place” in the medieval North Atlantic.

#### **1.4 Exploring Place in Greenland**

According to *Landnámabók* the Icelanders were aware of Greenland as early as the early 10<sup>th</sup> century when one Gunnbjorn Ulfson was blown off his course from Norway to Iceland. Upon arrival in Iceland he reported a series of islands – “Gunnbjorn’s Skerries” – off the east coast of Greenland (possibly near Angmagssalik). There also appears in *Landnámabók* an account of an ill-fated



and unsuccessful attempt to settle these islands by Snaebjorn Galti ca. 978 (4.3.1). The first successful settlement occurred on the west coast of southern Greenland just a few years later. The dating of the archaeological material aligns with the written accounts of when Eirik the Red launched his settlement attempts in the early 980s (5.4)

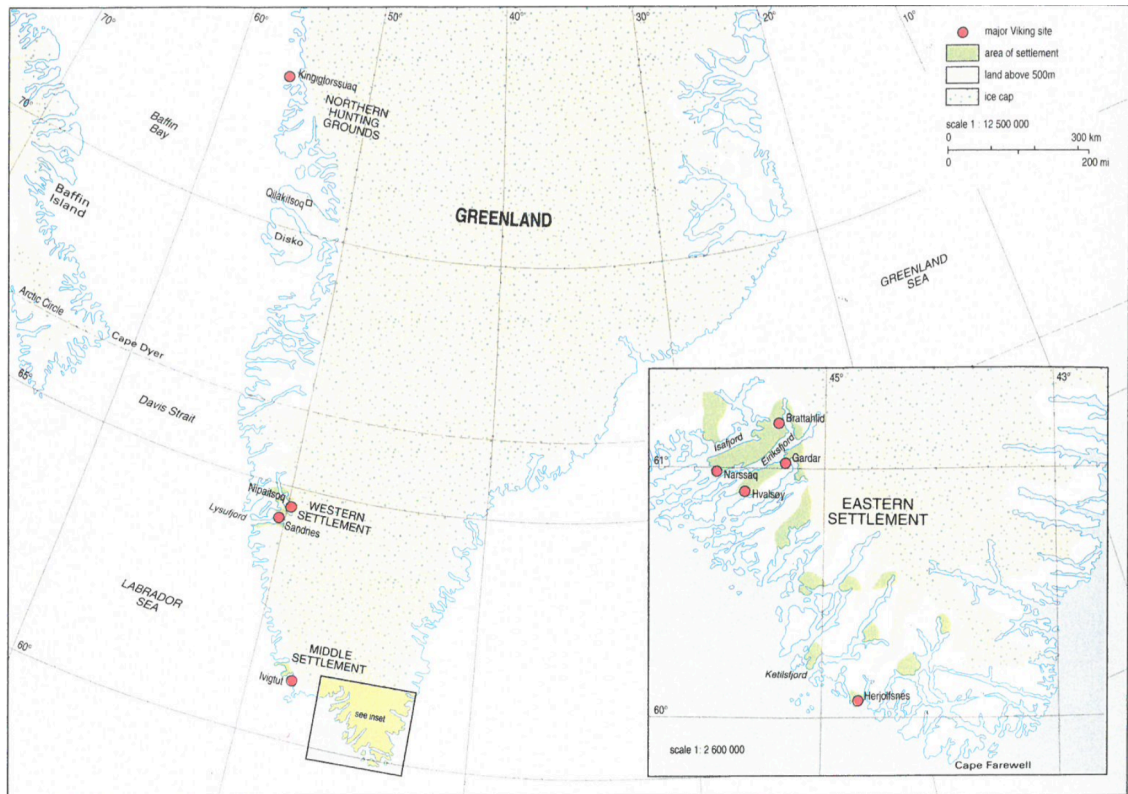


Figure 2: The Eastern, Middle, and Western Settlements (Batey & Graham-Campbell 1994:176)

The Norse settlements were limited to two small areas of southern Greenland (Fig. 2). The initial settlement was concentrated at the inland ends of the Tunulliarfik and Igalikup Kangerlua Fjords, believed to be Eiríksfjörður and Einarsfjörður respectively (Fig. 3). These regions remained the most populated of Norse Greenland for the entirety of the Norse settlement period. Within a matter of decades Norse farms were being established in the vicinity of modern day Nuuk almost 300 miles up the west coast. Much to the befuddlement of 19<sup>th</sup> century historians and linguists, the more northerly of the two settlements became known as the Western Settlement, and the larger, more populous southerly settlement the Eastern Settlement. A “middle settlement” located just north of the Eastern Settlement appears to have existed for most of the settlement period. Approximately 100 Norse ruin groups have been

documented in the Western Settlement, with approximately 500 in the Eastern Settlement (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Eastern, Middle, and Western settlement distribution map (Arneborg 2005, Fig.2)

The Norse farmers established operations much like they had elsewhere in the North Atlantic, primarily relying on stockraising. Additional sources of income came in the form of the hunting expeditions to the Disko Bay region, where walrus ivory and skins were collected for export. By the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century the Western Settlement was reported empty of Norse people by Ivar Bardarson, and a steady, if slow, depopulation appears to have followed (2.8). Norse activity in Greenland appears to have ended by the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The geography of southern Greenland is imposing. Steep, bare mountains rise up from iceberg-dotted fjords of an almost iridescent blue. From the sea the locations of Norse settlements are easily identifiable as they are the only patches noticeably greener than their surroundings (Fig. 4). Danish sheep farming enterprises utilize the same spaces for modern settlements and for the same reasons. At the height of the summer the mean temperature remains below 10° Celsius/50° Fahrenheit. Each Fall ice dams break open and flood Tunulliarfik Fjord (Eiriksfiord) with glacial runoff, cold enough to freeze a salt-water fjord to a depth of over a meter. Comparatively speaking, there is not much even in the way of wildlife in Southern Greenland. On a still summer night the silence is deafening and the feeling of smallness is ever present.



Figure 4: Hvalsey farm from the sea. The Church (lower right) would have appeared as a white speck in 1300. (Photo: J.A. McCullough)

Life in Greenland has always been at the mercy of this environment. Prior to the orders of the Danish government the Inuit population of Greenland was primarily nomadic and subsisted on the following and hunting of sea mammals. Travel from settlement to settlement in southern Greenland can be easily stymied by inclement weather to this day. For a sedentary, agricultural population like the Norse the looming environment must have been constantly present in their minds. This thesis will show that these concerns found their way into the worldview of the Greenland Norse, influencing their rituals, the churches they built, and the role that their faith played in their sense of connection to each other and the rest of the world.

## **1.5 Chapter Summaries**

The above concerns are addressed thematically.

### *1.5.1 Chapter 2: Past Trends and Themes in Greenlandic Research*

In Chapter 2 previous research themes and trends are briefly summarized with emphasis placed upon those that have a direct bearing on the current study. The chapter is not exhaustive, but will address the overall course of research into the Norse period from the Danish recolonization in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. 20<sup>th</sup> century research will be given priority as it is from this era that archaeological research began in earnest. Christian Keller prepared a more comprehensive history of research in 1989, which can provide greater detail on periods not specifically emphasized here (Keller 1989:51-107).

### *1.5.2 Chapter 3: Christianization in the North Atlantic*

Chapter 3 summarizes and explores Christianization processes in the North Atlantic world. A variety of approaches have been successfully applied to the other island communities of the Norse diaspora, and this chapter examines them and the impact of their conclusions upon Greenlandic studies. Commonalities are explored, in particular relating to the development and spread of the small timber and turf *baenhus* churches. The chapter provides

valuable context to study Greenlandic Christianity beyond its own icy waters as a part of a common and dynamic community.

### *1.5.3 Chapter 4: Greenland's Place in the Written Sources*

The contemporary literary and historical sources written during Greenland's Norse period are evaluated in Chapter 4 for what they can reveal about the community itself and outside perceptions of it. The Icelandic family sagas and medieval historical tracts are the prime focus of the chapter, though Scandinavian and European sources including Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (ca. 1073-1076) and the *Konungs skuggsjá* (ca. 1250) are also studied for valuable continental commentary on Greenland's reputation in more central areas of ecclesiastical and royal power. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century archaeology in Greenland was very much informed by these perceptions, often uncritically. This chapter unpacks these perceptions at their source.

### *1.5.4 Chapter 5: Greenlandic Church Structures and Their Implications*

The fifth chapter of this work investigates trends in Greenlandic church building, particularly the transition from *baenhus* churches in the early period of Norse settlement to larger stone churches. These structures, it is argued, not only demonstrate an evolving administrative structure for Christianity but also the evolving role that religion played in the community. Technical considerations of the churches are analyzed for clues into the manner of Christian practice present, local and communal identities, monumentality and social adherence.

### *1.5.5 Chapter 6: Portable Material Culture*

Chapter 6 is a substantial review of individual artefacts that may be interpreted as having a role in belief or practice. The chapter takes into account both Christian and pre-Christian interpretations for individual objects. The body of objects in question is primarily drawn from excavation reports of major Norse farms in both the Eastern and Western Settlements. Emphasized collections include liturgical items, amulets and other items of individual devotional

practice, grave goods, and otherwise non-ritual objects that have been effectively “Christianized” by carvings or inscriptions. Particular emphasis is placed on the pagan and Christian religious significance of weaving, an important daily task of the period. This chapter also addresses the small body of obviously pagan artefacts thus far excavated in Greenland.

#### *1.5.6 Chapter 7: Burial Practices and Mortuary Behavior*

Examination of Greenlandic practices of burial are analyzed in Chapter 7 as a means of understanding the funerary practices of the living community over time. While only one churchyard (E-29a “Thjodhild’s Church”) has been comprehensively excavated and subjected to radiocarbon dating and some have not produced any datable samples, the body of available C<sup>14</sup> dates can illuminate practices from the beginning to the end of the Norse settlement. The result is an interesting combination of localized and Greenland-wide practices, some occurring at earlier or later dates or with parallels outside of Greenland. Analysis in this chapter avoids conflating burial with the religious attitude of the deceased and views it as an assemblage of practices both religious and social that can inform a theoretical model of the Norse Greenlanders’s attitudes and concerns toward the dead.

#### *1.5.7 Chapter 8: Conclusions*

The conclusions presented in Chapter 8 will interpret the findings of the previous chapters. The chapter will present a speculative timeline of Christianity in Greenland from 985 to 1450, and offer an explanation of how this work fits in the ongoing study of Norse Greenland. The methods used and conclusions arrived at in academic discourse will be analyzed. An analysis of the state of the field and future research agenda will also be presented.

### **1.6 Conclusion**

When the hands of the first generation of settlers lifted the beams and cut the sod for the little church on Eiriksfiord, their concerns must have been numerous. Perhaps thoughts of relatives in the old country, or a list of chores that needed



to be done before the sun set on the farm occupied their minds as they labored. Perhaps as they built the tiny little church they thought of all the auspicious occasions they hoped to witness in it – weddings, baptisms, and burials – and each plank and turf brick were infused with their prayers, worries and hopes. A thousand years later it is those concerns that we hope to find in the ruins of Norse Greenland.

## Chapter 2

### Past Trends in Greenland Archaeological Research

#### 2.1 Introduction

To understand the study of Greenland, one must first go back to the time of Danish recolonization at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In the history of research that has been conducted on the Norse settlements in Greenland a number of trends are evident. Initial studies were not academic in focus, but rather an attempt to uncover the fate of the Greenland Norse, perhaps even locate bands of survivors that had relocated to North America or intermingled with the indigenous population of Greenland. This is most exemplified by the work of Hans Egede (1686-1758), the Norwegian missionary who established the first protestant colony in Greenland in 1721, and subsequent Danish colonists (Fig. 5) (Egede 1818).

When it had been accepted that there were no remaining remnants of the Norse population, scholarship turned toward seeking out and identifying places described in the corpus of Icelandic sagas. Working primarily during the second half of the nineteenth century scholars and explorers like Gustav Holm (1849-1940), Daniel Bruun (1856-1921), and Icelandic philologist Finnur Jónson (1856-1921) best characterize this phase (Holm 1884; Bruun 1896; Jónson 1928).

The first half of the twentieth century brought the first modern approaches to archaeology in Greenland, and the work carried out during this period remains some of the most important. But it was also during this period that the colonial ambitions of Norway and Denmark caused a schism in the research community. During the period of time between the Ihlen Declaration of 1919 and the settlement of the East Greenland Case at the Permanent Court of International Justice in 1933, both Norway and Denmark produced a bevy of research that will be explored more thoroughly below. Some, like the work of Poul Nørlund in the 1920s and 1930s was extremely influential and is cited to this day (Nørlund 1924; Nørlund & Stenberger 1934). Others, like Norwegian



Ella Anker, produced highly dubious and nationalistic work that maintained little relevance after the decision of The Hague to award control of Greenland to the Danish government (Anker 1931).

Not surprisingly, World War II all but halted research in Greenland, but not without the Nazis appropriating several works on the topic into their social-Darwinist milieu. Danish scholar Aage Roussell's work on Germanic farm structure was presented as evidence of the nationalist fallacy of pan-Germanism, though Roussell does not appear to have held any Nazi sentiment himself (Roussell 1937). Likewise, Hansen's erroneous conclusion that skeletal tissue excavated at Gardar (and promoted by Nørlund) illustrated the racial degradation of the Norse is one of his more unfortunate legacies (Hansen 1924; Hansen 1931).

While the Ingstad's discovery of the L'Anse Aux Meadows site in Newfoundland received far more popular attention in the 1960s, postwar archaeologists in Greenland like Vebæk, Meldgaard, and Krogh were producing work that reevaluated and built on the work of their predecessors and helped to modernize Greenlandic archaeology in terms of goals and methodology (Vebæk 1965; Krogh 1967; Ingstad 1969).

In the 1970s and 1980s the wave of "New Archaeology" reached Greenland. It was during this era that the academic vacuum in which Greenland had existed since the Greenland Case was punctured. A new generation of scholars like Thomas McGovern, Christian Keller, Jette Arneborg and Niels Lynnerup initiated a break with Greenland's archaeological tradition.

This chapter will provide a concise summary of research themes and findings to illustrate the strengths and shortcomings of Greenland research and place the work in its proper context.

## **2.2 Hans Egede (1686-1758) and the Danish Recolonization**

Attempts to understand the Norse settlement began with a Greenland that had been empty of Europeans for centuries, now being reconsidered in the colonial ambitions of a turbulent Scandinavia. By the time of Hans Egede's birth in 1686 there had been no documented contact between Greenland and Norway for over 200 years. In that time the Reformation had taken a firm hold in Scandinavia, and Egede was a member of the Lutheran clergy. In 1708 Egede petitioned King Frederick IV of Denmark for funds to reestablish contact with the Greenland settlements. The orthodoxy of Greenlandic Christianity was in question by secular and religious authorities even before contact with the Greenlanders was lost, and Egede's goal was to bring the Lutheran faith to the island and bring it once again into the fold of the faithful (Egede 1818).

The merchant community in Bergen, interested in re-establishing trade with the island, put up the lion's share of the funds with the establishment of the Bergen Greenland Company in 1721. On 3 July of the same year, Egede arrived in Nuup Kangerlua in the vicinity of present day Nuuk.



Figure 5: 1745 portrait of Hans Egede  
(Frederiksborg Museum)

Egede must have commenced his search for surviving descendants of the colonists immediately, for just a year later in a letter to the company he confidently reported that the Western Settlement had been found (Keller 1989:67-68). This is hardly a surprise, as Egede's landing site was in the vicinity of what later was proven to be the Western Settlement, but it is unclear if Egede was referring to the ruins in the area of his landing site or those further south in the Eastern Settlement.

It is likely that Egede considered all the ruins as being part of the "Western Settlement" (Fig. 19) as he, like others would do or the next century, had attempted to locate the Eastern Settlement on the east coast. Egede's expedition turned back at Nanortalik. Egede also conducted what could be

called the first “excavation” of the Norse ruins at Hvalsey Church (Keller 1989:68).

### **2.3 Attempts to find a surviving Norse population**

Other expeditions were made to locate the settlement on the east coast. In 1724 the Bergen Greenland Company dispatched a ship complete with a glossary of Old Norse words in order to communicate with any descendants of the colonies. In 1728 Major Claus Paars, while on a mission to resupply and relocate Egede’s colony to the mainland, unsuccessfully attempted an overland expedition across the Greenland ice sheet (ibid.). The belief that the Eastern Settlement was on the east coast of Greenland was reasonable enough, but as subsequent expeditions would ultimately prove the western coast had the only ice-free land capable of sustaining Norse settlement.

Despite the bankruptcy of the Bergen Greenland Company in 1727 and his failure to find the descendants of the Greenland Norse, Hans Egede’s mission could be called successful in two of its goals. It did reestablish regular contact between Greenland and Europe, and it did find new souls to whom to preach Reformation Christianity in the Inuit population. Egede also produced the first known book with special reference to the Norse Greenland colonies, *Det gamle Grønlands nye Perlustration* in 1729.

Egede went back to Denmark in 1736 to bury the body of his wife who had died in a smallpox outbreak in the colony, leaving its administration to his son. He never returned to Greenland. Upon his arrival in Denmark he was made Superintendent of the Greenland Missions, and in 1741 was made Bishop of Greenland. He died in 1758, directing missionary efforts by correspondence. Like many bishops of Greenland before him, Egede was an absentee at the time of his death (Bobé 1952).

Hans Egede recruited Peder Olsen Walløe in 1739 to join the colony in Greenland. From 1751 to 1753 Walløe, two Danish sailors, and two Inuit guides navigated from Godthåb (present day Nuuk) to Lindenow Fjord – a journey that took them around Cape Farewell and up the eastern coast – before

being driven back by sea ice and weather. The only evidence of Norse Settlement that Walløe noted in his copious diaries were in the southern reaches of what would later be identified as the Eastern Settlement. Walløe's contribution to modern knowledge of Greenland was sizeable, particularly with regard to ice conditions, geography, and the Inuit whose language he learned (Walløe 1927). Anders Olsen discovered more ruins in the vicinity of Julianehab (present day Qaqortoq) in 1770 and in 1776 retraced the course of the Walløe excavation with similar results. Olsen's findings were published by Egil Thorhallesen in 1776; this was the first attempt at collating information on the Norse ruins (Thorhallesen 1776). In 1793 H.P. von Eggers first suggested that the Eastern Settlement never existed on the east coast, a claim that would be debated until proven correct by the Graah umiak expedition of 1831 (von Eggers 1793; Graah 1832). With the Graah expedition, any remaining hope of finding the descendants of Norse settlers was dashed.

## **2.4 Identifying the ruins**

In the nineteenth century the focus of research shifted to the study of the Norse ruins rather than a futile search for their descendants. At this point there is a notable shift from the desire to seek out the remnants of the Old Norse colonists to an interest in cataloging and studying Greenland in a historical context. In 1834 the Danish Royal Society for Northern Antiquaries initiated the assembly of a three-volume text entitled *Gronlands Historiske Mindesmaerker*, a collection of all written material regarding Greenland (Kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab 1838). In 1880 Gustav Holm visited Greenland on behalf of the Danish Commission for the Direction of Geological and Geographical Investigations in Greenland and registered 40 new ruin groups (Holm 1884). He was followed in 1884 and 1885 by T.V. Garde and Johannes Hansen. J.A.D. Jensen produced several topographies for the Commission in 1878 and 1885, and these were published in 1889 (Jensen 1879; Jensen 1889).

Daniel Bruun, a Danish military officer *cum* archaeologist, was commissioned to survey the Julianehab region of western Greenland (Bruun 1896). After his arrival in 1894 he cataloged over 80 new ruin groups and devised the scheme by which such ruins are still cataloged to this day, by Ø-# for the Eastern

Settlement and V-# for the Western Settlement.<sup>1</sup> Bruun is also known for trying to identify not only the different buildings in the various ruin groups, but the rooms within the buildings themselves.

Bruun was not as thorough an archaeologist as he was an explorer, however, and his attempt to assign place names from the literary sources to the ruin groups was lacking in criticism. It seems that Bruun was too reliant on the work of C.C. Rafn, a Danish antiquarian who, in the mid 1800s, was one of the first to popularize the theory of Norse contact with North America. Rafn's expertise was literary, however, and his thoughts on Norse North America were fanciful. Bruun did little to question either. Bruun did make a sound judgment, however, when he posited that the identification of the standing church ruins in Greenland would be the key that unlocked the identity of the rest of the settlement (Bruun 1896 in Keller 1989:75).

Bruun's initial investigation was so successful that he was dispatched again to explore the Western Settlement in the vicinity of Godthab in 1903. This subsequent expedition was a good deal shorter in duration than his 1894 endeavor, resulting in a less comprehensive work (Bruun 1903). Still, Daniel Bruun's work is of enormous value to the field. Despite some of his erroneous conclusions Bruun's work was solid, comprehensive, well organized, and popular in its time.

Icelandic philologist Finnur Jónson was the *de facto* link between the literary sources on Greenland and the rapidly expanding archaeological corpus during the early years of the 20th century. Jónson was one of the foremost authorities on Icelandic literature of the time, with his focus primarily on Old Norse poetry. His attempts to place newly discovered sites in Greenland to historical names gleaned from Old Norse sources were problematic and perhaps too ambitious for the evidence at the time (Jónson 1928).

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<sup>1</sup> Example: Ø-29 Brattahlid, V-51 Sandnes

## 2.5 The East Greenland Case and major 20<sup>th</sup> Century excavations

Amidst the tumult and shifting borders of post World War I Europe a minor diplomatic agreement between Norway and Denmark set the stage for both an explosion of archaeological and historical work on Greenland and a most unfortunate academic schism among those conducting the research.

The agreement in question was the Ihlen Declaration of 1919. The Great War had weakened the ability of many European countries to maintain their colonies around the world. For Greenland, which had been a possession of Denmark since the Treaty of Kiel in 1815, it was a time for revisiting colonial law. Sentiment in Norway was that since the colony had been Norwegian prior to the Treaty of Kiel the colonial ownership of it should revert to Norway following the 1905 dissolution of the union between Norway and Sweden.



Figure 6: Helge Ingstad in 1932 (Gylendal Norwegian Publishing)

In the summer of 1919 the Danes proposed that there would be no contest on their part to any Norwegian claims to Spitsbergen providing that Norway would similarly support Denmark's claim to Greenland. Norwegian foreign minister Nils Ihlen responded by saying "...the plans of the Royal [Danish] Government respecting Danish sovereignty over the whole of Greenland...would be met with no difficulties on the part of Norway" (Grant & Barker 2009). This declaration was to be the subject of much debate in the coming years as to what extent Norway was bound by the words of its Foreign Minister.

Denmark's claim to Greenland went smoothly until 1921 when Denmark opted to shut out all non-Danish commercial interests from Greenland. Foreign trappers and whalers (particularly Norwegians) frequented Northern Greenland and this decision was unpopular. In 1924 the ban was lifted and Denmark allowed for limited Norwegian settlements north of 60°27' N. For seven years

this arrangement existed with little difficulty, but in the summer of 1931 Norwegian traders in Myggbukta raised the flag and the Norwegian crown proclaimed the lands between the Bessel and Carlsberg Fjords to be the property of Norway. Norway appointed lawyer *cum* arctic trapper Helge Ingstad (Fig. 6) as *sysselman* of the territory, which became known as Eirik the Red's Land. (Interestingly, Ingstad would later famously discover the Norse settlement at L'Anse Aux Meadows.).

The Danish and Norwegian governments opted to take the dispute to the Permanent Court of International Justice at The Hague where cases for both sides were made using historical and archaeological studies. It is unfortunate that the first modern excavations of Norse sites in Greenland occurred leading up to and in conjunction with this crisis. Nationalistic sentiment interfered with findings from Norwegian and Danish scholars and tainted the field well into the 20th century. Judges at The Hague sided with Denmark in 1933, and the issue was considered solved. Norwegian scholarly interest in Greenland essentially ceased at that point, not to be rekindled until the discovery of the L'Anse Aux Meadows site in 1960. Danish research did continue, albeit at a smaller and more scaled back pace for roughly the next 30 years.

In the lead up to and during the Greenland Case, a number of Norwegian research projects were undertaken to support their claims. Polar explorer and humanitarian Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) was first to cross the Greenland Ice Sheet by ski in 1888 (Nansen 1890). His experiences in Greenland, thoughts on the Norse settlements, and criticism of the Danish administration were later detailed in his 1891 book *Eskimoliv* (later published in English as *Eskimo Life*) (Nansen 1894). Gunnar Isachsen (1868-1939) explored the northwestern coast of Greenland from 1898 to 1892, though his discovery of Norse eiderdown gathering stations on Ellesmere Island have subsequently been identified as Dorset culture fireplaces (Isachsen & Isachsen, F 1933; Keller 1989:99). Edvard Bull Sr. (1881-1932) and Anton Brøgger (1884-1951) were the leading Norwegian researchers of Norse Greenland, though their approaches (and politics) were vastly different. Bull's 1922 paper "*Gronland of Norge i middelalderen*" argued that Greenland's subjection to the Norwegian crown was

ultimately a positive for the Greenlanders, though limited trade from Norway may have hurt the colonies over a long period of time (Bull 1922). Brøgger, on the other hand, was chairman of the Oslo Greenland Association and Norges Grondlandslag, both lobbying groups pressing for Norway's territorial claims in Greenland. Brøgger wrote several works on the Norwegians in the North Atlantic, such as *The voyages of ancient Norwegians in the Norwegian Sea* (1926), *Ancient Emigrants* (1928), and *The Vinland Voyages* (1937). Though his work relating to Greenland contained no new observations of note, he was quite satisfied to justify current political opinions using his archaeological background. In 1926 he said of the Greenland Case:

I will just remind [you] that [the Greenland Case] concerns access to a country once colonized by Norwegians and Icelanders, which was first settled over a period of 500 years by people of Norwegian stock, which was next resettled by Norwegians with Hans Egede at the helm, which up to 1814 was subject to Norwegian colonization of all kinds, and even after 1814 a considerable contingency of Norwegians was part of the constructive initiative in Greenland. (Blom 1973:148) (trans. Christian Keller)

The Danish contingent of researchers ultimately are the ones who produced more, better scholarship relating to Norse Greenland. Danish researchers held the advantage of administrating the populated regions of Greenland during this time, which for geographical reasons (1.4) more or less aligned with the Norse settlements. Foremost among these is Poul Nørlund (1888-1951). Nørlund was an historian, archaeologist, and eventual director of the National Museum of Denmark. He, more than anyone, brought archaeology in earnest to Greenland and conducted the first large scale excavations with stated goals.

Nørlund's work in Greenland began in 1921, driven by the recent developments in the Greenland case. In this year Nørlund initiated an excavation at Herjolfsnes when it was seen that erosion from wind and water was unearthing burial shrouds and coffins from the churchyard there (Nørlund 1924:18-19). Due to the frozen soil conditions in the churchyard, Nørlund was able to secure some of the finest samples of medieval clothing yet uncovered. After Nørlund's publication of the results of his finds at Herjolfsnes, his next major excavation



was at Gardar in 1926 with J. Raklev and Aage Roussell (Nørlund et al. 1930). Nørlund's approach was similar with regard to Herjolfsnes. The site was a one of the original land claims made by Norse settlers, like Herjolfsnes, and also a significant administrative center in that it was home to the bishops of Greenland from the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In 1932 Nørlund and Marten Stenberger excavated Eirik the Red's home of Brattahlid, again a major site from the settlement era. Their excavations of the dwellings on the plain north of Tunuliarfik Fjord (Eiriksfiord) did not produce very reliable dating, but did yield some interesting bits of material culture, including a steatite object incised with Thor's hammer (6.4.5.4). In 1934 Nørlund & Stenberger published their findings. Their conclusions, as with Gardar and Herjolfsnes before them, were concerned primarily with establishing the layout and dating of a major site from the era of settlement (Nørlund & Stenberger 1934). Many of Nørlund's conclusions have not endured, but this is due primarily to differences in interpretation rather than a flawed methodology on Nørlund's part.

Nørlund's protégé at Gardar was architect Aage Roussell (1901-1972). Roussell's training allowed him to correct some of Nørlund's theories on church architecture, though less so with dwellings (Roussell & Degerbøl 1941). Roussell's 1941 thesis *Farms and Churches in the Medieval Norse Settlements of Greenland* was an expansion of a paper published in 1937 entitled "Haus und Hof der Germanen in Norwegen, Island und Gronland".<sup>2</sup>

The somewhat confusing title of this article is due to its publication in *Haus und Hof im nordischen Raum*, a collection of papers presented at the 1<sup>st</sup> Nordic Scientific Conference and edited by Hans Reinerth, the Reich Deputy of German Prehistory. Reinerth's goal in the conference was to advance the theory of "pan-Germanism".

Despite Roussell's unfortunate company, his work is devoid of any Nazi sentiment. Roussell was also active in the Danish resistance during the Second World War, and was also the first director of the Resistance Museum in

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<sup>2</sup> "House and church of the Germans in Norway, Iceland and Greenland"

Denmark (Bak 2013:231; Dehn-Nielsen & Mackeprang 1979). The outbreak of the war did not dissuade him from continuing on in his research.

Roussell's career was beginning as the Greenland Case was drawing to a close, but his 1939 work in Iceland demonstrates some of the lingering animosity between the Norwegian and Danish camps. Nørlund and Stenberger organized a season of excavation in Iceland specifically to engage the Norwegian archaeological community, whose interest in Greenland had declined sharply following the decision of The Hague in 1933. The excavation of Skallaholt in Iceland that revealed a great deal about Viking age farming. Roussell was in charge of the excavation at Skallaholt. The Norwegian community opted not to participate, further divorcing the two sides and setting back both (Keller 1989:93).

## **2.6 New Discoveries in the 1950s and 1960s**

Following the trauma of the war both funding for and interest in Norse Greenland declined. This is not to say that Danish interest in Norse Greenland had faded completely. There was a small stream of Danish archaeologists and historians that continued conducting research, but in the post-war years it was simply not a priority. C.L. Vebæk (1913-1994) began researching Greenland in the 1930s after the close of the Greenland Case. Vebæk was made curator of the National Museum of Denmark in 1946, but most of his Greenlandic excavations took place in the 1950s. From 1954 to 1962 Vebæk carried out a series of excavations at a settlement era farm in Narsaq at the mouth of Tunuliarfik Fjord. These excavations contributed to the understanding of the settlement era in Greenland, yet Vebæk conducted them during periods of personal vacation or periods of allowance, and often times alone (Vebæk et. al. 1993:3). Jorgen Meldgaard (1927-2007) surveyed northern Newfoundland for possible connections to the Vinland sagas in 1956, though without success (Meldgaard 1992). While the Ingstads enjoyed that recognition in 1960, in 1961 workmen at Qassiarsuk stumbled upon the remains of a churchyard later revealed to be Brattahlid I, or "Thjodhild's Church" (Krogh 1967:20). Meldgaard led the excavations that followed. The Ingstads may have captured the popular imagination, but Meldgaard's discoveries tell us far more about the original

settlers of Greenland. Meldgaard's excavation confirmed that the cemetery was used in the earliest years of the Norse habitation, and provided a great number of insights into the first demographics, social strata and burial customs in the heart of the Eastern Settlement.

Meldgaard's excavations were ambitious and to date the only complete churchyard excavation in Greenland (Fig. 7). Meldgaard's team included Knud Krogh (who took over for subsequent phases of its excavation after Meldgaard's focus returned to pre-Norse Greenland and other projects) as well as Gwyn Jones, who used his experiences while writing *The Norse North Atlantic Saga* (Jones 1986; Appelt *et al.* 2007). Meldgaard was also one of the initiators of the Inuit-Norse project of 1976-1977, a large scale project to study the relationship of Inuit and Norse Greenlanders with each other and their environment (Keller 1989:99).

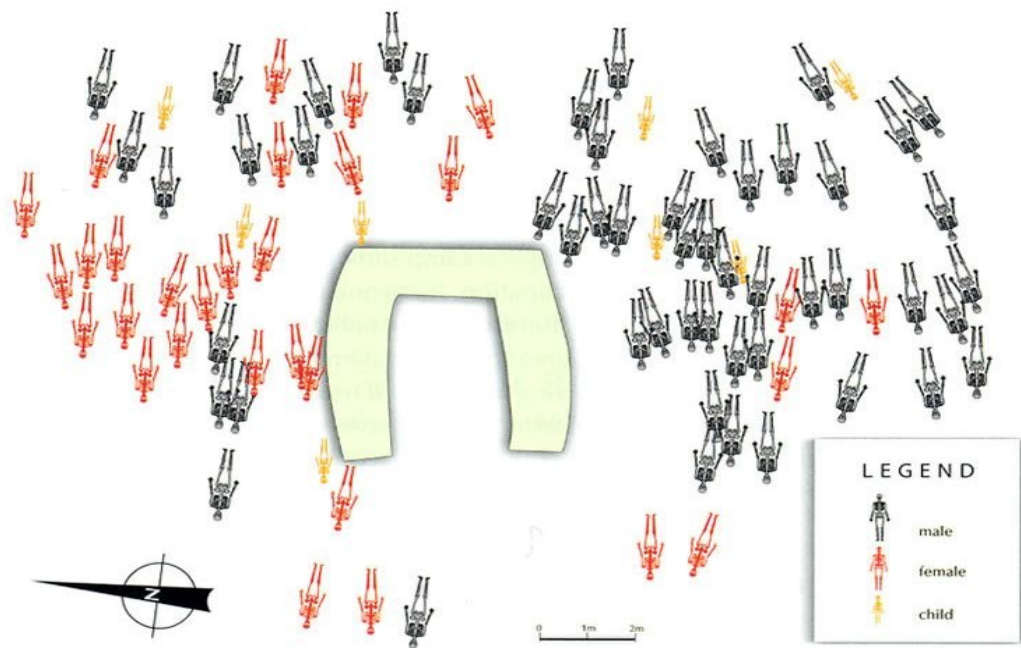


Figure 7: Burials at Brattahlíð I "Thjodhild's Church" (Image: Vis-à-Vis Graphics after K. Krogh 1967)

Knud Krogh (1932-) assumed the direction of the excavations at Brattahlíð in 1963 and 1965. Krogh's experiences during the excavations informed his 1967 book *Eirik den Rodes Grønland* (published in English as *Viking Greenland*) (Krogh 1967). Krogh is one of the early voices on the nature and use of Qoorlortoq/*baenhus* churches in Greenland (Krogh 1975:132). In 1976 Krogh

published the ground plans for all known churches in Greenland up to that date, and argued that the earliest were constructed using a wooden frame and then covered with earth, similar to structures in the Faeroe Islands (Krogh 1976:306-308). This collection of ground plans and designs was a much-needed collation of almost 80 years of data, and the diagrams are still frequently cited and displayed in publications on Greenland to this day. Krogh's work was also significant in that it did not shy away from citing parallels in the North Atlantic and Scandinavia, something earlier scholars like Nørlund, Sternberger and Bull were reluctant to do. This speaks to the fading impact of the Greenland Case. Krogh also dared to be more critical of the literary sources than his predecessors had, another indication of the changing climate of archaeology during the iconoclastic decade of the 1960s.

Henrik Jansen (1942-2000) participated in both the Brattahlid and Narsaq excavations led by Meldgaard, Krogh, and Vebæk respectively. His 1969 Ph.D. thesis was published in 1972 as *A Critical Account of the Written and Archaeological Sources' Evidence Concerning the Norse Settlements in Greenland*. It was what its title claimed, though its analysis was aimed primarily at the earlier eras of the settlement. Jansen's text was part of the tradition of its time of reevaluating previously held assumptions about the Norse settlements, particularly the failings of the literary sources and previous scholars' dependence on them (Jansen 1972).

## **2.7 "The Green Wave" and Modern Archaeology**

The era of environmental archaeology brought new approaches to the settlements at Greenland, and the most prolific researcher of archaeozoology and human ecodynamics is without doubt Thomas McGovern. In 1989 Christian Keller wrote "...McGovern must be credited with being the person who has been most influential in bringing Norse Greenland archaeology in touch with the current international debate" (Keller 1989:103). Keller's claim was not hyperbolic. McGovern's work on the ecological and zoological impact on Norse Greenland is voluminous and impactful.

McGovern is the first American to have a significant voice in the archaeology of Greenland. His focus on Greenland has not wavered in the 34 years since the completion of his dissertation, *The Paleoeconomy of Norse Greenland: Adaptation and Extinction in a Closely Bounded Ecosystem* in 1979. In 1985 McGovern explored the phenomenon of hunts to the *Nordsetur* region north of the Western Settlement (in the present day vicinity of Disko Bay) for valuable walrus ivory and sealskin. This region was sporadically and seasonally inhabited for hunting purposes. In this article McGovern's work on farmsteads enabled him to explore the social structure of the Norsemen and the impact that the *Nordsetur* hunts would have had on their division of labor (McGovern 1985). To what extent the Norse retained their "European" identity will be a significant factor in this course of research, but with a more developed focus on the religious aspects of identity, something McGovern has not explored in any depth.

Even so, the paleoeconomics of small North Atlantic communities in the Viking Age is a massively important factor in those communities' continued existence that was not much investigated prior to the 1970s. McGovern has also been active in the North Atlantic Biocultural Organization (NABO) as its coordinator since 1992. NABO is an interdisciplinary organization dedicated to the study of human-environmental interactions throughout the North Atlantic.

Though McGovern's work is primarily Greenland-based, he has ventured further out in to the North Atlantic with those researching Iceland, the Faroes, Shetlands, and Orkneys to explore this dimension in depth (McGovern et al. 1988; Amorosi, Buckland, et al. 1994; Amorosi, McGovern, et al. 1994; Amorosi et al. 1996; Amorosi et al. 1997; Dugmore et al. 2005; Ascough et al. 2006; Dugmore et al. 2012).<sup>3</sup> McGovern's influence continues on in the work of his former student and frequent collaborator Sofia Perdikaris (Perdikaris & McGovern 2006).

Christian Keller, to whom this research history is indebted, is a Norwegian archaeologist formerly of the University of Oslo. He is a veteran of the Nordic

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<sup>3</sup> This list is not comprehensive, but indicative of the nature of McGovern's collaborative efforts.

Archaeological Expedition to Qoorlotoq (1976-1977) a contemporary of Thomas McGovern and likewise active within NABO. His unpublished Ph.D. thesis of 1989, *The Eastern Settlement Reconsidered: Some analyses of Norse Medieval Greenland* is a very interesting piece of writing. In his discussion of the circular churchyards in Greenland, Keller suggests that this is the influence of Celtic Christianity, and that the newer churches built of stone with rectangular features may have indicated an overcoming of Celtic influence by Roman style missionaries and bishops from Norway (Keller 1989:210). Though Keller cooled on this idea later in life (Arneborg pers. comm.), he appears to have been more correct than he knew (5.7.1).

Jette Arneborg has been excavating in Greenland since before her PhD from Copenhagen in 1991 and has contributed to nearly every research avenue on the topic explored since the 1980s. Apart from her work on the well-preserved Western Settlement farm named The Farm Under the Sand in the early 1990s, Arneborg focused in the late 1990s and early 2000s on identity and culture in Greenland (Arneborg 1993; Arneborg 1998; Arneborg 2000; Arneborg et al. 2006). At the time studying the life of the Greenlanders was a relatively novel phenomenon as opposed to understanding the mechanics of the settlements and their eventual fate. Arneborg was instrumental in several long-term studies of Norse Greenland, such as *Resources, mobility, and cultural identity in Norse Greenland: The Vatnahverfi Project* from 2004-2010 and the *Churches, Christianity and Chieftains in the Norse Eastern Settlement Project* (Arneborg 2002; Arneborg 2008).

Niels Lynnerup's work on the extant osteological material from Greenland is to be credited with freeing the field of many erroneous conclusions and historical speculation as to the physical condition of the Greenlanders as well as opening up the field to a new area of paleodemographic research (Lynnerup 1998; Lynnerup 2009; Lynnerup 2014). Lisbeth Imer has begun the important work of reevaluating all Norse runic inscriptions from Greenland and presented a picture of a society that was culturally literate (Imer 2009; Imer 2012b; Imer 2012a; Imer 2014). Her forthcoming work will shed more light on the use of writing as a tool of belief.

This account of research is not comprehensive; the most recent trends in the field will be addressed below (8.5).

## **2.8 Norse Greenland: A Failed Colony?**

From the time of Hans Egede the Norse occupation of Greenland was seen as a failed exercise. At first glance it is easy to see why this is so. In the fifteenth century when contact with Greenland dwindled and eventually disappeared, those few Europeans who remembered it assumed that the Norsemen had reverted to paganism or that it had simply become an isolated backwater of Christian Europe. Therefore when Hans arrived two centuries later and found no trace of the Norse inhabitants, the speculation began.

The lonely, tumbledown walls of what had formerly been impressive stone churches and the subtle variations in terrain that marked the sites of *landnam* farms must have evoked ominous questions in the first modern European explorers to arrive. What could have caused a colony of 3-4,000 souls at its peak to have abandoned their homes and churches to ruin has been the great question of Greenlandic history, and one numerous scholars have attempted to answer. Most of these answers involve some sort of calamity, some a gradual descent past the point of recovery.

None are conclusive, but some have contributed to a greater understanding of life in Norse Greenland.

The catastrophic theories fall into three categories:

- 1) Conflict
- 2) Assimilation/Isolation
- 3) Ecological collapse

Fueled by Norse accounts of violent interactions with the *skraelingar* (perhaps Thule Culture Inuit) in the sagas and other texts, and Ivar Bardarson's 1350 report that the Western Settlement had been overrun, the earliest scholars on the subject were quick to assume that a bloody struggle had preceded Norse Greenland's demise. When the villains were not *skraelingar*, they were

foreign pirates; this was based on a questionable Inuit account collected in the nineteenth century (Rink 1875:317-321). In spite of the violent encounters mentioned in the literature, the archaeological findings do not corroborate theories of warfare or genocide. Greenland, like Iceland, was a country of limited resources and limited population. If the amount of violence exceeded a certain level it could have endangered the entire settlement in the manner of lost labor and eventual starvation. Niels Lynnerup's study of Norse skeletal tissue from Greenland did confirm a number of violent deaths, but not statistically high enough to render Greenland unsustainable (Lynnerup 1998:88-93). All told, it is reasonable to expect that Greenland experienced a similar level of violence to Iceland or the other Norse-settled North Atlantic islands, but any claims that Greenland's depopulation was caused by a massive conflict remain unsubstantiated.

Theories that the Norse had been assimilated into the encroaching Inuit population were suggested as early as those of annihilation by hostile forces. Fridtjof Nansen was one of the foremost proponents of the notion that the Inuit of Greenland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could be the descendants of earlier Inuit groups and Norse settlers.<sup>4</sup> The theory of assimilation is not in any way outlandish. It could be expected that two groups living near enough to raid-and-trade with one another would have at least some degree of genetic mingling. What is perhaps more surprising is the striking absence of such genetic admixture either in the present day population of Greenland or skeletal remains of the Norse (Saillard et al. 2000; Lynnerup 2009; Moltke et al. 2015). This in itself provides a fascinating avenue of research regarding Norse identity and why there is no evidence of such interaction, but over the past fifteen years the theory of assimilation has been fairly conclusively put to rest.

During the era of the Greenland Case isolation was blamed for Greenland's decline. Anatomist Dr. F.C.C. Hansen analyzed skeletal tissue recovered from Nørlund's excavations at Herjolfsnes and Gardar. In the case of the former, Hansen was working with a very limited sample of remains, and due to

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<sup>4</sup> Bruun and Bull also acknowledged this theory as a possibility, though not the most likely (Keller 1989).



preservation conditions the bones had shrunk over time. Hansen thought that the skeletons showed signs of hereditary degeneration and was heavily influenced by the racial anxieties of the time (Hansen 1924). Nørlund again turned to Hansen for analysis of skeletal remains from Gardar, leading to Hansen's publication of the infamous *Homo Gardarensis* in which he theorized that a fragment of an acromelagic skull represented the evolutionary regression of the Norse in the settlement (Hansen 1931; Kjærgaard 2014). Nørlund seems to have accepted Hansen's conclusions with little scrutiny and as a result the "racial degeneration" theory of the settlement's demise was born. No serious scholarship has accepted this theory.

The Danes argued that it was the Norwegian royal monopoly that choked off Greenlandic trade, and the Norwegians that a downturn in climate laid many medieval economies low and Greenland was simply not robust enough to withstand it. Both sides were plagued by nationalistic concerns, as described above, but interestingly the interrelationship of ecology and economy has become one of the most well developed and demonstrable theories as to the end of Norse habitation. As stated above McGovern has made a career out of studying the economic effects of resource management in the Norse North Atlantic. In 1981 McGovern put forward a theory that has had significant staying power in spite of its repeated questioning. The Norse settlements failed, he argued, in part due to a refusal of the Norsemen to adopt Inuit methodologies of arctic life. The Norse retained their European identity by insisting that their houses be built of turf, their boats of wood, and their diets of livestock and marine mammals (McGovern 1981). The notion that social barriers obstructed the Norse from creating sustainable ways of Arctic living has most recently found support in geographer Jared Diamond's bestseller *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Diamond 2011). While certain aspects of this theory may very well be true, it lends itself to a form of ecological reductionism that fails to acknowledge that the Norse would not have successfully occupied Greenland for half a millennium by failing to adapt. It has been argued that the Greenlanders saw themselves as both "Norsemen" and "Greenlanders", for instance, and that these identities are not mutually exclusive (Gräslund 2009). This "Greenlandic" identity can be seen manifested in

agricultural and environmental adaptations as well as its relation to the known North American site at L'Anse Aux Meadows (Arneborg 2008; Magnuson 2000).

In 2006 McGovern and Sophia Perdikaris published on the respective economic trajectories of Iceland and Greenland. The article convincingly demonstrated that aside from subsistence the Norse trade economy was based on prestige goods, walrus ivory in particular, and that this emphasis undermined the longevity of the Greenland settlements (Perdikaris & McGovern 2006). It has been fairly well proven that the Norse settlements suffered economic and ecological sustainability issues of their own making through overgrazing and poor land management, but one would be hard pressed to pinpoint a specific practice or turning point in which the settlements became unsustainable.

The most recent and most likely theory on the end of the Norse era in Greenland is not especially spectacular. McGovern has cautioned against relying on a single model for the settlements' eventual desertion, and noted that different factors must have contributed at different times (McGovern 1992). Arneborg also suggested a gradual evacuation as a likely scenario (Arneborg 1993). Lynnerup's 1998 study lays out a depopulation process that includes ecological pressure, disease, and a sudden availability of more productive land in Iceland and Europe.

The Norse, living at or just beyond their environment's capacity to sustain them in Greenland, would have felt the effects of the climatic change that occurred in the years after 1300. Middens show an increasing reliance on marine mammals for foodstuffs as raising livestock became more difficult, and the level of disease in Greenland began to increase. The number of skeletons of young adults decline in this period, perhaps indicating emigration from the low quality agricultural land of Greenland for old family land in Iceland recently scoured in one way or another by the Black Death. With those of childbearing age leaving a small community like Greenland the birth rate dropped dramatically, until eventually Norse Greenland faded away (Lynnerup 1998:127-128). According to Lynnerup's population calculations (Fig. 8), if even ten individuals a year emigrated from Greenland it would have induced a depopulation over the course of 200 years, whereas ten people a year arriving in a community the

size of Iceland could easily have gone unnoticed historically (1998:128).

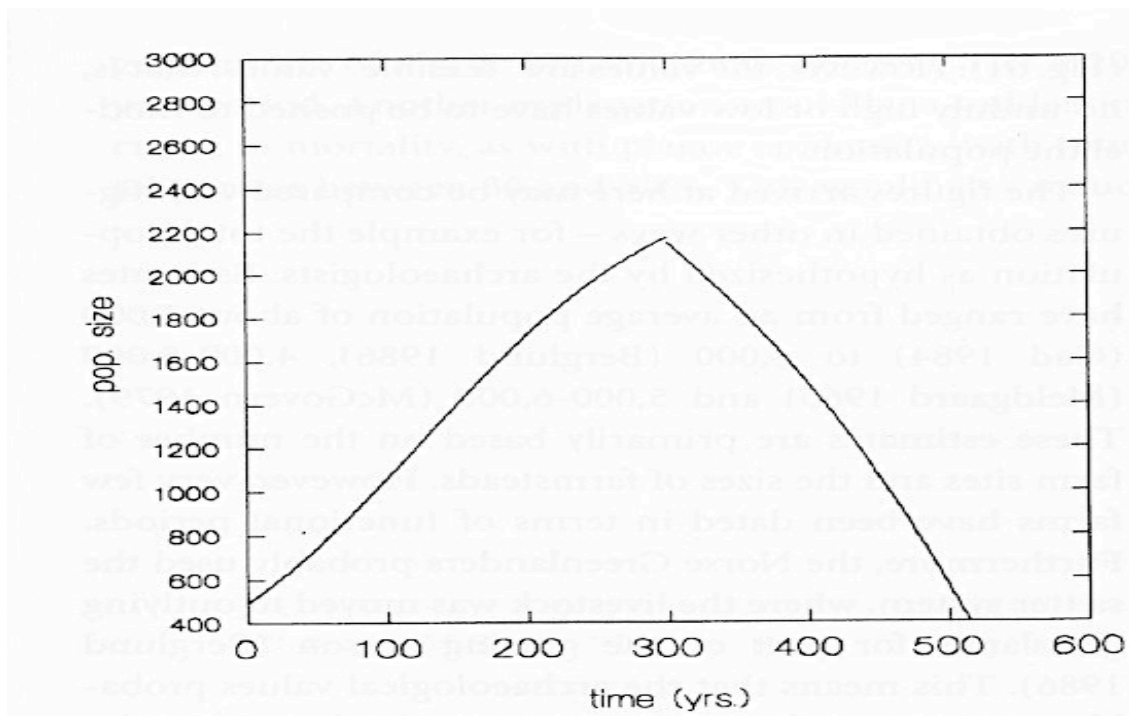


Figure 5: Lynnerup's theoretical population model (Lynnerup 1998, Fig. 65)

The work on this topic is voluminous as it was the primary question of Greenland until recent years, and the matter of the demise of an identifiably Norse community is mostly irrelevant to questions of identity five hundred years earlier. That being said, the topic has driven a great deal of research and has yielded some information pertinent to the study of identity, which as discussed is essential to studying the religious atmosphere of the time. McGovern, for instance, explains the Norse overreliance on livestock with a high ecological impact by attributing these decisions to a firmly entrenched cultural identity (Perdikaris & McGovern 2006). A lack of fish in the Greenlandic diet seems to corroborate the theory that the Greenlanders saw themselves as farmers and not fishermen. The production and use of stockfish in Iceland emphasizes what could be seen as a unique Greenlandic identity beginning with the first settlers. This will be an interesting factor when assembling a model Greenlandic mindset at the time of settlement.

Paleopathological and genetic studies have clearly shown what was not occurring in Greenland, such as widespread violence, plague, and

interbreeding with local populations (Lynnerup 1998; Saillard et al. 2000). This in itself reveals something about the social climate of the Norse settlements. The research into the cause of Norse Greenland's dissolution has revealed a society that maintained a moderate level of violence, avoided fraternizing with their Inuit neighbors, whose identity as farmers was strong enough that they remained so even after it was no longer profitable or sustainable, and whose way of life remained Norse despite a widespread Celtic background. This in itself provides a fascinating starting point for further research.

## **2.9 Conclusions**

As demonstrated, the investigation into the Norse period of Greenland began with a search for the Greenlanders themselves by Hans Egede and those who followed him. Egede's desire to reestablish contact with the Greenlanders arguably set the tone for the entire field into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The preoccupation with "what happened" to the Norse was based on an assumption that something catastrophic had. As a result, a considerable amount of time and effort was poured into discovering the form of this nonexistent catastrophe. Most studies of the time and place have subsequently been viewed through this lens.

In this view, Greenland *should* have been an ongoing Norse community like Iceland or the Faroes and therefore an asset to be argued over in the ever-shifting balance of early modern Scandinavian power. This view, then, informed the attitudes of Norway and Denmark when arguing the Greenland Case before the Permanent Court of International Justice.

These perceptions are all based on a projection of present attitudes, events, and identities onto the past. Even the proposed explanations for the "fall" of Norse Greenland mirror the attitudes of their times; eradication by hostile natives during the colonial era, racial degeneration in the post-Darwin era, political and cultural disruption following the Great War, and environmental collapse in the era of global warming awareness and ecological disasters. In the end, Greenland was subject to a complex series of interrelated factors including cultural values, climate, group and individual identities, and more.

Understanding this will ideally reinforce the most recent approaches to the study of Greenland and set the stage for future investigations.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Christianization in the North Atlantic**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

“In the course of time [Olaf Tryggvasson] was given credit for Christianising Norway (which is an exaggeration), the Shetlands and Faroes (about which little is known) Iceland (which is overgenerous) and Greenland (which is wrong).” (Jones 1984:135)

One of the ultimate goals of this thesis is to better understand the place of Greenland in the context of a Christian North Atlantic. While the level and form of Christianity in Greenland has been speculated on it has yet to be subjected to a rigorous synthesis of available evidence as regards the day-to-day practice of Christianity. While the “classical” excavations carried out by Bruun, Nørlund, Roussell and others emphasized the architecture and form of churches as evidence of their liturgical and political allegiance, recent studies of Christianization in the North Atlantic region have posed the question of what role such buildings played in the everyday and their significance to the communities they did or did not serve.

Lesley Abrams has concisely articulated some of the problems with understanding past conversion experiences on a personal level. For instance, that “religion was as much about conduct...as about belief” (Abrams 1995:137). Using this understanding of the experiences of 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century Norse people throughout the North Atlantic allows us to see their material culture as reflections not of “faith” in the modern sense of the word, but as items functioning on both the material and spiritual plane – the creation, modification, and abandonment of which reflected an interplay between cosmologies, societal conventions, and communities.

#### **3.2 Approaches to Christianization**

Conversion studies have been approached from a variety of disciplines emphasizing different aspects of the process by which individuals and groups change their understanding of the world in an ontological sense. A sociological

approach to Christianization relies on political concerns and group dynamics. Politically a ruler may find it expeditious to change religions for the sake of currying favor with a powerful neighbor or military commander. Later historians attributed this method to Olaf Tryggvasson, though with a good deal more credit than is due (3.3) (Jones 1984:135). Individual belief takes a backseat in this model to the considerations of the bureaucratic and administrative benefits of having a literate clergy or the influence of groupthink in a community. O'Dea argues that from a sociological standpoint such conversion 'supported and in fact partially inspired these efforts of unification' in pagan Scandinavia (O'Dea 1966:64-65). Fletcher argues that Christianity's appeal to political figures was that it formed a "cultural package" of useful Roman administrative and legal custom (Fletcher in Abrams 1995:137). While there is undoubtedly a good deal of truth to this claim, it sidesteps the notion of belief by painting Christianization as essentially political in function. To study the religiosity of a culture without taking into account the individuals that make it up overlooks much valuable evidence and plays into the false sense of uniformity of belief that plagues the study of medieval spirituality.

On the opposite side of the scale, however, is the psychological approach to the question of belief. Scholars such as Nock focus on the individual conversion experience, emphasizing personal revelations and the appeal of the late Roman mystery religions. Nock saw the success of Christianity in its appeal to the mindset of the medieval pagan, its promises of salvation and knowledge of the unknown (Nock 1998:99-121). The conversion experience depended on an individual identification with the new religion. Religious conversion is undoubtedly psychological on a personal level, but psychohistory is always extraordinarily imprecise. We simply do not know enough about individuals from the past to accurately appraise their individual mindsets in all their complexity and uniqueness. While modern psychology can provide some interesting analogies, it overreaches when attempting to analyze a medieval mind, let alone the mindset of a culture.

Cusack astutely pointed out that the very notion of Western Christianity is an inherently western perception and as such any study of Christianization risks

being little more than a projection of present understandings onto the past (Cusack 1998:10-11). This then also begs the question of whether or not pagan, non-western beliefs can be effectively defined and understood from the perspective of a culture that has been "Christianized." Cusack's work demonstrates that a single model of Christianization is not as possible or desirable as previously thought. Obviously all the approaches defined above have a certain level of merit to them and are valuable in the construction of a metahistorical narrative, but none look at the topic in a sufficiently holistic manner. It is this attitude that has been adopted most recently by scholars focusing the archaeology of religion. Lesley Abram's assertion that religion is as much about conduct as belief may be problematic in the sense that conduct and belief are not the same (Abrams 2000:137). A person may behave according to religious values and not 'believe' in a literal sense the stories and mythologies of that religion, for instance. Here Cusack's warning about modern definitions of what Christianity "is" apply.

The challenge to archaeologists is to frame the discussion independently of preconceived attitudes. Attention has been aptly drawn to the influence that the historical narrative has on the archaeology of Christianization (Schulke 1999). Insight into artefacts from a pre-Christian culture may be overlooked due to a lack of cultural context. However, archaeology may be a field uniquely qualified to observe and discuss the concept of Christianization, as its interpretations can be drawn directly from the material culture of the society in question. An archaeological approach can refocus the question on what tangible, physical evidence of Christianization remains and what its cultural correlates could have been. Almut Schülke writes of 'an archaeology that understands its role as coming closer to problems' and dethroning the historical sources that have reigned over conversion studies since the first accounts were written by the likes of Bede and Adam of Bremen (Schulke 1999:99). Taking this view even further is Bo Jensen whose work on pre-Christian amulets emphasizes a strictly materialist approach, inferring nothing from any non-archaeological source, though to do so deprives the archaeologist of the benefit of context (Jensen 2010:2-3).



More recently David Petts has challenged the lingering influence of colonialism in the field as well as the almost inescapable presence of the so-called Constantinian conversion model (Petts 2011:22). Most modern scholars seem aware of this problem, but it has proven exceedingly difficult to avoid. Petts suggestions include a more nuanced approach to interpretation of artefacts, much in the same way as Schülke's Contextual Archaeology does (1999). Rather than trying to discern which religious ideal was at play in these cases, the focus should lie in the fact that multiple ideals are present and that their interaction can in itself can be an avenue for understanding the beliefs of those who constructed them.

In this vein Kristjánsdóttir has very recently described Christianization as a Foucaultian process of discourse, action/reaction, and displays of power. The act of "becoming Christian" was (and is) a continuous process of resistance and accommodation between two ways of viewing and acting in the world. The end product is not a society which has stopped being pagan and begun being Christian, but rather "kaleidoscopic outcome of their sustained meeting" (Kristjánsdóttir 2015:30). In a case study based on the early Icelandic Christian church at Þórarinsstaðir, the church is identified as a panopticon wherein the numerous personal expressions of allegiance or resistance to the new order could observe and be observed by one another (2015:33). Her point of "functionalism, rationalism or human adaptation tends very often to become our default gear for explaining social changes" is particularly apt when considering the ecologically driven archaeology of Greenland in recent decades, whereas cultural motivations have been less represented (2015:40).

Examining belief in a time before Newton and more importantly before Luther allows us to more easily view structures, artefacts, and practices as physical correlates of non-physical principles as the Reformation emphasis on a deep, personal faith had not yet been so integrated into Christian philosophy. The construction of a church, albeit a purely physical undertaking in one sense, carries with it the builder's thoughts on what a church should look like, what materials should be used, what methods should be applied, not to mention the anticipated practices within it, their meanings, and how these would affect its

design. As an illustrative aside, in C.S. Lewis' *The Discarded Image* in which he presents his (admittedly idealized) understanding of a contextual reading of the Middle Ages, the following passage illustrates a pre-scientific and pre-Reformation understanding of the night sky:

[Books] become valuable only in so far as they enable us to enter more fully into the consciousness of our ancestors by realizing how such a universe must have affected those who believed in it... Hence to look out on the night sky with modern eyes is like looking out over a sea that fades away into mist, or looking about one in a trackless forest-trees forever and no horizon. To look up at the towering medieval universe is much more like looking at a great building. The 'space' of modern astronomy may arouse terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie; the spheres of the old present us with an object in which the mind can rest, overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony. That is the sense in which our universe is romantic, and theirs was classical. (Lewis 1964:98-100)

The Ptolemaic model of the universe which Lewis describes, the Greenlander's understanding of which is argued throughout this thesis, can thus be understood as defining the boundaries of the physical world within the giant apparatus of the Christian cosmology. Daily life was an interaction with it, and the building of a church to worship the deity who created it would inherently be more than a physical exercise of "conduct", but also of "belief".

### **3.3 Christianization in Scandinavia**

To assess Christianization in the North Atlantic we must first examine the process in Scandinavia, particularly in Norway, though perhaps not as much as early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars assumed. The process in Scandinavia, as elsewhere, had multiple influences. An influx of Christian slaves from Ireland, the British Isles, and elsewhere in Europe during the early Viking Age has been proposed as a vector for Christian infiltration, though historical sources from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onward tend to emphasise the activity of missionary saints (Brink 2011:622). The Anglo-Saxon church also played a significant role in the early period with a number of cults to Anglo-Saxon saints and Anglo-Danish bishops

appearing as churches were established in Norway, though German missionary activity based out of Hamburg-Bremen is likely equally responsible (perhaps competitively so), as well as Viking contact with the Eastern Church (Abrams 1995, Brink 2011:626).

The presence of grave goods in pagan burials appears to have declined in Scandinavia in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, though paganism and Christianity may have been practiced simultaneously in some parts of Norway and Sweden throughout the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Sawyer & Sawyer 1993:103-104; Abrams 1995:219). Despite rune stones from this period having been described as Christian propaganda, there appears to be no evidence of “culture wars” between adherents of the different traditions (Brink 2011:625). This may partially be explained by recent research into the supposed great pagan temple at Uppsala. While an earlier structure beneath the cathedral was detected in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, recent tests have shown that it was in fact an earlier church (Alkarp & Price 2005). If there was a “center” of pagan activity in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Uppsala was perhaps not its “home base”. Thor’s hammer amulets have been viewed as reactions to Christianity in Scandinavia, though the body of evidence may not be enough to form a convincing argument (Nordeide 2006; Staecker in Nordeide 2006:221).

Despite several furtive attempts at royally spreading Christianity in Norway it is King Olaf Trygvason (ca.995-1000) who is regarded as having the first nominal successes in this area, though following his death there was a resurgence of paganism in Norway. He is also credited with bringing Christianity to the islands of the North Atlantic though his influence was likely limited to the regional elites that he could directly control through military or diplomatic means.

Subsequently King Olaf II (ca. 1015-1028) renewed the royal assault on paganism, though his popularity as a saint following his death at the battle of Stiklestad was more influential than his reign in the establishment of Christianity in Scandinavia and the North Atlantic. On the topic of local sainthood, Brink points out

"In principle every province has a tradition of 'their' missionary who is said to have converted people and made them able to see the new light. ... The history of the introduction of the Christian religion in Scandinavia became the history of these holy men and women, who in principle had to give their lives in the religious struggle, but which eventually resulted in a local cult and a canonization of the one killed (2011:622)."

Perhaps significantly, there exists no account of a native Greenlandic saint, though Bardarson lists two church dedications to St. Olaf in Greenland: Vagar church, and the monastery which shared the dedication with St. Augustine (Ivar Bardarson, *A Fourteenth-Century Description of Greenland*, [Line]58-69; Derek Mathers (trans) 2009, 79-80).<sup>5</sup>

### **3.4 Christianization in Iceland**

Iceland serves as the chapterhouse for nearly all written accounts of Christianization in the North Atlantic. The population of Iceland was sufficient to support a class of ecclesiastical writers who could devote their energies to writing their own history, a luxury not in evidence in the rest of the North Atlantic. While the written sources are a major asset in understanding the region's history, they are also hugely influential in the way in which Iceland itself is studied.

Iceland's conversion has been studied almost exclusively through literary means until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main avenue of research has been Ari the Learned's account (and its derivatives in the family sagas) of the official conversion at the *Althing* of 999/1000, (Jochens 1999:621; Sigurðsson 2011:575). Ari's account is hierarchical and emphasizes the considerations of the Icelandic elite. It has been argued that the "distinctive[ly] Icelandic" decision was more related to preserving cultural homogeneity than religious conviction (Jochens 1999:651). In fact, the Icelandic reputation for arbitration based on feud structure in saga sources and a later historical reading of the proto-

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<sup>5</sup> Bardarson lists the dedications of a total of five churches. The cathedral at Gardar, dedicated to St. Nicholas, Aros church dedicated to the Holy Cross, and the convent dedicated to St. Benedict make up the other three.

democratic *Althing* is strong enough that the peaceful conversion has been presented almost as a given (Byock 2001:301). The first Icelandic bishopric of Skalholt was established in 1056 and was almost exclusively controlled by the powerful families of Haukadalur in Western Iceland (Vésteinsson 2000:144). The passing of the Icelandic Tithe Law of 1096 is regarded as a significant date in the institutionalization of the Icelandic Church, and the establishment of the second bishopric at Holar in 1106 followed shortly thereafter. By 1122 a section of the *Gragas* law codes was devoted specifically to Christian observance and it can be said that the Icelandic Church was thoroughly entrenched as an institution (Eypórsson 2005:20,55).

While Ari the Learned's long shadow has drawn historical scholarship toward the official apparatus of the Conversion, recent archaeological studies have examined what Ari does not say. Naturally, the remains of churches and burial grounds are used to assess the spread of Christian custom throughout Iceland. A striking development in this regard is the abrupt shift in burial custom away from furnished pagan burials to East-West oriented burials with no grave goods around 1000 (Vésteinsson 2000:45-48; Eypórsson 2005:23). Possible transitional burials uncovered by construction in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century at Hrafnagil in the Eyjafjörður region lend credence to this theory (Vésteinsson 2000:48). The extant pagan burials upon analysis appear to have more in common with those found in other Norse settlements in the British Isles than with Norway (Kristjánsdóttir 2011:424). Additionally, excavations at Mosfell have revealed a potential pagan cremation site which may overlap chronologically with an early Christian church (Zori & Byock 2014:14-15).

The number of churches present in Iceland at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century has been postulated to be as high as 3,000 though this number is likely very high (Vikungur in Eypórsson 2005:21). Still, by 1100 Icelandic churches were "numerous and small" (ibid). The earliest churches were likely established to meet the immediate needs of baptism, marriage, and burial in accordance with the new Christian custom rather than the performance of mass. Indeed, there exists no evidence to suggest that regular church services were held in Iceland until the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. Vésteinsson argues that church building itself

predated a general understanding of Christian doctrine among the Icelandic laity who may have been “awed by a splendid building but slightly puzzled about what to do in it” (2000:27).

Kristjánsdóttir has identified two schools of church architecture from this period: timber churches of a type found throughout Northern European Norse settlement areas between 1000 and 1100, and small, turf-walled *baenhus* style of the type found throughout the North Atlantic in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries (5.7.1) (Stummann Hansen & Sheehan 2006; Kristjánsdóttir 2011:425-428). Kristjánsdóttir views the churches – supported by findings from Icelandic pagan burials, mtDNA analysis, and blood type studies - as evidence of a coming together of different branches of Christianity from Ireland, Norway, and the North Atlantic islands, culminating in the style of timber-posted church with turf walls popular in Iceland until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (2011:431). Another interpretation sees the differences in style as a difference of use, with the smaller turf churches being private, family chapels not entitled to a share of the tithe and the larger timber churches functioning in the parish system (Eypórsson 2005:60-62).

Ari's account of the Conversion at the level of political and cultural elites seems reliable, in the least there's nothing inherently unlikely in his description. Though while a mass baptism of those involved in the making and enforcing of the new law would have undoubtedly caused some changes of practice in their own spheres of individual influence, it is only recently that a preliminary understanding of the general Christianization of Iceland has come to light.

### **3.5 Christianization in the Faroe Islands**

In 825 the Irish monk Dicuil writing in France described Irish monks settling in remote Islands in the North Atlantic. Dicuil believed these monks had been practicing their devotions in these northern climes for at least a century at the time of his writing before being afflicted by Norse pirates. Dicuil's monks are assumed to be the same people whom the Norse called *papar* throughout the Western and Northern Isles, Faroe and Iceland. Ari the Learned claims that the

first settlers of Iceland encountered bells and croziers left by these mysterious Christians, though it may be that he transplanted Dicuil's account from Faroe to Iceland (Jochens 1999:634). There is more evidence for the Papar in Faroe than in Iceland in any case. The significance of the Papar is the implication that some form of Christianity was present at the earliest period of Norse settlement. Lamb (1995) has argued that the closer they were to the population centers of Ireland and the British Mainland, these indigenous Christians may have been part of a Pictish ecclesiastical infrastructure that potentially drastically influenced the religious practices of the Norse newcomers. The presence of organized Christianity in the Faroes may have allowed for an active missionizing initiative or a distinct form of practice for Norse newcomers to emulate.

Aside from Dicuil, the Icelandic sources on the Faroes come from *Olaf's Saga* and the *Flateyrbok*. Danish antiquarian C. C. Rafn combined excerpts from these texts to form the *Færeyinga Saga* in 1832. Like most Icelandic narratives the sources are very Norway-centric. The *Færeyinga Saga* characterizes the process of Christianization as a struggle between the Norway-backed Christian Sigmundur Brestison and the intractable pagan Tróndur í Gøtu in the late 10<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> century. The date of settlement according to *Færeyinga Saga* is ca. 825, a date which has been corroborated by the excavations at Kvivik on the island of Streymoy (Pierce 2011:144).

Norse Faroe bears some similarity to Norse Greenland in a number of ways. Like Greenland the population appears to have been relatively small, visibly mainstream stone cathedral, and even written accounts of a Norwegian-backed Christian's conflict with a powerful pagan figure (albeit a far more violent process in the case of the Faroes), and like Greenland the archaeology is lacking in precious metals save for one oft-discussed silver hoard from the churchyard at Sandur (Graham-Campbell 2005:129; Pierce 2011:145). Both also lack the so-called "classical" pagan burials found elsewhere in the Norse diaspora. The Faroe Islands were the location of great developments in the analysis of place names in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Jakobsen 1904; McGovern 1990:338). Like Greenland, the study of the Faroese past did

not begin in earnest until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with a number of names familiar to the Greenlandic field at the same time, such as Daniel Brunn and Anton Brøgger (Bruun 1904; Brøgger 1937). Serious archaeological efforts began after the Second World War primarily in the work of Sverri Dahl and Arne Thorsteinson, followed by the work of Simun Arge and most recently Steffen Stumann Hansen (McGovern 1990; Stumann Hansen et al. 2013).

In recent years a number of small, turf churches with circular or sub-circular enclosures - *baenhus* (Prayer House) - have been surveyed in the Faroe Islands. 36 *baenhus* sites have been identified in the Faroes using place name analysis and survey work (Stumann Hansen & Sheehan 2006; Stumann Hansen 2011). Churches of this type have been identified throughout the North Atlantic from Orkney to Greenland and are generally regarded as private or proprietary churches (Brink 2004:173-174; Morris 2010:188; Kristjánsdóttir 2011:156; Stumann Hansen 2011:72-73). The best preserved Faroese *baenhus* at Leirvik stood roughly 500 meters from the Norse farmstead of Toftanes, settled in the mid 9<sup>th</sup> to mid 10<sup>th</sup> century. Christian artefacts have been recovered from the earliest layers of the farmstead, which supports the theory that Christianity in the Faroe Islands predates the traditional conversion date of 1000 by a substantial margin (Stumann Hansen et al. 2013:120-121). While none of the *baenhus* sites have been excavated so far, samples taken from one site exposed by erosion have been dated to the late 10<sup>th</sup> or early 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, supported by C<sup>14</sup> dating (Arge & Michelsen in Stumann Hansen et al. 2013:203).<sup>6</sup> Analysis of the function of churches of this type in Greenland appears below (5.7.1).

The circular or sub-circular morphology and turf construction of the sites are paralleled in early ecclesiastical sites in Ireland such as those at Church Island and Illanloughan in County Kerry (Keller 1989:191, Stumann Hansen 2006:41,50). Stone cross slabs from Skúvoy with Irish characteristics dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century demonstrates a Celtic Christian presence in the

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<sup>6</sup> An exact C<sup>14</sup> date was not cited in the available publication, but was summarized as 1000.



Faroes prior to the Norse arrival (Stumann Hansen 2006:46). Burnt peat-ash and carbonized cereals have demonstrated that the Faroes were settled in two waves prior to the Norse dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries (Church et al. 2013). A preexisting Christian presence may have led to a rapid assimilation of the Norse, accounting for the lack of pagan burials, and a Hiberno-Norse tradition was reflected in the construction of *baenhus* style churches until formally incorporated into the Archdiocese of Nidaros in 1152/53 (Young 1979:172). By 1300 the bishop of Faroe had ordered the construction of the opulent gothic cathedral at Kirkjubour, which was very much in the building tradition of medieval Europe and Scandinavia, and expensive enough that it appears to have only been used for only a brief period (Pierce 2011:155).

Despite the Faroes being settled a full century and a half earlier than Greenland it would appear that similar forces shaped their respective societies and the Christianization process. It is easily imagined that the construction of the gothic cathedral at Kirkjubour was as much a demonstration to foreign church authorities of the importance and orthodoxy of the Faroese church as it was to the local laity of the institution's power. The relatively short period in which it was used may indicate that the former was in fact its primary purpose, as the expense of maintaining and operating such a church may have led to its closing or, indeed, never being completed.

### **3.6 Christianization in the Northern Isles: Shetland and Orkney**

The history of the archipelagos of Shetland and Orkney are intertwined. Like the rest of the North Atlantic, Christianisation is credited to Olaf Tryggvasson in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century. In 1035 Henry of Lund – treasurer to King Canute – was made the first bishop of Orkney, a diocese that included the Shetland Islands (Thomson 2008:69). It has even been hypothesized that the two island groups were part of the same Earldom (Smith 1988). Both were likely inhabited by Pictish Christians by the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Cant 1972). Studies of both in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries question the Norse interaction with this population and the extent to which they influenced each other.

Place names relating to the *papar* are numerous, with 9 in the Shetlands and 7 in Orkney (The Papar Project, n.d.). There has been some debate as to how organized the Christian presence in the Northern Isles was. Lamb has referred to an existing Pictish ecclesiastical structure (1995). Lamb's view is supported by the 9<sup>th</sup> century *Life of St. Findan*, wherein the eponymous saint escapes from his Norse captors in the Northern Isles and encounters a bishop who "acquired his education in Ireland and was well acquainted with the language of that country" (*Life of St. Findan*; K. O'Nolan (trans) 2012,159). St. Findan's story is by no means demonstrably true, though it does make for intriguing circumstantial evidence. The extent to which the Norse were met with an entrenched and organized Christian apparatus is still a subject of debate.

Norse settlement of Shetland appears to have taken place in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, though the Norse farm of Jarlshof has been over relied upon for data from this period (Hansen 2000:89). The Shetland Chapel Sites Project's excavations on the supposed *papar* site at St. Ninian's Isle revealed the presence of an early Norse chapel. At the Brei Holm site at Papa Stour no definitive ecclesiastical use has been discovered, though Morris, Barrowman & Brady question who other than anchorites would have established themselves in such a remote site (Morris & Barrowman 2008:185-186). The oft-cited Bressay Stone's ogham dedication appears to contain the Norse loan-word *dattir* (daughter) (Fig. 9) (Crawford 1987:170-171). The stone is also notable for the robed figures carrying books and crosiers that match Icelandic and Norwegian descriptions of the *papar* (The Papar Project, n.d.). This evidence suggests that the Norse settlers did not exterminate the Papar/Christians in the Shetlands.

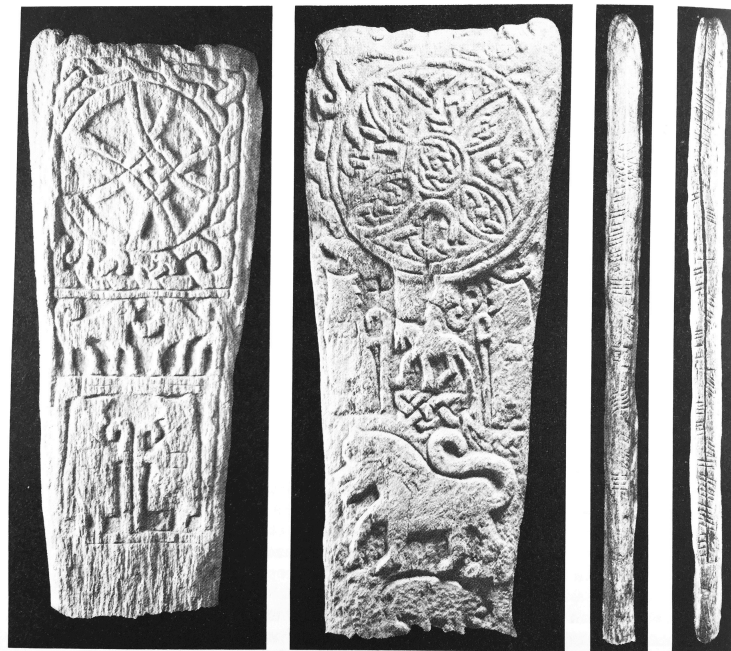


Figure 6: Bressay stone with ogham inscription and possible representations of "papar". (Crawford 1987, Fig. 60)

In both Shetland and Orkney the study of Norse Christianization is based heavily on the identification and dating of chapels. The Shetland Chapel Sites project extensively surveyed and dated ecclesiastical sites in Shetland prompting Morris to claim that “the formal adoption [of Christianity] in 1000 need, then, be no more than the official *de jure* recognition of a *de facto* situation” in the North Atlantic (Morris 2001:59). Barrett is more cautious, but discusses two possible models based on the dating of 10<sup>th</sup> century chapels from Newark Bay and the Brough of Deerness in Orkney with the *terminus ante quem* of Norse burials with grave goods: “syncretism during a period of conversion or the existence of distinct Christian and Pagan factions” (Barrett 2005:219). For Barrett, a great deal depends upon the historicity of *The Life of St. Findan* and upon the lack of sculpture combining Christian and Pagan imagery such as is known from the Isle of Man and southern Scotland (2005:220). Of particular interest are the existence of several late ‘hogback’ monuments in Orkney and one in Shetland (Lang 1972:209; Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998:248-250). Primarily found in Northern England and Southern Scotland, the presence of the Hogbacks is interesting in the context of the dueling between the archbishoprics of York and Hamburg-Bremen concerning

Orkney in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. The close proximity to numerous established seats of secular and religious authority would have made the Northern Isles' experience of Christianization quite different from more remote regions of the North Atlantic, though the presence of *baenhus* style churches also demonstrates a cultural connection with the same (Barrett 2005:207; Cant 1984:173-174).

Theories regarding the Norse settlement of Orkney can be broadly divided into two categories. The "Peace Theory" put forth by early scholars of the subject like Brøgger, Ritchie, and Lamb suggests that the Norse settlers claimed Orkney as their counterparts did in Iceland: for the purposes of farming, unhindered by the local Christian population with whom they coexisted or at least tolerated (Brøgger 1929; Ritchie 1976; Lamb 1995). The "War Theory" espoused by Clouston, Iain Crawford and Brian Smith contends that overwhelming Norse place names (as in Shetland) is an indication of a hostile takeover of the islands, enslaving, exterminating or driving out the local Pictish Christians (Clouston 1930; Crawford 1981; Smith 2001).

Christianization in Orkney is tied up with Earl Sigurd the Stout (ca. 960-1014), according to the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Orkneyinga saga*. Sigurd was allegedly given the choice of baptism or execution and invasion by Olaf Tryggvasson in 995, though he died carrying the raven banner of Odin at Clontarf in 1014 (*Orkneyinga Saga*, Appendix:186 J. Anderson (trans) 1873, 209-210). While Sigurd's death at Clontarf is attested to in several medieval sources both Norse and Irish, the episode with Olaf Tryggvasson is an exaggeration at best. Christianity was likely firmly in place in Orkney by 995, and both factions at Clontarf contained both pagans and Christians. It is possible that Sigurd himself was not exclusively one or another, lending credence to Barrett's syncretic theory, at least on an elite level.

### **3.7 Christianization in the Hebrides**

The importance of the Hebrides to Norse raiders and traders in the British Isles is evident. Strategically the islands control the waters off the west coast of

Scotland and north of Ireland and were a major factor in power struggles in Ireland, Scotland, Northern England and the Irish Sea throughout the Viking Age. Despite this importance, however, the nature of both the Norse settlement and the conversion of Norse residents there is still debated.

The distinctive boat-graves associated with paganism that are absent in Faroe and Greenland are quite visible in the Hebrides. While the boat-burial is the iconic Viking grave, it is becoming more recognised that there was nothing typical about such a practice. While such burials may have been desired for certain types of people (i.e. Vikings, merchants, warriors), there is no guarantee that burial in a boat with weapons and trade goods meant the same in the Western Isles in the 10<sup>th</sup> century as it did in southern Sweden a century earlier, or anywhere else in the Norse diaspora. The Norse presence in the Hebrides appears to have been more militaristic than elsewhere in the North Atlantic as the Hebrides provided a base to raid sites in Ireland and western Britain (Abrams 2007:189; Sharples and Pearson 1999:55-58). These “warrior” graves may have reflected that atmosphere, and thus conveniently explain their absence further from prime targets from piracy. This is a highly simplified explanation, however, and the nuances of each burial may reveal varying interpretations of their meaning. Iain Crawford, regarding research into place names and the sparse archaeology of North Uist declared that the Norse settlement “took place in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and it was sudden and totally obliterative in terms of material culture” (Crawford 1981:267). In contrast, a survey of South Uist demonstrated that the arrival of the Norse had not substantially disrupted the settlement patterns already in place there. Indeed, the Norse appear to have made use of the same local resources as the indigenous population. The main disruption may have been at upper levels of society (Sharples & Pearson 1999:57-58).

But once the Norse had established themselves in the Hebrides, at what point did they become Christian? Barbara Crawford has argued that Christianity could not have taken hold in the Hebrides without a sustained infrastructure; a “system of churches and hierarchy of priests” (Crawford 1983:102). Missionising bishops and local earls may have worked together to create a

mixture of public and private chapels (1987:178-180). The Columban ecclesiastical center of Iona makes a likely base for such missionizing activity, and while Iona's status as a center of Christian missionary activity during the Viking Age has been debated, that it was sacked four times in the space between 795 and 825 suggests that it was still productive and robust enough to have loot worth taking (Abrams 2007:174-175; Crawford & Simpson 2008:8).

During the 10<sup>th</sup> century pagan and Christian burials were occurring in close physical and chronological proximity to one another. On Barra, for instance, a classical Norse pagan female burial and a Christian monument dedicated to one Thorgerdr, Steinar's daughter may have been separated by as little as 50 years (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998:82-83; Abrams 2007:169). A 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century boat burial from Kiloran Bay on Colonsay included two prominent incised crosses (Crawford 1987:162). Several Norse burial mounds were opened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century near the chapel at Kildonnan on Eigg and are believed to be from the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Fragmentary cross slabs suggest a potentially contemporary Christian site in addition to a *papar* site on neighboring Rum (Graham Campbell & Batey 1998:84; Abrams 2007:173-174, Papar Project). These and other examples demonstrate the wide array of interaction between incoming Vikings and local Christian populations, including notable attacks on Christian sites during the same period.

The conversion of the Norse in the Hebrides appears to have been a diffuse and uneven process. For example, there are no *papar* place names north of Ardnamurchan, perhaps due to differing relationships between the Norse and the Christian inhabitants of the northern and southern islands (Crawford & Simpson 2008:10) Despite the assurances of the Icelandic *Saga of the People of the Eyri* there is no evidence to suggest that Ketil Flatnose or any singular missionary action or secular ruler imposed (or even introduced) Christianity among the Norse in the region, but rather a "multiplicity of reactions to Christianity" is more likely (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998:45; Abrams 2007:189).

In many ways, the Christianization process in the Hebrides is the most difficult due to the high volume of traffic. Irish missionary activity in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, Pictish political expansion, pagan Norse incursions and eventual settlement all took place in the Hebridean region. Isotopic tests conducted on the 10<sup>th</sup> century individual in the Swordle Bay Viking boat burial on Ardnamurchan may indicate a person who grew up in Norway or possibly Ireland, further supporting the notion that the Hebrides saw direct contact with Scandinavia (Harris et al. In Press).

Most work on the subject has presumed that a firm ecclesiastical structure was necessary for lasting Christianization in the region, despite acknowledging the vast regional variations and expressions of belief (Crawford 1987:180; Abrams 2007:182). In the end, these approaches still define Christianization as a consistent ecclesiastical authority rather than a new or altered understanding of the world shared by a group of individuals.

### **3.8 Discussion**

The regions described above benefit from a great number of avenues to explore the Christianization process that are not present in Greenland. In Greenland the Norse did not encounter any indigenous population upon their arrival (though the sagas claim that artefacts, likely Dorset, were encountered by the first settlers), there are no definite pagan burials thus far identified, no traditions of local saints, no remaining stone monuments<sup>7</sup>, and no reliable written account of the conversion process.<sup>8</sup> How then, to proceed?

What is known is that Greenland's Christianization was contemporary with the rest of the North Atlantic and only slightly behind Scandinavia in general. From the limited discussion of these communities above it is evident that despite certain commonalities (i.e. the mutual inclusion of these places in the Archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen, Lund, and Nidaros; the development of

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<sup>7</sup> Ivar Bardarson mentions one stone cross in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, though no trace of it has been found.

<sup>8</sup> The saga account of Leif Eirikson's voyage to Olaf Trygvason's court is likely an invention (5.1).

proprietary churches), there is also a body of evidence for distinct and varied expressions of belief.

For instance, burial practices. The work of Neil Price on the mortuary theatre of pre-Christian Norse burials assesses the practices that result in the static final image of a burial (Price 2010). Such an approach may also be employed to examine the varied practices of the Christian cemeteries in Greenland. While all of the burials are arguably “Christian” there are a number of divergent practices present in the form of enigmatic grave goods, absentee burials, and positioning of the body to name a few. Such variations are not as overtly dramatic as the richly furnished case studies in Price’s article, but the arrangement of an individual grave in a Christian cemetery nonetheless involves conscious symbolic action on the part of the living, including some interesting correlations over time.

These symbolic actions and their variance in the Greenlandic material can also be viewed in Kristjánsdóttir’s definition of “becoming Christian.” The physical remnants of lost rituals, sporadic pagan artefacts, and church morphology will be shown to reflect a society of “sustained meetings” between pagans and Christians acting upon differing tradition and identity (Kristjánsdóttir 2015).

As the most visible remnants of belief and practice, the morphology of church and domestic structures will play a significant role in this thesis. Stumann Hansen has suggested this as reflective of identity:

The apparently egalitarian picture, presented by the architecture, might also be seen as an expression of a community in the middle of a colonization process, in which a homogenous identity was of the outermost importance, politically as well as socially, in a counterbalance to other ... communities and identities (Stumann Hansen 2000:101).

Further architectural parallels suggested by Kristjánsdóttir involve the transition of single room to multi-room dwellings in Iceland as a reflection of changing family dynamics and practices as a result of Christianity (2015:40-41). Such a transition has been noted in Greenland as well, but with an emphasis on functionalist explanations (Roussell 1936; Roussell & Degerbøl 1941). The shift



in church style from *baenhus* to large stone churches will be discussed as it relates to an institutionalizing of Church power in the 12<sup>th</sup> century on and the subsequent changes that this brought to the Greenlanders' sense of place and power.

The regional examples above will provide the theoretical underpinnings of the following chapters. Approaches will attempt to eschew purely functionalistic explanations of practice where possible, as these approaches make up the bulk of Greenlandic archaeology and have been more thoroughly debated elsewhere. How these variances of belief were perceived in the Norse North Atlantic by those committing their world to writing will be evaluated in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4

### Greenland's Place in the Written Sources

*I can see death in a dread place,  
yours and mine, north-west in the  
waves, with frost and cold, and  
countless wonders; that's why  
Snaebjorn, I see, will lose his life.*  
– *The Book of Settlements*, ca. 1350 (*The Book of  
Settlements*, 1:152; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 72)

*The sagas that tell of Greenland do not leave the impression of a  
light-hearted community... - Ursula Dronke, 1969:108*

#### 4.1 Introduction

The problematic emphasis on the end of the Greenlandic settlements is due in large part to a lack of primary sources. No Greenlandic historian has left us a chronicle or text unequivocally describing life in Greenland or the reasons for its subsequent abandonment. Greenland has a place in the written record as a marginal place, a nexus of physical and spiritual perils. This view is reflected in Icelandic literature in several sagas and poems, as well as more “official” views from church authorities in Europe. This chapter will examine written conceptions of Greenland during the time of its inhabitation for clues as to the conditions and practices of life in Norse Greenland.

About 170 objects with runic and Latin inscriptions have been found in both settlements, primarily religious in nature (Imer 2014:342). This is indicative of a society that was well acquainted with writing and used it to express concepts such as belief and ownership.

When viewed alone, it is tempting to see this style of writing as quasi-magical or symbolic, especially when the majority of the runic inscriptions are religious in nature. Individual runic inscriptions will be evaluated in this respect below (6.4), but for the purposes of this chapter what must

be acknowledged is how these inscriptions indicate the role writing played in the community of Norse Greenland.

The abundance of runic inscriptions and an apparent Eddic poem, *Atlamal in Groenlenzko*, speak to the role of writing in Greenland as a means of cultural memory and as a static representation of the concepts of Christianity. Many of the inscriptions are dated post-1200, but this is likely due to excavation practices of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which did not allow for dating or accurate recording of provenance (Imer 2014:344). Many of the key sites excavated were not abandoned until near the end of the Norse period in Greenland (ca. 1450) and therefore yield finds that skew later. Whether or not *Atlamal* was unique in its place as Greenlandic literature, the numerous short inscriptions clearly demonstrate an appreciation of the permanence of the written word and its power in conveying an abstract concept throughout time. For example, “Gudveg’s runestick” (7.5.2.4) which was interred where it could never be read in order to provide a permanent substitute for an abstract concept of personhood in the coffin at Herjolfsnes. The Gospel of John begins by asserting the primacy of the Word, and describes Christ as the “Word made flesh” (John 1:1-14). Gudveg’s runestick has reversed the order. The changing and impermanent flesh is made static and enduring Word.

The Greenlanders clearly used and appreciated the written word, but they did not use it to describe their homes, their lives, or their stories in the manner of the Icelandic sagas. This was the domain of the authors and historians of Iceland, who placed their own social and spiritual anxieties and upon their western neighbors.

## **4.2. Writing in Greenland**

### *4.2.1 Atlamal in Groenlenzko, or The Greenland Lay of Atli*

*Atlamal in Groenlenzko* is a poem of the Elder Edda contained in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic *Codex Regius*. *Atlamal* is believed to date to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup>

century and is a reworking of part of the Volsung cycle (Terry 1990:229). It is the only extant text that is believed to be Greenlandic in origin. An earlier rendition of this story, *Atlakvida*, is also included in the same collection, which the compiler apparently also believed to be Greenlandic, but literary scholars now believe it to be too early (Dronke 1969:108). Subsequent analysis has focused on what textual evidence there is for such a claim. A description of a polar bear is an oft-cited passage, as are the descriptions of the key characters' modest living arrangements. While polar bears and aristocratic families of modest means were not limited to Greenland, Dronke finds that the Greenlandic origin of *Atlamal* is convincing when viewed in the light of its original designation in the *Codex* (Dronke 1968:108). While there exist no exclusively Greenlandic themes in *Atlamal*, there are also no compelling reasons to declare the designation an error.

*Atlamal* tells the same story as the earlier *Atlakvida*, but abandons many heroic and historical tropes in favor of a more simple and brutal style, resulting in a portrayal of society where "domestic hatreds, intrigue, and self-interest were so potent that it was unnecessary to specify any particular reason why a man should plot against his brothers-in-law" (Dronke 1969:99). Both lays recount Atli's orchestration of the deaths of Gunnar and Hogni, sons of Gjuki. Atli is then slain by his wife Gudrun, sister to the murdered brothers.

The author of *Atlamal* was familiar with *Atlakvida* as well as at least one German version of the tale resembling *Thidreks Saga* (a 12<sup>th</sup> century chivalric saga relating the life of Gothic King Theoderic the Great), but was also skilled and creative enough to bring together conflicting character traits and present a legendary tale as relevant to the world in which he lived.

The story of *Atlamal* was not told in this way simply because the poet... had a limited horizon, and therefore knew no better. He presented his story in these terms because he shared the pleasure of the people of his day in the dramatic – even melodramatic – tales of the life-and-death feuds of farmers, the great local figures of the past (Dronke 1968:106).

For such a piece to be composed in Greenland suggests that Greenland was a part of the developed literary tradition of the North Atlantic, centered in Iceland and drawing on influences from European sources as far away as Germany. Unfortunately, it remains the only possible example of such a tradition in Greenland.

If *Atlamal* was indeed composed in Greenland it undermines certain assumptions about Greenland's cultural isolation that pervaded the field in the early to mid twentieth century. While the atmosphere of the piece is dark and Spartan, the poetic skill and literary traditions drawn upon indicate an author well versed in the literature of their day, which was shared throughout the North Atlantic. Further evidence of this connection comes from a 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century runic inscription excavated in 1997 that bears similarities to a Faroese *lausavisa* (a single stanza poem) dated to approximately 1000 (Stoklund 1998:10-11).

### **4.3 Literary depictions of Greenland**

All the literary sources that feature Greenland were written in Iceland between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and are part of a larger body of work that are regularly set partially or completely outside Iceland. Grove describes these tales about Greenland as having an outlook that is "resolutely Icelandic" and "ahistorical at best" (Grove 2009:30). This is not to say they are without value as sources, as they emphasize Greenland's conceptual otherness in the medieval world and provide clues to Icelandic perceptions of Greenlandic customs and beliefs. The first examination of the sources listed below will relate to themes and motifs present in them that are reflective of outside perceptions of Greenland. Key perceptions that will be demonstrated are those of Greenland's conceptual place in the margins of the world, the prevalence of witchcraft or other perceived non-normative religious practice, and accounts cultural backwardness.

#### *4.3.1 The sagas as sources: challenges and theories*

Utilizing saga sources for historical context is much like crossing a marsh – it can be done, but only slowly and with great caution. Analysis of the sagas is a field unto itself, so an extensive review is not viable here, but a few chief issues must be addressed to contextualize the use of these sources in subsequent chapters.

The sagas utilized in this thesis all come from the so-called *Íslendingasögur*, the Sagas of Icelanders, also known as “Family Sagas”, detailing the genealogies and deeds of ostensibly prominent Icelanders in the Viking Age and their alleged relation to prominent families at the time of the sagas composition. The question of the sagas’ historical veracity is primarily debated through the question of how such stories were composed. The free-prose theory, popularized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, asserts that the sagas were initially oral compositions committed to writing in the 12<sup>th</sup> through 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this line of argument, the text reflects an ongoing tradition of oral storytelling and genealogical convention, the stories originating at or close to the time of their subject matter – this is to say the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. This view is still commonly held of other Icelandic bodies of work such as skaldic poetry or the *Gragas* law codes. The book-prose theory, which arose in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, sees the sources as primarily literary works composed by literate authors during this same span. While these authors may have drawn on local historical traditions present in Iceland at this time, the story structures, personalities, and values present in the stories should be viewed as the products of a thoroughly post-Viking, Christian mindset versed in continental sources as well. The debate continues, with each approach proving valuable in certain ways (Bibire 2007: 11-12). Further complicating the issue is the question of just when these texts were composed. Dating the sagas require linguistic and stylistic analysis and noting references to other sources from sometimes incomplete or significantly later manuscripts. Dates used for sagas in this thesis rely primarily on the latest complete edition of the Sagas of Icelanders (Fig. 10) (Hreinsson 1997).

While it does appear that the sagas were understood to be 'true' in some sense to their original audience, their purpose was also one of *sagnaskemtan* – 'entertainment' (Lonnroth 2008:306). Historians are understandably reluctant to accept saga accounts as historical sources in the same way as a chronicle is, for example (despite the same problems of credulity present in chronicles!). Perhaps the most useful way of interpreting how 'true' the sagas are is to see them, as Bibire says, as "layered, receding reflections of the past...not only our own and its own perceptions of the past, but the diminishing reflections of perception from previous periods" (Bibire 2007:17-18).

In this thesis, sagas are used as illustrative and hypothetical examples that can provide some clue into this layered and receding understanding of Greenland from an Icelandic point of view. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the chief analyst of Icelandic saga sources relating to Greenland was Finnur Jonson, a free-prose theorist. He and the early Danish archaeologists accepted the sagas relating to Greenland more or less uncritically and set a long-standing tradition in Greenlandic archaeology in motion. For instance, the Norse farm ruins at Ø-29a are still referred to as Eirik the Red's farm, Brattahlíð, despite there being no incontrovertible evidence that this is the case.

There are some aspects of the saga accounts of Greenland that are corroborated through archaeology, however. C<sup>14</sup> dating of the earliest Norse remains in Greenland approximate the dates given in the Vinland Sagas and the book of the Icelanders for the initial settlement (5.4). Some of these sagas can be read to demonstrate an understanding of the local geography of the Eastern Settlement (4.3.5). The descriptions of Helluland, Markland, and Vinland layer well over the geography of the east coasts of Baffin Island, Newfoundland, and the Norse site at L'Anse Aux Meadows (Ingstad 1969:98). Even in Iceland are occasional archaeological finds which bear a striking similarity to saga sources (Zori and Byock 2014:40).

Care is taken in this thesis to recognize the historical value of the sagas while still not taking them at their word. It may be that a medieval Icelandic saga audience took a similar approach – “what they thought had happened, or might have happened, or should have happened” (Bibire 2008:17). As the modern scholar has no other sources from which to glean information about daily life in Norse Greenland, references to saga content in subsequent chapters should be understood as layers of Icelandic understanding of the comings and goings and major events of their westerly neighbors, sometimes quite plausible and archaeologically credible, other times quite fantastic, and theoretically every variation in between.

#### *4.3.2 The perilous journey*

A frequent trope in tales about Greenland involves the difficulty of reaching it (Grove 2009:40-44). According to the *Book of Settlements* completed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the first wave of settlers leaving Iceland for Greenland in 985 set sail in 25 ships, of which 14 safely reached the Eastern Settlement (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:90; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 49). The journey from Snaefellsnes, where the fleet sailed from, to the presumed location of *Hvitserk* (near modern Amassalik on the east coast) is some 277 nautical miles (Forte 2005:330). *Landnámabók* times the journey at four days (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:2; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 15). These routes were well within the capabilities of Norse sailors, despite the North Atlantic's reputation for hard sailing, and trade and contact between Greenland and Europe was ongoing. However, by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century no less than five sources describe the journey as a trial that endures the whole of the sailing season, forcing the travelers to find temporary lodging on the inhospitable east coast wilderness or *obyggdir* (*The Saga of Ref the Sly*, 3:6; G. Clark (trans) 1997, 404; *The Saga of the People of Floi* 21-22; *The Saga of Bard the Snowfell God*, 1:5; R. O'Connor (trans) 2006, 193; *The Saga of Gunnar, the Fool of Keldugnup*, 3:5; S.M. Anderson (trans) 1997, 428; *Jokul Buason's Tale*, 3:1; J. Porter (trans) 1997, 328).



Text	English Title	Conventional dating	Earliest MS
<i>Einars þáttir Sokkasonar/ Grœnlendinga þáttir</i>	The Story of Einar Sokkason/The Tale of the Greenlanders	Late 12th century	ca. 1387-95
<i>Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka</i>	The Story of Audun from the Westfjords	Early 13 <sup>th</sup> c.	ca. 1275
<i>Grœnlendinga saga</i>	The Saga of the Greenlanders	Early 13 <sup>th</sup> c.	ca. 1387-95
<i>Eiríks saga rauða</i>	Erik the Red's Saga	Early 13 <sup>th</sup> c.	ca. 1302-10
<i>Fóstbræðra saga</i>	The Saga of the Foster Brothers	Early or late 13 <sup>th</sup>	ca. 1302-10
<i>Flóamanna saga</i>	The Saga of the People of Floi	Late 13th/early	ca. 1390-1425
<i>Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss</i>	The Saga of Bard the Snowfell God	Early or mid-14 <sup>th</sup>	ca. 1390-1425
<i>Króka-Refs saga</i>	The Saga of Ref the Sly	14th c.	ca. 1450-1500
<i>Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls</i>	The Saga of Gunnar, the fool of Keldugnup	Late 14th or 15 <sup>th</sup>	17th century
<i>Jökuls þáttir Búasonar</i>	Jokul Buason's Tale	Late 14th or 15 <sup>th</sup>	17th century
<i>Skald-Helga Rimur</i>	The Rhyme of Poet-Helge	15th c.	16th century
Source: Grove 2009, Hreinsson 1997, Moller Jensen 2007:159-168.			

Figure 7: Icelandic texts relating to Greenland, their conventional dating and earliest manuscripts.

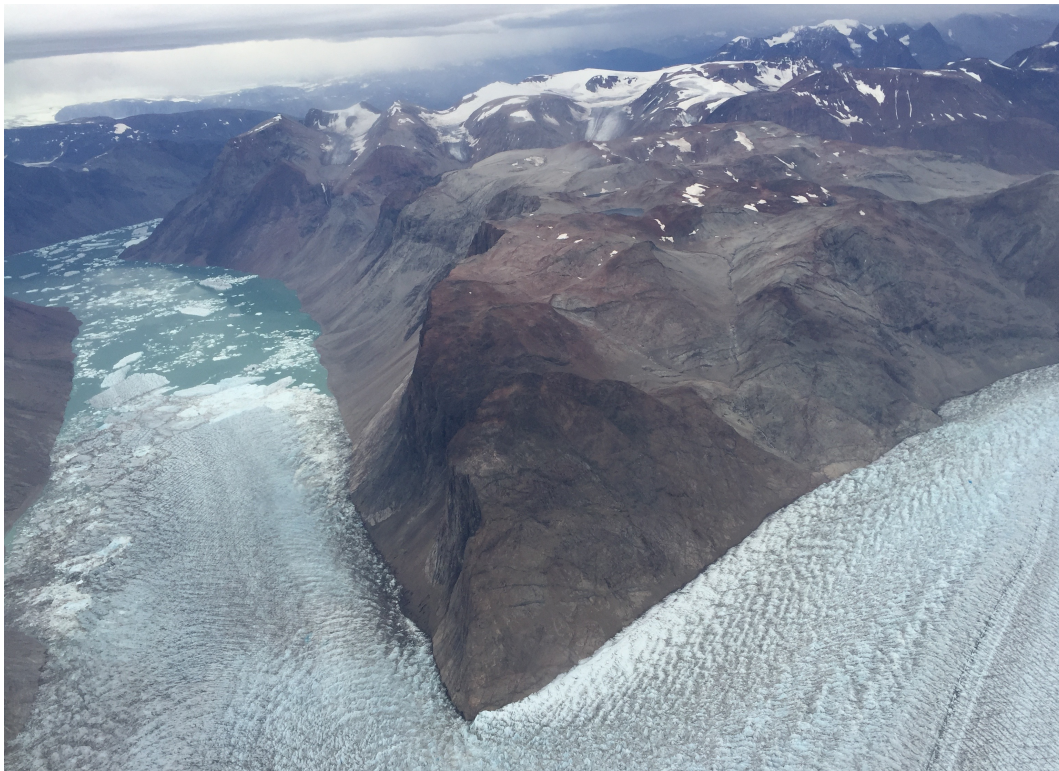


Figure 8: The *obyggdir* from the air just inland from Qassiarsuk. (Photo: J. McCullough)

This motif may have found its origin in the tale of Snaebjorn Galti, whose attempt to settle in Greenland at Gunnbjorn's Skerries predated that of Erik the Red but ended in division and murder (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:152; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 72-74). The exaggerated descriptions of the difficult journey to Greenland are accentuated by the lack of such descriptions of leaving Greenland.

Getting back from Greenland does not generally seem to involve the same difficulties as getting there in these tales, and we hear of no corresponding wrecks on the fearsome Atlantic lee shores of Iceland, Scandinavia, or the British Isles on the return journey. The asymmetrical pattern bespeaks the artificiality of these narratives. (Grove 2009:41).

It should be stressed that the artificiality described by Grove does not render these sources historically useless. Rather, they provide a window into the cultural and conceptual attitudes of the saga authors and their audiences as regards Greenland's place in the North Atlantic world.

#### 4.3.3 Menacing monsters and magic in the *obyggdir*

A large portion of the action of sagas set in Greenland takes place in the wilderness, or *obyggdir*. Greenland remains mostly uninhabited to this day. Geographically Greenland's total area is approximately 2,415,100 km<sup>2</sup>, of which the ice sheet covers 1,799,850 km<sup>2</sup> (approximately 74.5%) (Kleivan 1996:125). The landscape is dramatic and imposing, and is a fitting setting for an adventure at the edge of society (Fig. 11).

Grove argues that the increased literary use of the *obyggdir*, or the wilderness beyond the settlements, emphasizes the marginality of Greenland to establish it as a "peripheral setting in which manhood is challenged and vigorously asserted", in every case by non-Greenlandic protagonist (Grove 2009:33). While *Snaebjorn Galti's* story is fairly mundane, later stories about the Greenlandic wilderness veer into the fantastic, where heroes do battle with amorous giantesses and hunt witches (*Jokul Buason's Tale*, 3:1; J. Porter (trans) 1997, 328-330; Konradson, G. *The Tale of Scald-Helgi*; A. Boucher (trans) 1983, 68-69).

What is most noteworthy about this phenomenon for the purposes of this chapter is that these stories were composed during Greenland's height as a colony, and became more fantastical as the population and prosperity of the settlements dwindled. *The Story of Bard the Snowfell God* (ca. 1350) pushes the border between center and periphery even further to the west - when Gest prepares to raid the burial mound of the undead King Raknar, the author places it in Helluland – modern day Baffin Island - and by doing so incorporates the expanding geographical knowledge of North America into a realm of monsters (*The Saga of Bard the Snowfell God*, 1:14; R. O'Connor (trans) 2006, 228). The folkloric *Jokul Buason's Tale*, written in the late 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> century (when the emptying of Greenland was almost complete) insinuates that Jotunheim – the mythological home of the giants - is Greenland, or at least overlaps it, completely assigning to Greenland an other-worldly status (*Jokul Buason's Tale*, 3:3; J. Porter (trans) 1997, 333).

The vast, uninhabited expanses of the *obyggdir* weighed heavily on the Greenlanders. The journey from a habitable community to an unforgiving landscape of ice-covered mountains was very short from any Norse farmstead. This landscape symbolized the limits of society, Christendom, and a way of life. The Norse were farmers, and any of the *skraelingar* - likely the Thule culture Inuit who moved south along the coast of Western Greenland in the 13<sup>th</sup> century they encountered in Greenland lived according to what would have seemed completely foreign principles (Kleivan 1996:125). Beyond the ice-defined settlement areas was an enormous zone that no Norse settler could successfully survive in or even hope to know. This anxiety can be seen in the development of churches (Chapter 5) and in the exclusive interment of the dead within the churchyard (Chapter 7), which both speak to the Greenlanders desire to surround themselves a conceptual center in the midst of the periphery.

It is not surprising, considering the extremes of the environment, that this great unknown became the home of supernatural threats in need of defeating by Christian heroes. According to the sagas, this boundary is almost synonymous with the supernatural. The following passage reviews them briefly in chronological order by estimated date of composition. Interestingly, the earliest text in this body, *The Story of Einar Sökkason/The Tale of the Greenlanders*, contains elements of the supernatural in the *obyggdir*, but in a subtler manner than its successors. The journey into the wilderness contains a prophetic dream of a descent into madness, but no monsters or sorcery (*The Story of Einar Sökkason*, 1:2; G. Jones, 238-239). In fact, the primary concern of the tale is the establishment of a formalized Christian bishopric at Gardar. *The Story of Audun From the Westfjords* is similarly lacking in the supernatural, though Audun spends only a brief portion of the story in Greenland (*The Tale of Audun from the Westfjords*, 1:1; W.I. Miller (trans) 2008, 7). Audun purchases a polar bear cub in Greenland and transports it to Denmark as a gift for King Svein, Greenland serves only as a place where such animals are readily available.

*The Saga of the Greenlanders* and *Eirik the Red's Saga* are collectively known as *The Vinland Sagas* and are the most famous of the written sources on Greenland due to their descriptions of the North American continent. It is in these early 13<sup>th</sup> century sources that tales of the supernatural first gain prominence.

#### 4.3.4 *Eirik the Red's Saga and The Saga of the Greenlanders*

In the *Vinland Sagas* themselves all these supernatural themes are present. Of the two sagas, *Eirik the Red's Saga* features more fantastic elements. In *Eirik the Red's Saga* Thorbjorn Vifilson's ship endures "many hardships" before arriving safely at Herjolfsnes, lean times revive pagan practices out of necessity, the dead are restless, including Thorstein Eirikson, intractable pagans beach whales for food through sorcery, and unipedal monsters lurk in the forests of Vinland (*Eirik the Red's Saga* 1:4,6,8,12; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 5-6, 9-11, 13-14, 17).

Perhaps the most important passage in *Eirik the Red's Saga* is the description of Thorbjorg, the "little prophetess." The saga relates how during a "very lean time" in Greenland, a pagan *volva* makes the rounds in the district around Herjolfsnes. It appears that she is paid for her work, and that despite the nominally "Christian" status of Greenland that she has enough willing customers that making this circuit was her "custom" (*Eirik the Red's Saga*, 1:4; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 5-7). The passage, consisting of the entirety of Chapter 4, has been noted for the "unparalleled detail of its description and its social context" (Price 2002:71). Thorbjorg's dress and implements of sorcery are described, as well as the manner in which people of the farm received her.

When she arrived one evening...she was wearing a black mantle with a strap, which was adorned with precious stones right down to the hem. About her neck she wore a string of glass beads and on her head a hood of black lambskin lined with white catskin. She bore a staff with a knob at the top, adorned with brass set with stones on the top. About her she had a linked charm belt with a large purse. In it she kept the charms which she needed for her

predictions. She wore calfskin boots lined with fur with long, sturdy laces and pewter knobs on the ends. On her hands she wore gloves of catskin, white and lined with fur. When she entered, everyone was supposed to offer her respectful greetings, and she responded according to how the person appealed to her. Farmer Thorkel took the wise woman by the hand and led her to the seat which had been prepared for her. He then asked her to survey his flock, servants and buildings... A porridge of kid's milk was made for her and as meat she was given the hearts of all the animals available there. She had a spoon of brass and a knife with an ivory shaft, its two halves clasped with bronze bands, and the point of which had broken off (*Eirik the Red's Saga*, 1:4; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 5-6).

Price urges caution in accepting all these accouterments as historical descriptions of a sorcerer's tools and dress, but some (such as the staff, charms, and belt) have parallels in archaeology and literature (Price 2002:171).

Perhaps the most telling portion of this passage as relates to the Icelandic perception of Greenlandic Christianity is the singing of chants.

Late the following day she was provided with things she required to carry out her magic rites. She asked for women who knew the chants required for carrying out magic rites, which are called ward songs. But such women were not to be found. Then the people of the household were asked if there was anyone with such knowledge.

Gudrid answered "I have neither magical powers nor the gift of prophecy, but in Iceland my foster-mother Halldis taught me chants she called ward songs." Thjorbjorg answered, "Then you know more than I expected." Gudrid said, "These are the sort of actions in which I intend to take no part, because I am a Christian woman." Thjorbjorg answered: "It could be that you could help the people here by so doing, and you be no worse a woman for that. But I expect Thorkel to provide me with what I need." Thorkel then urged Gudrid, who said she would do as he wished. The women formed a warding ring around the platform raised for sorcery, with Thorbjorg perched atop it. Gudrid spoke the chant so well and so beautifully that people there said they had never

heard anyone recite in a fairer voice. The Seeress thanked her for her chant. (*Eirik the Red's Saga*, 1:4; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 6).

Another important passage is that surrounding the death of Thorstein Eirikson, the husband of the same Gudrid who assisted Thjorborg. When sickness strikes the farm at which the two are staying, there are several instances of hauntings. When Thorstein himself dies of the illness, his corpse calls for Gudrid, and among other things decries the state of Christianity in Greenland.

[Thorstein Eirikson said:] "These practices will not do which have been followed here in Greenland after the coming of Christianity: burying people in unconsecrated ground with little if any service said over them. I want to have my corpse taken to a church, along with those of the other people who have died here. But Gardi should be burned on a pyre straight away, as he has caused all the hauntings which have occurred here this winter." It had been common practice in Greenland since Christianity had been adopted to bury people in unconsecrated ground on the farms where they died. A pole was set up on the breast of each corpse until a priest came, then the pole was pulled out and consecrated water poured into the hole in a burial service performed, even though this was only done much later. The bodies were taken to the church in Eiriksfiord and priests held burial services for them. (*Eirik the Red's Saga*, 1:6; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 10)

Interestingly, so far no burials outside of a designated churchyard have been detected in Greenland. Burial practices are analyzed further in Chapter 7, but evidence indicates that the Greenlanders were fastidious in their observance of churchyard burial.

An arrow kills another of Eirik the Red's sons, Thorvald, during his exploration of Vinland. While this is true in both sagas, in *Eirik the Red's Saga* the arrow was fired by a uniped, a one-legged humanoid described in classical sources and medieval sources as living in the far east and Africa (Pliny the Elder. *The Natural History*, 7:2 J. Bostock (trans) 1893; *The Etymologies* XI.iii.23). The Hereford Mappa Mundi of ca.1300 also depicts a uniped inhabiting the mouth of the Ganges at the eastern most edge of the world (Fig. 94). The presence

of the uniped in *Eirik the Red's Saga* serves to underscore the perceived extreme limits of Greenland and its surroundings.

*The Saga of the Greenlanders*, though somewhat more restrained than *Eirik the Red's Saga*, contains multiple passages emphasizing the same themes. The archer who kills Thorvald is a native, for example, as opposed to a uniped, but the attack is foretold by a disembodied voice urging Thorvald to rally his men and escape (*The Saga of the Greenlanders*, 1:4; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 25). Thorstein's corpse also awakens to speak to his wife Gudrid, but the passage is written to emphasize the importance of Gudrid's descendants to Icelandic Christianity.

I want to tell Gudrid her fate, to make it easier for her to resign herself to my death, for I have gone to a good resting place. I can tell you, Gudrid, that you will be married to an Icelander, and you will live a long life together, and have many descendants, promising, bright and fine, sweet and well-scented. You will leave Greenland to go to Norway and from there to Iceland and set up house in Iceland. There you will live a long time, outliving your husband. You will travel abroad, go south on a pilgrimage, and return to Iceland to your farm, where a church will be built. There you will remain and take holy orders and there you will die. (*The Saga of the Greenlanders*, 1:5; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 27)

The saga concludes by attesting that Gudrid did indeed journey to Rome and established a church at Glaumbaer in Iceland. Three bishops are counted among her descendants (*The Saga of the Greenlanders*, 1:8; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 32).

#### 4.3.5 Later sagas

*The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* relates the tale of adventurous antiheroes Thorgeir and Thormod. While seeking revenge in Greenland for Thorgeir's death, Thormod takes shelter with the witch Grima, who lives close to the seat of temporal power in Greenland, Erik the Red's Brattahlid, but the saga makes clear that her home is "just beneath the glacier" (*The Saga of the Sworn*



*Brothers*, 2:23; M. Regal (trans) 1997, 382). Grima's keeping of "the old ways" is emphasized by her proximity to the wilderness. In *The Saga of the People of Floi* Christian protagonist Thorgils Orrabeinfostri is wrecked on the east coast of Greenland after refusing to sacrifice to Thor. His travails reaching the comparative safety of the Eastern Settlement are fraught with catastrophes both mundane and supernatural – he is attacked by ghosts, sees his wife murdered by treacherous slaves, battles with troll-women, and earns the enmity of his friend Erik the Red by killing a polar bear, for "some men said that Eirik held onto the ancient beliefs" (*The Saga of the People of Floi*, 3:25; P. Acker (trans) 1997, 295). The syncretic *Saga of Bard the Snowfell God* – a tale of half-troll Bard and his offspring - contains a passage relating how Helga, the daughter of the supernatural Bard, blows to Greenland from Iceland on an ice-floe. Eirik the Red welcomes her for the winter, during which time

...trolls and evil wights came down into Eiriksfiord [from the *obyggdir*] and did people a great deal of damage and harm. They destroyed ships and broke people's bones. There were three of them: a churl, a crone and their son. Skeggi made plans to do away with them: that went ahead only because Helga helped him do it and all but saved his life. (*The Saga of Bard the Snowfell God*, 1:5; R. O'Connor (trans) 2006, 194)

Helga's brother Gest later travels to Greenland, sailing past Halogaland, Finmark, and into the "Ocean of Mists" wherein they encounter and do battle with Odin, only after which "they came to the wastes of Greenland" (*The Saga of Bard the Snowfell God*, 1:13; R. O'Connor (trans) 2006, 226).

*The Saga of Ref the Sly* uses the *obyggdir* slightly differently. The titular character consistently outsmarts and defeats his Greenlandic enemies, who in this case are the settlers themselves. In this saga "the supernatural is conspicuous in its absence", but the laws of reality still break down in the wilderness (Willson 2006:1064). Ref constructs a fortress of impossible engineering and resists an assault by his enemies.

They considered it carefully and they thought that they had never seen such a beautiful building. It was large and strongly built, untarred, and with four corners.

They could not see one board overlapping another anywhere; it seemed to be made all of one plank...Bard ordered them to drag wood up to the fortification. When the wood was piled all around it, they set it on fire. The wood kindled quickly. But they saw it promptly went out. They dragged up wood to the fortification anew. Then they saw that a great stream of water came from the fortification and put the fire out. They searched all around the fortification and found no source of water. They built a fire up to the top of the fortification, but as much water came from the top as from the bottom. (*The Saga of Ref the Sly*, 3:10; G. Clark (trans) 1997, 410)

When the frustrated attackers return later and cut the subterranean pipe running water to the fortress, Ref and his people escape in a wheeled ship that rolls down to the sea from a wall that folds down like a drawbridge (*The Saga of Ref the Sly*, 3:14; G. Clark (trans) 1997, 414). Kendra Willson notes that Ref's assailants "naively interpret his technical prowess as magic" though it is telling that the most fantastical moments of this take place in Greenland (2006:1069-1070).

*The Saga of Gunnar, the Fool of Keldugnup* describes Gunnar's exile to Greenland where he never makes contact with human occupants at all. Gunnar spends a year alternately courting and slaying trolls in the *obbygdir* before seeking his fortune in Norway, his mettle now tested in the marginal space of Greenland for the approval of the more conceptually central figure Hakon Sigurðsson (ca. 937-995) (*The Saga of Gunnar, the Fool of Keldugnup*, 3:5-6; S.M. Anderson (trans) 1997, 428-432). The shorter *Jokul Buason's Tale* follows a similar theme, with the titular character at first doing battle with giantesses who "slapped their hands on their thighs and behaved in a very unladylike way" to later assisting one of them in overthrowing her father's household and winning her the hand of Grímnir, son of Skram, the "king of all the wilderness". In doing so, he also rescues Hvítserk<sup>9</sup> and his sister Marsibilla, the children of "King Soldan [Sultan] in the land of the Saracens"

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<sup>9</sup> *Hvítserk*, or "White Shirt", perhaps not accidentally, is also the medieval name for Greenland's tallest mountain, Gunnbjørn Fjeld (3,700m). It is named now for Gunnbjørn Ulfson, the first Norseman to report land west of Iceland, though not the first to land on it.

who had been magically abducted (Jokul Buason's Tale, 3:1,3; J. Porter (trans) 1997, 329-333). This curious happening thus provides a plot thread wherein the hero is again rewarded by a figure in the "real" world for his deeds in Greenland. In this case, Jokul is rewarded with the impossible gift of Marsibilla's hand and "half the land of the Sarecens" before succeeding King Soldan (ibid.). This tale in particular illustrates the Icelandic concern with its own place in the changing political dynamic of the North Atlantic in the late Middle Ages. By describing the adventures in the *obyggdir* of Greenland and the claim at the end of becoming King of the land of the Saracens, the author makes the Icelandic protagonist someone who is experienced in both the margins of the world and its center. An Icelander becoming king of the Saracens, however outlandish, symbolizes the authors' desire for Iceland to be seen as part of that center, as opposed to part of the periphery like their Greenlandic neighbors.

#### 4.3.6 *Historical value*

Separating "fact" from "fiction" in a saga is a notoriously difficult task as the sagas switch between fantastic and realistic situations with ease. "Realistic" is not "real", however, and numerous precautions must be taken when attempting to use the sagas as historical sources. Archaeology has confirmed, for instance, that the sagas' dates for the settlement of Greenland are more or less accurate, as is the position of Norse settlement on the North American continent.

The sagas wherein Greenland is a significant setting can tell us much about its perception in Iceland. All the main characters in sagas about Greenland have been noted as coming from the southern and western Iceland, and while Greenland exists in an ill-defined broader geography, certain passages reflect a rather sophisticated understanding of spatial relationships within limited geographical areas, such as the descriptions of sea caves and the route to Eiríksfjörð from Einarsfjörð in the *Saga of the Sworn Brothers* (Sigurðsson 2011:92-100). These geographical connections between Iceland and Greenland suggest a network of physical contact and perhaps knowledgeable

living sources informing written depictions of Greenland. How reliable, then, are the depictions of life in Greenland? Some of the themes examined by Sigurðsson, “the importance of in-fjord transportation; the love of seal-hunting, fishing and whaling; long hunting trips to the wilderness in the summers; irrigation technology, valuable objects from Greenland” can be accounted for, archaeologically (McGovern 1980; McGovern 1985; Arneborg 2005:58; McGovern & Perdikaris 2006; Sigurðsson 2011:99). There is nothing unreasonable about these “realistic” portions of the saga accounts, indeed, they seem to be quite specific.

As concerns belief, the archaeological record in Greenland may corroborate some of these saga claims. For instance, possible evidence of reinterment (7.3) recalls the burial concerns of Thorstein Eirikson in *Eirik the Red's Saga*. Two carvings of Thor's hammer (6.4.5.4) have also been discovered, suggesting at least some manner of worship in the earlier days of the settlement like that of Thorhall the Hunter's prayers to “Redbeard” for whale meat (*Eirik the Red's Saga*, 1:8; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 13). The enigmatic rune stick from Ø-17 Narsaq (6.4.5.3.1), though subject to a wide array of interpretations, may be indicative of pagan magical practices akin to Thorbjorg and Gudrid's chants at Herjolfsnes (Stoklund in Vebæk 1993:47-50; Abrams 2009:55).

These artefacts may not be enough to conclusively demonstrate that the sagas' representation of Greenland's religious activities are accurate, but to borrow a phrase from Dronke, “the aptness of it grows upon the reader” (Dronke 1969:108).

#### **4.4 *The Book of the Icelanders, The Book of Settlements, and other historical accounts***

##### **4.4.1 *The Book of the Icelanders***

Ari Thorgilson's 12<sup>th</sup> century *Book of the Icelanders* deals with Greenland succinctly in one chapter, though what he does say established multiple themes that recur in both historical and saga sources relating to Greenland.

The country called Greenland was discovered and settled from Iceland. A man from Breidafjörðr called Eiríkr the Red went out there from here, and took possession of land in a place that has since been called Eiríksfjörðr. He gave a name to the country and called it Greenland, and said that it would encourage people to go there that the country had a good name. They found signs of human habitation there both in the east and west of the country, fragments of skin-boats and stone implements, from which it may be deduced that the same kind of people had passed through there as had settled Vínland and the Greenlanders call Skrælingar. And Eiríkr began to settle the country fourteen or fifteen years before Christianity came here to Iceland, according to what a man who had himself accompanied Eiríkr the Red there told Thorkell Gellison in Greenland. (*The Book of the Icelanders*, 1:6; S. Grønlie (trans) 2006, 6)

Ari's description is the earliest Icelandic source concerning Greenland. Ari's information on Greenland appears to have come from primary accounts told to his uncle Thorkell Gellison. Thorkell's date of birth has been assessed at ca. 1030 at the earliest, indicating that perhaps Ari's dating of Greenland's settlement in 985 was too early, though Norse artefacts in Greenland do start to appear at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Grønlie 2006:23). Though he does not address Greenland's status as a Christian country directly, he does discuss it in relation to Christianity in Iceland. Its date of settlement is described in relation to Iceland's official conversion in ca. 1000, and Leif Eirikson's charge to convert the country by Olaf Tryggvasson is also described (Grønlie 2006:7,47).

It has been noted that Ari's wording of Eirik the Red's departure from Breidafjörð – "out from here" – establishes Iceland's conceptual centrality (Grønlie 2006:xxvi). Ari's language can be sometimes read as nationalistic, especially as concerns Norway's role in the conversion of Iceland, and it is likely that this view is also reflected in the brief description of Eirik the Red's departure.

#### 4.4.2 The Book of Settlements

*Landnámabók* or *The Book of Settlements* (literally *The Book of Land-Taking*) details the settlers of Iceland, their families and holdings. Ari Thorgilson is also believed to have written an early draft of the document, but the earliest complete version was compiled in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Sturla Thordarson (Fig. 12) (Pálsson & Edwards 2007:4).

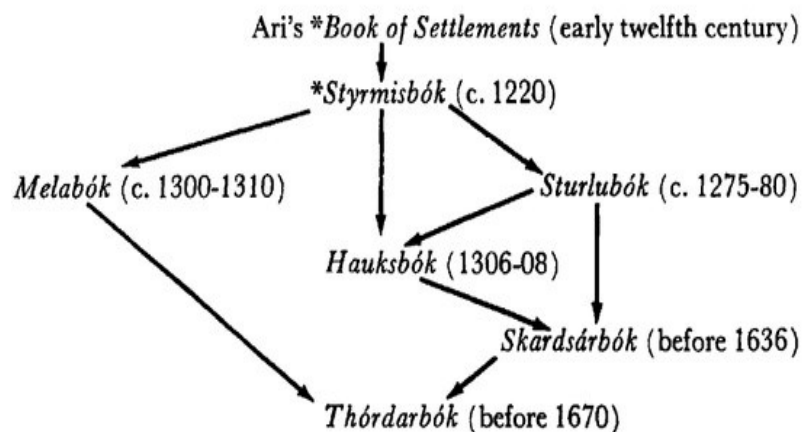


Figure 9: Jóhannesson in Pálsson & Edwards 2007:9. Asterisks denote foundational manuscripts for subsequent versions of *The Book of Settlements*.

The text provides more detail on the life of Eirik the Red in Iceland and influenced *Eirik the Red's Saga*. *The Book of Settlements* also provides a limited roll-call of the first *landnámsmen* in Greenland with varying degrees of detail as well as occasionally genealogical asides of other notable Icelanders who had something to do with Greenland, ex: "[Valthjof Orlygson] was the father of Signey, mother of Gnup, father of Birning, father of Gnup, father of Bishop Eirik of Greenland" (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:17; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 24).

*The Book of Settlements* is perhaps more useful for assessing the family background of the original settlers and their families (4.6) than it is for discerning their religious attitudes directly. *The Book of Settlements* is not concerned with the Greenlanders beyond the names of settlers and the names

of their holdings. This could indicate either that for the book's intended audience the details of Greenland were either taken for granted or irrelevant. One notable exception is a brief chapter dedicated to Thorkel Farserk, a cousin of Eirik the Red who was "a man of unusual powers" and at the time of writing was reputed to haunt his farm at Hvalsey (7.2) (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:93; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 50).

A common motif in the actions of the original settlers of Iceland is supernatural guidance to their respective places of settlement. Ingolf Arnarson, whom *The Book of Settlements* credits as the first successful settler of Iceland, settled near present day Reykjavik by throwing his highseat pillars overboard and building where they washed ashore (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:8; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 19-20). Thorolf Mostrarskeggi, Lodmund *hinn gamli*, Hrollaug Rognvaldson, Hasteinn Atlason and Thord Hrappson establish their homesteads in the same way (with the minor exception of Thord, who uses his bench-boards) (Wellendorf 2010:7-8). Anecdotes with a more Christian mindset involving shrine timbers, church doors, and a church bell appear in the *Hauksbok* version of the text. Wellendorf sees these tales as reflective of the Icelander's anxiety reconciling the paganism of the Icelandic settlers and contemporary Christianity. By recounting similar practices among pagans and Christians *Landnámabók* emphasizes the overall piety – misplaced or otherwise – of the first Icelanders (Wellendorf 2010:21). This same anxiety is represented in the literary depictions the Icelanders crafted of Greenland demonstrated above.

#### 4.4.3 *Historical sources from outside of Iceland*

Historical documents from beyond the North Atlantic present a confused-at-best understanding of Greenland's location, population, and state of affairs. Greenland was addressed periodically throughout the Middle Ages by several authors with varying degrees of accuracy or care. By the end of the medieval period it appears that awareness of a place called Greenland had spread, but the veracity of information regarding it had significantly degraded.

### Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*

*The History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* was written ca. 1035 to detail the history of the Archdiocese. Hamburg-Bremen's mandate was the conversion of Scandinavia, and as such Adam's text is one of the primary written sources dealing with Norse paganism. When the episcopal see of Gardar was established in 1121, it fell under the jurisdiction of Hamburg-Bremen. Adam, writing over 85 years before the official establishment of the see states that the Greenlanders had "come the farthest" to ask Archbishop Adalbert of Hamburg to send preachers (Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, 2&3; Francis J. Tschan (trans) 1959, 23,73). He also reports that "The people there are greenish from the salt water, whence, too, that region gets its name. The people live in the same manner as the Icelanders<sup>10</sup> except that they are fiercer and trouble seafarers by their piratical attacks. Report has it that Christianity of late has also winged its way to them" (Ibid. 36). Adam either saw no need or had no information to paint a more detailed picture of Greenland, presenting it as a vaguely Christian backwater. A later author appending Adam's work in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century describes Greenland (along with Sweden and Gotland) less favorably:

The peoples of this land claim that they are in part Christian, even though they are without faith and without confession and without baptism. In part they even worship Jupiter and Mars, although they are likewise Christian. (Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, Appendix; Francis J. Tschan (trans) 1959)

### *The King's Mirror*

*The King's Mirror* was composed in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century as a text for the education of King Magnus Lagabøte of Norway (1238-1280). Its representation of Greenland is curious. The anonymous author describes with

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<sup>10</sup> Adam is liberal in his praise for the Icelanders, likely due to their relatively recent official conversion at the time of writing, though it is not without its marginal curiosities: ice that burns like wood and dwelling in underground caves (Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, 4:35; Francis J. Tschan (trans) 1959). A late 12<sup>th</sup> century appendix to Adam mentions the danger of wiping one's nose completely off due to the cold. (Ibid., Appendix)



some accuracy the fauna and living conditions of Greenland. Multiple species of seals, walrus, and polar bear are described with an impressive degree of scientific accuracy. Economic factors such as Greenland's dearth of iron and timber are explained, and its chief exports of ivory, skins, and white falcons that the natives "do not know how to make any use of" *The King's Mirror*, 1:XVII; L.M. Larson (trans) 1917, 144). The author has no suspicions regarding the piety of the Greenlanders, whom "are all Christians and have churches and priests" (ibid. 1:XVIII, 144). It is interesting that the author's knowledge of Greenland's circumstances are so close to the truth, as it is explicitly described as being located at the extreme of the T-O perception of the world:

It has been stated as a fact that Greenland lies on the outermost edge of the earth toward the north; and I do not believe there is any land in the home-circle beyond Greenland, only the great ocean that runs around the earth. And we are told by men who are informed that alongside Greenland the channel is cut through which the wide ocean rushes in the gap that lies between the land masses and finally branches out into fjords and inlets which cut in between the lands wherever the sea is allowed to flow out upon the earth's surface (ibid.1:XIX, 148).

The sea surrounding Greenland – "more tempestuous than all other seas" - is also reported to be full of monsters – notably mermaids and mermen, and strange oceanic phenomenon (ibid.1:XVI-XVII, 135-137). That such a seemingly well-informed description of Greenland's domestic concerns is accompanied by the motif of the perilous ocean journey to the ends of the earth demonstrates a conceptual bias regarding Greenland. The Socratic questioner at one point asks "why men should be so eager to fare thither, where there are such great perils to beware of", and is given the reply of fame, curiosity, and the desire for gain (ibid. XVII, 142). Contact with Greenland was obviously feasible enough that author had "often met men who have spent a long time in Greenland" from whom he received this information, and yet the literal marginality of the place is emphasized (ibid. XIX, 149).

## Claudius Clavus

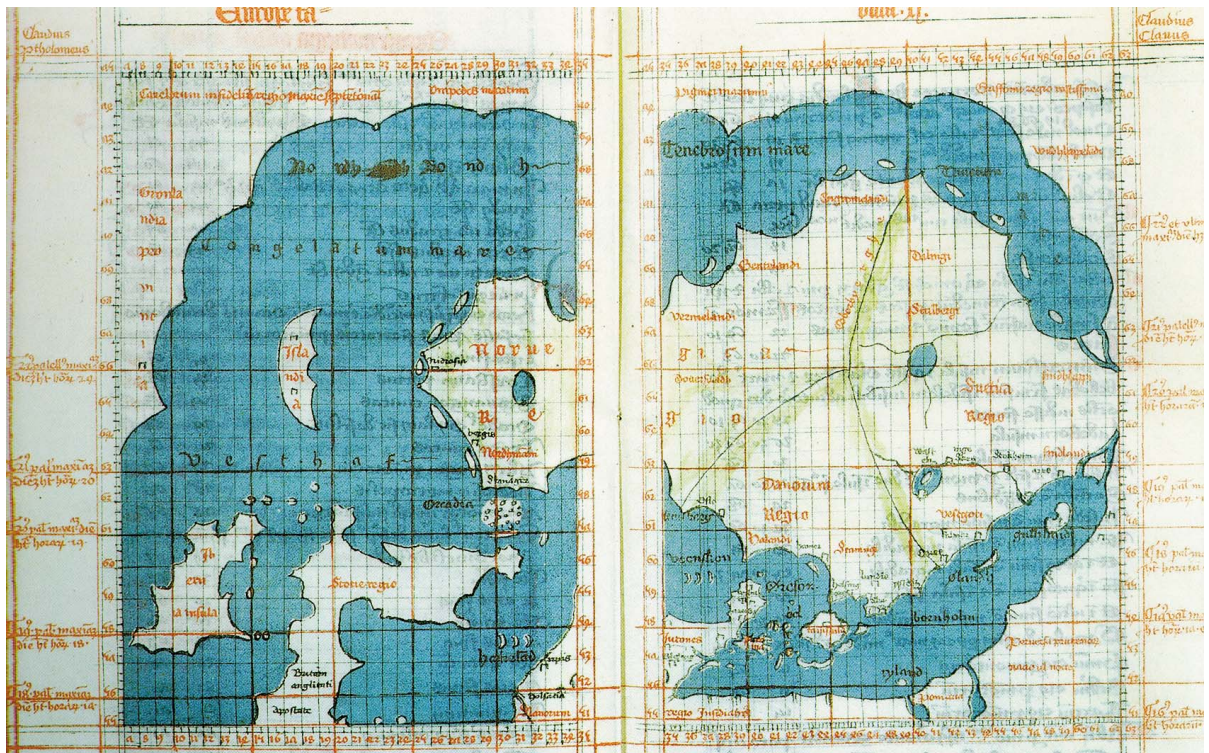


Figure 10: Claudius Clavus *Map of the North* (1424-1427) with Greenland in the upper left corner.  
(Bibliothèques de Nancy, ms. 354, fol.184 verso-185)

The first depiction of Greenland on a map is attributed to Claudius Clauson Swart (Fig. 13), more commonly known as Claudis Clavus (ca. 1388-?) (Seaver 2013:77-80). Clavus' accounts of Greenland seem influenced by Adam of Bremen and Saxo Grammaticus, though his claims that Greenland was continually harassed by hostile Karelians and Ptolemaic Pygmies seems to indicate that he was unclear as to the island's actual location (Bjornbo & Pettersen in Keller 1989:53-54, Seaver 2013:75). Clavus also conflates the northern Sami with the "pygmies" of Greenland in an extreme locale that is pointedly beyond Christianity:

...the uttermost limit is marked with a crucifix, so that the Christians shall not venture without the kings permission to penetrate farther... And from this place westward over a very great extent of land dwell first Wildlappmanni, people living a perfectly savage life and covered with hair... And after them, farther to the west, are the little Pygmies, a cubit high whom I have

seen after they were taken at sea in a little hide-boat  
which is now hanging in the Cathedral and Nidaros...  
(Nansen 1911, II:269 in Keller 1989:54)

Clavus worked in Rome as part of an initiative to update the geographical records of the Papacy, and as such may be partially responsible for the geographical indiscrepancies in a 1448 letter from Pope Nicholas V:

...As regards our beloved sons, the natives and in habitants of the island Greenland, which as we are told, is situated at the utmost limit of the northern seas north of the kingdom of Norway... From the neighboring coasts of the heathens the barbarians came thirty years ago with a fleet, attacked the people living there with a cruel assault... in the course of time most of them have returned from their said imprisonment to their own homes...they long to establish and extend divine service again, as far as possible, in accordance with previous practice, as, due to their misfortune, as well as starvation and poverty, they have not been able to support priests and bishop, they have for the said period of thirty years lacked the solace of the bishop and the service of priests... (GHM III:171 in Keller 1989:57)

Keller believes this to be a geographical misunderstanding of an incident occurring in 1420 of Russian attacks on Finnmark and Halogaland exacerbated by Clavus' unclear maps (Keller 1989:58).

#### **4.5. Naming the landscape**

Interestingly, the practice of naming places to reflect Christian practice as is seen in Iceland does not occur, to our knowledge, in Greenland. Both historical and literary sources illustrate the possible presence of "Christian" place names preceding Iceland's official conversion in 1000, such as the island of Papey off the coast of Eastern Iceland, Aud the Deep Minded's Krossholar or numerous sites possibly named for saints (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:1,97; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 15, 52; Cormack 2010:43-44). Post conversion place names show an increase in the number of overt references to ecclesiastical structures (*kirkju*, *baenhus*), personnel (*Biskup*, *Prest*) and Marian and other saintly names (Cormack 2010:35-42).

Cormack's study relies on land ownership records called *máldagar* and focuses on names recorded between the conversion (ca. 1000) and the Reformation (1550), though the majority originate post-1300. Many of these names, she argues, could be secondary names or names that changed over time (2010:34). The recorded place names in Greenland are split between descriptive geographical names (*Brattahlid*) or personal landclaim names (*Herjolfsfjord*). According to Ivar Bardarson's description of Greenland, even the churches themselves retain the name of their geographical surroundings (Fig. 14).

Ruin Group #	Modern Location	Norse Name	Norse Name Meaning
Ø-29a	Qassiarsuq	Brattahlid I/Bjóðhildarkirkja	"Thjodhild's Church"
Ø-162	Narsaq in Uunatoq	Vagar	"Way/Road" or "Wall"
Ø-47	Igaliku	Gardar/ St. Nicholas' Cathedral	"Settlements"
Ø-18	Narsap Ilua	Dyrnes (Hardsteinaberg?)	"Deer Point/Headland" (Hard Stone Cliff/Hill)
Ø-23	Sillisit	Undir Sjollaførum	"Under Sun Mountains"
Ø-29a	Qassiarsuq	Leyder/Brattahlid II & III	"Steep Slope"
Ø-66	Igaliku Kujalleq	Undir Høfði	"Under the Head"
Ø-83	Qaqortukulook	Hvalsey	"Whale Island"
Ø-111	Ikigaat	Herjolfsnes	"Herjolf's Point/Headland"
Ø-149	Ujaarsuit	Anavik	"Rushing Stream"
V-7	Kilaarsarfik	Sandnes	"Sand Point/Headland"
V-51	Nunataaq	Isafjord?	"Ice Fjord"

Figure 11: Place names of church locations in Greenland

The difficulty in establishing Christian place names in Greenland could easily be the result of a lack of written records as Bardarson's description is the only document of its kind.

A certain anxiety regarding the religion of Iceland's forbearers runs throughout the written sources. Wellendorf has explored the mingling of Christian and pagan beliefs present in the origin myths of Iceland as set down in *Landnámabók* and their role as a "societal adherent" (Wellendorf 2010:2). The number of cases in the text in which the *landnamsmen* rely on supernatural guidance (either Christian or pagan) suggests that "as long as piety was the focal point, where this piety was directed ... was less important" (2010:18, 20). Associating physical spaces with Christianity through naming (or changing a name after the fact) could reflect the evolution of Iceland's cultural concern with its own place in Christian history. The Greenlanders, from what can be determined, did not view this particular display of religiosity as necessary.

#### 4.6 Greenlandic connections to prominent Norse-Gaelic Christians

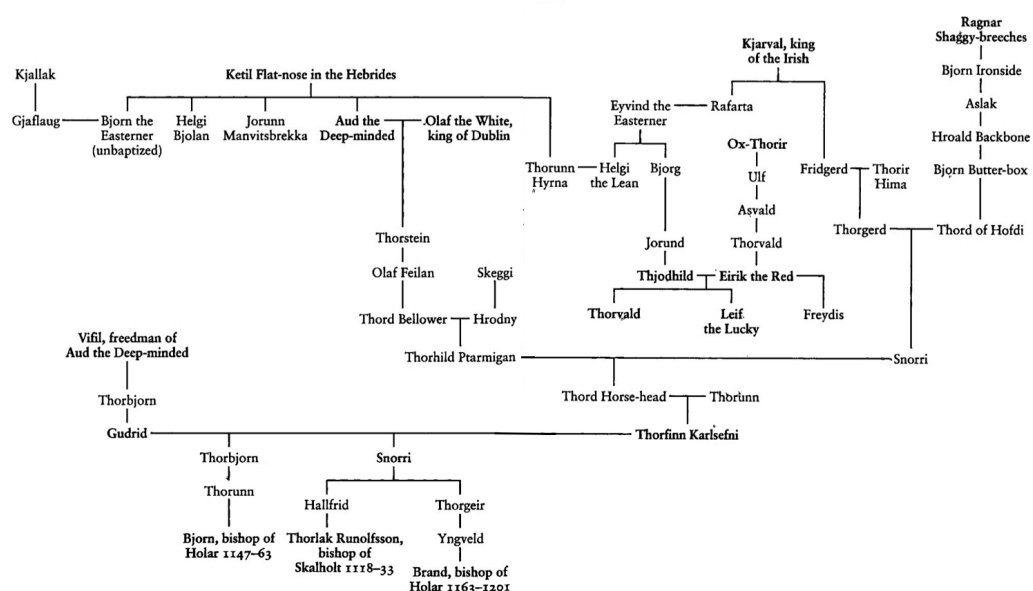


Figure 12: Family tree of important figures in the Vinland Sagas in (Kunz 2008:72-73).

*The Saga of Eirik the Red* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders* both fall within the body of Icelandic family sagas, which are particularly concerned with

genealogy and family history. Both are concerned with the establishment of Greenland as a community and the actions of Eirik the Red, his sons, and their families.

The saga authors claim that several of the core characters in these two sagas are descended from the allegedly Christian Aud the Deep Minded and her father Ketil Flatnose (Fig. 15). Haukr Erlendson (d.1312), for instance, 'revised' the version of *Eirik the Red's Saga* in his compilation with material that glorified his own alleged ancestor Thorfinn Karlsefni, expanding Karlsefni's role in the discovery of Vinland and linking him genealogically with Aud the Deep Minded. According to Haukr, Karlsefni's great grandfather was Thord Gellir (Magnuson & Pálson 1965:30-31,91,105). This would have made Karlsefni six generations removed from Aud the Deep Minded and seven from Ketil Flatnose. Karlsefni's wife, Gudrid the Far Traveler, is descended from an Irish slave – Vifil – freed by Aud (Smiley & Kellogg 2001:630).

Eirik the Red's wife Thjodhild Jorundardottir, according to tradition, through her father, was the great-niece of the syncretic Helgi the Lean who worshipped both Thor and Christ (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:218; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 113). Helgi had married Aud the Deep Minded's sister and his son Hrolf married Thjodhild's cousin Thorarna (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:121; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 60).

While *Landnámabók* makes it clear that after the Christian Aud died "her kinsmen lost the faith", the claimed descent from the line of Ketil Flatnose is interesting in the context of North Atlantic Christianity (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:110; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 55). Ketil Flatnose, according to saga sources, was active in Scotland and the Western and Northern Isles in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century (*The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 5:4; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 3; *The Saga of the People of the Eyri*, 5:1; J. Quinn (trans) 1997, 131). Aud was already a Christian upon her arrival in Iceland and her flight there in ca. 895 was via Orkney and the Faroes, where she married off one of her granddaughters (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:97; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 51-52). She seems to be the archetypical example of a Christian Norse-

Gael: daughter of a Norwegian Sea King, husband of the King of Dublin, and active in the politics of Ireland, Scotland, Orkney, the Faroes, and Iceland. When various branches of her progeny established Christian practice in Greenland it should not be surprising that we see a similar pace of development or early church architecture as in other North Atlantic communities (5.10).

This is not to say that North Atlantic Christianity during this time was the product of Aud and her family *per se* (if, indeed, her legacy is to be believed), but she and her contemporaries would have shaped and been shaped by it, bringing it with on their journeys. Even if the Icelandic genealogies in *Landnámabók* and the sagas are not completely accurate, they still establish a connection between Christian communities in Greenland at the turn of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and Christian Norse-Gaels in the 9<sup>th</sup>. Might this be a hint at the nature of pre-1000 Christianity in the North Atlantic?

#### **4.7. Conclusions**

Documented knowledge and perception of Norse-era Greenland does not at first seem to be of much use when examining the beliefs and practices of those who lived there, but upon closer inspection certain trends become evident that may provide a window into spiritual life in this “dread place.” What emerges from this body of work is a portrait of a community of settlers with differing ontologies whose transition into a broader Christendom was marked by differing attitudes regarding the demonstrative aspects of Christianity and a concern with the imminent spiritual dangers of their place in the physical world.

##### *4.7.1. Pagans and Christians*

Despite the minimal amount of archaeological evidence of pagan practice the sources unanimously declare that Greenland was a land of pagans in the beginning. Most sources attribute the Christianizing process to Leif Eirikson acting as a proxy for King Olaf, though this appears to be a primarily literary notion (5.1). Despite this insistence, all the sources describing the first generation of settlers include Christian characters. *Landnámabók* pointedly



states that Herjolf Barson, founder of Herjolfsnes, had with him on his ship a "Christian Hebridean" who composed the *Hafgerdinga*<sup>11</sup> Lay: "I beseech the immaculate Master of monks to steer my journeys; may the lord of the lofty heavens hold his strong hand over me" (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:91; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 49-50). Thorbjorg the *volva* provides prophesy to pagan and Christian alike, even assisted by a prominent Christian woman. Grima the witch lives not far from Brattahlid. Even intractable Eirik the Red's household was multifaith, albeit not happily.

The saga representation, particularly *The Vinland Sagas*, depicts a small community with two major religious forces interacting with but not necessarily opposing one another. There are prominent pagans and prominent Christians both represented positively just as we see in sagas set in Iceland. The character of Gudrid (setting aside concerns of her progeny, who were likely the authors of her tales) navigates both these worlds as one might expect in a small subsistence community where other social factors were more immediately relevant to the day-to-day concerns of prosperity and survival in a remote setting with little resources. Religious disputes are person-to-person rather than sectarian, as in the case of Thorfinn Karlsefni's anger at Thorhall the Hunter's use of sorcery to find food in Vinland (4.3.5). Despite the saga authors' clearly Christian mindset, interactions between Christians and pagans in Greenland are represented as peaceful, even amiable.

Despite Greenland's reputation as a pagan community, the same sources describe a fairly diverse population. Church structures and Christian burials date to the earliest periods of the settlement, indicating that the sagas were correct about the presence of Christian settlers. Indeed, it is likely that the written sources *understated* the size of the Christian population at the time of settlement. The anxiety present in the written sources regarding the true Christianity of the Greenlanders likely comes from differing demonstrative practices viewed through the lens of Iceland's own process of conversion (3.4). These Icelandic anxieties in turn influenced continental sources like Adam of

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<sup>11</sup> Literally "sea-mountain"



Bremen, who is supposed to have gleaned his information on Greenland from a visit from Icelandic Bishop Isleif Gizurason during his visit in 1055 (Seaver 2004:216).

#### *4.7.2 Differing Practices*

It has been argued that early churches in Iceland operated on a proprietary basis, and the same is likely true of Greenland (Byock 2001:304-305; Krogh 1967:90). It is not until the establishment of the bishopric at Gardar that we see an effort to create a formal administrative structure for the Church in Greenland. Assuming Ari's dating of the settlement in 985 is correct and that there were Christian worshippers among the original population, this leaves 141 years wherein Greenlandic Christianity grew untended. While the churches themselves were built as part of the construction of a spiritual landscape (Chapter 5), their names were not specifically Christianised as was seen in Iceland (4.5). The exact reason for this is uncertain, but whatever value, spiritual or otherwise, that may have been seen in this process of naming in Iceland was evidently not shared in Greenland.

There must have been many more such idiosyncrasies that are not reflected in the written sources but will become visible in the archaeological record (Ch. 6). Perhaps the root of the documented perceptions of Greenland comes from a community whose process of conversion was more gradual and less traumatic than those of the authors. Iceland's official conversion ca. 1000 was preceded by several decades of escalating tensions and violence regarding the Christianizing push from Norway. It was this tumultuous Iceland that the settlers departed in the 980s. It is not difficult to imagine that households of both religious persuasions who wished to avoid what could have become a civil war found the prospect of a new settlement appealing. To an outsider in the 12<sup>th</sup> century it would have seemed that the Greenlanders had languished for a century and a half without the guiding hand of the "official" church, and little wonder that it was a frightening and backward place.

#### 4.7.3 *The Spiritual Danger of the Unknown*

The Kingittorsuaq Runestone found in the remote northern hunting grounds of Greenland demonstrates that the Greenlanders observed Rogation Day. In parts of Europe this celebration frequently included the tradition of “beating the bounds”, where as Michael Camille says “every country child would remember the boundary brooks and trees where he was dunked and bumped on Rogation day...which marked upon his own body the spatial limits of his world” (Camille 1992:16). It is not known if Beating the Bounds was part of the Greenlander’s observance, but the location of the stone at the extreme of Norse Greenland is significant. Its significance lies in the written perception that Greenland was in itself a boundary between Christendom and a realm of monsters, between civilization and barbarity. The Kingittorsuaq Runestone hints that the Greenlanders, too, feared this boundary and their proximity to it.

As discussed above (4.3) Greenland’s place in the conceptual margins of the world was well established literarily. Historian Robert Bartlett writes:

It is as if there were three concentric circles: one, our world, where there is no need for generalizing description because everything is taken for granted; the second, outer ring where the barbarians live, peoples whose strange customs prompt us to record them; the third, outermost ring where the principles of order dissolve and all our fears, fantasies, and projections become real. (Bartlett 1994:174-175)

Greenland was clearly in Bartlett’s second ring when it comes to European thought, and likely the thoughts of the European bishops sent to oversee their faith. This perception appears to have been shared by the Greenlanders and can be seen in their burial practices (Ch. 7) and church design (Ch. 5). It is not possible to conclusively know how much the Icelandic sagas influenced the way in which the Greenlanders saw themselves, but it is reasonable to suggest that if *Atlamal* was composed in Greenland and found its way to the Icelandic *Codex Regius* that literary transmission flowed both ways.

What we are left with is a body of work that reflects a community at the edge of otherness. Concepts such as geography, religion, and history bleed into one another in this corpus. This conceptual morass allowed for perhaps anecdotal tales of shipwrecks and pagan practices to become assumed truths by outsiders. As these beliefs began to circulate back to Greenland, religious architecture and practice became more explicitly European in response. Just as Gudveg's absent body was transmuted into the stave bearing her name, so to was the dynamic landscape of stone and ice and water surrounding the Greenlanders transmuted into the edge of everything.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Form, Place, and Role of Greenlandic Church Structures**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

There are 21 confirmed Norse churches in Greenland; 17 lie in the Eastern Settlement and 3 in the Western Settlement (Fig.18 & Fig. 19). The location and identity of these churches have always been of great importance to Greenlandic archaeology as identifiers - landmarks on the map of the Norse settlements. These are the most obvious and tangible religious artefacts left behind by the Norse. For a sailor arriving from Iceland or Norway in the 12th century, the perilous trip around Cape Farewell would have revealed the occasional Norse farm or isolated hunting station. As the landscape began to grow greener and more hospitable, a coast-hugging crew negotiating the skerries and islands would have seen a Romanesque church on a small peninsula at the mouth of Herjolfsfjord "like a hand stretched out in welcome to the ships approaching land" (Fig. 16) (Nørlund 1924:40).



Figure 13: Panorama of Herjolfsnes (Photo: Neils Algren-Møller)

The church at Herjolfsnes and its contemporaries of greater and lesser stature had far greater significance than just as a welcome to weary sailors: such churches bore witness to the key episodes in the history of the Greenland Norse, and the written sources bear this out. For example, the sagas tell us of the domestic unrest wrought by the construction of Thjodhild's church in the final years of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (*Eirik the Red's Saga* 1:5; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 8); while last written records pertaining to a wedding performed in 1408 at Hvalsey church (Berglund 1982:280). For almost five centuries Greenlanders were baptized, wed, and buried in and around them.

The churches have always been a key factor in the archaeology of Norse Greenland. Daniel Bruun wrote in 1896 that matching the newly discovered ruins to their possible literary counterparts would be best accomplished by identifying the churches first (Bruun 1896:47). This view set the stage for Greenlandic archaeology for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Identification of the churches has typically come from comparing archaeological findings with descriptions of Greenlandic churches from medieval Icelandic sources, notably through Ivar Bardarson and the list of churches in *Flateyjarbok* (Keller 1989:221, Mathers 2009). This meshed well with the noted approach of reconstructivists like Nørlund and Jónson. However, the discovery of the church at Ø-23 by C.L. Vebæk in 1950-1951 saw the number of Norse church ruins in Greenland exceed that indicated by these literary sources (Keller 1989:94-95). This was a significant development, as it demonstrated that the institution of Christianity in Greenland was not limited to a named parish system.

Conceivably other churches built by the Greenlanders remain to be found. A rune stone commemorating one Ossur Asbjarnarson recovered in the Middle Settlement in 1916 convinced Vebæk that a church probably lay in the vicinity, though none have been located to date<sup>12</sup> (Vebæk 1991:16-18).

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<sup>12</sup> The rune stone had been reused in a wall of an Inuit house. The term Middle Settlement is used to refer to a region of 40-60 Norse farms in the vicinity of present day Arsuk, which seems to have been the northernmost region of the Eastern Settlement. See Edwards et al. 2013.

Another church site is proposed at Ø-39 Qinngua, though the consensus is currently against this (Guldager 2000; Guldager 2002; Edwards et al. 2010). In addition some churches are 'missing'. For example, 3 churches have been traced in the Western Settlement, though some sources mention 4 (Roussell 1941:97-98). The Aros church mentioned by Bardarson was likely located on Ketilsfjord at Ø-140, but again no church has yet been discovered, although a fragment of a church bell found on the beach near the farm may suggest that the church has been lost to erosion (Krogh 1967:89-90;

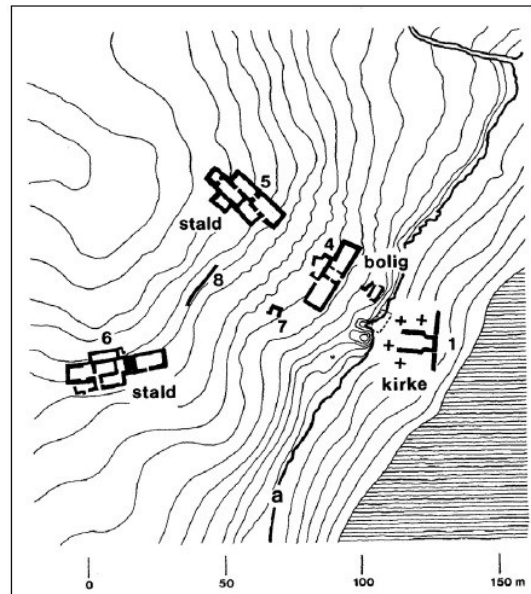


Figure 17: Site plan of V-51 Sandnes. Note that the church lies below the tide line (a). (Krogh 1982)

Vebæk 1991:13). Such a conclusion is reasonable, as shorelines have changed rather dramatically in Greenland, and several sites have been severely affected by erosion, notably Ø-111 Herjolfsnes and V-51 Sandnes (Fig. 17), and the Farm Under the Sand in the Western Settlement which was completely covered by Aeolian deposits (Nørlund 1924:40; Lynnerup 1998:23; Hebsgaard et al. 2009).

Primarily, the concerns of archaeologists have been related to dating the churches (Roussell 1941; Krogh 1967; Krogh 1982; Arneborg 2012). Their relationship to farms has also been examined, especially as regards societal status (Berglund 1982b). Various scholars have attempted to piece together an idea of a parish system relying heavily on Ivar Bardarson's 14<sup>th</sup> century description of Greenland. Such a system is plausible but needs fuller exploration; furthermore, the size and shape of these parishes are still up for debate (Krogh 1982a; Keller 1989:219-253; Vésteinsson 2009). More recently the churches have been studied in their relation to the Greenlanders' sense of identity as well (Arneborg 2008; Gräslund 2009; Pierce 2011:215-258).

Research has demonstrated that the churches were closely bound to the farms of Greenland's chieftains. Berglund (1982) has tied the presence of churches on farmsteads to issues of class and status, and Pierce has recently discussed their role in fostering and projecting identity for the residents of Greenland (Pierce 2011:215-258). One might note that although the extant church remains have been thoroughly documented, little discussion has occurred about their relation to actual belief. The possibility of a shift in the administration and use of these churches over time, such as Krogh's theory that these structures reflect functional changes from more modest prayer houses to parish churches, will be analyzed generally and in a detailed case study (5.8) (Krogh 1982a:122). The goal of this chapter, however, is to assess what can be learned from the remains of these churches regarding the beliefs and practices carried out within (and without) them.

Jon Jóhannesson (1962:62-64) has traced all the accounts of Leif's mission back to a lost saga of Olaf Tryggvasson by the 12<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic monk Gunnlaug Leifson. This renders *The Saga of the Greenlanders* the earlier of the Vinland sagas, and yet includes no mention of Leif's supposed mission. As demonstrated (3.3), attributing the Christianity of the North Atlantic lands to Olaf Tryggvasson was a literary convention in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, though the evidence indicates that Olaf's involvement in the matter was spotty in the best of cases and non-existent in the worst. As the age of modern archaeology preceded Jóhannesson's argument, archaeology in Greenland began in a reconstructivist and nationalistic vein (2.5) and the discussion of Norwegian influence on Greenlandic church architecture was at times both accepted and rejected by Danish scholars with some passing comparisons to medieval churches in the British Isles (Nørlund 1936:34; Roussell 1941:118-122). Later evaluations of the *baenhus*/Qoorlortoq style churches have described these as being of Irish design (Keller 1989:199). Stumann Hansen & Sheehan have more recently emphasized the likely Irish influence on the design but have stopped short of calling it specifically Irish (5.7.1).

As can be seen from the other communities of the North Atlantic, Christianity in these locales was not uniform in its trappings, practice, or progression. Each

community's transition into a Christian place happened in conjunction with a myriad of environmental, political, and societal circumstances. Greenland's individual path to Christianity has not been charted, and cannot be completely understood, but if it is to be evaluated fairly it must be viewed as a dynamic and independent enterprise within – not from - the context of a greater North Atlantic process.

Analysis will begin with an overview of the forms and construction methods of the edifices (5.2). Analytical challenges related to the preservation status of the structures will also be addressed (5.3), followed by an analysis of the dating methods used to establish a chronology for their construction (5.4). The location and setting of the churches will be analyzed for both practical and symbolic considerations (5.5), followed by a spatial analysis of their interiors (5.6). Both the Qoorlortoq churches and their larger stone successors will be examined in the context of the greater North Atlantic (5.7) before applying all these analyses to a case study relating to Eirik the Red's farm at Ø-29a Brattahlid (5.8).



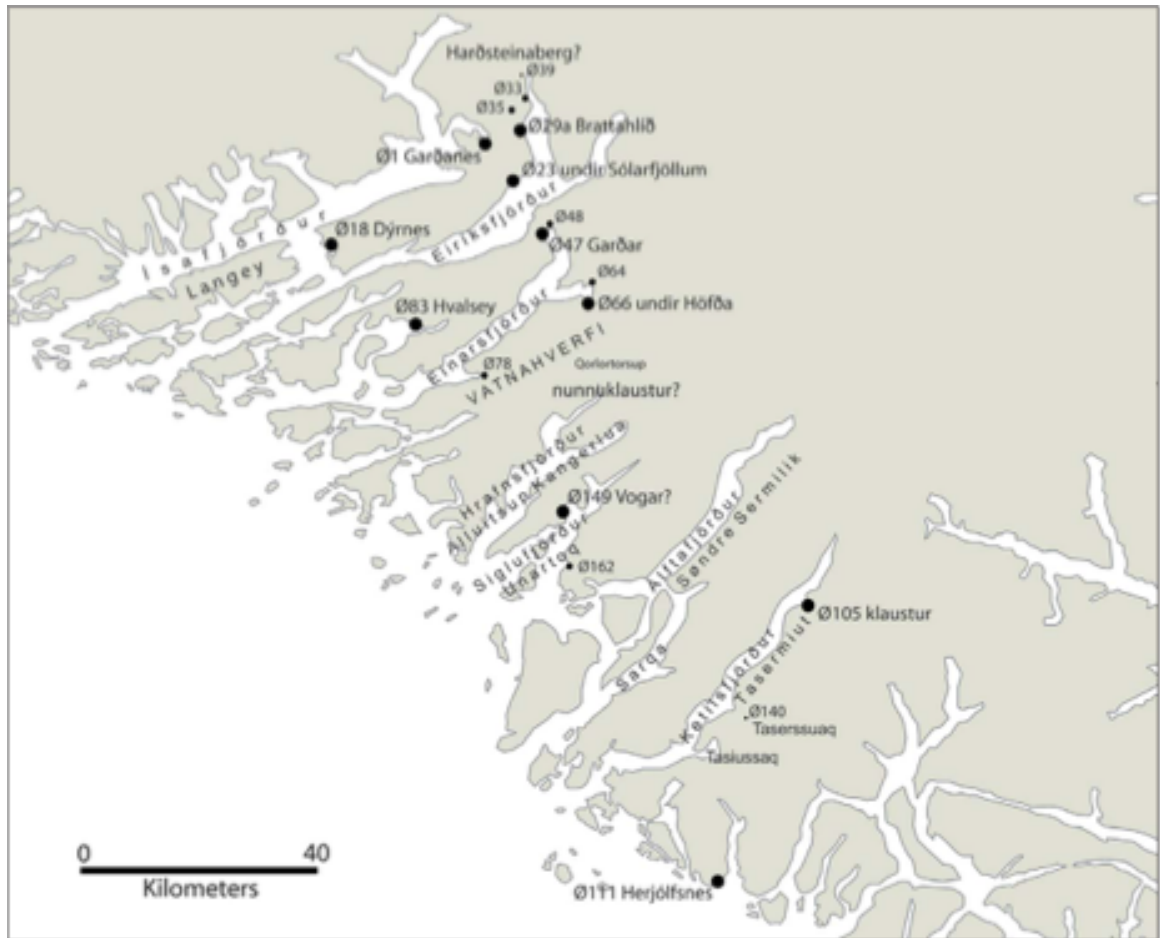


Figure 14: Eastern Settlement churches (Vésteinsson 2009, Fig. 1)



Figure 15: Church sites of the Western Settlement. Romanesque (V-51) marked in purple, Medieval (V-7) marked in red, Unknown (V-23a) marked in white (After Fitzhugh & Ward 2000)

## 5.2 Church constructions and forms

The church ruins of Norse Greenland can be divided into two main categories. The first group are smaller churches of wood and turf construction enclosed by circular dikes or walls; these are usually referred to as Qorlortoq structures (or Q-form), named after the Qorlortoq valley between Tunuliarfik and Sermilik fjords in which they are most concentrated (Nørlund & Stenberger 1934:14). Their locations are generally among the most heavily settled and earliest areas of the Eastern Settlement, a feature that led some scholars to view them as marking an initial phase of Greenlandic church building (Keller 1989:177). More rigorous dating on these structures has demonstrated that some of these buildings do indeed date to the earliest period of Norse settlement, but their construction and use came to overlap with the rectangular, stone-built churches

that exemplified the latter half of the Norse period (Fig. 20) (Krogh 1982:122; Arneborg 1990:142-150; Arneborg et al. 2012). None of these churches exceed an internal floor area of 10m<sup>2</sup> and their circular churchyards do not exceed a 30m diameter.

The second group consists of churches of stone construction and is of a more clearly defined Romanesque/European architectural style. Conventionally, stone churches that terminate in narrower chancels in Greenland have been categorized as 'Romanesque', whereas rectangular churches are referred to as 'medieval'. One possible variation is proposed for the church believed to be Dyrnes at Ø-18 Narsap Illua although it is in poor condition, Krogh has noted that its decay might match that of a cruciform structure (1976:301). The stone churches range in size from the smallest at Ø-23 Sillisit where the interior area of the church is just over 32m<sup>2</sup> to the largest at Ø-47 Gardar with an internal area of approximately 170m<sup>2</sup>.

Ruin Group #	Modern Location	Norse Name	ca. Internal Square Metres	Building Type
Ø-33	Qorlotoq		5	qorlotoq
Ø-35	Qorlortop Itinnera "Waterfall Valley"		6.5	qorlotoq
Ø-64	Inoquassaat		6.5	qorlotoq
Ø-29a	Qassiarsuq	Brattahlid I/Thjodhild's Church	7	qorlotoq
Ø-48	Igaliku		7	qorlotoq
Ø-78	Egaluit		15	qorlotoq
Ø-29a	Qassiarsuq	Leyder/Brattahlid II	38	Romanesque
V-51	Kilaarsarfik	Sandnes	40	Romanesque
Ø-105	Tasermiutsiaat	Augustinian Monastery/Klaustr	46	Romanesque
V-7	Ujaarsuit	Anavik	48	Medieval
Ø-29a	Qassiarsuq	Brattahlid III	50	Medieval
Ø-66	Igaliku Kujalleq	Undir Høfði	63	Medieval
Ø-83	Qaqortukulook	Hvalsey Fjord Church	65	Medieval
Ø-149	Narssarsuaq in Uunatoq	Benedictine Convent/Klaustr	65	Medieval
Ø-111	Ikigaat	Herjolfsnes	80.5	Romanesque
Ø-47	Igaliku	Gardar/St. Nicholas' Cathedral	170	cathedral
Ø-23	Sillisit	Undir Sjollaførum (Hardsteinaberg?)	32.25m <sup>2</sup>	Medieval
Ø-162	Narsaq in Uunatoq	Vagar Church	unknown	qorlotoq
V-23a	Qaqssinguit		unknown	Unknown
Ø-18	Narsap Illua	Dyrnes (Hardsteinaberg?)	unknown	Unknown
Ø-1	Nunataaq	Isafjord Church?	unknown	Romanesque?

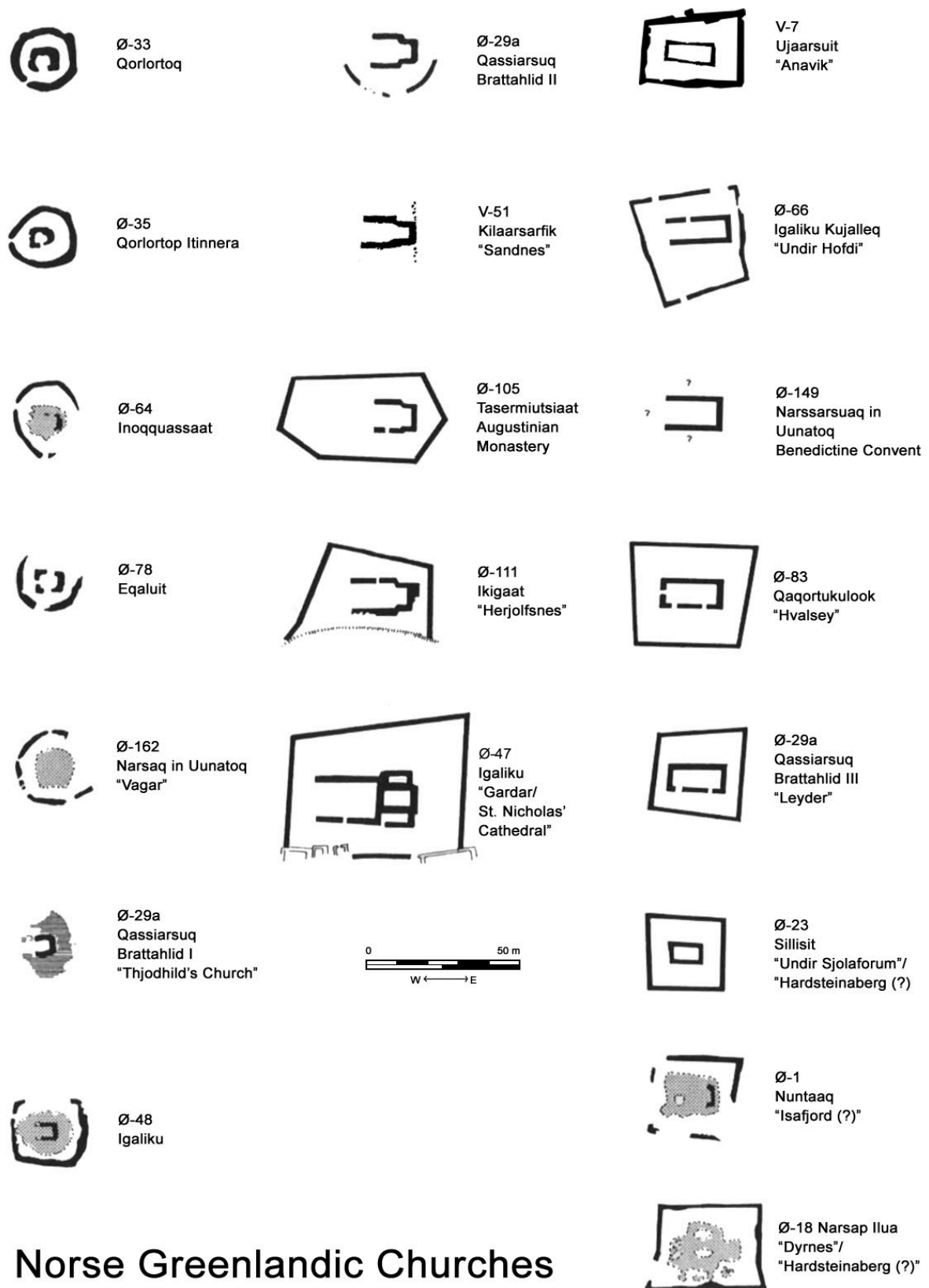


Figure 16: a) church size table b) churches of Norse Greenland (After Keller 1989)

In 1989 Keller reckoned that the difference in form reflected the possible influence of Celtic Christianity in Greenland; here he was drawing on early medieval Irish examples (Keller 1989:199). Though Keller later retreated from this view somewhat, the possibility of a Hiberno-Norse architectural school of circular churchyards and turf-walled, small churches has gained some new adherents in recent years in light of studies in the Faroes and elsewhere (Arneborg pers.comm 2010; Stummann Hansen & Sheehan 2006).

Finally, for the sake of perspective, these findings must be observed within the context of other parts of the Norse North Atlantic. Iceland is of particular interest in being the closest neighbor to Greenland, and its settlement and Christianization have been subject to many studies (e.g. Amorosi, Buckland, et al. 1994; Vésteinsson 2000; Byock 2001). Nørlund and Roussell both turned to the British Isles for the source of architectural influences (Nørlund 1930:56-57, Roussell 1941:123). The Faroes have recently been discussed in relation to the Qorlortoq structures found in Greenland (3.5). A key aspect of this research addresses possible Hiberno-Norse influences in turf church design and construction in the North Atlantic (Scandinavian influence in Greenlandic church design is generally reserved for the later stone churches), though Keller and Gjerland stress that turf churches were also constructed in northern Norway, little has been published on these (Gjerland & Keller 2009:167). These other pockets of Norse Christianity will serve to contextualize Greenland's place in the wider Christian community of the North Atlantic.

All of these approaches will be considered in this thesis, though the main goal is to study the beliefs and practices of the Greenlanders themselves, not the development of the institutional church. The dating of these churches and theories of their use will potentially act as physical reminders of a conceptual landscape, reflecting the beliefs of the people who built and used them. Identity and belief are frequently conflated in the study of Christianization, but this thesis aims to tease apart the strands of who the Greenlanders were and what they believed.





Figure 17: The well-preserved ruins of Hvalsey Church (Photo: J. Van Nurden)

### 5.3 Preservation status

The churches themselves vary widely in preservation, owing to a variety of factors, from mode of abandonment, to environment (such as exposure to the elements), and to the robbing of building stones by subsequent inhabitants of the region. Dyrnes church at Narsap Illua is in the worst condition, decayed to such a point that its plan is unknown (Fig. 20). By contrast, the best-preserved church is Ø-83 Hvalsey (Fig. 21), which is the only Norse church in Greenland with walls surviving to a substantial enough height to identify the position of windows and pitch of the roof. Many of the extant medieval churches are built on top of older ones; this of course makes it difficult to be sure that all the Norse-period edifices are known and plotted. One such example is the medieval church of Ø-29a Brattahlid III, which sits atop an older, Romanesque church.

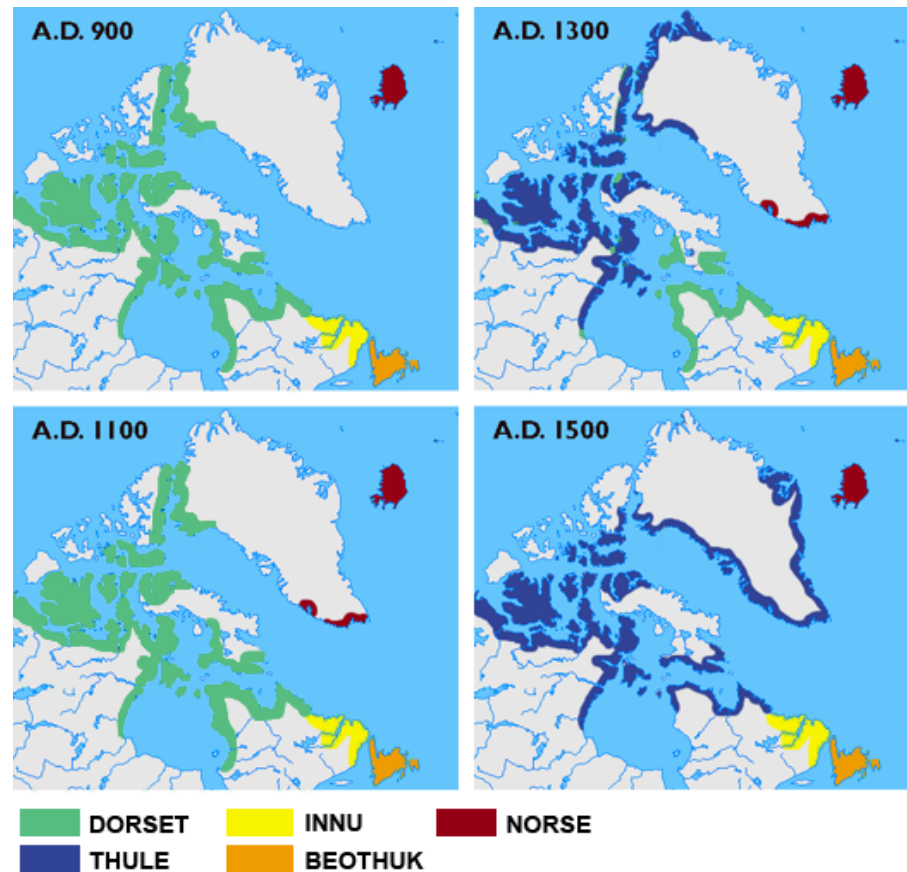


Figure 18: Changing populations of Greenland (Masae based on Gulløv 2005)

The noted robbing of the structures (and abandoned Norse settlement sites) and items of Norse origin found among the Inuit peoples of Greenland indicate that as the Inuit moved into the vacated regions formerly occupied by their Norse neighbors they scoured the abandoned settlements in search of useful items, particularly iron and other metalwork (Fig. 22) (Gibbon & Ames 1998:391). Noticeably, however, not enough of these items exist to suggest widespread pillaging or robbing – contrasting with the traditional view (persisted into the 20<sup>th</sup> century) which had its origins in the cryptic 14<sup>th</sup> century statement from Ivar Bardarson: “Now the natives have all of the Vesterbijgd” (Ivar Bardarson, *A Fourteenth-Century Description of Greenland*, [Line] 125-126; Derek Mathers (trans) 2009, 81). More damage was probably done to the integrity of the residual monuments between the 18<sup>th</sup> century resettlement of Greenland by the Danes and the present day as ambitious sheep farmers once more built permanent structures on the only suitable land in Greenland. The settlement of Herjolfsnes, for example, was identified in 1830 when a visiting

missionary noticed that a stone with Norse runes had been used to build a wall of a modern Inuit structure (Nørlund 1924:16-17).

#### **5.4 Chronology**

Clearly there are challenges to relating belief to the lonely remains of Norse churches, but these are not impossible to overcome. Understanding the interplay between these structures and the mindset of those using them can come from a looking at the structures in a macroperspective using a variety of criteria, the first of which is chronological. Below the the suspected date of construction for selected churches are assessed to determine if these are reliable in light of new evidence. Some church structures have been subject to C<sup>14</sup> dating using available skeletal and faunal remains, which has proved invaluable (Fig. 23) (Arneborg et al. 2012; Nelson et al. 2012).

There appears to have been a boom in construction of the Romanesque stone churches attached to prominent farms in the twelfth century. Gardar, Herjolfsnes, and Brattahlid all saw churches of this type roughly coinciding with the arrival of the first bishops of Greenland in the 1120s (Arneborg 2005:92). The design of these churches, combined with the establishment of a bishopric at Gardar led to an early theory that the churches were evidence of the ascendancy of the institutional church, but this theory has fallen out of favor as improved dating and new theories have developed (Krogh 1982a:265).



Site	Earliest C14 Date BP	Reservoir Corrected C14 Date BP	Earliest AMS Dating	Calibrated Intercept(s) (1 sigma range)	Latest C14 Date BP	Reservoir Corrected C14 Date BP	Latest AMS Dating	Calibrated Intercept(s) (1 sigma range)	Citation
Ø-1	-	-	1220-1280 (1180-1300)	-	-	-	1426 (1412-1438)	-	Arneborg 2012
Ø-18	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Ø-23	-	-	1299 (1288-1314)	-	-	-	1448 (1436-1469)	-	Arneborg 2012
Ø-29a (II & III)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Ø-29a (T.C.)	1229 ± 41	1100 ± 41 (Marine Fraction 0.294)	-	976 (894-996)	1025 ± 50	870 ± 50 (Marine Fraction 0.353)	-	1192 (1122-1228)	Arneborg et al. 2012 Table 3.
Ø-33	1095 ± 29	-	-	978 (897-998)	1017 ± 30	-	-	1019 (997-1024)	Koch Madsen 2014 Table 8.1, Arneborg 2012
Ø-35	-	-	AD 1002 (983-1022)	-	-	-	1213 (1167-1250)	1213 (1167-1250)	Arneborg, Lynnerup, Heinemeier 2012 Table 1
Ø-47	1030 ± 65	810 ± 65 (Marine Fraction 0.499)	-	1233 (1170-1281)	880 ± 90	700 ± 90 (Marine Fraction 0.254)	-	1295 (1256-1392)	Arneborg et al. 2012 Table 5.
Ø-48	1008 ± 35	-	-	1037 (1025-1155)	880 ± 33	-	-	1163-1180 (1067-1215)	Koch Madsen 2014 Table 8.1, Arneborg 2012
Ø-64	1089 ± 30	1220	95.4% probability: 802-972	0898-0990	635 ± 45	1300-1380	1290-1400	-	Koch Madsen 2014 Table 8.1, Arneborg 2012
Ø-66	890 ± 45	1297	-	1279-1317	880 ± 55	1392	-	1312-1417	Koch Madsen 2014 Table 8.1
Ø-78	942 ± 36	-	-	1020 (1032-1153)	-	-	-	1280?	Koch Madsen 2014 Table 8.1, Arneborg 2012
Ø-83	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Ø-105	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Ø-111	1000 ± 35	730 ± 35 (Res. Age 0.60)	-	1285 (1260-1295)	750 ± 56	500 ± 56 (Res. Age 0.565)	-	-	Arneborg et al. 2012 Table 10.
Ø-149	1005 ± 35	700 ± 35 (Res. Age 0.67)	-	1290 (1280-1305)	852 ± 44	590 ± 44 (Marine Fraction 0.588)	-	1399 (1325-1418)	Arneborg et al. 2012 Table 9.
Ø-162	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
V-23a	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
V-51	1177 ± 45	951 ± 45 (Res. Age 0.50)	-	1038 (1021-1151)	865 ± 40	560 ± 40 (Res. Age 0.602)	-	1408 (1390-1428)	Arneborg et al. 2012 Table 12.
V-7	959 ± 38	818 ± 38 (Marine Fraction 0.29)	-	1219 (1186-1261)	890 ± 50	572 ± 50	-	1404 (1329-1427)	Arneborg et al. 2012 Table 15-16.

Figure 19: Available C14 and AMS dating for Greenlandic churches

For churches containing no skeletal remains or remains which have proven unsuitable for C<sup>14</sup> dating, dating for the stone churches in Greenland has primarily relied on comparisons to church architecture in Norway: Keller has claimed that “church building seems to follow the stylistic changes in Norway in an almost surprisingly well synchronized manner” (Keller 1989:177). The bipartite churches with Narrow chancels deemed “Romanesque” by Roussell are compared Norwegian examples from the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century to the earliest 13<sup>th</sup>, such as the Sta. Maria church in Oslo and that at Urnes (Keller 1989:200). Similar transition from bipartite church to rectangular church is documented at Hrífsbrú and Keldudalur in Iceland, and the Faroese site of Sandi, where five church ruins stratigraphically overlay one another beginning in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 24) (ibid. 205; Fisher & Scott 2007:373).

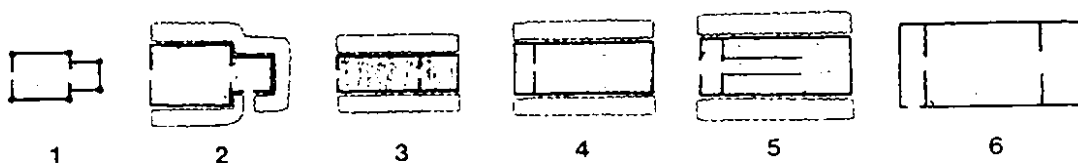


Figure 20: Stages of church buildings excavated at Sandi (Krogh in Keller 1989, Plate 30)

Poul Nørlund first pointed out that the stone churches in Greenland were larger than seemed strictly necessary for the size of the population they served, although this is dependent on assumptions about the latter and about what happens inside a church (Nørlund 1924:51). Why this large size? Most recently Pierce has suggested that large churches were intended as displays of Christian orthodoxy to visiting church officials and foreigners (Pierce 2011:256). The proportions of these churches and their prominent locations (5.5) do indicate that high visibility was intentional, but other possibilities exist for the intended audience (see below).

To recap, turf and stone church buildings in Greenland have been divided into three main phases:

- 1) The Qoorlortoq phase, ca. 980-1050
- 2) The Romanesque phase, ca. 1100-1250
- 3) The Medieval phase, ca. 1250-1300

Even though dating for these stone churches is largely relative, relying heavily upon comparisons, the chronological frame has not received any major criticisms since Keller's analysis and in fact convincingly dovetails with church building conventions in the rest of the North Atlantic.

## **5.5 Location and setting**

Locational analysis can be employed to assess how the church structures are physically related to the farms on whose lands they were built. It has been recognised that all of Greenland's Norse churches were built on plots quite close to the main dwelling. Berglund related this trait to a reflection of status within the community, arguing that prominent churches would have also usually been found near a prominent feasting hall (Berglund 1982:275). Further explorations of church-farm layouts have demonstrated similarities between the relationship of the church to the farm core in both Greenland and Iceland, though the churches in each country may have been influenced by differing schools of architecture (Gjerland & Keller 2009:169).

In *Eirik the Red's Saga* the construction of Thjodhild's Church – associated with Brattahlid I at Ø-29a – we are told that:

Eirik was reluctant to give up his faith but Thjodhild was quick to convert and had a church built a fair distance from the house. It was called Thjodhild's church and there she prayed, along with those other people who converted to Christianity of whom there were many. After her conversion, Thjodhild refused to sleep with Eirik, much to his displeasure. (*Eirik the Red's Saga*, 1:5; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 8)

Whether or not Thjodhild built Brattahlid I further away from the house out of deference to her temperamental husband, such considerations cannot be ruled out. Among these first churches we also see variation in their locations. Some, like those at Ø-64 and Ø-78, are constructed quite near their presumed associated dwellings. Others, such as Ø-29a and Ø-35 are over 20 meters from the nearest farm building often near prominent or symbolic locations (Fig. 25).<sup>13</sup> Eirik the Red was probably not alone in not wanting the Christian building just outside his door. Perhaps this disparity indicates individual farmers' thoughts on Christianity?



Figure 25: The church at E-35 in Qoordlortoq Valley (Drawing: Gustav Holm)

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<sup>13</sup> In the case of Ø-29a, the distance between the church and the main dwelling could be up to 100 m. (Fig. 23).

To take this interpretation a step further, it may be that the Q-structures placed near prominent geographical features were placed there due to the building's isolation from the central farm building. A waterfall, a river, or a promontory would all serve to emphasize the presence of the church in the landscape and capitalize on the eye-catching features of a world crafted by, in the minds of the viewers, divine beings of either Christian or Norse conception. As Krogh noted, the transition to stone churches of Romanesque design might indicate the ascension of Western Christian practice in Greenland (Krogh 1982a). As far as dating efforts have concluded, their construction is at least contemporary with the establishment of the bishopric at Gardar (Fig. 18). If true, it is likely that V-51 Sandnes was the earlier of the two known churches in the Western Settlement.

The relationship between the church and related farm buildings can be analyzed on a number of levels. The physical proximity of the church to other buildings needs to be examined, as well as its size and shape in relation to other structures; we can also question if this relationship changes depending on the form of the church. Of particular interest will be whether the location of the church itself can be perceived as in any way symbolic of belief or if its construction was based more on practical concerns, such as ease of access for people, building materials, or for visibility.

Thinking beyond the structure of a church alone, we might ask what was the view from the church door or window? Did these look to specific landmarks or numinous places? How did the church's exterior appearance interact with the surrounding landscape? Roussell believed that more care was taken with the exterior walls of the churches than the interior (Roussell 1941:103). If he is correct, such care would indicate the visual importance of the structure was radiating out toward those looking at it rather than inward to those inside.

Furthermore, it is essential to debate the siting of churches near specific or prominent natural features and to ask whether such points held local or symbolic significance. A strong example is Herjolfsnes. In terms of farmland, Herjolfsnes would have been an odd choice for a settler in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century

with better options for farming not far away; however, the peninsula itself is a striking landscape feature, highly visible if somewhat sparse. It is reasonable to suspect that the rivers, waterfalls, mountains and harbors attracted other churches and their builders were built with their eye-catching geography in mind as well. John M. Howe cites a tradition of natural “‘heirophanies’, revelations of the divine through numinous natural features” and Christianising awe inspiring natural places to claim their power (Howe 1997:63, 69). A pilot study was conducted in 2009 which included the relationship of geographical features to churches and churchyards throughout the North Atlantic which incorporated 18 Greenlandic churches, which demonstrated that the “Greenlandic churches ... have a great affinity to water and welcome positions” (Gjerland & Keller 2009:169). Interestingly, the study also found that siting of Greenlandic churches places them further from the farm core than contemporary churches in Iceland, yet closer than is seen in Norway (ibid). This is especially intriguing when considering the spread of turf and stone church building methods in the North Atlantic, discussed further below (5.7.1 and 5.7.2).

## **5.6 Interior spatial analysis**

One challenge is presented by taphonomical concerns relating to these structures. Multiple studies lend credence to the theory that the depopulation of the Eastern and Western settlements was a non-catastrophic process of emigration and declining birth rates brought on by the gradual loss of agricultural productivity and a changing climate (McGovern 1990:341-343; Lynnerup 1998:115-119). This theory is supported by the dearth of high value artefacts left behind by the Greenlanders, showing that their owners removed items of great portable or personal value as they left for greener pastures elsewhere in the Norse North Atlantic. Surviving artefacts that appear to have had spiritual or religious significance seem to have been forgotten, broken, or interred with the dead. Noticeably, very few liturgical items have so far been recovered from the churches, such as an ivory crozier and gold ring discovered in a 13<sup>th</sup> century burial believed to be that of Bishop Olaf (Arneborg 2005:50-51).

We may learn a substantial amount from the surviving church outlines. For instance, how many of the faithful could fit inside? Where did the light come from? Where were the doors positioned? Traces of stained glass have been found at several prominent churches, as well as bell fragments (Pierce 2011:234). We know, then, that there may have been special uses of light and sound involved in the church experience. Light and sound will be considered in relation to changes in church doctrine in a North Atlantic context, drawing from Tomas Ó'Carragáin's recent research into architectural analysis of the Mass and sacred landscapes (Ó'Carragáin 2009a; Ó'Carragáin 2009b; Ó'Carragáin 2010).

What evidence can we draw upon for the interior? It has been suggested that the church interior walls were all faced with wooden planks, even in the later stone churches (Krogh 1967:21). The absence of internal mortar rendering to the walls in many churches has been noted and this is surprising given the need to keep warmth in and draughts out of these religious edifices. Multiple churches show evidence that stones were bonded with clay or turf whose traces have disappeared (Ø-29a Brattahlid III, Ø-149 Narssarsuaq in Uunatoq); furthermore we might expect that the inner walls were covered with hangings.

## **5.7 The churches explored**

### *5.7.1 The Qoorlortoq church or "baenhus" and its associated architecture*

The Qoorlortoq church is, as noted above, generally assumed to belong to the first phase of church construction in Greenland. Seven such churches have so far been identified, named for the two structures (Ø-33 and Ø-35) first excavated by Poul Nørlund in 1932 in the Qorlortoq valley at the head of Tunuliarfik fjord (Vebæk 1991:7). So far their distribution is limited to the Eastern Settlement.

They were constructed by stacking turf around the walls of a presumed wooden interior or frame, and surrounded by a circular churchyard of 19-25 meters in diameter. Christian Keller argued for an Irish derivation to the design, and later research has demonstrated how this Irish design was filtered through Norse

cultural contexts (Keller 1989:191; Stummann Hansen & Sheehan 2006:50). Keller himself mentions circular churchyards in southwest Norway, Finland, Sweden, and the Orkneys (Keller 1989:195-198). In Iceland turf churches of similar construction were in use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and although Roussell claimed a lack of evidence of any such turf or timber churches being built in Iceland in the Middle Ages, this statement has recently been disproven (Vésteinsson 2000:93-143). The best parallels for the Qorlortoq style of church occur in the Faroes, such as the Leirvik "Bønhustoft" on Eystroy (Stummann Hansen & Sheehan 2006:31). It is arguable that the style of church and churchyard is Hiberno-Norse rather than as Celtic *per se*, since Christianization throughout the North Atlantic is associated with various Norse individuals and groups with connections to Ireland, such as Ketil Flatnose and his descendants (4.6).

In Greenland these small structures seem to have operated as proprietary churches, prayer houses, or family chapels. At least one of them, Ø-162, may have functioned as the center of a parish as it is located near Bardarson's description of Vagar church (Vebæk 1991:9,14; Ivar Bardarson, *A Fourteenth-Century Description of Greenland*, [Line] 67; Derek Mathers (trans) 2009, 80). Two other Qorlortoq structures - Ø-29a Brattahlid and Ø-48 Igaliku – lie near the ruins of the clearly identified parish centers of Brattahlid and Gardar; accordingly, they may have been precursors to the presumed establishment of Greenlandic parishes in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century.

In the context of this thesis, the Norse term *baenhus* is used to refer to such churches outside Greenland, and Qoorlortoq or Q-form for the seven present in Greenland. *Baenhus* itself means prayer-house, suggesting the structure's roles (for some at least) as proprietary churches.

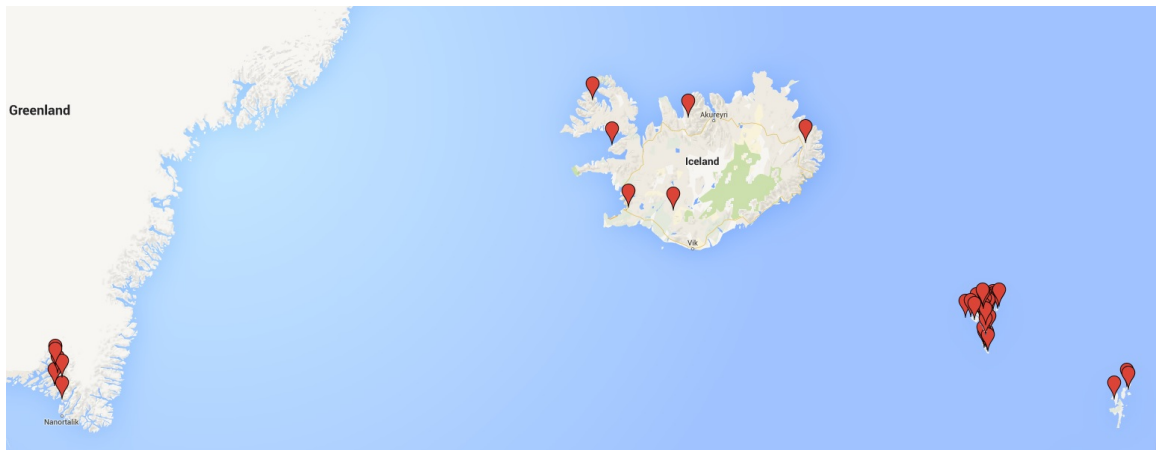


Figure 21: 10th-11th c. baenhus churches in the North Atlantic.

In a wider context, some 50 locations associated with this type have been identified between Greenland and Orkney all of which appear to date to the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries (Fig.26). The debate surrounding these churches have primarily revolved around their function and relation to prominent farms and settlements, whereas relatively little consideration has been given to the possibility that the form itself might indicate a mode of Christian practice that was distinct from that of other churches.

The architectural similarities of these churches demonstrate that Norse communities stretched across 1500 miles of ocean shared an idea of what a proper church should look like. With multiple church styles in use elsewhere over this time period, it is reasonable to view the *baenhus* as the product of some variation of Christian belief and part of the discourse of Christianization in the region. It has been argued that in Iceland these churches and timber post churches eventually merged into a distinctly Icelandic design (Kristjánsdóttir 2011:433); such a merger into a uniform style would presumably reflect a societal consensus on what design was needed to best express the purpose and use of the church.

Arguably, multiple church designs might signify a more piecemeal approach to the formation of a Christian identity in the region as opposed to the royal mandate of missionary kings that saga writers and chroniclers have attributed to Norway. A royal mission would presumably have included ecclesiastical figures



to oversee the construction of churches to establish bases of operation for missionizing activities. The presence of *baenhus* churches in places like Greenland where they predate the arrival of an official ecclesiastical leader by several decades or more suggests that this form of church is the product of a Norse North Atlantic Christian tradition, one which was eventually incorporated into the larger archdiocesan apparatus post-AD 1000.

Given the noted claim of Irish influence in the design of these *baenhus* churches (Stummann Hansen and Sheehan 2006:37-50) the extent to which the Irish church colonized or missionized the North Atlantic has been subject to some debate, though there is little doubt of the presence of populations practising if not preaching Irish Christianity at least as far west as the Faroes and possibly in Iceland as far back as the 7<sup>th</sup> century (3.4 & 3.5). As the Norse expanded into the North Atlantic during the 9<sup>th</sup> century these populations were enslaved, assimilated, or in some cases appear to have continued side by side with the new Norse population. Indeed, genetic studies in Iceland and Greenland have established substantial Celtic lineage among these populations (Helgason et al., 2001:733). Saga sources frequently trace lineages of Icelandic *landnamsmen* to Hiberno-Norse dynasties in Ireland where opportunistic Vikings constructed marital arrangements with Christian Irish rulers. It is perhaps not fair to label the medieval North Atlantic as part of the Norse Diaspora. Outwardly artefacts and cultural trappings appear Norse, but it may be perhaps more appropriately designated as the 'Norse-Irish North Atlantic'.

In this case, Norse-Irish people would have been most likely practising a Norse-Irish form of Christianity. This is not to say that Irish Christians converted the incoming Norse populations wholesale, but the inevitable cultural exchange of two cultures overlapping in the same physical environment would have resulted in new communities of Christian practice. The individuals who made these up would have brought their own cultural resources and ideas to bear upon the formation of their community, and the development of the *baenhus* is likely one reflection of this. Such a scenario is hardly farfetched, as Kristjánsdóttir has argued for a similar process in Iceland (see above).

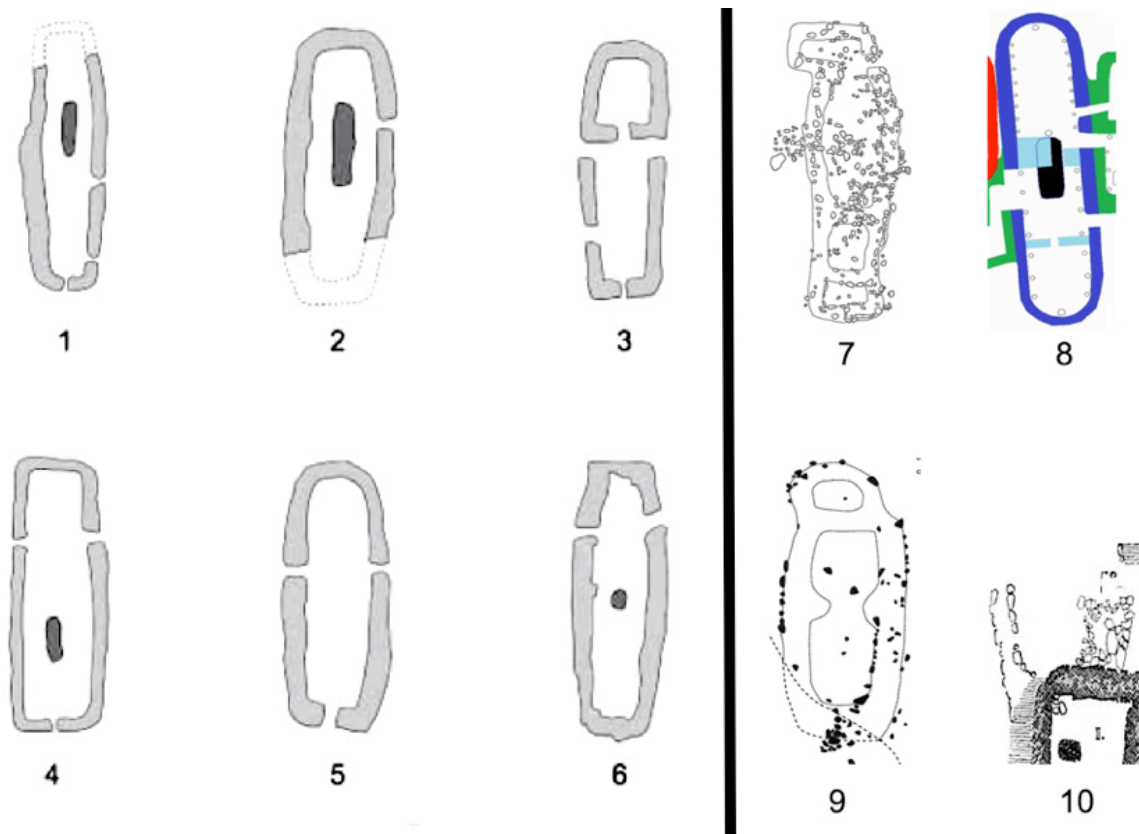


Figure 22: 9th-10th c. North Atlantic longhouses. 1. *Toftanes*, Faroe Islands; 2. *Niðri á Toft*, Faroe Islands; 3. *Hamar*, Shetland; 4. *Jarlshof*, Shetland; 5. *Brough of Birsay*, Orkney; 6. *Oma*, Norway; 7. Ø-252, Greenland; 8. Ø-71 (Phase 1); Greenland 9. Ø-2, Greenland; 10. Detail of earlier hall underlying Ruin 2 at Ø-29a Brattahlíð. (After Nørlund & Stenberger 1934; Stumman-Hansen 2000; Guldager et al. 2002)

Furthermore, Stumann Hansen has discussed the Norse architectural style in the North Atlantic as “an expression of a community in the middle of a colonisation process, in which a homogeneous identity was of the outermost importance, politically as well as socially, in a counterbalance to other, including native [in the case of previously inhabited regions], communities and identities” (2000:101). This emphasis on architectural reminders of “home” is interesting especially in far-flung regions like Faroe and Greenland. When describing the similar styles of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century longhouses in the region Stumann Hansen mistakenly states that the absence of such house types in Greenland is due to its later period of settlement (ibid). Multiple houses of similar form do exist in Greenland, however (Fig. 27). Madsen (2014: Tab. 5.1) lists 12 in both the Eastern and Western Settlements. The longhouses in Greenland as well as the six *baenhus* churches clearly indicate that in its earliest phases of settlement it

could have been very much a part of this same North Atlantic architectural culture.

The difficult question is whether or not a distinctive form of architecture can demonstrate a distinctive form of Christianity. Unfortunately excavated *baenhus* structures have not yielded anything in terms of liturgical artefacts to inform us of what sort of services may have been carried out in them. However, if we look at a church as an artefact itself, we may establish some small understanding of the happenings.

To utilize Brattahlid I, constructed in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century at Ø-29a, as an example, we shall review it briefly as a representative of the *baenhus* style. Excavations reveal that, like the Norse longhouse, the interior was furnished with side benches (Fig.28). Light must have come from an open door or from portable lamps, such as a steatite lamp burning whale oil; without hearths, either the lamps offered some heat source or people relied on warm cloaks and clothes and close proximity.

A phenomenological understanding of the setting may also be of use in hypothesizing the type of rituals conducted. Such churches will have generated an intimate – if not claustrophobic – experience! Pale wooden planks reflected the small light of perhaps a steatite lamp burning whale oil. The sounds of mass, the words of the officiant or hymns of the small congregation will have been muffled by the massive turf wall outside which also held in what body heat was produced by those sitting or standing close to one another, their scents and their voices. Inside the church was a subterranean, womb-like environment of incredible intimacy where one heard or discussed the stories of Christianity and their bearing on the life one should live. Exiting the church must have seemed birth-like with a bracing blast of fresh air and bright light. The experience could not be more different from that of mass in a massive stone cathedral like Gardar, where the light filtered through stained glass and the peal of bells reverberated off stone walls. The *baenhus* provided a small, potentially cramped arena for the rituals of Christianity.

### 5.7.2 *The implications of the Norse stone churches and their construction*

If the *baenhus* as a church represented a dark, introspective experience by pressing the laity against one another then may it be said that the stone churches that followed represented permanence, monumentality and allegiance to an ecclesiastical authority?

In the North Atlantic the Norse began to build stone churches following their official submission to the Norwegian crown. In Orkney Christchurch on Birsay was begun in 1065, followed by the construction of the Cathedral of St. Magnus in Kirkwall in 1137 (Cant 1972:5). In the Faroe Islands St. Olav's church was constructed in the early years of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, mere yards from where Bishop Erlendur ordered the construction of a cathedral to St. Magnus so large it may never have been finished. Greenland's earliest stone church, Brattahlid II - based on its Romanesque design and circular churchyard - was likely constructed in the late 11<sup>th</sup> or possibly early 12<sup>th</sup> century (Arneborg 2012). However, scholarship of the Greenlandic Church is reluctant to reduce the switch in church construction to a purely chronological evolution. For instance, there are not enough stone churches to occupy every name on Ivar Bardarson's 14<sup>th</sup> century list of parishes, prompting some to assume that the *baenhus* churches endured as parish centers even after the design of new churches had become decidedly more European (Keller 1989:224, Vésteinsson 2009:240).

Greenland's stone churches (with the possible exception of Brattahlid II) were all built following the arrival of a foreign bishop. That so clear a transition occurred under the auspices of an officially designated representative of a faraway ecclesiastical power structure demonstrates that a new understanding of what Christianity looked like had arrived. The new churches were monumental and far larger than the Qoorlortoq churches. Architecture is only the most tangible aspect of this. The new experience was illuminated by stained glass windows (as at Ø-47, Ø-83, Ø-111) and warmed by hearths (as at Ø-29a III, Ø-47, Ø-149). Priest's doors are plainly discernible at Ø-29a III and Ø-83, Parishioners now entered the building through a different door than the priest, they stood facing the head of the church rather than sat facing one

another. Furthermore, changes came in terms of burial, with bishops and important people were afforded burial even inside the church itself. While a *baenhus* would appear from a distance as a variation on the terrain, almost a part of the landscape, these stone churches stood out as monuments claiming it. A stone church weighed down the fluttering edges of the map of Christendom. The winds that moved these edges were those of pre-existing traditions and the mysterious nature of the world "out there." The Church, symbolized by the stone cathedral, here demonstrated that it was the sole negotiator between the inhabitants of this world and any powers beyond it. As the secular power of the Greenlandic church expanded, as emphasized by the spread of these stone churches, so too would its influence on ritual and popular belief. The shifting of a cosmology does not necessarily overwhelm and eliminate rituals or beliefs already in place. In many cases the traditions would carry on with a retroactive sense of context. The precautions taken against the restless dead as we see in coffin 30 at Herjolfsnes (7.5.2.4), or the interment of animal skulls at Gardar (6.4.5.1.2.2), for example, did not disappear once Christianity was the religion of the land.

While Greenland undoubtedly continued traditions that made its particular approach to Christianity unique and culturally appropriate, it appears to have been rather eager to accept new traditions from the church, especially when compared to Iceland. Iceland stands out as the only North Atlantic Norse community to not construct stone churches like the rest of the Archdiocese of Nidaros (Gjerland & Keller 2009:168). Iceland was incorporated into the archdiocese with the rest of the North Atlantic following its establishment in 1152, but its Christian practices on the ground appear to have been more independent than its neighbors. Iceland's Christianization process has been extensively studied so an in depth analysis here is not necessary, but this phenomenon can be broadly explained by the nature of Iceland's political response to Christianity. It has been suggested that the Icelandic elite adopted Christianity in a more diplomatic and pragmatic way than did those of lesser economic standing (Kristjánsdóttir 2015). Clerical celibacy and monogamy were particularly absent among those wealthy enough to endow and preside over the

new churches (ibid. 32). It may be seen as the historical memory of the tense conversion of 1000 and an attempt to disrupt the ruling *status quo* as little as possible. As the largest and wealthiest of the North Atlantic communities Iceland had the political and economic capital to resist the official dominion of Norway until 1262. By contrast, it does not appear that said capital was enough to compete with Norway for influence in neighboring North Atlantic communities. While the stone churches representing a Christian mainstream are absent in Iceland, *baenhus* churches are not. These turf churches and the proto-stave churches seen in the Baltic region have been interpreted as representing either competing Christian ideologies or churches of differing function, but later medieval church building in Iceland appears to incorporate elements of both designs (3.4) (Kristjánsdóttir 2011). This may corroborate the theory that *baenhus* churches represent an overall earlier style of Christianity in the North Atlantic, one that did not necessarily indicate an acceptance of the politico-religious order of a foreign power.

If the absence of stone churches in Iceland can be interpreted as a sign of resistance – passive or active – to foreign church authority, it may then be argued that the presence of such churches in Greenland is an acceptance of the same. In the late 10<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> centuries when *baenhus* churches were present in both Iceland and Greenland (as well as the Faroes, Shetland, and Orkney) we may see them as indicative of a certain approach to Christianity. If the stone built churches are a reflection of the influence of Norwegian ecclesiastical authority, their absence in Iceland may be a demonstration of these two communities' differing reaction to said authority.

### 5.7.3 Monastic Sites

Ivar Bardarson mentions two monastic sites in his account; a Benedictine convent and an Augustinian monastery (Ivar Bardarson, *A Fourteenth-Century Description of Greenland*, [Line] 63-66; Derek Mathers (trans) 2009, 79). The Benedictine convent at Ø-149 was easily located by its accompanying hot springs. The Augustinian monastery has been associated with Ø-105 since Finnur Jónson first hypothesized it based on Bardarson's description in 1898

(Vebæk 1991:6). Any remaining doubts as to the identity of these sites stems from the fact that there is little to set them apart from a typical Greenlandic Norse farm.

#### Ø-149 "Klaustr"

The Benedictine convent was excavated by C.L. Vebæk with a skeleton crew in the summers of 1945, 1946, and 1948, and his 1991 publication on the topic remains the most comprehensive report on the site. Unfortunately, due to the lack of trained experts on the excavation, Vebæk's text apologetically notes that a number of mistakes were made (1991:21). Wooden artefacts C<sup>14</sup> dated to 985 (895-101 ± 1 stand.dev.) established that the site was first settled during the initial settlement period (73). The earliest dated skeletal material from the churchyard dates from 1290 (818 ± 38), the latest 1399 (572 ± 50) (Arneborg et al. 2012: Table 9). A letter from Bishop Arne of Bergen to Bishop Thord of Greenland dated to 1308 makes mention of Greenlandic monasticism, suggesting that the houses were already functioning by at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century (*Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, 10:9; C.R. Unger & H.J. Huitfeldt (eds) 1878, 14-15).

The church itself was built with large blocks of local stone, mortared with packing stones and turf or clay. The western gable was constructed of wood as was common in Greenlandic churches (Fig.24). Vebæk excavated a 3x4 metre depression in the chancel of the church which contained a hearth (Vebæk 1991:25-27). The purpose of the depression is uncertain. The most distinctive feature of the church at Ø-149, however, is the large number of burials within it. Vebæk excavated 20 people from graves inside the church, stating "there would have been room for only three or four more before the church was completely filled with graves" (1991:28). The presence of a child's grave inside the church would suggest that if the church were part of a convent it also functioned as a parish church accessible to the surrounding community (Lynnerup 1998:20). In the churchyard there was no evidence of coffin use, though Vebæk excavated an apparent mass burial and a disarticulated individual which could potentially indicate reinterment (Vebæk 1991:40,42). Fragments of bronze church bells

were recovered, as were several runic carvings of uncertain meaning (Stoklund in Vebæk 1991:58, 63-65).

#### *Ø-105 Klaustr*

The identification of Ø-105 as the Augustinian monastery is based completely on an approximation of Bardarson's location, as described in Roussell (1941:48): "The topographical lists drawn up in the Middle Ages mention a monastery for the Augustinian monks in Ketilsfjord; judging from the position in the list it has to be found in present-day Tasermiut fjord in which case in all probability it is the ruin group on the east bank near the head of the fjord, marked No. 105."

The only excavation thus far carried out was a small test trench by Nørlund to determine the presence of a stone west gable in 1921. A charcoal covered grave was located beneath the wall foundation, suggesting that the Romanesque church was not the first on the site (Lynnerup 1998:30). Like Ø-149, there is nothing stylistically about the farm to suggest its use as a monastery. The identification of the site with the Augustinian monastery has been met with skepticism (Jansen 1972:119). It is possible that Ø-105 is a parish church unnamed in the medieval sources, but at present this can only be seen as a best guess

#### *Other sites*

The claim that both sites are monastic without any corroborative archaeology has again come under scrutiny considering the large number of Norse sites that remain unexcavated and that may provide more conclusive identification. Both Ø-66 and ruin group 545 at Ø-1 have been put forward based on the resemblance of the farm layout to the monastic sites of Eynhallow in Orkney and Skriðuklaustur in Iceland (Grayburn 2015:15). The assumption about Greenlandic monasticism based upon the current sites is that it was essentially life on an "ordinary farm, where the prior was master, but where, in addition to the usual farm duties, they lived according to precepts which perhaps were not observed too strictly" (Roussell 1941:50). Should subsequent excavations



reveal a more cloister-like layout at other sites, this notion will need to be reconsidered.

### **5.8 Case Study: Ø-29a Brattahlid**

Only one place in Greenland contains a Qorlortoq, Romanesque, and medieval church all in one site (Fig. 28). This is site Ø-29a at Qassiarsuk on the north side of Tunuliarfik fjord. This case study thus provides a unique opportunity to consider and debate look, size, and, arguably, the importance of a church structure.

Sites Ø-29 and Ø-29a comprise the remains of a large Norse farming complex near present day Qassiarsuk. Originally one site, the two were divided into Ø-29 "The River Farm" and Ø-29a "The North Farm" or "Eirik the Red's Farm" (Arneborg 2005:19). These sites were identified as Brattahlid early on primarily on the basis of their size and the visible ruins of a stone church (Brattahlid III). In his survey of the region, Daniel Bruun had originally suspected that Brattahlid lay on the south side of Tunuliarfik Fjord at Igaliku, but it was Finnur Jónson who declared it to be on the north shore (Jónson 1928). The identification of Ø-29 and Ø-29a as Brattahlid is not without its criticisms, but thus far an acceptable alternative site has proven elusive. Guldager suggested that Brattahlid lay further up Tunuliarfik at Qinngua, but this has been disproven (Guldager 2000; Guldager 2002; Edwards *et al.* 2010). Nørlund & Stenberger (1934:17) furthermore argued that Ø-29a was in fact the older of the two ruin groups. This was confirmed, though with different evidence than the two originally put forth, namely the discovery of earlier structures than those of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Nørlund identified as the oldest (*ibid.*:71)

Ø-29a has seen multiple large-scale excavations by Bruun in 1894, Nørlund in 1932, Meldgaard in 1961 and Krogh in 1964, and occasional smaller excavations have occurred since. Combined, these show that Ø-29a contains the ruins of three churches of different type dating from the start to the end of the settlement (ca. 985-1450).

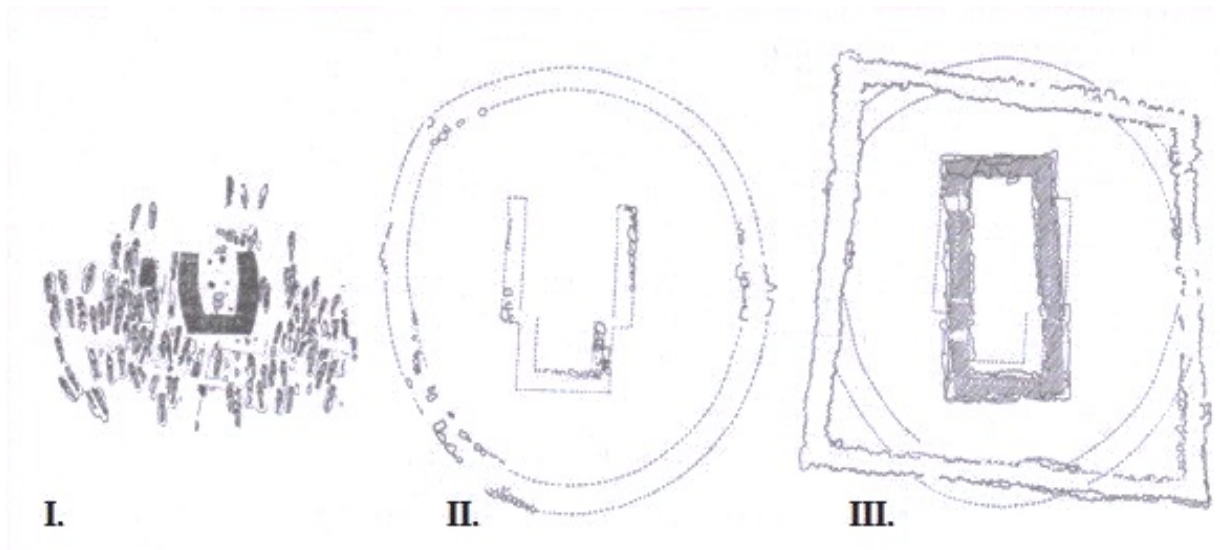


Figure 23: All three phases of church construction at Brattahlid (after Arneborg in Gulløv 2004)

#### 5.8.1 Ruin 59, Brattahlid I “Thjodhild’s Church”

Ruin 59 was a minor sensation when explored during Meldgaard’s 1961 investigations. The church is chronologically the earliest known church in the Western Hemisphere; datable to the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century by both its curved, turf walls and the C<sup>14</sup> dating of skeletons in its surrounding circular churchyard, the earliest of which dates to 1100 ± 41 BP (Arneborg 2005:33; Arneborg *et al.* 2012:13). It is of the Q-type, likely a wooden structure protected by thick turf on the north, south and east sides that are now the only remnants of the walls. The western wall is open, suggesting a now lost wood construction (Fig 30).

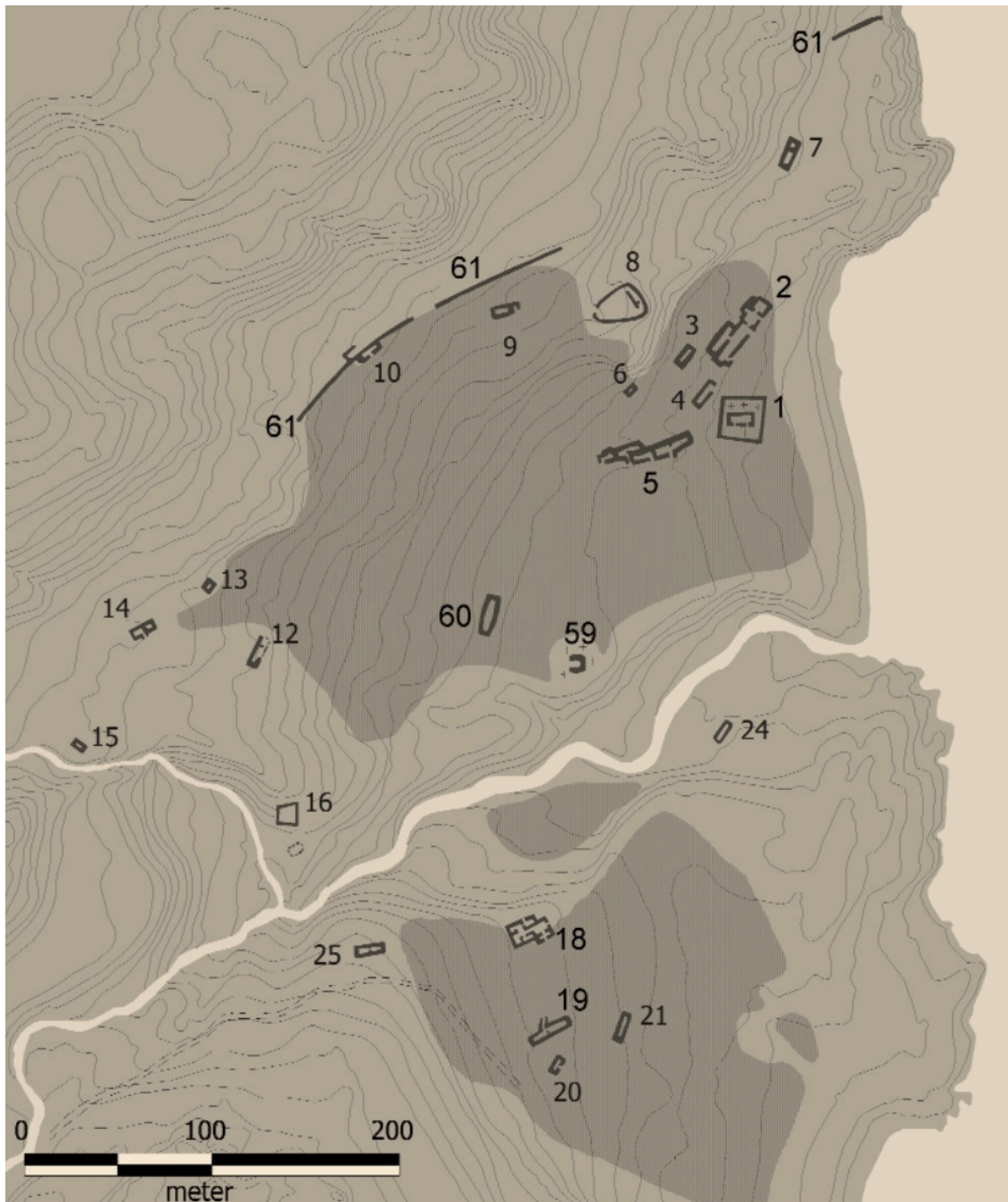


Figure 24: Complete plan of Ø-29a (Arneborg 2005)

Standing on a small promontory beside the river that separates the North Farm from the River Farm, roughly 100 meters from the present day shore of the fjord, at the time of its construction the shoreline perhaps lay twice as far from the shore (Fig. 29) (Edwards *et al.* 2010:93). The entire complex rests on a sloping plain descending toward the fjord that gives Brattahlid its name - “The Steep Slope”.

Currently, there are not many contemporary buildings to assess how the church sits within its associated settlement, but ruin 60, which is believed to be the oldest dwelling house in Ø-29a lies only 50 meters to the northwest. Krogh believed that this close proximity undermined the sagas as historical sources, which described Thjodhild's church as being "built a fair distance from the house" due to Eirik the Red's refusal to accept the new faith (Krogh in Keller 1989:97; Hreinsson 1997a:8). However, the older structure underlying room 1 of structure 2 is likely contemporary with the church, and it sits some 200 meters away (Arneborg 2005:25). The church interior had approximately 7m<sup>2</sup> of floor space paved with red sandstone. Six wooden posts supported the roof; and the impression left by a plank suggests a possible partition between a choir and a nave. Most likely the congregants would have sat on benches set into the north and south walls, as in a contemporary Norse house (Krogh 1967:21). No lighting implements have been found, nor any indication of a fire pit in the floor. Meldgaard estimated that 20-30 people could have heard mass in the church if standing (1982:155) and the ceiling was likely not much higher than 3 meters at its peak.

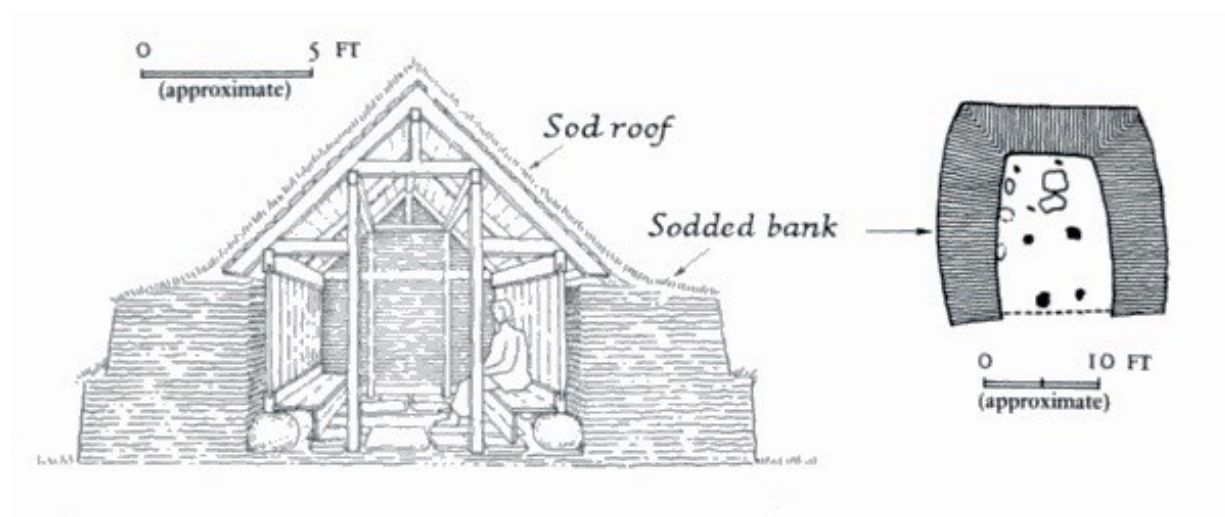


Figure 25: A reconstruction of Thjodhild's Church, Qassiarsuk (Krogh in Conant 1978)

The burial data and related C<sup>14</sup> indicates that this church (or at least the churchyard) was in use between 976-1192, signifying that those buried here belonged to the first generation of Norse settlers (Lynnerup 1998:14; Arneborg 2012). However, since it is believed that the church was in use for only 30 to 50 years (Arneborg 2005:30), the extended burial timespan is interesting. The

successor church was larger and occupied a more prominent position with its own graveyard, though burials continued at the initial site.

### *5.8.2 Ruin 1, Brattahlid II*

Brattahlid II was discovered during Nørlund & Stenberger's 1932 excavations of Brattahlid III. The only visible remains are the slight outline of the foundation almost directly beneath the newest church. It is of bipartite design with a narrow chancel in the east, 12m in length, with a nave width of 4m and a chancel width of 3m surrounded by a circular churchyard 22m in diameter (Nørlund & Stenberger 2010: 32-34).

Constructed of stone, perhaps to shelter an internal wooden structure from the weather, little is known of its design but the floor area is approximately 38<sup>m<sup>2</sup></sup>, the nave covering 14m<sup>2</sup>. If the ratio of floor space to suspected occupants from "Thjodhild's Church" remains the same, Brattahlid II could have hosted over 100 people. The exterior stones of the wall were larger than those on the interior (Nørlund & Stenberger 2010:34).

Dating the structure is problematic, but its construction was likely a part of an expanding farmstead in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. The hall complex of ruin 2 was continuously added to throughout the Norse settlement; so that by the time Brattahlid III was constructed it stood very near the primary dwelling of the farm. The oldest room in Ruin 2 has been tentatively dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century by comparing an internal cistern system to a similar one from a C<sup>14</sup> dated structure at Ø-17a Narsaq (1140±35 BP) and its construction on top of an older structure (Arneborg 2005:25; Arneborg et. al. 2012, Tab. 2). Dating based on skeletal material has proven impossible owing to poor preservation conditions in the churchyard, however (Lynnerup 1998:27). Based on the building design and churchyard layout both Keller and Arneborg have argued for a late 11<sup>th</sup> or early 12<sup>th</sup> century construction date (Keller 1989:188; Arneborg 2012).

The location of this new church suggests increased importance, either from a social or spiritual standpoint. The church was closer to Ruin 2, labeled "Erik the Red's Hall", and stands just south of it, c. 40 meters from the current



shoreline. The entrance faces away from the fjord, and from it the site of “Thjodhild’s Church” and the old churchyard is still visible. The bipartite stone construction of the church in addition to creating a larger center of worship is also a change from the earlier Q-structures such as “Thjodhild’s Church.”



Figure 26: Ruins of Brattahlid III (Photo: J.A. McCullough)

### 5.8.3 Ruin 1, Brattahlid III, “Leijder”

The third and final church constructed at Brattahlid is of rectangular design and increased in size from its predecessor to ca. 50m<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 31). The east-west axis is more true than Brattahlid II. Entry to the new structure was via two doors on the south face. The easternmost door is c. 0.57 m in width and is assumed to be the priest’s door. The congregation would have entered a door further to the west which Nørlund estimated to be 0.66m wide due to wear on the sill. Both would have required a significant entry step up (Nørlund & Stenberger 2010:30-31).

In relation to the dwelling structure Brattahlid III is almost identical to Brattahlid II, though the farm expanded around it. Ø-29a contains 15 Norse structures not including Ruins 1, 2, 59, and 60, with the major structures all within 100 meters of the church (Fig. 26).

The churchyard was likely also altered in this phase, into roughly square form with “an enormous number of disturbed bones of earlier interments” (Nørlund & Stenberger 2010:39). Unfortunately none of these bones were deemed suitable for testing. The churchyards of Greenland will be addressed more fully in Chapter 6. It is unclear where the entrance to the churchyard was, but potentially near the west corner of the north wall; visitors will have wound around the western gable of the church to reach its entrance. The interior space of the church increased by c. 15m<sup>2</sup>, offering space now to 150 individuals to have heard mass in Brattahlid III.

The construction of Brattahlid III coincided roughly with Neils Lynnerup's hypothetical population peak in Greenland, assuming a total population of some 2000 souls. (Lynnerup 1998:117-118). However, Keller claims:

“But Brattahlid III is only slightly larger than its predecessor Brattahlid II, a fact that does not particularly agree with the idea that demographic growth leads to the construction of larger churches” (1989:244).

The terrain of Greenland and the distance separating settlements would render regular church attendance a daunting task for those not living in its immediate vicinity, and the question of relating parish size to population size should be discarded. However, it is possible semi-regular services held in the church on holy days would have been larger social events. The increasing size of the churches should therefore be considered a symbolic choice.

The “largest and best” stones used to build Brattahlid III were locally quarried porphyry of both blue and red hues, employed in the outer walls, and with smaller stones for the interior, which was likely lined with wood or perhaps tapestries. However, this use of smaller interior stones is seen in most stone churches in Greenland (Nørlund & Stenberger 2010:30; Roussell & Degerbøl

1941:103; Arneborg 2005:28). Since no evidence exists for an outer coating of either lime or another coloring agent on the church, the natural blue and red porphyry may have had an intentionally polychrome effect (Fig.32). There is no evidence of flagging stones as part of the church floor, making the floor most likely wooden planking (Arneborg 2005:28). A stone-lined hearth lay near the middle of the structure, which Nørlund & Stenberger view as a source of heat rather than light (2010:31), faintly illuminating parishioners, tapestries and metal fittings alike.



Figure 27: External wall at Brattahlíð III (Photo: J.A. McCullough)

#### 5.8.4 Case study analysis

What, then, can these three structures tell us about the people of Brattahlíð, and how do these beliefs and practices fit into the greater picture of Norse Greenland? Ø-29a was settled in the last decades of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, with 2 dwellings dated to this moment: Ruin 60 and Ruin 2. Brattahlíð I was constructed very near the time of initial settlement, perhaps around the year 1000. The accuracy of the saga's claim that the church site was selected to



avoid offending Eirik the Red has long been a thorn in the side of reconstructivists, as addressed above. The two dwellings conveniently lend credence to both sides of the question. It is interesting that Brattahlid I was constructed simultaneously close to and far from contemporary dwellings. Perhaps the Christians chose to live near the church almost half a kilometer from the pagan chieftain, but this is entirely speculative. Brattahlid II's construction closer to the farm core indicates that Ruin 2 was, at that time, the chieftain's primary residence, as also indicated by the dwelling's subsequent expansion. While the chieftain's family may have moved from ruin 60 to Ruin 2 in the intervening years, it is equally possible that once converted the chieftain moved the church closer to the main dwelling and expanded it.

As noted, Brattahlid I has evidence of a division between the chancel and nave. While little is known for certain about how the landowners who built their own churches in Iceland (and presumably in Greenland) conducted their services, but a chancel screen in any form would inform on the archaeology of the Mass. Perhaps it indicates the presence of a priest rather than just a Christian landowner standing in the "head" of the church. Regardless of whether Brattahlid I is truly "Thjodhild's Church," it is the oldest Christian structure known in the Western Hemisphere and its design and content were probably highly influential on the first generation of Greenlandic churches.

Dating samples from the 144 burials around Brattahlid I range from the earliest period of settlement up to the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, and thus well after the construction of Brattahlid II (Nelson *et al.* 2012:13). Though the skeletal material from the newer churches was unsuitable for dating due to poor soil preservation, we must assume that the dead at Brattahlid were being buried simultaneously in the churchyards of Brattahlid I and II. Perhaps Brattahlid I remained a family chapel of sorts, or at least a family plot for the descendants of Eirik the Red or whomever the notable farmer at Brattahlid was.

In many respects, Brattahlid II is the most interesting of the three churches in terms of what it can say about the religious atmosphere of the time. Almost certainly the large stone church was constructed before the arrival of Bishop

Arnaldur in 1126, and its layout features several elements that mark it as a transitional church. The combination of a narrow-chancelled church like those at Ø-47, Ø-105, Ø-111, and V-7 with a circular churchyard boundary like those of the Qorlortoq structures illustrates a church of two worlds. As Brattahlid's first two churches were being built the clergy of Bremen accused the Greenlanders of being Christians in name only (Nørlund & Stenberger 2010:30). The construction of Brattahlid II can be seen as an effort to counter such opinions, whether or not the specific accusations from Bremen were known in Greenland.

But if Brattahlid II's bipartite design was chosen to emulate more "mainstream" Christian conventions, the initiative predates the Bishops of Gardar. One possible explanation for this lies in the written sources. The *Story of Einar Sokkason* (also called *Grœnlendinga þáttur* or *Tale of the Greenlanders*), which is in the 14<sup>th</sup> century *Flateyrbok*, is the story of Einar, son of Sokki the chieftain of Brattahlid. This tale states that it was the Greenlanders who took the initiative in establishing their own bishopric, a statement broadly supported by Adam of Bremen (3.4.3.1). Einar is elected as the Greenlander's representative to Norway where he petitions King Sigurd the Crusader (1103-1130) for a bishop and is granted one.<sup>14</sup> When Bishop Arnaldur finally arrives in Greenland he comes first to Brattahlid, but thereafter establishes the see at Gardar. "Einar and his father were [the bishop's] mainstay, whilst they and all their fellow-countrymen stood highest in favour with the bishop." (*The Story of Einar Sokkason*, 1:1; G. Jones, 238). The historicity of the *þáttur* is debated. It has been argued that the tale is based on oral accounts of actual events, though the legal issues that form the central plot have been linked to changes in Icelandic law rendering the extant text no earlier than 1250 – over a century after the events it depicts (Grove 2009:49).

It is not known if Eirik the Red's position of "Paramount Chieftain" was hereditary, but Ivar Bardarson claimed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that Brattahlid was "where the Lawman lives at the farmhouse" (Ivar Bardarson, A Fourteenth-

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<sup>14</sup> According to the tale, Arnaldur was reluctant to accept the appointment "because he would have to deal with such cantankerous people." The complete tale is included in Jones 1986.

Century Description of Greenland, [Line] 111; Derek Mathers (trans) 2009, 81). Some have taken this to mean that Brattahlid was the permanent seat of the Law Speaker (e.g. Jones 1986:86). Whether or not it was the secular equivalent of Gardar, Brattahlid was a powerful farm holding prime farming land; those who subsequently inherited the property, like Sokki, gained a large and profitable operation. Gardar lies only 20 km away as the crow flies, and was equally as profitable. There were close kin relations between the farms early in the settlement described in *The Saga of the Greenlanders*:

Eirik [The Red]'s children were Leif, Thorvald, Thorstein and a daughter, Freydis. She was married to a man named Thorvard, and they farmed at Gardar, where the bishop's seat is now. She was a domineering woman, but Thorvard was a man of no consequence. She had been married to him mainly for his money (*The Saga of the Greenlanders*, 1:1; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 20).

Could the transitional design of Brattahlid II and the textual evidence indicate that Brattahlid was the primary point for the practice and dissemination of Christianity in Greenland? Why, then, was the Episcopal residence established at Gardar rather than Brattahlid? Probably this is due to Gardar being the largest and most productive farm in the Eastern Settlement (Gad 1971:68). Inheritances and marriages may still have bound Gardar and Brattahlid together by 1126, four or five generations later.

Alternatively, the establishment of an Episcopal seat at Gardar denoted a separation from the secular power at Brattahlid. The bishops may have wished to be less dependent upon the powerful farmers than is implied in *The Story of Einar Sökkason*. The presence of the massive tithe barn (Ruin 5), cowshed (Ruin 9) and harbour storehouse (Ruin 20) indicate Gardar was the most productive farm in Greenland by far by the end of the settlement (Buckland et al. 2008). However, it seems unlikely that the bishopric could have been established without the support of the powerful landowners, regardless of how the balance of power may have subsequently shifted.

Prior to the establishment of the see the Christians of Greenland are believed to have been under the jurisdiction of the bishops of Iceland, though no record exists that any of them ever visited. Perhaps the construction of stone churches beginning with Brattahlid II were part of an initiative to secure the appointment of a bishop for Greenland. Even if the size of Greenland's Christian population was low, it would not do to have a group of the faithful in a sustained community like Greenland to be lacking episcopal oversight simply because they were isolated (Vésteinsson 2009:148). Brattahlid II did not remain standing until the end of the settlement, however, as similar Romanesque churches in Greenland did. By the time Brattahlid III was constructed sometime after 1300 it was the center of a parish church unambiguously under the jurisdiction of Gardar, and had a new design.

The rectangular churches of Greenland are generally believed to have been constructed post-1300 and signify the final phase of church construction (Keller 1989:177). As most of these churches survive only as foundations we are unable to analyze much more than their outline. Fortunately we have the church at Ø-83, identified as Hvalsey Church, by which to make comparisons with Brattahlid III.

Of the six rectangular, medieval churches Hvalsey most resembles Brattahlid III in outline, though with greater care in construction. Mogens Clemmensen, who conducted a detailed survey of the church in 1910, compared the style of Hvalsey to Irish churches of the 11th and 12th centuries, presumably due to its rectangular layout and Roman arched window. However, Roussell later dated it to 1300, seeing its style more like contemporary churches in Norway and specifically the Old Church at Eidfjord. Roussell's dating is now the preferred one (Roussell & Degerbøl 1941:124,135; Arneborg 2005:63).<sup>15</sup>

According to *Sturlubók* Hvalsey was originally settled by Thorkell Farserk, a cousin of Eirik the Red, during the initial settlement of Greenland, but by the time of Ivar Bardarson's account the entire fjord was owned by the church

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<sup>15</sup> Clemmensen's 1910 illustrations of the church are outstanding, and were in fact used during the restoration of Hvalsey Church in 1999. See Nyegaard 2009.

(Arneborg 2005:60; Ivar Bardarson, *A Fourteenth-Century Description of Greenland*, [Line] 96-101; Derek Mathers (trans) 2009, 80-81). Hvalsey would have been a relatively new church during Ivar's time in Greenland, perhaps as little as 30-40 years old. It is likely that Brattahlid III was probably constructed at roughly the same time. Brattahlid III's foundation outline gives us the location of its entrances, but little else. These entrances recall those at Hvalsey, though the latter has an additional entrance in the west gable. Hvalsey church also features seven windows, including a finely crafted window with a Romanesque arch in the east gable (Fig. 33). Overall, the church layouts demonstrate a number of similarities of design, and some of these, as will be demonstrate various similarities of design, were likely reflective of liturgical convention.

The east-west axis of Brattahlid III differed slightly from that of Brattahlid II, potentially indicative of a change in the "official" method of calculating due-east, and similar changes can be seen between the Romanesque Gardar I and the cruciform Gardar II (Keller 1989:206-207). Support for this interesting idea is limited: the shift is very small, and practical concerns of building a new church on top of the older one must be considered as well. It also seems that the shift of Gardar II is in the eye of the beholder.

Brattahlid III did shift, however, and is more correctly oriented east-west than its predecessor. This adjustment may signify use of outside craftsmen. Such experts were called in to construct the church at Kirkjubøur in the Faroes, and it has been suggested that Hvalsey's arched window and lime whitewashing reveal professional church builders (Pierce 2011:227). If Greenland churches were being built by (or at least under the guidance of) professionals from outside Greenland, the Norwegian parallels of Hvalsey and Brattahlid III are not that surprising. Peculiarly, however, such structures are absent in Iceland. If those in authority in 14<sup>th</sup> century Greenland – presumably the bishops – were willing to invite builders of Norwegian-style churches, it suggests a stronger desire to maintain connection with Norwegian church authorities than was seen in Iceland.

Other post-1300 rectangular churches in Greenland have open west walls, including Ø-66 and Ø-149, constructed in similar fashion to the bipartite churches, with a wooden western gable or perhaps even complete wooden structures protected by stone walls (Krogh 1967:95). At Brattahlid III the congregation entered through the western door on the south face, whereas the clergy entered the priest's door closer to the altar. Ó'Carragáin's analysis of Irish churches could shed light on the activities within Greenlandic churches. The addition of separate doors for clergy and parishioner may represent a growing distinction between the two groups, as opposed to the presumed early arrangements of proprietary churches. While Roussell and Degerbøl (1941:104) claimed that the interior of these churches would probably have lacked decoration due to the dim light within, Ó'Carragáin (2009a:133) argues that such limited visibility would have played a role in the atmosphere of the service.

“...it is almost as if those commissioning them were aiming to create an atmosphere that was as different as possible from the outdoors, or indeed the relatively flimsy domestic buildings of the day, perhaps to heighten the sense that one was entering a sacred, almost otherworldly space. The coldness of the stone walls and the dimly seen but massive beams of the roof above would have contributed to this, as would carefully positioned lighting, through which certain focal points were illuminated in the gloom”

The ‘carefully positioned lighting’ in Brattahlid III consisted of a hearth in the nave, plus windows. While we have no knowledge of Brattahlid III's windows we know that Hvalsey had no shortage of them, and some were carefully emphasized in their construction. At Hvalsey the altar would presumably have been illuminated by the east gable window and one on the south wall approximately a meter west. Three more windows on the south face and another across from the parishioners' entrance would have provided more illumination, as would the window above the west gable entrance. Hvalsey, comparatively, would have been rather bright by comparison with the earliest churches in Greenland. If Brattahlid III had a similar arrangement of windows the interior space would have certainly been bright enough to see carvings or

tapestries, and perhaps even emphasize them. Ó'Carragáin has argued that altar space can be identified by the positioning of south facing windows in his studies of Irish churches (Ó'Carragáin 2009a:137). If this is so at Hvalsey the appropriate window would be that furthest east.



Figure 28: Western gable and southern wall of Hvalsey Church with southern windows still plainly visible. (Photo: J. A. McCullough)

All these features, actual and theoretical, combine to paint a picture of a solid, established parish church at Brattahlíð with firm connections to the episcopal seat across the fjord at Gardar; the features also imply links to the Norwegian church.

However, the structure alone does not indicate an orthodoxy of belief among the Greenlanders. In fact, the literary evidence seems to indicate that the outsiders perceived Greenlandic Christians as backward at best and heretical at worst (Chapter 4). But the institutional church as exemplified by Gardar seems to have been firmly entrenched as the highest power in Greenland. The bishop's residence at Gardar, for example, was a major network of massive buildings and paved walkways.  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  isotopic testing on the 13<sup>th</sup> century bishop burial excavated at Gardar by Poul Nørlund has demonstrated that his diet

comprised of far more livestock than the average Greenlander at his time, meaning that he was either a new arrival from Norway when he died or ate the more prestigious livestock raised on the inner fjords rather than the seal and walrus meat consumed by the laity (Arneborg et al. 1999:165-166, Arneborg 2005:50; Pierce 2011:255). It seems that the bishops wasted little time in separating themselves from the community in this manner.

Brattahlíð appears to have transitioned from an Icelandic style proprietary church to a significant parish center between 985 and 1340, and remained in use until the end of the settlement sometime in the mid fifteenth century. Christianity was practised at Ø-29a for the entirety of the Norse habitation. Its residents were witness to multiple layers of transition: from Christians perhaps as a minority population in the 10<sup>th</sup> century; their growth as a demographic; and changes in the rite as the settlement grew in size and connections were made with Nidaros, and how the structures they worshipped in changed to reflect these developments.

## **5.9 Chapter discussion**

The variations in construction and design of the churches reflect changing sensibilities about their roles and context. Architectural variations between the Q-form type churches and their later Romanesque and medieval counterparts have been the subject of some debate; namely whether the different types of churches represent differing uses (e.g. in terms of ownership and private vs. public) or even religious persuasions. Krogh in particular argues that Qorlortoq churches were proprietary churches or family owned prayer houses, and later that their absence from Bardarson's descriptions and other written sources was because they were not tithe-collecting churches and therefore not necessarily relevant to a parish register (Krogh 1967:90-91; Krogh 1976:308).

Vésteinsson has suggested that differences in form were expense driven: thus, if a stone church was a status symbol to an elite farm, perhaps maintaining a Qorlortoq structure was a reflection of emulation by a less prosperous landholder (Vésteinsson 2009:143).



The earliest Qorlortoq structures were in many respects like any secular building. The Greenlanders, the vast majority of them from Iceland and elsewhere in the North Atlantic, were used to building in turf to save valuable lumber. This was less labor intensive than building in stone, and was a technique already known for houses and churches in Iceland and the Faroes. Undoubtedly the first Greenlander who built a church (Thjodhild Jorundardottir, perhaps?) would have been familiar with the design.

Qorlortoq churches appear to have been constructed over a period of 200 years. It appears that the Qorlortoq churches served multiple functions and perhaps in some cases (Ø-29a, Ø-78) were in use contemporaneously with the later medieval stone churches. The practice of constructing Q-form churches over this period potentially reflects the practical and economic advantages of a small, turf church. Alternatively, it could represent a tradition of symbolism or ecclesiastical practice.

The larger stone churches, built more consistently close to the farm centers, certainly were conveying different message. Greenland's first bishop, one Erik Gnipson, was appointed in 1121 and promptly disappeared, presumably on an expedition to Vinland (Arneborg 2005:92). His successor Arnaldur was appointed in 1124 and resided at Gardar until 1152. Arnaldur is duly credited with the establishment of Gardar as an episcopal see (*The Story of Einar Sokkason*, 1:2; G. Jones, 236-238). Gardar appears to have steadily grown in size and importance once the Bishop was in residence.<sup>16</sup> Nørlund's excavations revealed the first, Romanesque stone church at Ø-47 (Gardar I) that was expanded into the cruciform cathedral (Gardar II) (Nørlund *et al.* 1930). It seems likely that the Romanesque design reflects a developing liturgical protocol in Greenland. The 12<sup>th</sup> century Irish *Treatise on the Eucharist*, for instance, emphasizing the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, states emphatically that "Those who believe are the body, Christ is the beautiful strong head; from these two – and this is not a matter of little moment – the perfection of the Church has grown." Ó'Carragáin notes that this

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<sup>16</sup> Or at least theoretically when the bishop was in residence. The bishops of Greenland took their time arriving in their remote see, and half never arrived at all.

aspect of the liturgy is reflected in Irish church construction from this time as the Church formalised its official doctrine on the Eucharist. The conceptual 'head' of the church is reflected in the narrower chancel, occupied by the clergy. The wider nave was occupied by the laity, or 'body' of the church (Ó'Carragáin 2009a:143-147). Irish practice alone is not enough to make such a claim for Greenland, but more will be revealed once the dating and spread of bipartite churches through Scandinavia and the North Atlantic is conducted.

One very interesting factor, however, is that at least one Romanesque church – Brattahlíð II, as noted – was constructed prior to the arrival of Bishop Arnaldur and may demonstrate that on some level the church builders in Greenland *wanted* to reflect a part of greater European Christendom.

It is impossible to say without documentation whether such church design was in any way mandatory in the form of an order from the new bishop or other church authority. However, the spate of construction of Romanesque churches in the 12th century - five in all including two monastic sites - suggests some form of convention.

The stone churches were larger and clearly accommodated more people. However, the Qorlortoq church at Ø-162 is believed to be Vagar. Yet theoretical models depict Vagar as a geographically small but highly populated parish. (Vebæk 1991:18; Vésteinsson 2009:146). If so, this demonstrates neither parish population nor ecclesiastical convention were wholly responsible for the design of churches. It is interesting to note that according to Bardarson's description Ø-17 Dyrnes "has the largest parish of any church in Greenland" despite the uncertainty of where its boundaries may have been (Ivar Bardarson, *A Fourteenth-Century Description of Greenland*, [Line] 104; Derek Mathers (trans) 2009, 81; Vésteinsson 2009:145).

The change to stone as a construction material says much: stone construction required more resources and time on the part of the builders, and would have given the churches a quality of permanence, reinforced in certain cases by the size of stones used. Nørlund notes stones weighing multiple tons being used in the construction of Herjolfsnes and Gardar, and the slabs of porphyry used

on Brattahlid III are plainly visible today (Fig. 29) (Nørlund *et al.* 1930:55; Nørlund & Stenberger 2010:29). At V-7 Anavik a large stone flag was placed against the outside of the chancel's east wall, which created the illusion of a solid stone in addition to blocking the wind (Roussell & Degerbøl 1941:104). The largest halls (with the exception of the hall at Hvalsey) tended to maintain the construction techniques and materials of the earliest settlers, albeit with evolving designs (Roussell 1937; Roussell & Degerbøl 1941:136-214). To construct a stone church was a powerful statement about the endurance of Christianity, and perhaps even its wealth and authority.<sup>17</sup> Monumental edifices may have been used as a counterpoint to their environment - as strong and permanent signs of human presence amid the looming mountains and icy fjords (Figs. 4 & 11).

The resources required to build stone churches in Greenland would have been non-monetary. The economy of Greenland was based on the export of items like ivory and sealskin - goods worth more in Europe than in Greenland (Perdikaris 2006). The real commodities necessary to build a church were manpower and influence. Since Greenland, like Iceland, was a community based around the economics of agriculture and a complex network of personal alliances (Byock 2001:63-80), so the labor necessary to build a churches like Gardar or Hvalsey would surely have been more than even a large farm could afford to divert from the day-to-day tasks necessary for survival and prosperity, and therefore must have been a communal effort. A chieftain with the urge to build a church could have coerced his neighbors to help if he had enough economic and martial clout, but the use of such methods is absent from the historical record. In our medieval context, it seems more likely that the construction of stone churches had broad enough support to be carried out without such forceful measures. Indeed, considering the construction of churches relatively near the end of the Norse period it is likely that church building activities enjoyed considerable community support (Lynnerup 2014:21).

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<sup>17</sup> Perhaps tellingly, the "tithe barn" at Gardar was constructed out of massive stone as well. Nørlund *et al.* 1930:55 went so far as to describe its construction as "cyclopic."

To the bishops at Gardar in the 1300s the “white veil of churches” constructed under their watch must have seemed a testament to their will and wealth, the furthest fingers of the Mother Church gripping Greenland and keeping it within the realm of the faithful. This does not seem to have been the view of those outside Greenland (see Chapter 4). Did the bishops of Gardar see the signs? By 1350 only four or five more generations would hear mass in these churches, and the churches in the Western Settlement already stood empty (Ivar Badarson 125-126). There was a sense of irony – just when the bishops’ authority over these “cantankerous people” was finally demonstrated through these new houses of worship, the settlement was already contracting, with only about a century left until even the residence of the bishop was silent but for the waves and wind.

## Chapter 6

### Portable Material Culture

#### 6.1 Introduction

At Umivarsuk in the Western Settlement, some Norse man or woman wore on a thong a miniature walrus (Fig.64). Perhaps they had carved it themselves; perhaps it was a gift or a purchase. The miniature was worked from a walrus tooth, making it a portrait of its own source. The form was cut with the familiarity of someone who had seen many walruses in their time, and hung from a cord passed through a hole behind the tusks – making use of the animal's anatomy in life in a cunningly practical way. The miniature meant something to its wearer. A charm for plentiful game? Protection during the harrowing spear charge used to bring down a 2,000 pound animal? Its exact role in the hunt or the beliefs of its wearer is lost to us, but its presence reminds us of Norse artefacts beyond utilitarianism. Whalebone spades and antler arrowheads have been used in the past to demonstrate the practical nature of Greenland Norse workmanship, but this walrus is something different (Vebæk 1993:31-33, 37). Its' agency lies in its resemblance to a living thing and the concept it represented in the mind of those who wore or saw it.

Having examined the establishment of places of worship in chapter five, this chapter aims to examine evidence of devotion and belief revealed through portable artefacts. A number of liturgical items are present in the corpus due to the higher number of excavations at church sites over the years. These items are discussed in section 6.3. These objects are useful for documenting practices being carried out by church officials. Personal devotional items such as prayer counters and crosses are reviewed in section 6.4. Non-liturgical items with religious inscriptions are also examined, with an emphasis on textile production due to the large body of textile-associated artefacts in section 6.4.3. Evidence of a possible Marian cult is reviewed in section 6.4.4. This chapter considers artefacts potentially relating to pre-Christian belief ranging from the

obvious Thor's Hammer carvings in section 6.4.5.4 to the more enigmatic amulets and runes in section 6.4.5.

Unfortunately, this review cannot be considered exhaustive. As of the time of writing the National Museums of Denmark and Greenland do not have published or searchable databases of Norse small finds publicly available. The artefacts discussed below are gleaned from published finds reports, monographs, and articles, some nearly 100 years old. Various forthcoming publications, however, should shed more light on some of the artefacts discussed in this chapter. A comprehensive review of runic inscriptions in Greenland has been conducted with the goal of being published as a monograph (Imer 2012:203). The body of published small finds is sufficient, however, to demonstrate forms of belief and practice previously unanalyzed in Greenland. An intensive analysis of unpublished Greenlandic small finds could potentially yield very illuminating results.

## **6.2 Provenance and Taphonomical Issues**

The body of Norse artefacts from Greenland presents a number of challenges to interpretation due to the quality and quantity of extant material culture. The population decline, which probably began in the mid to late 14th century, was a gradual winnowing away of the population of reproduction age (Lynnerup 1998:117). Catastrophic, single cause theories have been for the most part disproven. As regions of Greenland fell into disuse and the population relocated to the inner fjords of the Eastern Settlement or back to Iceland, high value items would have been removed with the household. Only six items of gold or silver have been recovered from all recorded excavations (Kopár 2009:103). Comparatively, very little metal of any kind has been found with the exception of some well-used tools and slag material. Inuit populations likely collected much of the metal that was left or forgotten by the Norse settlers as they occupied the former Norse settlements in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This challenge presents us with an opportunity, however. Most of the artefacts available for analysis are made of non-precious materials, primarily wood and

steatite. And yet, a significant number of these artefacts directly or indirectly relate to belief. The beliefs of the Greenlanders did not require precious materials to have physical cognates. While it is not unlikely that the bishops of Gardar celebrated mass with a monstrance of silver or some other precious metal, no object of this type has thus far been found. The majority of items left to us appear to be the items crafted for and by the laity, creating a picture of the day-to-day use of religious objects and their immediacy to the general populace.

### 6.3 Christian liturgical and devotional objects

A number of liturgical artefacts demonstrate the organizational Christianity in place by the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. These artefacts are valuable to this study as a baseline of the official doctrinal stances of the Church in Greenland immediately following its ascendancy. All artefacts that might be classified as liturgical thus far have been recovered from Gardar and Sandnes.

#### 6.3.1 *Objects of the Mass*

##### *Pax*

A pax is a small plaque usually carved with an image of Christ or the Virgin Mary, and is first mentioned in the statutes of the archbishop of York in 1248. It was used in the mass as a substitute for the Kiss of Peace and may be an English invention (Koslofsky 2005:21).

A wooden object discovered in a stable at V-51 Sandnes has been interpreted as a pax frame by Aage Roussell (Roussell

1936:24). It is 30cm high and roughly oval shaped (Fig. 34). The center is sunken and contains a cross which likely contained a crucified Christ which has since been removed. Roussell suggests

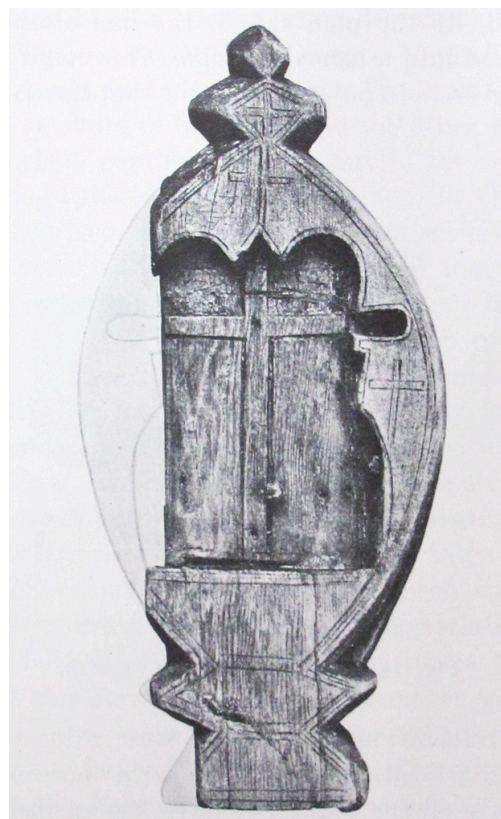


Figure 34: Pax (Roussell 1936, Fig. 13)

that Mary and John were probably also included based on the placement of nail holes and similar enameled pieces from Iceland. If this object is a pax, it cannot be dated earlier than the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century. The use of the pax eventually spread throughout Western Europe, but Koslofsky suggests that it may have been limited to England prior to 1350 (Koslofsky 2005:21-23). However, Sandnes appears to have been abandoned with the rest of the Western Settlement by the mid 1360s according to Ivar Bardarson and subsequently verified through carbon dating (Mathers 2009:69; Arneborg et al. 2012:29). If Koslofsky's dates on the spread of pax use are correct, Greenland may have been one of the first countries outside of England to include it in the liturgy. Several other artefacts suggest direct contact with English Christianity, specifically in the vicinity of Yorkshire (6.4.2.3.1).

### *Bells*

Bell metal has been recovered from multiple sites in Greenland (Seaver 1996:97). At Gardar alone Nørlund reported over 50 pieces, the most in a single site (Nørlund et al. 1930:144). A fragment recovered from the beach at Ø-140 has been used to tentatively identify the location of Aros Church despite no church ruins being found (5.1).

Bells were used as both a call to prayer, announce the beginning of services, and provide animation for liturgy. Their popularization in Northern and Western Europe has been attributed to Irish missionaries (Bourke 2013:276-277).

### *Font or Laver*





Figure 29: A reconstructed font from fragments found in the chancel at Gardar. Nørlund calculated its greatest interior diameter to be 43.5 cm. (Nørlund 1924, Fig. 86)

The only potential font or laver that has been excavated was recovered in fragmentary condition from the chancel at Gardar (Fig. 35). Nørlund suggested the possibility of a font based on its similarity to a Faroese specimen (1930:154.)

The difficulty in identification of a steatite font of this kind is that there is little stylistically or materially to distinguish it from any number of domestic vessels. Steatite fragments are ubiquitous at Norse sites throughout the North Atlantic and specifically Greenland. That the vessel was inside the church itself is all that would differentiate it from many other similar finds.

### *Episcopal regalia*

Osteological material from the bishop's burial at Gardar has been radiocarbon dated to  $880 \pm 55$  BP (reservoir corrected to  $770 \pm 55$ ), most probably dated to approximately 1270 (Arneborg et al. 2012:Tab. 5). The bishop in question is likely Bishop Olaf, who was ordained Bishop of Greenland in 1246 and died there in 1271 (Arneborg 2005:92).

### *The episcopal ring*

The bishop was buried with a gold episcopal ring (Fig. 36) – the stone was not recovered and Nørlund believed it to have been removed prior to burial

(1930:69). Several other rings were found at the site, it should be noted. One gold ring with an unpolished garnet still in place was found at the east side of the bell tower similar in style to the one buried with the bishop, albeit smaller. A ring of twisted gold wire likely from the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century was excavated in the chancel (1930:52,69). A similar bronze ring was found by a local Greenlander in 1923 and sent to the National Museum in Copenhagen, its provenance unknown (1930:52,69). These are the only known gold items thus far excavated in Greenland.

#### *The episcopal crozier*

The ivory crozier head (Fig. 36) is stylistically similar to contemporary examples in the British Isles and Europe and ivory croziers have been found in burials in 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century burials in Ireland and England (1930:70,71). It is likely local material and craftsmanship, despite Nørlund's excitement to link it to Margrét *hin haga* (7.5.1).



Figure 36: Episcopal crozier and ring from Gardar (Photo: National Museum of Denmark)

#### *Episcopal sandals?*

Fragments of wood were found near the feet of the bishop, perhaps remnants of the episcopal sandals. One of the bishop's feet was missing, and Hansen interpreted this as perhaps the result of gangrene prior to death (Nørlund et al. 1930:65-75). The presence of shoe fragments attached to an amputated foot could support the conclusion that these were episcopal vestments included in the burial with the ring and crozier.

### *Folding chair?*

Ivar Bardarson stated that for a time “Stensnes” (V-51 Sandnes) was for a time “the cathedral and bishops seat” (Ivar Bardarson, *A Fourteenth-Century*



Figure 37: Folding stool with animal heads, ca. 1200 (Photo: Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna)

Description of Greenland, [Line] 124; Derek Mathers (trans) 2009, 81). While there is certainly no evidence of a cathedral there, Roussell suggests that Greenland’s nominal first bishop, Eirik Gnupson, may have made Sandnes a temporary seat before setting off on his ill-fated expedition to Vinland (Roussell 1936:28-30). Roussell’s speculation – which he emphatically states is merely that - hinges on a finely wrought arm of a folding chair, carved with a “dragon’s head” (or perhaps a bear) at the end and several cat heads of a secular style carved along the top (Fig. 38). The item, Roussell suggests, is an arm of an episcopal folding chair depicted in artistic representations of bishops.

The arm does bear some similarities to certain representations of such chairs (Fig. 37). However, the importance of Sandnes as a parish church – likely the first and largest in the Western Settlement, must be considered. If, at any time in the Norse period, the Bishop of Gardar were to conduct services in the



Western Settlement it should not be surprising liturgical items of high quality should be found at Sandnes.

a)

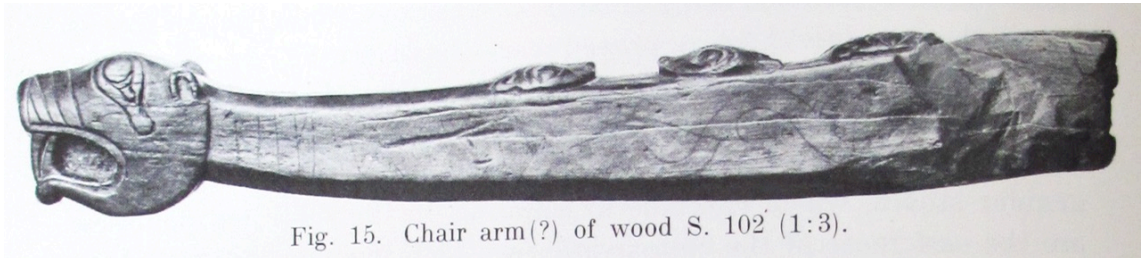


Fig. 15. Chair arm(?) of wood S. 102' (1:3).

b)



Figure 30: a) Chair arm? from V-51 Sandnes (37.5cm in length) b) cat heads detail (Roussell 1936, Fig. 15 & 16)

### *Crucifixes and Crucifixion groups*

A finely carved crucifixion scene was recovered from the cemetery at V-51 Sandnes in one of the burials “deepest down”(Roussell 1936:19). The scene depicts Christ with Mary and St. John in their usual configuration (Fig.39a). The object appears to have been fixed to a pole or stand which provided “ample scope for guesswork as to its original use”, but was perhaps an altar piece or

attached to a reliquary (1936:23).



Figure 31: a) Crucifixion group from Sandnes (34.3 x 13.3 cm) (Roussel 1936, Fig. 10) b) Crucifixion from V-53d Austmanadal (21.5cm in length) (Kopar 2009, Fig. 7) c) Lead pilgrim's badge (40x55mm) from Frederiksdal near Herjolfsnes (Kopar 2009, Fig. 4)

A cast lead plate found near Herjolfsnes at Narsarmijit with two suspension holes depicts the same scene and is believed to be a pilgrim's badge made outside Greenland (Fig.39b) (Kopár 2009: 104). Roussell also recovered a crucifixion carved in relief with a pointed terminal from V-53d Austmannadal (Fig.39b). More finely wrought than other burial and devotional crosses in Greenland, it is assumed to be a liturgical item despite there not being a church at the location, though V-53d is under 10 kilometers from Sandnes (Roussell 1936:247-247; Seaver 1996:128; Kopár 2009:108).

#### *Baleen plate*

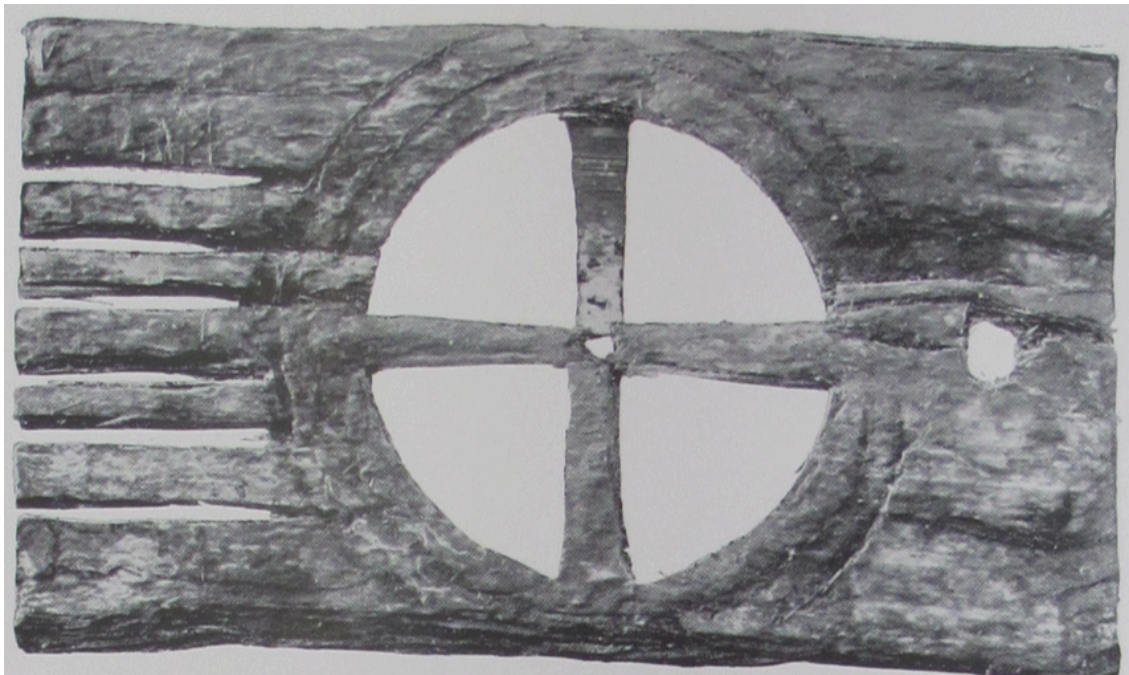


Figure 40: Baleen plate (16x9.8x0.6cm). Runic inscription can be faintly seen on upper left (Moltke in Roussell 1936, Plate 1)

An unusual artefact carved of whale baleen was found in the sheep stable at V-51 Sandnes. A large circular recess has been cut through the center, leaving an equal armed cross with concentric circles around it (Fig. 40). The object was found in the same stable as the potential pax. Stylistically, the cross is similar to several trenchers and other artefacts from Sandnes. It contains contains a partial runic inscription for "...ria", interpreted as "Maria" (Moltke in Roussell 1936:224). Its purpose is unknown.

#### *Decorative steatite fragment*



Daniel Bruun returned to Denmark with a fragment of a steatite disk recovered near the church at Gardar by local Greenlanders (Fig.41). The complete disk would have been 19cm in diameter and 2.5cm thick. The disk was incised with "Romanesque" leaves, and at its centre a cross. At the intersection of the arms a hole has been drilled, presumably for mounting on a wall. A second hole has been drilled near the edge of the fragment, but Nørlund interprets this as secondary (Roussell 1936:163).



Figure 41: Steatite disc (19cm diameter), use unknown  
(Nørlund 1926, Fig. 98)

#### 6.4 Items of personal devotion

The omnipresence of religious symbols on every day items blurs the distinction between what was a "religious" object and what was not, but this distinction does not appear to have been important to the Greenlanders. That said, there are a number of personal items that do not appear to have any function beyond devotional practices. Keith Thomas described the church as "a repository of supernatural power which could be dispensed to the faithful to help them in their daily problems" (Thomas 1997:32). The Church's role in performing this service in turn left them "saddled with the tradition that the working of miracles was the most efficacious means of demonstrating its monopoly of the truth" (ibid. 26).



Figure 42: Prayer stick from Sandnes (Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen)

These items and charms were not just portable reminders of this power, but were agents of it.

#### 6.4.1 Prayer counters

Norse tally sticks are a common find in Greenland, which is not surprising in a community subsisting on herding and maritime trade. Recently, however, 4 of these sticks have been reinterpreted as Christian prayer counters, particularly those with notches or other repetitive features in increments of 5, 10, or 15 (Imer 2012a). At Sandnes a counter was excavated consisting of five carefully carved cups with a runic inscription reading “Hail Mary, Full of Grace” etched in Latin on the back (Fig. 42) (Roussell 1936:155, Imer 2012a:69). A wooden fish recovered from a midden at V-52a Umiviiarsuk is notched ten times along its spine and has runic engraving invoking Mary, and an attempt at a Latin rendering of Psalm 118:49, ‘Remember thy word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope’ (Fig. 44) (Imer 2012:70).

The fish from V-52a is notable because of another fish shaped wooden artefact excavated from Room I at the Farm Beneath the Sand (*Garden Under Sandet*) in 1991 (Berglund 1998:52). The *GUS* site is less than 5 kilometers from V-52a, but how far apart in time is as of now unknown.





Figure 32: Tally stick from Qoorlortop Itinnera (Drawing: Lisbeth Imer)

A stick from Qoorlortop Itinnera also contains notches in groups of 10 and terminates with a mark that could be a Latin “M” (Fig. 43). This particular artefact also has a hole at one end, perhaps for being worn (Imer 2012:70).



Figure 33: Fish tally stick from Qoorlortop Itinnera (10.5cmx2.5cm) (Photo: Lisbeth Imer)

#### 6.4.2 Crosses

The most recognizable symbol of Christianity, the cross, is ubiquitous in Greenlandic material culture. The sign of the cross was widely held to have protective power at least as early as the time of Constantine. Lactantius (c.250 – c.325) wrote:

At present it is sufficient to show what great efficacy the power of this sign has. How great a terror this sign is to the demons, he will know who shall see how, when adjured by Christ, they flee from the bodies which they have besieged. For as He Himself, when He was living among men, put to flight all the demons by His word, and restored to their former senses the minds of men which had been excited and maddened by their dreadful attacks; so now His followers, in the name of their Master, and by the sign of His passion, banish the same polluted spirits from men. (Lactantius. *The Divine Institutes*, IV:XXVII; W. Fletcher (trans) 1997, 129)



Figure 45: Devotional cross 137 from Herjolfsnes (38cmx26cm) inscribed with "Jesus Christ help..." and "Christ born to us." (Drawing: Lisbeth Imer)

Doctrinal belief in the efficacy of the cross as a weapon against the Devil was still attested to in later medieval sources. Aelfric of Eynsham (ca. 955 – 1010) wrote "Be ye not afraid of the sight of [the Devil], but mark the sign of the rood on your foreheads, and every evil shall depart from you" (Aelfric, *Sermones Catholici*, 1:31; B.Thorpe (trans) 1844, 467). Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*, a popular book in western medieval theology, features the instruction to "cross yourselves and your houses" to banish demons (St. Athanasius. *Life of Anthony*, 1:35; W.H. Freemantle (trans) 2012). Such concerns were likely the explanation for the prevalence of the symbol in this cold land at the edge of Christendom. Crosses are distinct

from Crucifixes (6.3.1.5.1) as they are solely the symbol itself and do not contain images of Christ, thus making them easier to construct and carve.

Crosses in Greenland can be broadly grouped into two categories – free standing or sculptural crosses, and cross etchings. The majority of sculptural crosses appear to be burial or devotional crosses (Fig. 45). Cross etchings are those engraved on nearly every type of artefact, sometimes as part of an owner's mark or runic inscription and sometimes independently.

### *Burial/Devotional Crosses*

Burial crosses are mostly known from Nørlund's Ø-111 Herjolfsnes excavations in 1921. 58 crosses were found in the graveyard, suggesting that they were incorporated into burials, though only three could be specifically associated with human remains (7.5.2) (Lynnerup 1998:59). The crosses range in design from split sticks to finely wrought crosses with runic inscriptions (Fig. 47). Most terminate in points at the bottom, suggesting they were to be planted in the ground or a churchyard wall. This feature suggests that the crosses were used devotionally in life and were possibly buried with their owners (Seaver 1996:99).

Another smaller, modest burial cross was recovered from the so-called "family grave" at V-51 Sandnes (7.5.3). Five fragments were also found at V-51 that have been interpreted as cross arms (Fig. 46) (Roussell 1936:18,171). The Farm Under the Sand revealed two complete crosses in a similar style to those at Herjolfsnes (Berglund 1998:50-51).

In many ways Herjolfsnes offers us more evidence for the beliefs and practices of its time and place than other sites. Looking at the burials as a corpus a number of trends become evident. Burial with devotional crosses is of particular interest because it is a practice that only seems widely practiced at Herjolfsnes. It is tempting to assign the crosses to individuals of greater or lesser prominence based on the quality and workmanship of them individually, but this cannot be said for certain and in fact may be assigning an inappropriate definition of value to these artefacts. What can be said about them is that they

were deemed appropriate for inclusion in the churchyard, most likely in a funerary context, and were not deemed so valuable that they were removed as the settlement was deserted.

Though only 3 have been found in the context of a specific burial, it is likely that the crosses were

possessions of individuals or at least assigned to individuals after death. This practice is not evident in any other Greenlandic cemetery thus excavated, with the exception of a single wooden cross at V-51 Sandnes and

several fragments found throughout the

farm. Numbered S-96, the cross rested in a group burial of two adult females each holding a child (Roussell 1936:17-18; Lynnerup 1998:24). The cross rested between them. A wood fragment interpreted as the arm of a cross by Roussell was also recovered from the north west corner of the churchyard (S-97). Other cross fragments of larger size and more ornate decoration were found in the stable (S-97), the house (S-98), and the midden (S-99) (Roussell 1936:18).<sup>18</sup> S-99 is fragmentary and cannot be said for certain to be part of a cross, but it terminates in a point much like the devotional crosses seen at Herjolfsnes (Fig. 45). The lateness of the burials at Herjolfsnes and the absence of crosses from elsewhere in Greenland may indicate that the use of devotional crosses was a part of a later phase of Greenlandic Christianity. An increasing Europeanization of church authority in Greenland and Herjolfsnes'

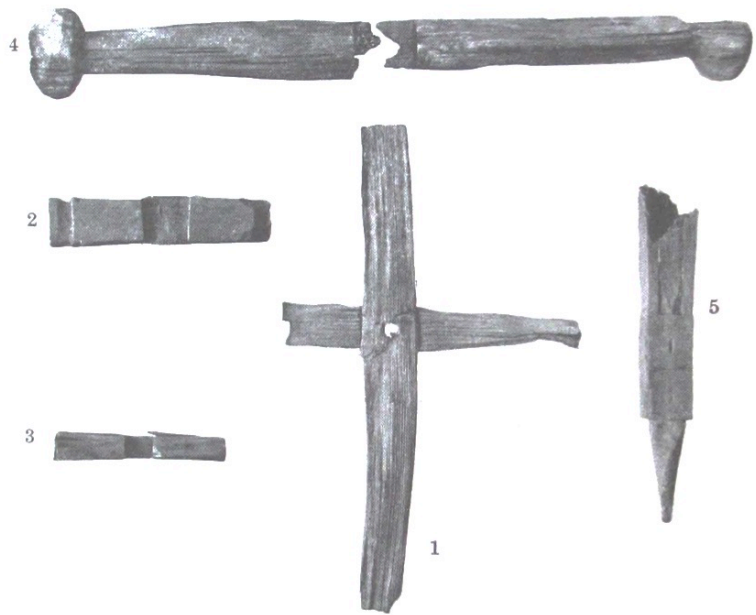


Figure 46: Devotional cross fragments from V-51 Sandnes (Roussell 1936, Fig. 9)

<sup>18</sup> The labeling of the churchyard fragment and the stable fragment as both S-97 is due to Roussell's cataloguing by type rather than individual find.

role as a seaport and frequent exposure to foreign ships may have led to a greater adoption of this practice locally.

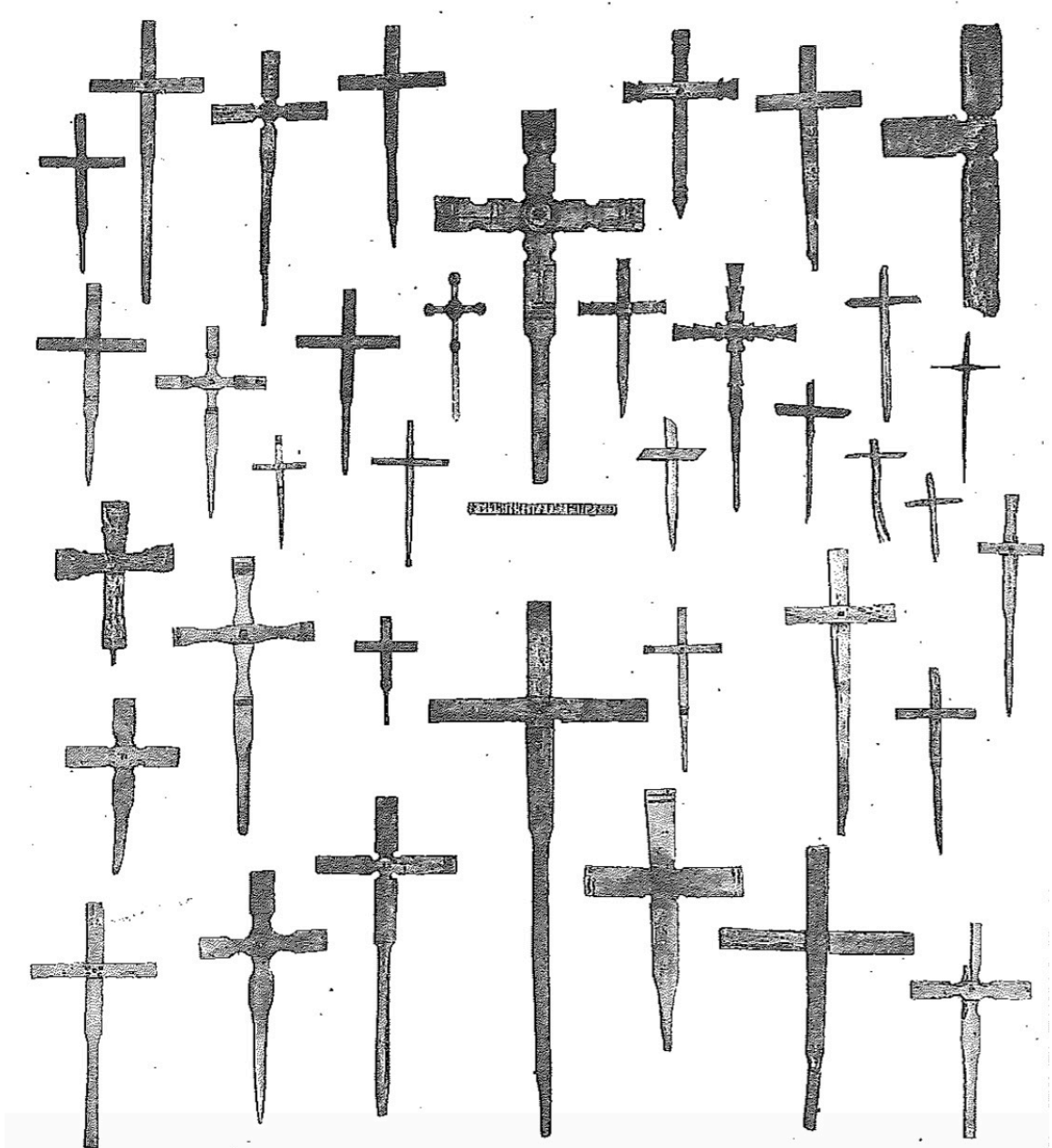


Figure 47: Devotional/burial crosses from Herjolfsnes (Nørlund 1924, Fig. 42)

### *Absolution crosses?*

Nørlund suggested several steatite mould fragments from Gardar could have been for lead absolution crosses which were sometimes cast for burials (Nørlund et al. 1930: 146-147). The specimen does resemble the arm or base

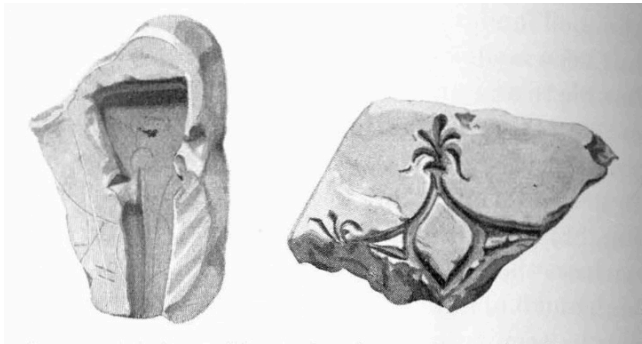


Figure 48: Potential cross moulds from Gardar (Nørlund 1924, Fig. 83b & 83c)

of a cross, but with no visible transept it cannot be determined for certain, and no lead crosses have been found in Greenland to date (Fig. 48).

### *Worn Crosses*

Only two crosses have been identified as items to be worn or hung from a cord. For a community that made such extensive use of this symbol the lack of more artefacts of this type is noteworthy. It is likely that these items were of high personal value and were maintained and kept by living Greenlanders up through the gradual desertion of the settlements.

A 13mm wide and 4mm thick equal armed cross decorated with a ring and dot motif was recovered near the shoreline at Ø-111 Herjolfsnes by local Greenlanders (Fig. 49). Nørlund identified the specimen as being crafted out of bone, but Pierce has identified it as jet (Nørlund 1924:192; Pierce 2011:248).

The cross has been stylistically dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and is part of a distribution of nearly identical artefacts centered around Yorkshire but with specimens in Ireland, Scotland, and Norway (Pierce 2011:134,248). Jet was considered to have magical properties in the medieval period and was thus suitable for protective amulets. It is also found in abundance near Whitby where most of these crosses have been recovered. The English origin of the artefact itself or its design is probable. Many of these crosses have been found in monastic contexts, and it has been argued that this may have also formed a network for their distribution (Pierce 2013:199).





Figure 49: Jet crosses from York (L) and Herjolfsnes (R) (Pierce 2011, Fig. 8.21)

A Latin cross (Fig. 48) excavated from Hvalsey was made of a type of pewter commonly found in England (Fig. 50) (Berglund 1982a:13). Seaver postulates that the cross, along with a table knife from Gardar, suggests visitation by English whalers in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Seaver 1996:173)

#### *Bone Cross*

An astralagus from a cow (Fig. 51) was round at Ø-71 with a cross incised into it. Any religious or spiritual significance of the bone or animal is not known, but a hole bored through the bone suggests that it was suspended. A suspended animal bone combined with Christian imagery must be considered an amulet.



Figure 50: Pewter Hvalsey cross (Drawing: Kistat Lund, Qaqortoq Museum)

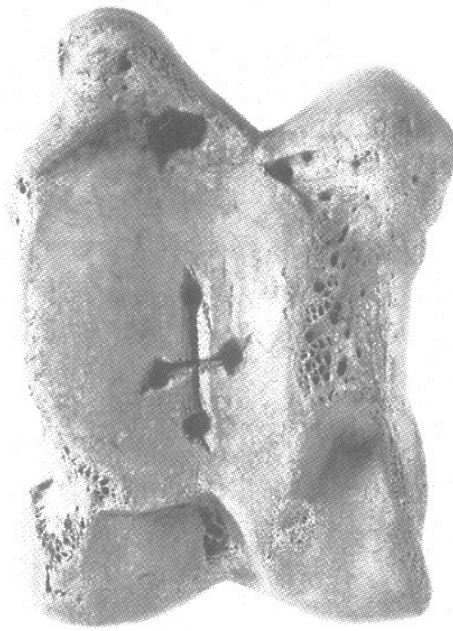


Figure 34: Cattle astralagus from Ø-71 with incised cross (Vebæk 1992, Fig. 145)

#### *Crosses on Domestic objects*

Most crosses are found on objects not usually associated with institutional Christian practice, which potentially reflects the depth with which the symbol and its power permeated the Greenlandic mindset (Fig. 52, Fig. 55).

#### *Crosses used as owner's marks*



Figure 35: Bone pin with cruciform owner's mark from the Farm Under the Sand (Drawing: Lisbeth Imer)

A mark of ownership could be used to label household goods or claim resources such as driftwood, as established in the Icelandic *Grágas* (*Grágás*, 1:K+8; D. Foote et. al. (trans) 2006, 39). In Greenland crosses are found as part of most owner's marks (Fig. 53) (Berglund 1998:5). The presence of a cross incorporated into an owner's mark not only aligns the owner with



Christianity, but it aligns the object itself. Such an association renders the object a portable symbol of the faith, therefore bringing the liturgy home and providing protection against the negative spiritual forces of the Greenlander's world.

### *Cross types*

Greenlandic cross carvings depict a wide variety of typology. At the Farm Under the Sand alone ten different versions of the cross were found inscribed on various items (Berglund 1998:49-52). Particularly common in the

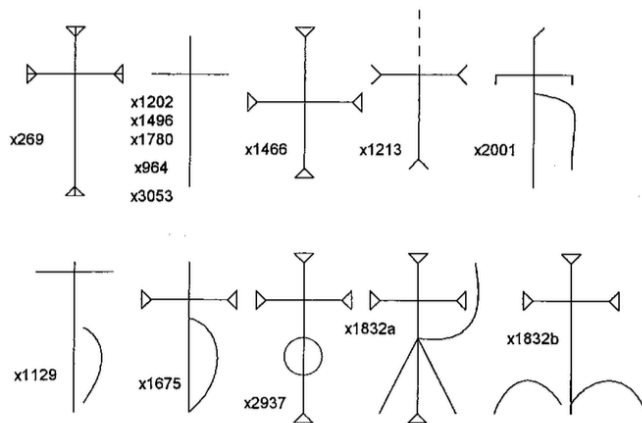


Figure 53: Cross types from the Farm Under the Sand (Berglund 1998, Fig. 2)

Greenlandic record are Latin crosses with arms terminating in triangle or "Y" shaped ends. Roussell referred to this as "typically Greenlandic", though it has been documented in both Iceland and the Faroes (Roussell 1936:205;

Schmeissner 1976:79 in Berglund 1998).

Greenlandic crosses with trilobate terminations have been compared to the Icelandic magical symbol "Ægishjalmur" or "Helm of Awe" as depicted in the sixteenth century *grimoire* (a book of magic spells) *Galdrabók* (Lindqvist 1921:46 in Berglund 1998:50; *Galdrabók*, 1:8; S.E. Flowers (trans) 1989, 61).

An enigmatic scrap of leather excavated by Nørlund at Herjolfsnes contains nine crosses containing at least one trilobate arm could perhaps be interpreted as protective magic of a similar sort (Fig. 54). There are a total of sixteen complete and incomplete crosses on the fragment, which is 27.5 cm long and 14.5 cm across. Nørlund believed it could have been a piece of footwear, but the lack of stitching and irregular patterns of wear cast doubt on this (Nørlund 1924:94). Regardless of if the piece was specifically or analogous to a magical stave, considering the exceedingly common use of the cross it would be highly

unlikely that the piece did not have some magical or ritual value. It is possible that the crosses etched on the scrap represent a tally of some act of piety, perhaps for a prayer or an act of penance.

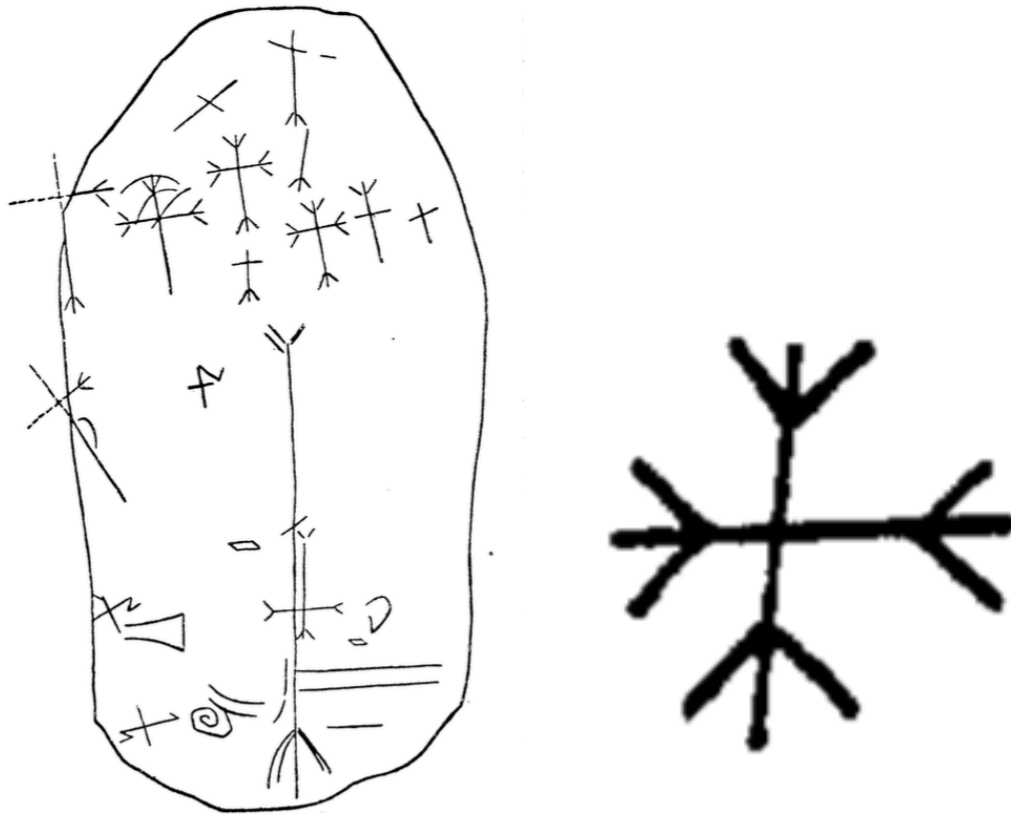


Figure 36: Above: Leather scrap from Herjolfsnes (Nørlund 1924, Fig. 132) Below: *aegishjalmur* stave from *Galdrabók* (Flowers 1989:61)

#### 6.4.3 Textile tools

Prior to the Industrial Revolution the domestic production of textiles was essentially omnipresent. Experiments conducted by textile researchers at the national museum in Copenhagen have demonstrated that 3,000 metres of thread were needed to produce 1 piece of Greenlandic-style cloth 1x1.5m<sup>2</sup> with a weave density of 10 threads per centimetre (Østergård 2004:45). To put such a statistic in context, hood D10603 from the Herjolfsnes garments used approximately 2.2 metres of fabric and contained a weave density of 20-22 threads per centimetre (Østergård 2004:209-210, 243). On a Norse farmstead

it is likely that at any given part of the day someone would have been working on some aspect of production.

The producers seem to have been chiefly women. Cultural notches, likely from biting thread, have been found in the teeth of Norse Greenlanders throughout the settlement period, women greatly outnumbering men in every sample (Scott & Jolie 2008: 257). A spindle whorl from Ø-167 bears the runic inscription "Sigrid made", indicating that the implements of textile manufacture were also crafted by women (Fransen et al. 2011:51).

For such an ongoing and important part of the day's work, it is hardly surprising that both pagan and Christian cosmologies made use of the imagery of spinning and weaving.

### *Spindle Whorls*

Østergård lists 251 spindle whorls so far found in Greenland. All are made of easily workable, locally available steatite, though at Gardar a steatite mould was found for casting whorls in metal. Interestingly, the mould bears the Latin inscription *Didricus me pose ...* "Didrek owns me" (Nørlund et al. 1930:147; Østergård 2004:52; Imer 2014:347). Didrek is a man's name, and this has been interpreted as the name of the farm owner, but the use of Latin lettering on a domestic tool at the bishop's seat is interesting. No metal whorls from Greenland have been recovered (6.2).

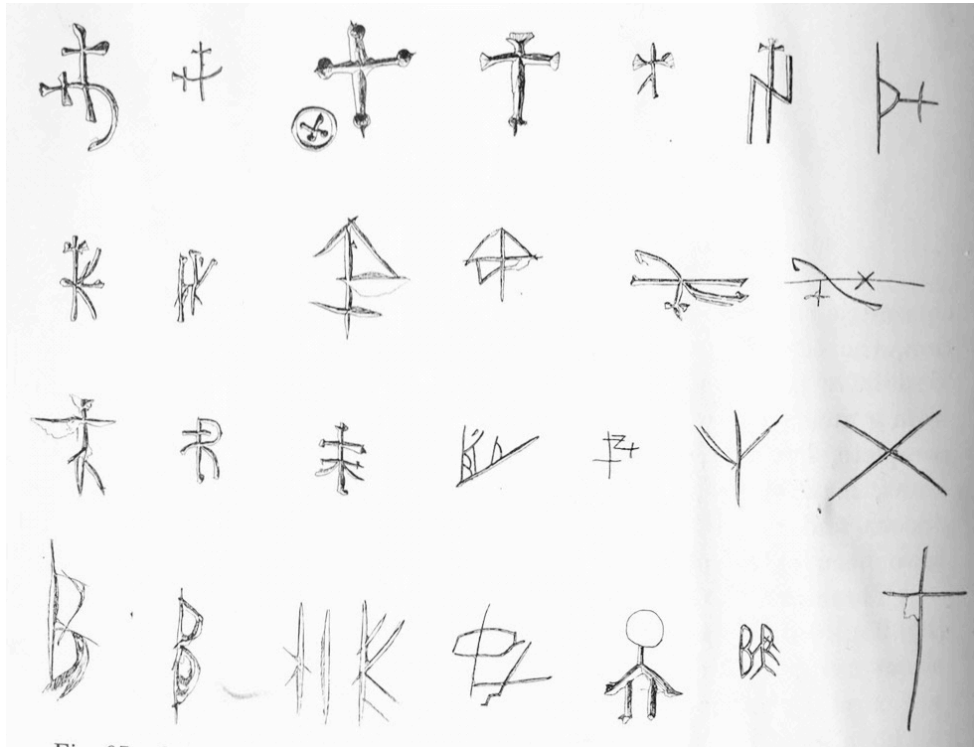


Figure 37: Various cruciform owner's marks from Gardar (Nørlund 1924, Fig. 97)

At Gardar in particular, 9 spindle whorls were found in the kitchen, 1 in the chancel of the cathedral and another in the bell tower (Nørlund et al. 1930:166; Østergård 2004:52). This speaks to the constant need for producing thread. Anywhere a woman might have a chance to sit, she spent the time spinning. In addition to the whorls, a total of 16 wooden spindles (to which the whorls would have been attached) have been recovered, all from the Western Settlement, along with several spinning and twining hooks (Østergård 2004:49-50).

#### *The warp-weighted loom*

Weaving in Greenland was carried out on the warp-weighted loom, and it is remnants of this process that are the most voluminous remnants of the process. Steatite weights used to stretch the warp strands are ubiquitous. At the Farm Under the Sand in the Western Settlement, 60 loom weights were found in one room alone along with several wooden portions of the loom. Another example from Sandnes has been quite squarely cut and carved with a well

formed ribbon-cross. Roussell noted similarities to a gravestone in Orkney and on one of the Lewis chessmen (Roussell 1936:152).

It is on a loom-weight that one of two Greenlandic depictions of *Mjolnir* was found (Fig. 79) (Nørlund & Stenberger 2010:131). It appears that such weights also served as net-sinkers, in which case Thor imagery is easier to explain as his control over the weather made him a favorite among fishermen and sailors. This particular piece was found in a cow byre at Brattahlid (Nørlund & Stenberger 1934:91).

### *Sword beaters*

To tighten the weft on a weighted loom, the weaver would “beat” down the threads using a weaving sword or sword-beater. Østergård lists 14 partial remains of such tools that have been excavated in both the Eastern and Western Settlements (2004:56-57). Noteworthy examples include one found in a grave at Herjolfsnes, dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and perhaps used as a precaution against haunting (Nørlund 1924:58,224; Østergård 2004:56). Another found at V-53d bears a carved battle scene between two figures armed with swords (Fig. 52). At the *landnam* farm at Ø-17a Narsaq a handle was found clearly modeled after a real 11<sup>th</sup> century sword (Vebæk 1993:36). The connection between the weaver’s sword and the warrior’s sword is worth noting.

For a particularly compact weave such as was produced throughout Greenland, metal weaving swords were used for their weight. Only sword beaters made of wood or whalebone have so far been found in Greenland (Østergård 2004:56).

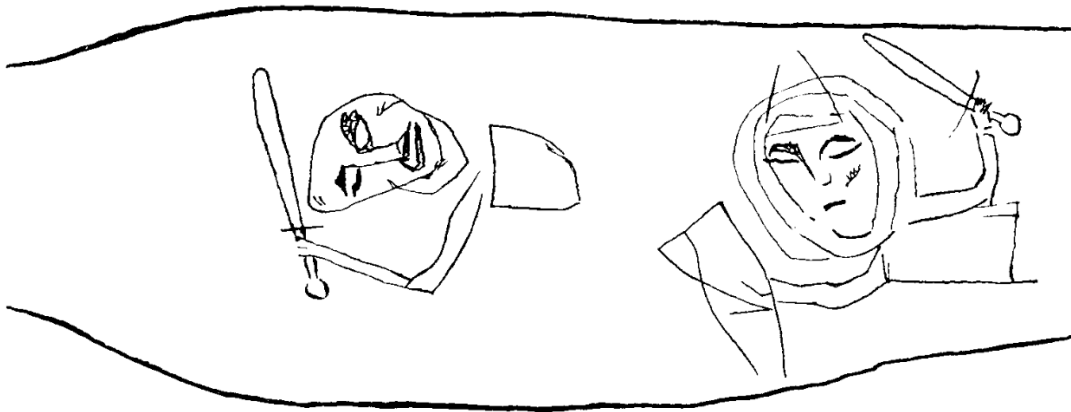


Figure 38: Battle scene on a weaving sword (Roussell 1936, Fig. 171)

### *Textile production in Norse paganism*

Norse mythology frequently makes use of textile production symbolism. The stars of Orion's Belt were referred to as "Frigg's Spindle" or "Freya's Spinning-Wheel" (Østergård 2004:45).

From written sources we are informed that the Norns are three supernatural women responsible for determining the fates of gods and humans. The *Voluspa* lists their names as Urdr (wyrd/fate), Verdandi (present) and Skuld (debt/future) (Orchard 1998). They are typically represented as spinners, likely due to their similarities to the *Moairai* of Greek mythology, though the basis for this representation has been recently called into question (Grant & Hazel 1973:175; Bek-Pedersen 2007). The Norns are seen frequently in Skaldic and Eddic poetry, though it is only in the Elder Edda's *The First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbane* where they are specifically associated with textile production.

The Norns came to the house that night,  
those who would fashion the princes fate;  
great fame, they said, would mark his future,  
he would be called the best of kings.

Then they wound the threads of fate,  
in Bralund's castle where the hero was born,  
gathered the strands into a golden rope,

and made it fast in the moon's high hall.

East and west they hid the ends;  
the prince's lands lay in between.  
Neri's sister went to the north  
And fastened one end to hold forever.  
(The First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbane, [Stanza] 2-4; P.Terry  
(trans) 1990, 115)

If the thread with its beginning, middle, and end symbolized the individual life, the act of weaving was an apt metaphor for the interrelated relationships and events of life. *Darraðarljóð*, a skaldic poem included in *Njal's Saga* describes Battle of Clontarf in 1014 through the imagery of Valkyries weaving the battle on a grisly loom which uses intestines for strands and is weighted with human heads (*Njal's Saga*, 3:157; R. Cook (trans) 1997, 215-217). Through the process of the Valkyrie's weaving the battle takes place. In addition, *Darraðarljóð* is the most complete source for the weaving terminology of the Middle Ages (Østergård 2004:53).

One piece of textile production equipment that is absent in Greenland's archaeological record is the distaff, a specialized stick to hold the material from which thread was spun. One possible depiction of a distaff exists, however, in the form of a carving on a steatite fragment from Gardar. Nørlund described the figure as male (1926:164), but does not explain why and it appears to be a matter of interpretation. The carving is rudimentary, but it could also be interpreted as a figure holding a distaff between its legs (Fig. 57). The distaff is associated with the form of Norse sorcery known as *seidr*. Through *seidr* the practitioner "spins charms" and sends out an aspect of their soul to attract what is desired (Heide 2006:164). Select iron staffs from Norse female graves in Scandinavia and Northern Europe bear a striking resemblance to distaffs, but would be far too heavy to be used in the manner distaffs were. A ritual interpretation of these items is most likely (Heide 2006:167). Thorbjorg the Volva is described as carrying such an iron staff in *Eirik the Red's Saga*.





Figure 39: Left: Detail from steatite fragment from Gardar with possible distaff (Nørlund et al. 1930, Fig. 105) Right: Eve holding a distaff between her knees in the Hunterian Psalter, c.1170 (Glasgow University Library, ms. Hunter 229, fol. 8r)

### *Textile production in medieval Christianity*

Medieval Christianity appears ambivalent toward textile production on a symbolic level. Eve was frequently depicted in medieval art spinning following her ejection from the Garden of Eden (Fig. 57) Her spinning created clothes to cover her nakedness and establishes perpetual labor as a consequence of sin. In the late medieval English Wakefield Noah Play, Noah's wife *Uxor* (a cognate

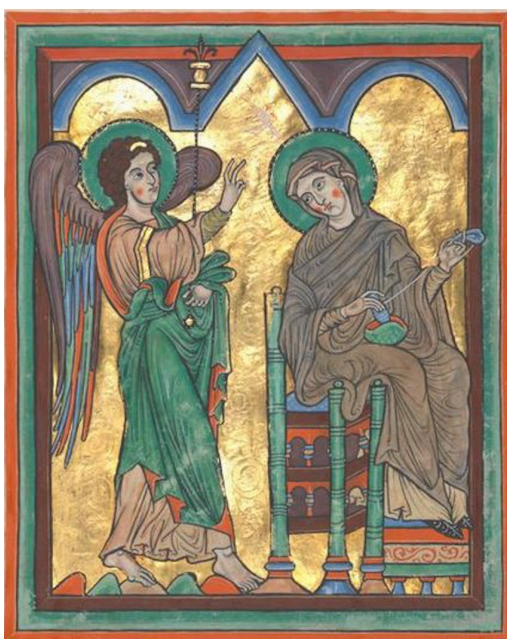


Figure 58: Mary spinning during the Annunciation from the Speyer Gospel ca. 1220 (Badische Landesbibliothek, ms. Bruchsal 1, fol.1 recto-7)



Figure 59: Four hole weave tablets (Østergård 2004, Fig. 84)



of Eve) defies her husband through excessive spinning (Hodges 1990).

However, spinning imagery is also used to demonstrate industriousness and was also associated with the Virgin Mary (Fig. 58). Proclus of Constantinople was identifying the womb of the Virgin Mary as a workshop which contained "the awesome loom of the divine economy" as early as the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Proclus. *Homily I*, 1:1; N. Constan (trans) 2003, 137). A story from the 7<sup>th</sup> century apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew relates Mary's service as a temple virgin and assisted in spinning and weaving wool for the temple veil. The image of Mary spinning and weaving found its way into artistic depictions of the annunciation with the introduction of Feast of the Presentation of the Virgin in 1372, and was frequently seen in western Christian art before Mary's book became the more prominent motif in the later Middle Ages (McMurray Gibson 1990).

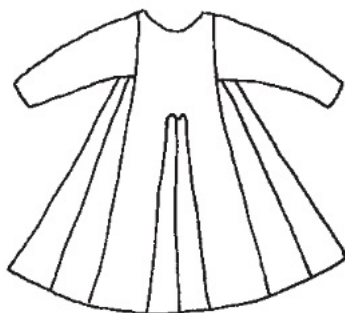
It is unknown if Marian inscriptions on textile tools in Greenland are products of this tradition due to the poorly recorded provenance of many artefacts, but Mary's use as the "good example" for Medieval women should make it hardly surprising that she is referenced in such a typically female-centered occupation. It is interesting to note that Eve - the "bad example" - is engaged in the same activities, presumably due to their importance.

One particularly evocative Greenland artefact combining Christian imagery with textile production are two four-hole weave tablets found at Ø-71 Russip Kuua (Fig. 59). Both have cross images etched on both sides, but on one tablet the image appears to represent a cross made of thread or yarn (Østergård 2004:113).

Østergård has suggested that pointed middle gussets in the Herjolfsnes garments may have drawn stylistic inspiration from North Atlantic church doors (Fig. 60) (2004:93). The shape is certainly similar, but assigning symbolic value to the similarities is premature. It is worth noting, however, in a context so symbolic as textile production.



Figure 60: Above: Detail from the carved door from Valþjófsstaður. Below: Nørlund type Ib and Ic garments. Note similarities of gusset and door detail above (After Østergård 2004)



#### 6.4.4 Marian objects

Of known runic inscriptions associated with religion the largest portion of these are associated with the Virgin Mary (Imer 2012:67). These inscriptions are in large part inscribed on items associated with textile production such as warp weights and spindle whorls (Imer 2012:68). Veneration of Mary in Western Europe intensified from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onward, suggesting that Greenland was in this way in sync with European Christianity (Gambero 2005:4).

Marian symbols are common on textile production tools, suggesting that, as in Europe, she had a particular importance to Greenlandic women (6.4.3).

Objects believed to be associated with Marian veneration are indicated by text (with the exception of her presence in crucifixion groups (6.3.1.5.1). A fragment of a steatite mould for spindle

whorls from Gardar contains the runes for "...ue m..." (Fig. 61).

The complete whorl is believed to have read "Ave Maria" (Imer 2012:203). Also from Gardar a loom weight marked with crosses contained on one side a cross

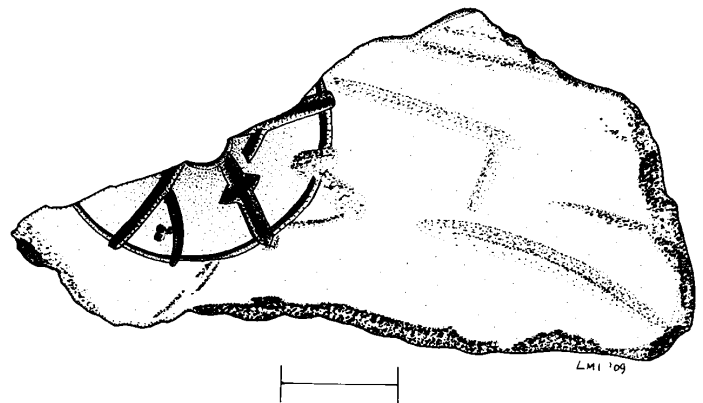


Figure 61: Whorl mould from Gardar (Drawing: Lisbeth Imer)

combined with "a" and "u" runes, and on the opposite side an "m"

rune (Imer 2014:348) (Fig. 62). Another rune carving recently excavated at Gardar contains the inscription "...et benedictus fructus ventris tui", another portion of the Ave Maria (Fig. 63) (Imer 2012b).<sup>19</sup> Crosses and prayer counters also contain full Marian inscriptions, though some of these are also limited to a singular Latin "M" (Fig. 43) (Imer 2012a).

<sup>19</sup> "...and blessed is the fruit of thy womb"

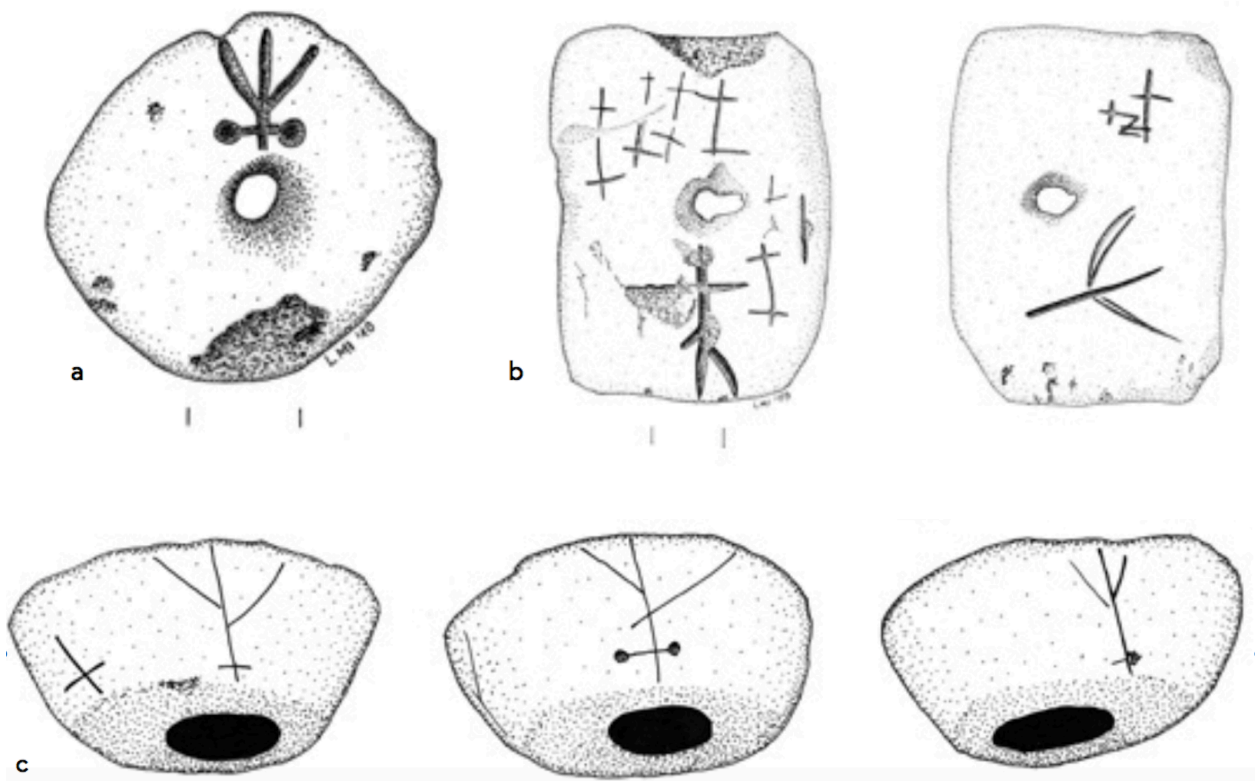


Figure 62: "M" and cross inscribed warp weights from a) Brattahlid and b) Gardar and c) a stray find spindle whorl (Drawing: Lisbeth Imer)

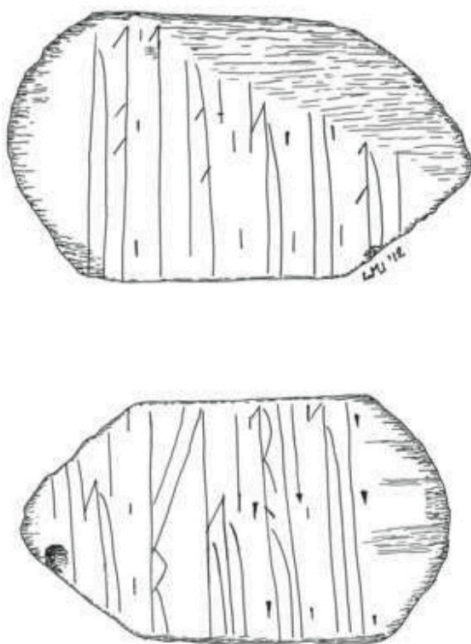


Figure 63: Wood fragment of Ave Maria from Gardar (Drawing: Lisbeth Imer)

#### 6.4.5 Amulets

Using the word "amulet" to describe the following items may not be entirely accurate, but a better term is not readily apparent. This is due to the problematic definition and use of the word in an archaeological sense. Amulets in the Viking Age, broadly speaking, are generally miniatures – weapons, tools, animals, etc. Amulets of natural origin – such as animal parts or fossils – are rare but visible in the corpus. In the later

Middle Ages Scandinavian amulets of natural origin or runic inscriptions become more common with the sign of the cross as the primary miniature (Fuglesang 1989:24).

Bo Jensen, who collated an exhaustive catalogue of Viking Age amulets in Western Europe, is far more cautious in his use of the term. He argues that the concept of an amulet is not something that was readily understood by Viking Age Scandinavians or present day readers, that there is no way of determining what purpose miniature symbols might have had, and that interpretation of such objects has relied to heavily on non-archaeological sources (Jensen 2010:7-8).

Jensen's argument hinges on interpreting amulets as objects and a dismissal of interdisciplinary approaches to their meaning. Such strict materialism, however, is ill suited to the study of belief. Written sources have been used cautiously to great effect.<sup>20</sup>

The objects reviewed from Greenland skew toward Fuglesang's definition of later medieval amulets, and this is to be expected due to the taphonomical issues discussed above (6.2). However, certain miniature symbols fit the strictest technical definition of an amulet, yet are unique in the whole of Viking and Norse archaeology.

### *Animal Amulets*

Animal amulets for the purposes of this thesis contain both miniature representations of animals as well as amuletic use of animals remains themselves. In at least one case, we see both.

### *Bear*

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<sup>20</sup> For a useful review of these studies see Hedeager, L. 2011. *Iron Age Myth and Materiality: An Archaeology of Scandinavia, AD 400-1000*. Routledge, London; New York. p. 21-22.



Figure 64: Polar bear figure from Sandnes (Roussell 1936, Fig. 106)

A 2.7 cm ivory bear figurine was recovered from Sandnes during Roussell's investigations. It is clearly a polar bear based on its proportions and posture as opposed to a more generic representation. The front paws are joined together at the bottom but a suspension hole is cut between the front legs, indicating that it was perhaps worn or hung (Roussell 1936:123)

### *Bear teeth*

From the Iron Age through the Viking period bear teeth appear to have been thought to have magical properties, particularly in Finland and the Baltic regions (Gräslund 1969:170). Three bear teeth that appear to have been worn around the neck have been excavated in Greenland. One excavated from the dwelling at Ø-17a Narsaq may be dated as early as the *landnam* period and as late as the mid to late 11<sup>th</sup> century (Vebæk 1993:32-33,73). The tooth has a groove cut at the root end suggesting that it was worn on a chain (Fig.65a). The second tooth was discovered in a church burial at Herjolfsnes (Fig.65b). Nørlund's description from Herjolfsnes is painfully vague, but he seems to indicate that the tooth was originally resting on the chest of the buried body and "could hardly have been anything but a charm" (Nørlund 1924:68). A third was excavated at the Farm Beneath the Sand in the Western Settlement (Fig.65c)



The bear teeth from Narsaq and Herjolfsnes are quite similar to specimens elsewhere in the Viking World. A bear tooth with a suspension hole and also engraved with runes was excavated at the Brough of Birsay and was dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries by Curle (Fig. 65d). Curle noted that similar objects without runes were common in Norway throughout the Viking period (Curle 1982:59-60). Though initially identified as a seal's tooth, it has since been confirmed as a bear (Anon n.d.). In the Viking Age cemetery at Birka a tooth pendant was found in a child's grave. It was the only wild animal tooth present in the massive Birka cemetery (Graslund 1980:170). Bronze miniatures of bear teeth are known from Finland as well (Fugelsang 1989:22).



Figure 65: a) Polar bear tooth pendant from E-17 Narsaq (Vebæk 1993, Fig. 39) b) Bear tooth from the church burial at E-111 Herjolfsnes (CC-BY-SA, National Museum of Denmark) c) Bear tooth pendant from Farm Beneath the Sand (Fitzhugh & Ward 2000, Fig.22.12 d) Bear tooth pendant from Brough of Birsay with runic inscription (ILL 37 Pendant 253, National Museum of Scotland)

### *Walrus*

A miniature walrus, 3.8 cm tall, was recovered at Umiviarssuk farm in the Western Settlement during Roussell's excavations (Fig. 66). The walrus could be hung on a cord via a suspension hole drilled behind the tusks where they meet the mouth (Roussell 1936:123). Interestingly, the walrus is carved from a walrus molar. Walrus ivory was one of the key exports for the Greenlanders,

and it is likely that this amulet may be associated with some manner of hunting magic.



Figure 66: Walrus pendant (CC-BY-SA, National Museum of Denmark)

#### *Other walrus practices*

The Greenlanders deposited walrus remains in unusual, perhaps ritualistic ways. At Gardar, 20-30 walrus skulls were buried in a row inside and outside of the church (they were possibly buried outside an older church) (Arneborg 2005:51). Paster Esman reported four or five narwhal skulls, another animal valued for trade, in the eastern end of the chancel in 1832 (Nørlund et al. 1930:138).

Curiously, buried rows of walrus mandibles with teeth removed found at multiple sites on Baffin Island – *Helluland* in the sagas - could also be of Norse origin (Seaver 1996:30-31). Norse trade visitation to Baffin Island has received some archaeological support in the past few years, and these mandible arrangements could indicate that the Greenlanders also crossed the Davis Strait to hunt (Sutherland et al. 2015). Dr. Sutherland's claims have not come without academic and political controversy. The reception of the evidence presented in



her paper remains to be seen, though there is little to be skeptical of in the basic premise.

A large number of walrus baculi (penis bones present in many mammals) have been recovered from Norse sites – six at V-51 Sandnes alone. While these may have been byproducts of butchery, Roussell noted some “inserted” into walls and floors of various buildings on site (Roussell 1936:178).

At Ø-172 a similar item was found in an early midden layer (Fig. 67). An awl or drill handle shaped from a walrus molar contains an incised illustration of a walrus. While not specifically amuletic, the carving of an animal image on a piece of the same animal creates a visible association between the item and its source.



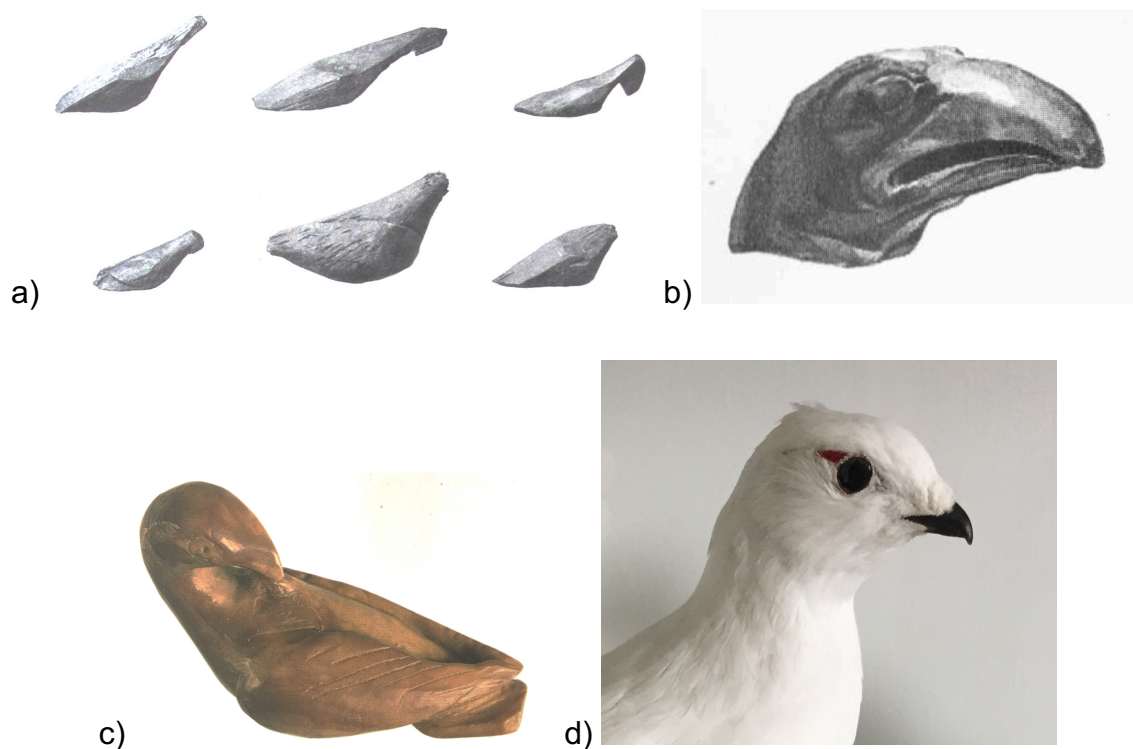
Figure 67: Walrus molar tool handle from E-172 compared with a 16th century illustration of a walrus on the right (Madsen 2014, Fig. 100a)

### *Birds*

Six small wooden birds of varying detail believed to represent Greenlandic ptarmigans were recovered from Umiviarsuk (Fig. 68a). Roussell believed

them to be used in a game based on their deposition in a midden with other gaming pieces (Roussell 1936:129-130). There is little evidence contextually to indicate that these birds were used as amulets except for a bird's head of steatite found in the south churchyard at Gardar (Fig. 68b).

Nørlund reports that his local assistants identified the bird as a ptarmigan (Fig. 68d), though Nørlund expressed doubts: "For what purpose would they use the image of a ptarmigan? It may be part of the decoration of the church, for example and eagle (the symbol of John the Baptist) or perhaps a dove (the Holy Spirit)" (Nørlund et al. 1930:162). Not far from Umiviarssuk, at Sandnes, a 3.2cm gyrfalcon (Fig.68b) of ivory was also excavated, likely dating to the 11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Fitzhugh & Ward 2000:424). The falcon may also have been suspended.



**Figure 68:** a) Bird figurines from Sandnes (4.4-7.3cm in length) (Roussell 1936, Fig. 114) b) steatite bird head from Gardar (Nørlund 1926, Fig. 100a) c) Ivory falcon (?) from Sandnes (Fitzhugh & Ward 2000, Fig.24.4) d) Greenlandic Ptarmigan (Photo: J. A. McCullough)

## *Dragons*

When excavating the cemetery at Herjolfsnes Nørlund unearthed a coffin partially covered by the foundation stones of the church. The reused planks were fastened with baleen, and both sides of the foot piece were incised with several triquetra designs on one side and a dragon image on the other (Fig. 69). Nørlund does not indicate whether the dragon was on the inside or outside of the coffin *in situ*, but he dates it stylistically as being 12<sup>th</sup> century pre-Romanesque (Nørlund 1924:48).

Several sticks of unknown use can be tentatively identified as dragons. One such stick from Sandnes is a simple peg 14.1 cm long with a dragonesque head carved at one end (Fig. 70). Its use is unknown. Roussell tentatively suggested that it may have been a hook or peg that could be placed in a wall (Roussell 1936:209). Two more potential tally sticks from Umiviarssuk also resemble dragon figures (Fig. 71).

Roussell referred to the supposed chair arm from Sandnes is referred to as the head of a dragon (1936:28). It has been dated stylistically and with C<sup>14</sup> tests to the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Imer 2014:345). While the head on the arm bears a passing resemblance to a 9<sup>th</sup> century animal head from the Oseberg ship, it is more convincingly interpreted as a bear, as Roussell noted when describing the ears (1936:28). Along the top of the arm, it should be noted, are three clearly carved cat heads (Fig.38). These are the only known cats represented in Greenlandic art.



Figure 69: Dragon carved boards reused as coffin boards (Nørlund 1924, Fig. 24)



Figure 70: Dragon headed peg from Sandnes, use unknown (Roussell 1936, Fig. 150)

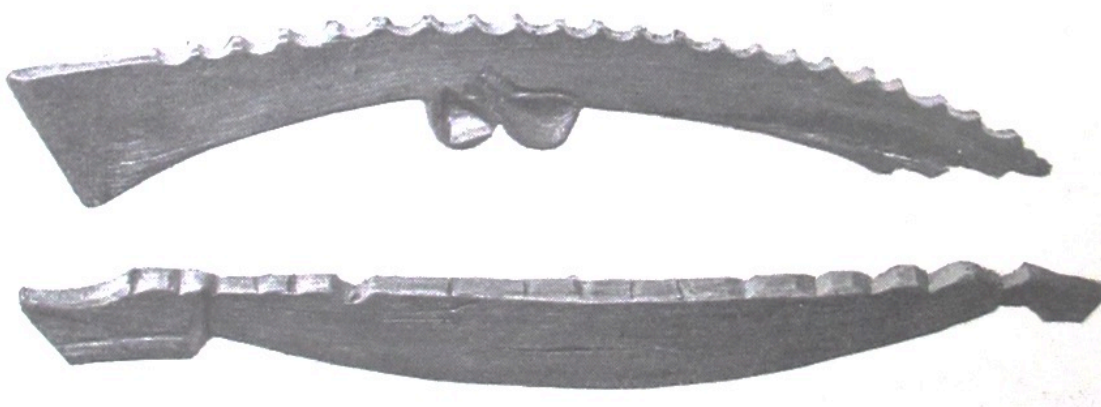


Figure 71: Dragonesque tally sticks from Umiviarssuk (Roussell 1936, Fig. 150)

*Unknown*



One unusual find is that of a very crude bronze figurine from the *landnam* era farm at Ø-17a Narsaq (Fig. 72). Vebæk mentions its “slight resemblance” to a horse (1993:42). The artefact is 3.7 cm long and .5 cm thick and is unusual in that it is made of bronze, the only potential amulet in Greenland of this material. Nørlund interpreted a more distinctly formed brass horse as a trade weight, though he neglected to discuss its provenance or his reasoning (1924:247). It could also be viewed as a boar, perhaps an unpracticed attempt at the boar iconography on helmet crests and other Viking Age art.

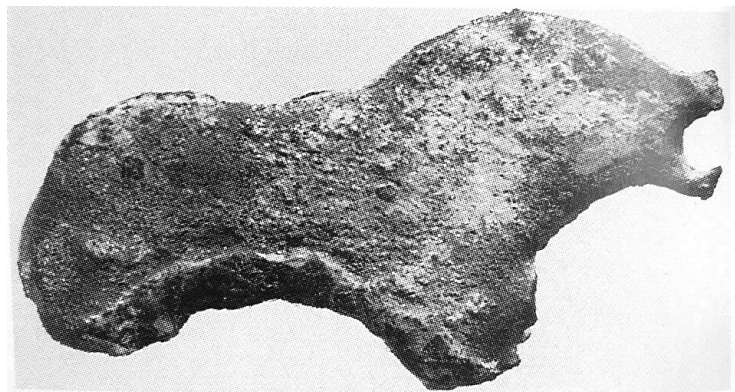


Figure 72: Bronze figure from Narsaq (Vebæk 1993, Fig. 96)

### *Humans*

Representations of humans in Greenland tend only to be abstract figures, and most of these faces only. Aside from the weaving sword discussed in 6.4.3, two full human figures were recovered from Gardar. One of these is the possible distaff figure (8.4, Fig. 57 & Fig. 73). Another is more curious. Etched on a fragment of steatite, which appears to have a lip at one end, is an abstract “stick figure” of a human. What makes the item unique is that the figure’s head is formed by a drilled hole all the way through (Fig. 73) (Nørlund et al. 1930:11). If the hole is for suspension, passing a cord through the head of the figure may hold some symbolic significance. Dobat, examining ways in which functional culture was representative of divine intervention in the Viking Age, analyzes several sculpted harness bows, in two of which the reins pass through a humanoid figure, perhaps symbolizing a representation of divine guidance (Dobat 2006:185). *Seidr* has also been described as a process through which a

sorcerer sent forth their mind as a thread or line (Heide 2006:165).

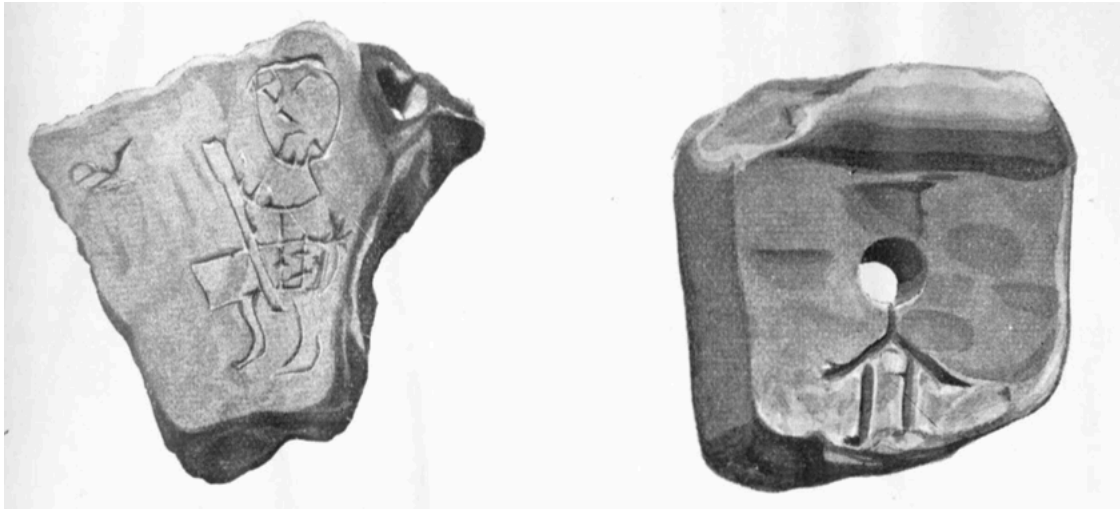


Figure 73: Steatite fragments with images of humans from Gardar (Nørlund 1936, Fig. 99)

Abstract faces have been found in the Eastern and Western Settlements. At Gardar five inset faces were carved into one of the steatite whorl moulds. It is believed that they were moulds themselves, though no castings have been found (Nørlund et al. 1930:136,148). An ivory face from Sandnes has been noted as being rudimentary in aspect, perhaps a caricature. The face appears to be wearing a “flat crowned cap” according to Roussell (Fig. 74a), but from the front it might be compared to a 12<sup>th</sup> century bishop’s mitre as seen on the Lewis Chessmen (Fig. 75) (Roussell 1936:124). A face from neighboring Umiviarssuk (Fig. 74b) is more abstract and carved from willow (Roussell 1936:123,125).



Figure 74: a) Ivory face from Sandnes (ca.3cm) b) Wood face from Umiviarssuk (ca. 6.cm)  
(Roussell 1936, Fig. 108 & 109)



Figure 75: A bishop from the Lewis Chessmen with similar hat to Fig.72a (Photo: British Museum)

### *Runic Amulets*

The use of written inscriptions as amulets is documented in Greenland as well. The most famous of these is a 43 cm stick found in the dwelling house at Ø-17 Narsaq (Fig.76). A local resident digging in the ruins for gardening soil uncovered it and several other wooden artefacts leading to a series of

excavations by C.L. Vebæk between 1948 and 1958 (Vebæk 1961:113). The stick is four sided, with inscriptions on sides A-C and an indistinguishable mark on D. Side A contains an inscription that has been the subject of extensive interpretation. Moltke's original translation of the inscription is as follows:

Á sæ, sæ, sæ, es Ása sat. Bibrau (?) heitir mær sú es sitr á  
bláni fuporkhniæstbml { aaal. . . aaaaa. . .

'On the sea, sea, sea, where Asa sits. Bibrau (?) is the name of the maid who is sitting on the blue . . .' (MacLeod & Mees 2006:79)

Ása sat has been translated as both "Asa (a womans name) sits" and "watch seat of the Aesir" (Moltke in MacLeod and Mees 2006:79). Moltke's approximation reads:

The sense of these obscure words might be the following the sea is deceitful; the asa-gods (whom you cannot always trust, or who are not always friendly towards you) are on their watch with stormy weather and rough sea. But Bibrau (except for this inscription the name is unknown), that virgin who is sitting in the blue sky, will take care that we reach our destination safely. (Moltke in Vebæk 1965:116).

This interpretation, combined with the typological age of the runes (not later than ca. 1020) strongly suggests the practice of pre-Christian Norse magic in Greenland (Stoklund in Vebæk 1993:49). The mention of the sea and color blue are evocative of the environs of Narsaq, in which bright blue sea ice is common year round, perhaps indicating a reference to the physical environment (Fig. 77). A similar interpretation is speculated upon in the 2006 novel *The Thrall's Tale* (Lindbergh 2006:440-441). The inclusion of the *futhark* on side B and an apparent system of secret or encrypted *løn*-runes on side C would also seem to suggest a magical purpose for the stick. However, other translations and interpretations have been posited that suggest the primary inscription may be a 'tongue twister' or riddle, and that the *futhark* may be practice for a novice rune carver (Helgason 1977:198-200; Vebæk 1993:48; Imer 2014:349).



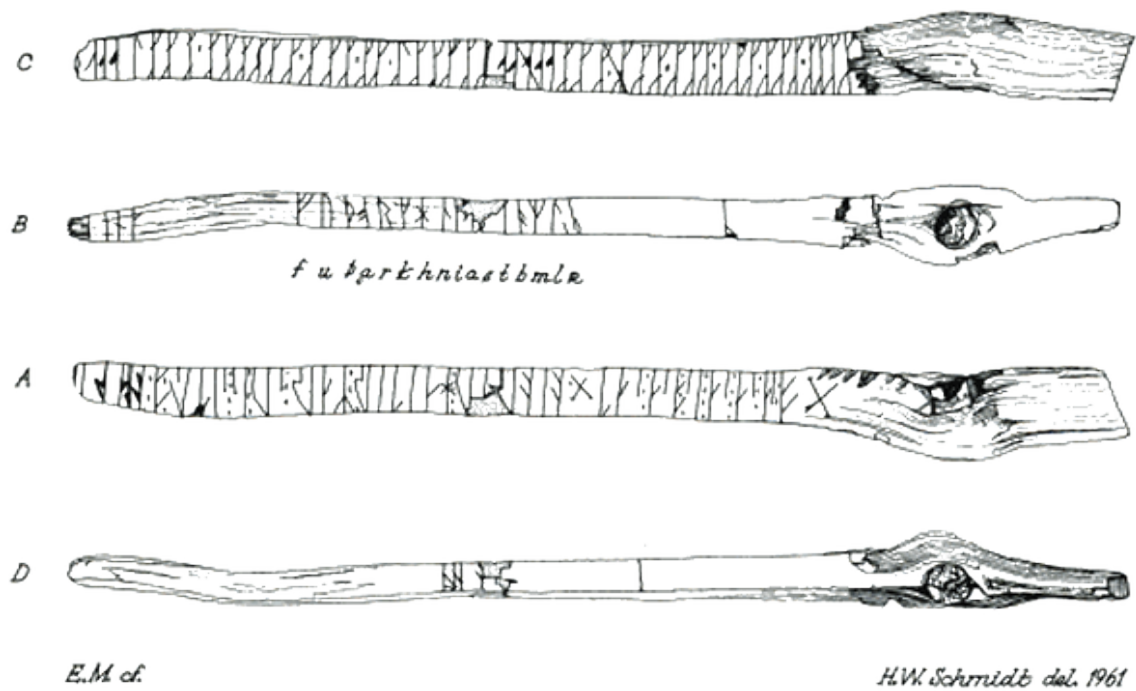


Figure 76: The Narsaq rune stick (Drawing H.W. Schmidt)



Figure 77: Blue sea ice in the mouth of Tunulliarfik Fjord, near Narsaq (Photo: J.A. McCullough)

### *Qorlortup Itinnera*

A 10cm runic stick with runes cut on two sides was found by a sheep farmer at Ø-34 Qoorlortup Itinnera in 1993 (Stoklund 1994:9). The text was perhaps full

of errors or misspellings, but the most current interpretation is "...ora pro sanc[tus]...ora sanc[tus]" translated as "...pray for saint... ...pray saint" (Imer 2012b:200). One problematic portion of the inscription are runes interpreted by Stoklund as "siesit", which has no linguistic meaning. Imer has since read the runes as "skes(s)a", the Norse word for "sorceress" or "giantess" (Fig.78) (Imer 2012b:202). Imer reads the object as an amulet that drives out an illness by naming it in Norse and invoking Christian powers in Latin. Similar inscriptions requesting intercession from Saints and other holy figures have been found on crosses at Herjolfsnes, and textile production implements.



Figure 78: 'skessa' stick from Qoorlortop Itinnera (Photo: Lisbeth Imer)

### *Thor's hammer*

Thor's hammer, *Mjolnir*, has been represented many times throughout the Norse world. Worn pendants were particularly common during the Viking Age in Europe and the North Atlantic with over 700 examples in Western Europe

alone (Jensen 2010: Supplemental Index). Two representations of *Mjølfnir* have been excavated thus far in Greenland. The first, from Herjolfsnes, was a narrow headed hammer incised on a flat, six-sided steatite plate of uncertain use and approximately 18x18.5 cm (Fig. 79b) (Nørlund et al. 1930:224-225). Nørlund states that the opposite side shows signs of wear, but what wear this is is not specified nor is the location of the find.

The second is a steatite loom or sinker weight found in a cow byre at Ø-29 Brattahlid, the "River Farm" (Nørlund 2010:91). The weight contains two bored holes, and presumably the hammer would have hung head down like the pendants (Fig. 79a). The oldest dated buildings at Brattahlid, like Thjodhild's Church and the earliest dwellings are at Ø-29a, the "North Farm" (Arneborg 2005:23-25). From the data available the sinker cannot be dated. Both specimens are easily recognizable as Thor's Hammers. While neither can be conclusively dated, both Herjolfsnes and Brattahlid are sites active from the earliest phases of Norse settlement. Based on this and the scarcity of such artefacts it is reasonable to assume that the hammers came from an early phase of the settlement.

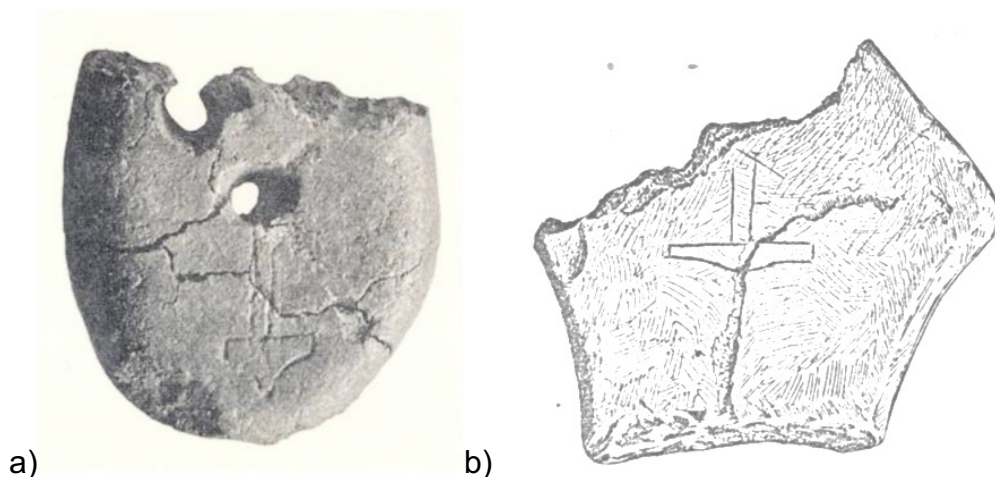


Figure 79: a) Steatite weight from Brattahlid (Photo: National Museum of Denmark) b) Steatite fragment from Herjolfsnes (18x18.5cm) (Nørlund 1924, Fig. 157)

## 6.5. Discussion & Conclusions

### 6.5.1 Physical Christianization Processes

As demonstrated in Chapter 4, the churches were the Christian landmarks on the physical space of Greenland. In Iceland and elsewhere in the North Atlantic we see landscapes being named for Christian figures and concepts (Kristnes, Krossholar), in Greenland we see the opposite (Hvalsey, Brattahlid) (4.5). This practice is potentially reflective of the Greenlanders perception of the geography's otherness; that the church stood as a spiritual fortress in the wilderness, separate from the geography. The construction of a church was an expensive project, likely financed and administered by powerful landowners. The extensive use of Christian symbolism on every day objects reflects a similar practice of physical Christianization conducted by the non-elite members of Greenlandic society.

It is evident that marking a bowl or spoon with the sign of the cross was a widespread practice. When observed in conjunction with Greenlandic attitudes about the importance of place and centrality and the symbolic importance of the church as a spiritually safe space (5.7), the "Christianising" of domestic objects likely reflects a desire for a sense of portable protection and centrality (6.4.2). In a marginal land of spiritual dangers, the constant presence of Christian symbolism stood as a connection to the safety of the church and as protection from the hostile forces of the unknown.

#### *6.5.2 Everyday Tasks as Devotion*

Certain artefacts - such as prayer counters and freestanding crosses – did not have any purpose beyond devotional use. Other artefacts are clearly in one sense ordinary tools, but also contain a religious association. Religious inscriptions appear on items used for textile production (and perhaps fishing), the serving of food, and farm labor.

Norse Greenland's agricultural productivity was never far beyond subsistence level – its chief exportable resources were luxury goods secured from access to arctic fauna rather than foodstuffs (Perdikaris & McGovern 2006). There was little room for error in daily domestic chores, so associating the tools of the task with benevolent spiritual powers may be seen as a devotional practice.

Such practices are not exclusively Christian. As we see with the steatite *Mjólnir* weight from Brattahlíð the symbol of Thor was carved in association with the object's use, perhaps fishing.

Whether an every day act, weaving for example, could be considered a devotional practice in itself is perhaps too modern a way of framing the question. The distinction between an act of practicality and an act of belief was not so clearly defined prior to the Reformation. These "practical" items and their association with belief demonstrate a relationship between the owner-user and their cosmology, simultaneously acting in both contexts.

### *6.5.3 Amulets and Magical Practices*

Despite the problematic use of the term "amulet" (6.4.5), several Greenlandic objects meet the most stringent definitions of the term. The miniature animals presented in are demonstrably Greenlandic, and this in itself is interesting. The bear figure is clearly a representation of a polar bear, less abstract than the bear amulets in Jensen's Database (Jensen 2010:Supplemental Index). The same is true of the wooden and steatite ptarmigans. The walrus appears to be the only amuletic representation of a walrus on record. If Roussell was correct in his assumption that the walrus and bear amulets were magically associated with the *Nordsetur* hunts it is a demonstration of a very specific appeal to local powers. The burial of walrus skulls at Gardar and potentially Baffin Island are very probably ritualistic and associated with some form of hunting magic.

The early date of the Narsaq stick and the later phase runic amulet from Qoorlotop Itinnera demonstrate the perceived presence of magic throughout the settlement history. The belief in the sorcery (*seidr*) in the latter is supported by one of the last items of roughly contemporary written news about Greenland. The *Lögmannsannáll* states that in 1407 a certain Greenlander named Kolgrim was burned for seducing another man's wife through sorcery (Mitchell 2013:171). While the breadth of data is as of this writing not sufficient to illustrate the scope and nature of magical practices, it can be stated with

confidence that Greenlanders were taking precautions with and against it for the duration of the settlements.

#### *6.5.4 The Sign of the Cross*

The sheer volume of Greenlandic artefacts containing the sign of the cross speaks to its perceived potency as a symbol in a wide variety of contexts. The pointed ends of the “burial” crosses from Herjolfsnes and the similar finds from Sandnes and the Farm Under the Sand suggest that individuals in life used these items for devotion, and incorporating the crosses into burial was a secondary use. Likewise, the mysterious scrap of leather that Nørlund found at Herjolfsnes may indicate a devotional practice of gathering crosses, perhaps on a pilgrimage route now lost to us. Perhaps it was an activity to pass the time or practice for a more important carving, but its presence in a churchyard where so many crosses were used for burial suggests that it was of greater symbolic importance.

As the Greenlandic church became more institutionalized and Scandinavian bishops brought with them the perception of the settlement’s remoteness, the sign of the cross likely became even more vital to protect the Greenlanders from the spirits at the edge of the world.

## Chapter 7

# Burial Practices and Mortuary Behaviour

### 7.1 Introduction

The interment of human remains and associated conventions are rarely considered to be anything other than “religious” in nature. A practice that deals with an experience so universal and immense as the end of life can scarcely be otherwise. However, practical considerations for burial in icy Greenland must be considered as well. How interrelated burial practices are to the cosmology and worldview of the related culture, however, has been the subject of much debate. David Petts, for example, warns that drawing assumptions of ritual behavior based on material sources runs the risk of marginalizing those aspects of ritual that “do not have physical correlates”, such as social memory and the performance aspects of belief (Petts 2011:46). This raises the question of how such ritual aspects can be explored by archaeologists. Neil Price has considered performance and narrative aspects of burial in the context of Norse ship-burials by using these physical correlates. While the cosmological significance of individual practices may not be determined from their physical remains, the deliberate placement of individuals and goods were actions *performed* by a participant in the funeral. Price describes such analysis as viewing the end of *Hamlet*:

...the scene at the final curtain is complex enough, but leading up to it is the rest of the play. What of all the actors who are not present in the final scene, but who have had major roles in the drama? The same applies to all the different settings, the hours of dialogue, the action, the historical narrative, the deeper themes of the writing, even the humour used to offset the grimmer themes. In this light, one may think again of Ibn Fadlan<sup>21</sup> and those ten days of actions: what were they doing? With reference to the archaeology, a useful focus is on the notion of the

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<sup>21</sup> Here Price references the famous account of a ship cremation on the Volga River by 10<sup>th</sup> century Islamic ambassador Ibn Fadlan. See Montgomery 2000 for an annotated translation.



stage, considered first in terms of the symbolic overtones of the grave. (Price 2010:138)

In the case of Greenland, such physical remainders of performance are more subtle, but, as will be seen, many graves still contain this narrative component. Interments are east-west in orientation and exclusively found in churchyards. Grave goods are limited to wooden devotional crosses and coffins were sporadically used. With such seemingly sparse material evidence for understanding the beliefs of Greenlanders, it is tempting to attribute any performance to the requirements of a generic Christian funeral mass. Yet closer examination reveals a degree of nuance in burial practices varying from site to site throughout the history of the settlement. Burial crosses, for instance, are primarily found in the far south of the settlements at Herjolfsnes, whereas the finest (possibly European influenced or imported) woodcarvings are located in the Western Settlement. Animal remains have been interred in the churchyard at Gardar, the supposed center of church authority for both settlements as well. These various practices may indicate localized traditions throughout the settlements' history, but there exist striking similarities between all known sites – namely the great care taken to ensure that every known burial in Greenland took place within a clearly defined boundary of the churchyard itself. This chapter posits that such a practice was due to a keen sense of place in the geo-conceptual world that the Greenlanders inhabited.

## **7.2 Evidence of pagan burial practices**

Despite the insistence of the written sources that the Norse settlers were pagans, there is no conclusive evidence of pagan burial practices in Greenland (and very little evidence of pagan practice at all). Only three sites have been suggested as including pagan burials: Roussell believed ruin 15 (Fig. 80) at Hvalsey was the cairn of Erik the Red's cousin Thorkell Farserk, who "was buried in the homefield and after haunted the house" (Roussell 1941:94-95; *The Book of Settlements*, 1:93; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 50); however Roussell did not ever provide supporting proof, and subsequent analysis has not revealed anything to corroborate Roussell's theory (Arneborg 2005:60; Jansen 1972:101).





Figure 80: Ruin 15, Thorkel Farserk's suspected cairn at Hvalsey (Photo: J.A. McCullough)

Second, Roussell also believed he had located a burial mound at Sandnes in the Western Settlement (Fig. 81). The ruin contained split reindeer bones, a part of an iron nail, and fragments of steatite, but no human remains (Roussell & Degerbøl 1941:96). Jansen suggested that that the iron nail could indicate the use of a wooden coffin (1972:101).



Figure 81: The suspected grave at Sandnes (Roussell 1936, Fig. 68)

Ruin 29 at Brattahlid was originally designated as an enclosure or pen by Poul Nørlund (1934:159-160). However, test excavation in 1962 discovered fragments of burnt bone, charcoal, and steatite (Jansen 1972:100). The site has not been properly excavated since this trial excavation, and of the three sites has the most potential of actually being a burial. However, with what evidence that currently exists the conclusion must be that there are no known pagan burials in Greenland.

Pagan burial practices across the Norse world were highly varied, and it is possible that burial practices from the pagan era in Greenland were of a nature that is less recognizable than counterparts in Scandinavia and the North Atlantic. It is also possible that reinterment was a common practice (7.3). It is also possible that more distinctly pagan burials have yet to be discovered, as the vast majority of Norse sites in Greenland have not been excavated.

### **7.3 Churchyard Burials**

Burial practices in Greenland are mainly consistent with contemporary burial trends in Scandinavia (Lynnerup 1998:66; Pierce 2011:236). Burials in churchyards took place from the very earliest days of the settlement (C<sup>14</sup> dated to 1229 ± 41 BP at Thjodhild's Church) to the very end (AMS dated to 1448 (1436-1469) at Ø-23). In fact, it seems that proper burial in consecrated ground held a place of very high importance in Greenland. Multiple written sources document individuals going to great lengths to ensure that proper burial protocol was followed. Corpse-Lodin, for instance, is described as sailing to the remote regions in the north of Greenland in the 11<sup>th</sup> century to find the bodies of sailors and hunters and return them to the nearest church for Christian burial (Anon 1849:59). Einar Sokkason boiled down the bones of the victims of a shipwreck for the same purpose (The Story of Einar Sokkason, 1:2; G. Jones, 239). This practice was also used by Europe's crusading elite to secure a burial closer to home and was outlawed by the papacy in 1299 (O'Sullivan 2013:64). Thorstein Erikson died on a mission to collect his brother Thorvald's body from where it lay on the North American continent (*The Saga of the Greenlanders*, 1:5; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 27). And *Eirik the Red's Saga* hints at

a practice of burying those that died far from a cemetery with a pole resting on their chest and sticking out of the ground so that any passing priest could pour holy water down onto the corpse and retroactively sanctify the earth (*Eirik the Red's Saga* 1:6; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 10).

Burial within the limits of the local churchyard was the norm. There are only six instances of human skeletal remains found outside a church cemetery, but these are fragmentary and in most cases not especially valuable in the context of belief and practice. One interesting exception is the fragmentary skull of a 13th century male (described as Norse by Vebæk) aged 20-25 found in the passageway of a passage house at Ø-167. Vebæk explained the unusual find as the last individual in the area who died with no one to conduct a proper burial (Vebæk 1991:68,108). A more recent interpretation is that the skull lies in a secondary position (Arneborg et al. 2012:21). Being located in a passageway, the find does bear an outward similarity to an account in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic *Laxdaela Saga*, wherein the farmer Hrapp commands his wife to bury him upright in the doorway to his hall, but there is no conclusive evidence that the man from Ø-167 was buried in such a fashion (*The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 5:17; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 19).

Several archaeological finds reveal evidence of reinterment. Thus Krogh identified several burials in Ø-29a Brattahlid I of disarticulated skeletons that appeared to have been “bundled” at the time of burial, representing a secondary deposit (Krogh 1967:37). Also at Brattahlid I is a mass grave containing 12 adult males and 1 juvenile; all the skeletons in this were disarticulated and comingled, apart from their skulls, which were arranged in a line facing east. Lynnerup proposed that based on analysis of posterior Wormian bones and double condylar facets and several individuals from the grave may be related (1998:64).

Aside from purely practical explanations of moving isolated corpses to the churchyard in the case of shipwrecks or accidents, reintering the remains of deceased pagan ancestors was a well-known practice in the Viking world. Gorm the Old's reburial beneath the new Jelling church by Harald Bluetooth in

the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the construction of the stave church at Hørning over a woman's burial mound are two famous examples (Gelting 2007:86). Odin-worshipping warrior-poet Egil Skallagrimson was also reinterred by his children in Mosfell, likely eligible for such inclusion due to his provisional baptism (*prima signatio*) while fighting in England (*Egil's Saga* 50; Byock 1993:30; Zori & Byock 2014:51-52). It is possible that the "bundled" burials and mass grave at Brattahlid I represent an inclusion of deceased pagans in a changing belief structure.

#### **7.4 Abnormal burial practices**

Among the corpus of burials thus far excavated in Greenland there are none indicative of deviant or what Pentikäinen defines as "quiet" and "shameful" burials associated with executions, suicides, and untimely or unnatural deaths (Pentikäinen 1968:52-53; Lynnerup 1998:55). On the contrary, the burial of fetal skeletal remains at Brattahlid I suggests that even miscarried Norse children were entitled to burial in the churchyard. Other infants buried near the east gable of Brattahlid I are congruous with practices in Scandinavia (Lynnerup 1998:62). Several were uncovered beneath stones. The placement of a deformed infant in an unfilled grave topped by a stone is referred to in the Norwegian Eidsivating Law, but no such evidence has been documented about the Brattahlid I burials (Pentikäinen 1968:80). The presence of fetal burials suggests the practice of lay-baptism by a midwife or other member of the church or at the least an acceptance of the deceased infant into the community (either that of the living or that of the dead) signified by its inclusion in the churchyard.

Double and group burials did take place in Greenland, however, including a coffin at Gardar where the first corpse had apparently been dismembered in order to make room for a second (Nørlund et al. 1930:64). Such practice has been interpreted as prioritizing the "peaceful rest" of the newest occupant of the coffin at the expense of the first (Kopár 2009:107). It may be that bodily arrangement was viewed as a necessary part of the burial performance, but not necessary for the ongoing repose of the deceased.

## 7.5 Case Studies

The case studies chosen to illustrate the variation of burials and their relation to belief are Ø-47 Gardar, in the heart of the Eastern Settlement and residence of the bishops of Greenland from ca. 1126-1450; Ø-111 Herjolfsnes, the southernmost church and first available landing site for visiting ships; and V-51 Sandnes, a major farm and church site from the center of the Western Settlement. The sites were selected based on 3 main criteria:

- First, and most obvious, the presence of a multiple-phase church with associated cemetery. Due to the great expense of large-scale excavations in Greenland, excavation of these cemeteries is incomplete. However, paleodemographics based on burial density over the use period of the cemeteries have provided estimates for the number of deceased buried at each case study site (Lynnerup 1998:109). All three of the selected sites were inhabited in the first phases of the settlement era and churches were in use as church sites into at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century.
- Second, these sites were represent different geographical regions of both the Eastern and Western Settlements. Non-ecologically focused studies of the culture and practices of the Greenlanders have prioritized the Eastern Settlement more than the Western due to its higher population and abundance of sites. By representing both, parallels and differences of practice will be revealed in geographically remote sites.
- Third, sites with unique, non-normative, or potentially unorthodox burials were selected to illustrate fluctuations and variation in belief and practice. These range from possible pagan burials (7.2) to animal burials and the inclusion of both Christian and “other” grave goods.

Combined, the case studies provide a temporally and geographically long-term picture of burial practices at important church centers.

### 7.5.1 Case Study: Ø-47 Gardar

All that is known about the first farmer at Gardar is a name in *Landnámabók's* list of those who accompanied Erik the Red and the names of their settlements – “Einar; Einarsfjord” (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:92; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 50). Einarsfjord was identified as Tunulliarfik Fjord due to the easily identifiable ruins of Gardar cathedral at modern day Igaliku (Fig. 83). Within the first decade of settlement, Einar's son Thorvard “who farmed at Gardar” had married Erik's daughter, Freydis (5.8.4). By 1124 Bishop Arnaldur had been made Bishop of Greenland as stated in *Flateyjarbok* and presumably was in residence at Gardar by the late 1120s (Fig. 82) (Arneborg 2005:91).<sup>22</sup> According to the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Fóstbrœðra saga*, Gardar was also the site of Greenland's *thing* (*The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, 2:23; M. Regal (trans) 1997, 376).<sup>23</sup> The 1409 letter attesting a marriage at Hvalsey was composed at Gardar, demonstrating that the settlement was still active in the final years of the settlement (Arneborg 2005:43). Keller theorizes that just as the inner fjords of Tunulliarfik and Qassiarsuk were the first sites settled, they were also the last areas abandoned as the settlements contracted five centuries later (Keller 1989:253).

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<sup>22</sup> Arnald is listed in *Flateyjarbok* as being in Iceland in 1126 and is not mentioned again until he is ordained Bishop of Hamar in 1152.

<sup>23</sup> A possible *thing* site has been explored at Brattahlid (Sanmark 2009). If the *thing* moved from Brattahlid to Gardar it could indicate another avenue through which secular authority was consolidated at the Bishop's residence.





Figure 82: A reconstruction of the bishop's seat at Gardar (Image: Vibeke Krogh)

Human skeletal material was unearthed at Gardar as far back as 1830, but none was kept for later analysis. However, very few archaeologically useful data were gathered from the site until Daniel Bruun's topographical survey in 1894 and the Nørlund & Roussell excavation in 1926 (Nørlund et al. 1930; Lynnerup 1998:14). Subsequent investigation of the site has not matched the size of the 1926 excavations.

### *Churches*

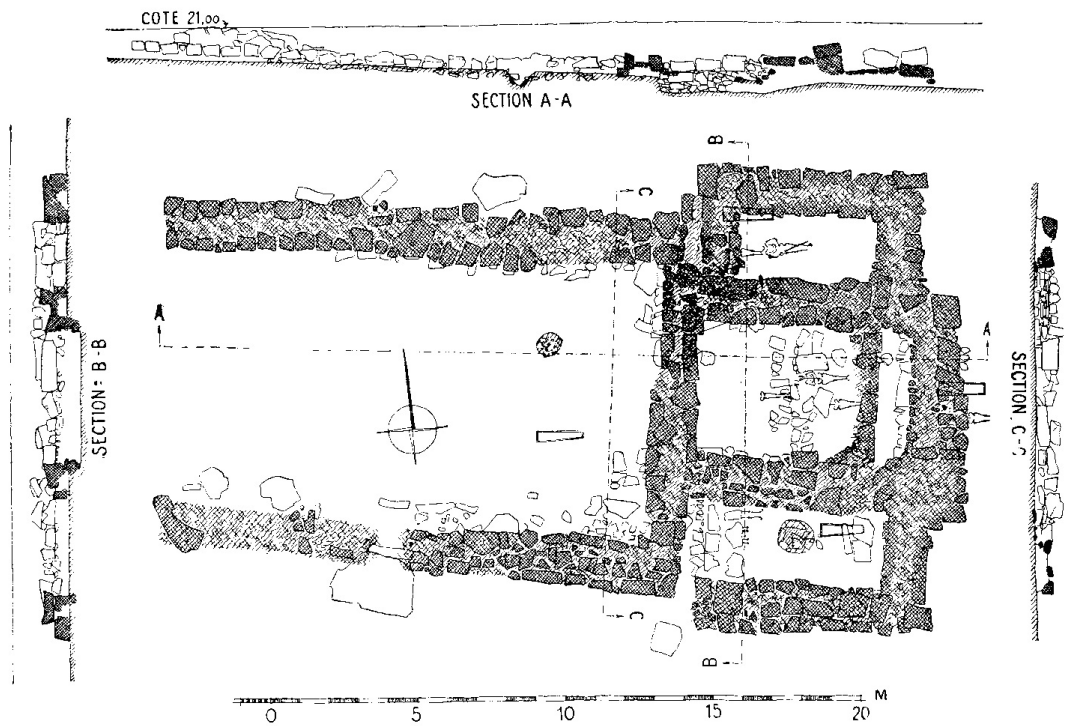
The cathedral at Gardar (Gardar II), which Bardarson tells us was dedicated to St. Nicholas, did not obtain its cruciform design until the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Nørlund et al. 1930:65-75; Lynnerup 1998:16; Mathers 2009:80). St. Nicholas' patronage of sailors is logical in a maritime setting like Greenland, but his famous devotion to orthodoxy (a popular but unlikely example is his striking of the heretic Arius at the Council of Nicaea in 325) may also have played a role in his veneration in Greenland during a time when continental church authorities questioned the sincerity of the Greenlanders' faith (4.4.3).



Figure 83: The foundations of St. Nicholas' cathedral in present day Igaliku (Photo: J. Van Nurden)

A smaller Romanesque bipartite church (Gardar I) was detected in the same space for which Nørlund selected ca. AD 1150 as *terminus ante quem*. A relatively quick transition from a bipartite church to a cruciform one when older designs remained active in other parts of Greenland seems plausible for a site selected to be the home of Greenland's bishops (Fig. 84).





**Figure 84: Plan of St. Nicholas' cathedral. The layout of Gardar I is visible as outlined stones. Gardar II is filled. (Nørlund et al. 1930, Fig. 11)**

It is possible that the Qoorlortoq church at Ø-48 served as the church for the first group of Christian settlers living at Gardar. Though a separate site, less than a mile separates the two and skeletal material retrieved from the cemetery at Ø-48 has been C<sup>14</sup> dated to 1037 (1025–1155), the first 50 years of Norse settlement (Arneborg et al. 2012:122).

### *Stone Markers*

Stone markers from the cemetery were among the first items curated by the National Museum prior to Nørlund's excavations. Surprisingly there is only one stone grave marker at Gardar, commemorating a woman named Vigdis (Fig. 86). It appears that stone markers were either not in common use at Gardar or were thoroughly removed by subsequent



**Figure 85: Stone discovered by Rink (25x28cm) (Nørlund 1930, Fig. 8)**

inhabitants of Igaliku. This latter explanation seems unlikely, as other sites such as Herjolfsnes show that even repurposed grave stones are still visible in the area (Nørlund 1924:16-17). Vigdis' stone is an unadorned flagstone bearing a



Figure 86: Vigdis gravestone from Gardar  
(Nørlund et. al 1930, Fig. 8)

simple runic inscription. Finnur Jonson translated the inscription as "Vigdis m[agnus?]. d[aughter]. rests here, God gladden her soul" and dated it to the late 1200s at its latest based upon the runes themselves (Nørlund et al. 1930:175-176). Jonson also discussed a smaller (25x28cm) stone discovered by Rink in 1857 (Fig. 85), but he was unable to discern a translation or date from the weathered runes (Ibid.177). A stone set grave was discovered south of the cathedral similar to "Ingibjorg's Grave" at Brattahlid III, but it featured no marker (Ibid.:61)

#### 7.5.1.4 Cemetery

The churchyard at Gardar was trapezoidal, but roughly rectangular and has an area of 1505.7m<sup>2</sup>, the largest in Greenland (Lynnerup 1998:107). Despite its large size, relatively few human remains have been recovered from it when compared to other Greenland sites: Lynnerup's paleodemographic study counted only 13, of which only 5 could be assigned to places on the site plan (1998:15). Nørlund (1930:59) blamed the conditions in the

churchyard for the paucity of human remains, saying:

From an archaeological point of view, raised sea-floor is the barrenest of all barrenness. Nothing is preserved in it for long, except just the imperishable precious metals. Bones decompose, wood and cloth

disappears, iron rusts away and bronze weathers. Under these circumstances the systematic examination was restricted to the southeast corner of the churchyard; the whole area east of the church and all the piece south of the chancel were excavated right through. Finally, the interior of the church was excavated systematically. Otherwise, we limited ourselves to scattered sample excavations on the north and west sides of the churchyard, and they gave no results that tempted us to continue.

The skeletal material recovered from Gardar all dates from between 1200 and 1300. Lynnerup's theoretical model indicates that over 2,100 individuals may have been buried at Gardar over a period of 400 years (Lynnerup 1998:109-112). In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century there were reports of coffin fragments and scraps of cloth (presumably shrouds) by Jorgenson (Lynnerup 1998:14).

Interestingly, while Nørlund and Roussell discovered several burials that appear to have been disturbed by the expansion of the church, three within the north chapel of the church clearly post date the structure. These burials are those of a man and woman, possibly important farmers from the settlement, and a bishop all date to the mid to late 13th century (Nørlund et al. 1930:74; Lynnerup 1998:16; Arneborg 2005:50-51).

No abnormal human burials have been discovered at Gardar, but there is evidence of animal interment that can only be described as ritual. In 1832 the local pastor discovered 4 to 5 narwhal skulls interred in the eastern chancel of the cathedral. Subsequently, a row of walrus skulls were discovered in the eastern gable and else where in the churchyard. Altogether, there are between 20 and 30 walrus skulls on the site (Arneborg 2005:51). It has been postulated that these animal interments are remnants of pagan practice, evidence of so-called "church magic", or some combination of the two (6.4.5).

### *Discussion*

In 985 the mysterious "Einar" arrived with Erik the Red in southern Greenland. By the time Thorvard took over the estate around 1000 the Qorlortoq church Ø-48 had been constructed less than a mile away. We know little about Einar, but

excavations at Ø-48 include a group burial of individuals dating from the first generation of settlers. If he were a Christian, this is a possible burial place.

In the century between Einar's death and the arrival of the bishop the first church must have been built on the Gardar farm core itself. With the assumed arrival of Bishop Arnaldur in the late 1120s it is possible that the first church was constructed in anticipation of his residency. Romanesque design was already present in Greenland across the fjord at Brattahlid I, and is visible in Nørlund's plan of the church (Fig.82).

The expansion of this structure into what is now designated as Gardar II occurred between 1150 and 1250. It seems more likely that the primary structure was constructed shortly after the bishop's arrival and the chapels added near the end of this period. As discussed above (5.2) a wave of church construction in the style of bipartite, Romanesque churches washed over Greenland in the 12th century. The continued modification and expansion of the church itself and the farm core in general is consistent with the growing importance both spiritually and politically of the farm.

### *Evidence of Beliefs and Practices*

The burials within the chapel of the cathedral are significant in a number of respects. First, the inclusion of a man and woman together suggest that in Greenland interment within the church was not a privilege reserved for the clergy, but might be possible for important persons in the parish. C.L. Vebæk (1991:31) wrote thus of the church burials at the Benedictine convent Ø-149:

Burial inside the church is...normally the privilege of the more important members of the community - that is, in this case those connected with the church, and in particular the abbots and nuns... Besides it's special function as a church for the Benedictine order, the convent was also a parish church. So farmers and their families from the parish would be buried here; most of them in the churchyard, but as we have seen - some in the church itself.

If this is so, and the man and woman buried together near the bishop are the farmer and his wife during the middle to late 13th century, it indicates that ownership of the farm and ownership of the church were not necessarily the same socio-religious position, though of similar stature.

Burial near the bishop in the recently constructed chapel could indicate that the church was expanded into a cathedral during the tenure of these individuals. Only a few bishops died in Greenland, and to date the grave of only one bishop has been excavated. The couple in the chapel dated to the same time period, though they are positioned slightly lower in the ground, suggesting that the bishop was interred after them.

The bishop was buried with a gold ring (with a missing stone) and a finely carved ivory crozier (6.3.1). That the crozier is made of walrus ivory indicates its North Atlantic connection. Nørlund eagerly presented its fine workmanship to belong to the Icelandic Margrét *hin haga* (Margaret the Dextrous), allegedly a particularly talented scrimshawer; however the crozier's 13th century context makes it too late for this (Nørlund et al. 1930:74). That a Greenlandic bishop used a crozier made of ivory speaks to the importance of the material in Greenland at the time. While other ivory croziers exist, more common materials in Europe were silver or other precious metals. This particular crozier was made from material readily available in his remote see as opposed to imported material. As one of the few liturgical items ever discovered in Greenland this use of ivory is significant. Potentially the crozier was used to demonstrate the natural "wealth" of Greenland to outsiders or, perhaps, the audience was domestic and the crozier symbolized the connection of the bishop to Greenland and the resources at its disposal. For example, in 1327 Greenland's share of Peter's Pence was paid in walrus ivory, according to documents in the Vatican Archives (Keller 1989:277).<sup>24</sup>

When viewed in conjunction with the chapel, which was relatively new at the time of interment, it is tempting to assign the three burials in the north chapel as those who oversaw the expansion of the church in the 13th century, but this is

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<sup>24</sup> Archivio Segreto Vaticano, collect. 227f. 6v 1326 - 1343

conjecture. What is demonstrable is that the burials in the church are concentrated in the north chapel in the middle 1200s, indicating a preference for burial within the church that was reserved for very few.

The unusual practice of interring animal skulls in the church or churchyard is unique to Gardar in Greenland, and most of the North Atlantic. The first trait to recognize is that the animals included were all of high economic value to the Greenlanders, though their valuable ivory had been removed. This suggests that the presence of the skulls was not for display, but rather some manner of ritual. Perdikaris and McGovern have connected the presence of the skulls to some sacral element of the seasonal hunting expeditions to the *Nordsetur* region near modern Disko Bay (Perdikaris 2006:207-208). While this is possible, discussing non-normative Christian behavior as a pagan holdover is not necessary. The material value of the animals themselves may represent patronage from a benefactor, for instance, or a secular ritual being conducted near the highly visible and central meeting point of the cathedral.

#### 7.5.2 Case Study: Ø-111 Herjolfsnes

Herjolfsnes was settled in 985 by Herjolf Bardarson, according to *Landnámabók*. Aboard his ship was a Christian Hebridean composing poems during the voyage (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:50; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 35). Whether or not Herjolf himself was a Christian is unknown, but he established his farm in the vicinity of modern Ikigait on a prominent peninsula, apparently sacrificing the best farming land for access to a nearby harbor (Nørlund 1924:7).



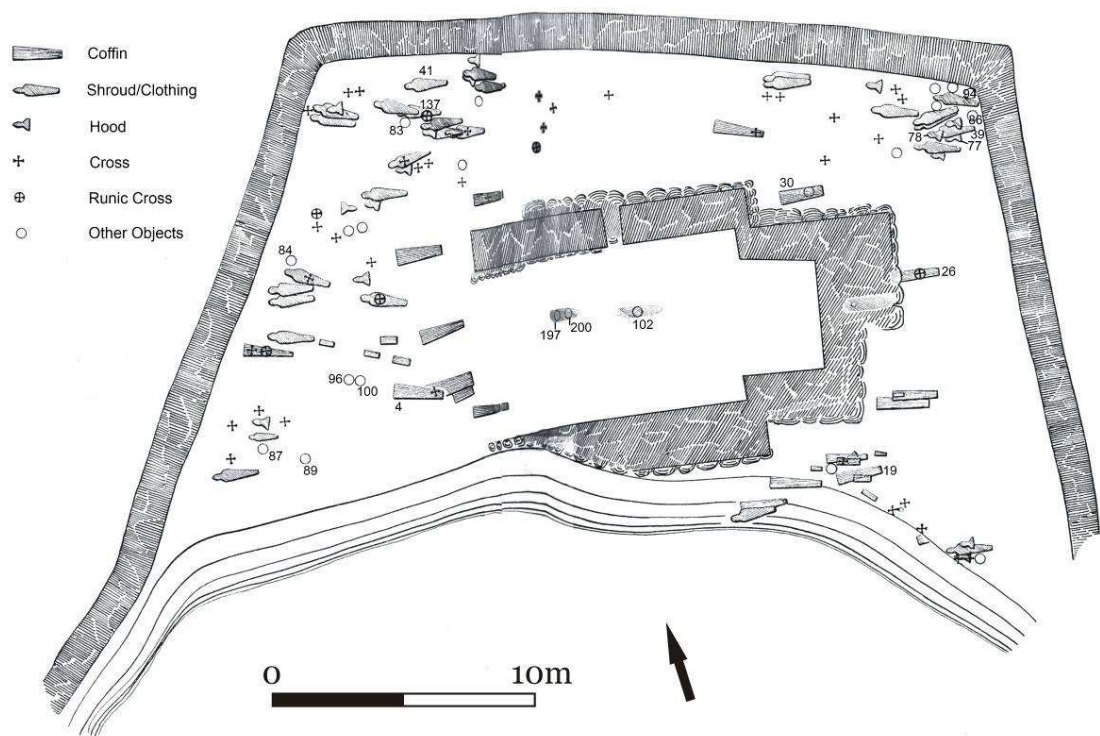


Figure 87: Plan of Herjolfsnes church and churchyard (Pierce 2011 after Nørlund 1924: Table I)

Herjolfsnes is the southern most settlement about which we have literary and archaeological information. The site was inhabited from the late 10th century to the mid 15th, spanning the entire period of Norse settlement, but the only major excavation carried out on the site has been by Poul Nørlund in 1921.

### *Churches*

There was certainly one church at Herjolfsnes, possibly two. Nørlund believed the ruined but visible bipartite Romanesque church overlay an earlier church (Fig. 87). Likely built in the mid 12th century, the visible church ruins are consistent with contemporary building trends at Brattahlid, Gardar and Sandnes. Nørlund's excavations indicated one or more churches existed on the site in the 11<sup>th</sup> century or earlier (Arneborg 2005:79).

### *Cemetery*

The shape of the associated churchyard is rectangular, but much has been lost to erosion. Bones washing into the sea have been reported as early as the

1830s (Arneborg 2005:77). A full 200 burials have been excavated, dating from the final phase of the churchyard in the early 15th century from the north-east corner of the cemetery. Though the surviving burials date from late in the settlement there have been no other burial sites discovered in the immediate vicinity, and presumably the cemetery must have remained same site throughout the settlement's history. Lynnerup's calculations place the total number of burials at 1505 over 400 years, and taphonomical concerns such as erosion as well as limited excavations can account for the overrepresentation of 15th century burials (Lynnerup 1998:106-110).

Despite the extant burials' skewed dates, they can tell us much about beliefs and practices. The most famous finds from Herjolfsnes are the numerous well-preserved garments recovered from the churchyards. Some individuals were buried wearing their garments; others were buried shrouded in them. The garments themselves generally show signs of heavy wear and use, suggesting that the clothing selected for burial was chosen based on its physical state - heavily worn clothing was suitable for burial, presumably for the living to make further use of the clothes in better condition (Nørlund 1924:90, McCullough In Press).

Coffin use in Greenland as been assessed as high-status burial due to the sparsity of wood available in Greenland, a view supported by the variety of coffins used - some with no floor, some built onto one another to make double use of the valuable planks, even some made with repurposed boards (Fig.67). This may be an appropriate assessment in some cases, but evidence also suggests that coffin burial may also indicate a desire to establish an individual space for the dead in the churchyard. The bottomless coffin, for instance, does not so much contain the body as it separates the body's space in the earth, not from the bottom or the surface, but defining its location within the burial "plane". Attaching three walls of another coffin to a coffin already in the ground makes use of precious lumber, but it also relates the occupant of one to another, perhaps symbolizing a relation of the two in life or in death. A problematic use of a coffin at Herjolfsnes is discussed more thoroughly below (7.5.2) (McCullough In Press).



One practice more heavily represented at Herjolfsnes than anywhere else in Greenland is the use of burial crosses. Only one similar specimen was recovered from the Farm Beneath the Sand and another from Sandnes, as well as several fragments (6.4.2). While only three are associated with skeletal material, 58 crosses of varying quality and design have been recovered from the cemetery, suggesting that they too were buried with the dead. Many of the crosses have spiked bottoms, suggesting their use as devotional crosses. Nørlund states that crosses such as these have clearer parallels in northern France than Scandinavia, comparing them to lead examples from Metz, Angers, Bouteilles by Dieppe, raising interesting questions about the transmission of Christian practices.

### *Stone Markers*

A Norse gravestone from Herjolfsnes had been reused as door lintel in a modern Inuit dwelling (Fig.88). It was noticed by a visiting missionary in 1830 and was in fact the clue that led to the rediscovery of Herjolfsnes (Nørlund 1924:193). The incomplete stone measures 148cm x32-48cm and is inscribed with a Latin cross and the words "Here rests Hroar Kolgrimson" in Latin lettering. A sequence of letters ending in "IDVS" also appear, but their meaning has not been discerned (ibid.).

A fragmentary granite tombstone was discovered during the Kielsen excavations of 1839 and 1840 (Fig. 88). The fragments revealed a cleanly cut trapezoidal stone of approximately 1.25m long. Also contains a cross, apparently with the traditional Greenlandic triangular terminals, and Romanesque Latin lettering, though there are not sufficient letters to decipher its inscription (ibid:195).

Kielsen also discovered two small cross slabs that lack inscriptions. The crosses, however, have the traditional tripartite terminals seen on a number of objects throughout Greenland (6.4.2). Nørlund cautiously dated the one with accompanying tendrils to the 13<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest (Fig. 88) (Ibid:196).

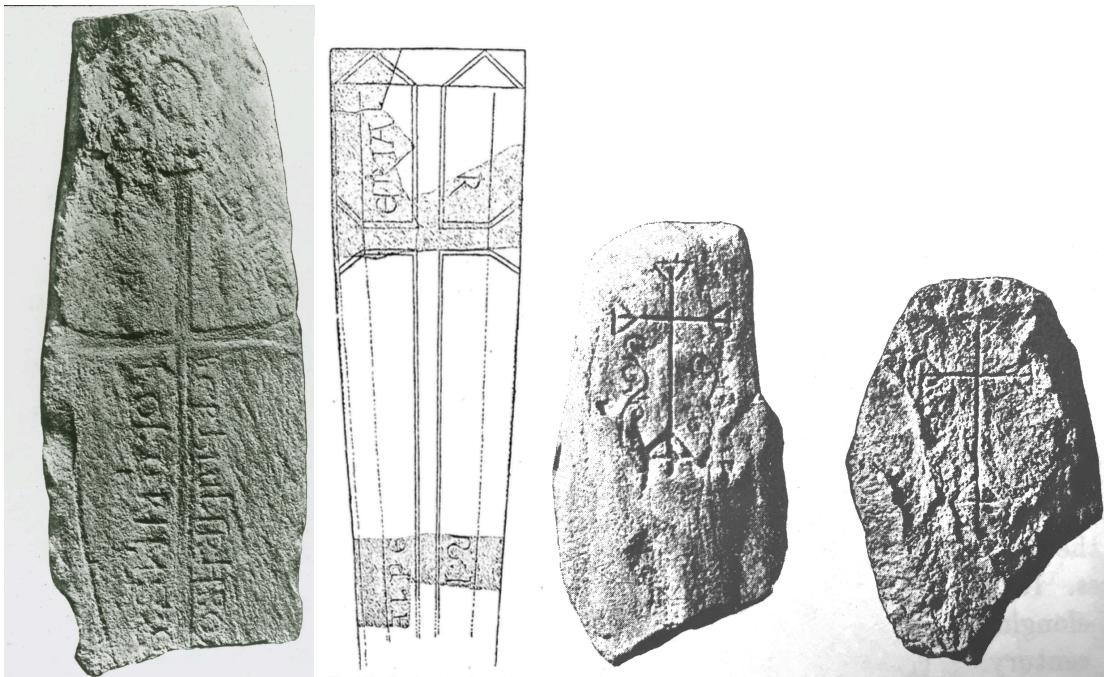


Figure 88: Hroar Kolgrimson's stone, the fragmentary granite slab, and two small cross slabs from Herjolfsnes (L 44.3x22.5, R 38x25cm) (Nørlund et. al. 1930: 194-196, Figs. 138-140)

### *Abnormal Burials*

The number of burials at Herjolfsnes provides us with greater variety in burial practice than can be seen at other sites. Three burials in particular demonstrate practices that while perhaps not enough to be considered "deviant" certainly demonstrate non-normative practice when compared with others from Herjolfsnes and elsewhere in Greenland.

Within the church itself are two inhumations that raise numerous questions. Nørlund's excavation of these graves revealed only the "faintest reminiscences of bodies", and neither have thus far been radiocarbon dated, but the advanced state of decay and placement of the graves could indicate that the individuals in question were buried in the earlier phase of the church (Nørlund 1924:68).

The first of these burials, buried in the east, contained a bear tooth that has been worked in a way that suggests it was worn on the body as a pendant or perhaps amulet (Fig.65b). The literature on the significance of the bear in Norse paganism is highly developed, and while one cannot say for certain that this tooth is directly related to cultic practice, its presence in a prominent burial

within the church is noteworthy. Very few graves in Greenland contain any manner of adornment at all. Any item buried with an individual carried a meaning either to the deceased or those burying them. The presence of the tooth in the grave (as well as the one from Narsaq) are likely to be representative of a sense of personal symbolism.

The second church burial confuses the issue of relations between the Norse and the Inuit, and perhaps the relation of their respective practices of burial. Approximately 1.5m further west into the nave of the bear tooth burial, a grave was excavated which contained the wooden pommel of a knife (with owners mark) and a whale bone and pine oval box of the type used by the Inuit people of the time, placed under the head of the deceased (Fig. 89). The box was filled with animal tissue and blood, leading Nørlund to conclude that the box must have contained "food for the dead person" (Nørlund 1924:64). Nørlund's conclusion that it contained food for the deceased is one of many possible interpretations, however. While pre-Christian Norse burials have contained foodstuffs and the implements for preparing them, there have been no other known incidences of such goods being interred in Greenland. It is possible that the box represents an acknowledgment of Inuit concern for the treatment of the deceased rather than a Norse one, perhaps as a diplomatic overture between two cultures. The prominence of the grave's placement suggests that in life the occupant was a person of importance - perhaps the presence of the box indicates a flexibility of practice on the part of those who conducted the burial.

At the waist of the individual a wooden knife pommel was found, perhaps worn on a belt. No other part of the knife remains. The pommel, however, is etched with a design interpreted as an owner's mark. Conceivably this part of the knife symbolizing ownership was interred, and the rest of the tool was kept or recycled by a survivor. So far this is the only indication of a person being buried with a "weapon" in Greenland, though a knife could be simply an everyday tool (McCullough In Press).

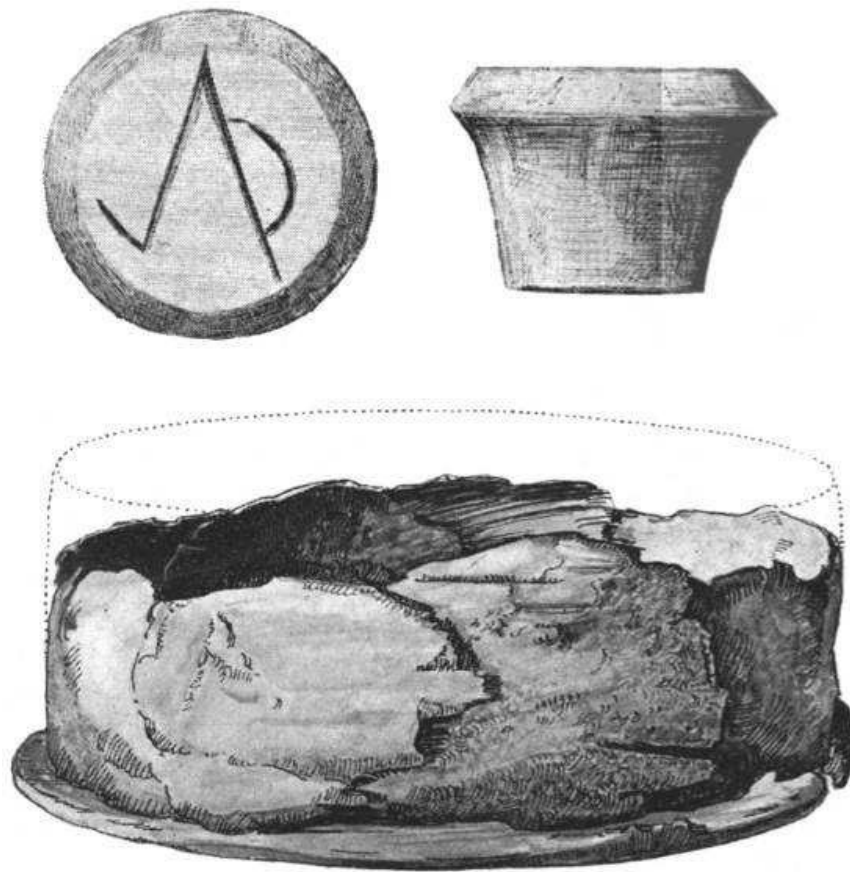


Figure 89: Knife pommel and whalebone box from Herjolfsnes (Nørlund 1924, Figs. 158 & 160)

The most complex and involved burial at Herjolfsnes is that which occurred in the Coffin 30, set just outside the north wall of the church. In the grave was a sturdy, lidless coffin with interior dimensions of 1.615m long and 43cm across at the top, narrowing to 31cm at the foot. A cross was etched on the coffin floor, "in the bottom at the pace of the breast" (Nørlund 1924:83; McCullough In Press). Contained in the coffin were the remains of at least one individual, though remains were so thoroughly decomposed that only patches of a "waxy substance" remained. This substance was likely adipocere, a soap-like byproduct of decomposition in anaerobic conditions. These two patches were discovered near where the head and hips of the individual would have lain, prompting Nørlund (who believed the adipocere to be the remnants of brain material) to declare that the head of the second body lay near the hips of the first (Nørlund 1924:61-63,82-86). Such deposits can be formed from subcutaneous fat as well, and as such both patches in Coffin 30 may be from

the same individual (Lynnerup 1998:59). Grouped or "family burials" are not out of the ordinary in Greenland judging by other examples at Ø-111, Ø-149, and V-51, though kinship is not necessarily demonstrated (Lynnerup 1998:64).

Even if there was only one physical body in the coffin at the time of interment, the grave also belongs to another individual. Found in the corner of the coffin was a rune stick with the inscription "*This woman, whose name was Gudveg, who was laid overboard in the Greenland Sea*" (Lynnerup 1998:54). Gudveg, it is clear, is not the person whose body decomposed in Coffin 30, but her memorial was interred in the churchyard all the same. The inclusion of her memorial may indicate marital or blood relation to the decomposed person.

Following the deposition of the coffins' occupants the grave was sealed by the placement of a 1.5 ton boulder atop the grave which was massive, unadorned, and unlikely to be a monument. Nørlund viewed this as a precaution against revenants - a belief which is widely attested to in Norse literature and archaeology as well. Nørlund's interpretation was based on the placement of the boulder itself, but subsequent research has demonstrated a number of other factors that could support the theory that members of the community were concerned about the restless dead in Coffin 30 (Nørlund 1924:63).

First, if the second adipocere deposit was brain matter, it was near the pelvic region of the body. Severing the head and placing it between the legs of a corpse has been attested to in medieval literature and archaeology as a way to silence revenants and their cultural-specific incarnation *draugar* (Scudder 1997:107; Klevnäs 2011:169). As Gudveg's rune stick demonstrates, the coffin did hold - at least at a symbolic level - multiple individuals.

Second, the cross carved "where the heart should be" upon the floor of the coffin could be interpreted in the same manner of other robbed and disturbed medieval graves in England and Europe. Klevnäs documents a number of Christian objects deliberately left in disturbed early medieval graves (such as those at Berghausen, Baden-Württemberg) perhaps left by grave-robbers as a

means of protecting themselves from the vengeful dead or showing deference to artefacts of Christian significance (Klevnäs 2010:54-55).

Gudveg's rune stick commemorating a woman buried at sea also calls to mind numerous examples in Norse literature and folklore connecting the *draugar* to water and drowning. Numerous drowned sailors and travellers are described in *Eyrbyggja saga*:

After Thorir's death one of Thorodd's farmhands became ill, and he lay in bed three nights before dying. Then one after another died until six people had died altogether. It was coming up to Advent, although at that time it was not observed in Iceland. The store-room was so well stocked with dried fish that the door could not be closed... Then things started to happen in the evenings. Just as people sat by the fire, they could hear the dried fish being torn at in the store-room, but whenever they went to look, they could find nothing alive in there. During the winter just before Yule, Thorodd the farmer went out to Nes to fetch his dried fish. There were six men altogether in the ten-oared boat, and they spent the night out there. (*The Saga of the People of the Eyri*, 5:5; J. Quinn (trans) 1997, 200)

The next morning when Thorodd and his men were coming back from Nes with the dried fish, they were all drowned out near Enni. The boat and the fish were washed ashore beneath Enni, but the bodies were never found. When this news reached Froda, Kjartan and Thurid invited their neighbours to a funeral feast. They took the Yule ale and used it at the funeral. On the first night of the funeral feast, once everyone was in their seats, Thorodd the farmer and his companions came into the fire-room, completely drenched. People welcomed Thorodd warmly, thinking it was a good omen, because at that time they believed that the drowned had been well received by the sea-goddess Ran if they attended their own funeral feast. There was still a small degree of belief in heathen ways, even though people had been baptized and called themselves Christians. Thorodd and his companions walked all the way across the sleeping hall, which had two doors, and into the fire-room without responding to anyone's greeting. When they sat down by the fire, the people

of the farm rushed out of the fire-room, but Thorodd and his companions stayed there until the fire had turned to ashes. Then they went away. It went on like this every evening during the funeral feast, with the drowned men coming in and sitting by the fire. (*The Saga of the People of the Eyri*, 5:54; J. Quinn (trans) 1997, 201)

Such traditions carry on into the modern era in parts of Scandinavia. Folklorist Jonas Lie and artist Theodor Kittelsen popularized the folk tales of Northern Norway during the renaissance of folklore in the mid to late 1800s wherein the *draug* - now in the form of a seaweed covered sailor - terrorized coastal towns (Fig. 90) (Lie 1893:1-20). *Draugar* became increasingly associated with the sea from the Middle Ages onward. Gudveg's bodily absence from the coffin and subsequent burial *in absentia* may have caused anxiety about her physical and spiritual repose among the community, prompting them to take precautions against her restlessness (McCullough In Press).



Figure 90: *Draugen* (1895) by Theodor Kittelsen (1857-1914)

### *Discussion*

The overall timeline for Herjolfsnes is as follows: in the late 10th century the site was selected by Herjolf Bardson, seemingly favoring proximity to a sea port than prime farming land, which was near but further inland. By 1150 the first



church was constructed near the farm core, and 50-100 years later was expanded into a bipartite structure as was the trend in Greenland at that time. The church appears to have been constructed to be highly visible from the sea. This church remains until ca. 1450 when the burials stop, and the Norse no longer inhabited Greenland.

The variations of burial described above raise a number of questions as to what beliefs were being represented. A fear of revenants certainly had its roots in pre-Christian traditions, as did the deposition of food, weapons, and tools with the dead. Are these examples of "pagan" practice in a Christian context? The issue at hand is that this dichotomy relies upon the misconception of a monolithic medieval Church authority. That the bishop of Greenland would have allowed for or even sanctioned a cultural practice with its roots in pre-Christian tradition should not be surprising. It is more useful to refer to the practice as a tradition of "Greenlandic Christianity". As shown in other case studies, a variety of practices with correlates in Ireland, Scandinavia, and Europe are all present in Greenland, suggesting that, as anywhere else, the development of Christianity did not occur in a vacuum nor from a single source.

That practices such as these are evident at the centers of formal Christian authority in Greenland indicate an effort to accommodate, incorporate, or at least acknowledge the other practices present in the community.

#### *Church burials and grave goods*

The term "grave good" has been thoroughly reevaluated in recent years, especially as regards the relation of such objects to the religious identity or identities being represented in the burial. While the dichotomy of presence of goods/pagan, absence of goods/Christian is demonstrably false, the presence of artefacts in any grave surely is deliberate and carries meaning. The meanings of the whalebone box, the knife pommel, and the bear tooth pendant may be difficult to determine, but it is worth remembering their intentional placement within the church itself. Given the marked absence of any form of



potentially non-Christian grave good in Greenland, it is extraordinary that the only examples are within the church.

Based on their placement and condition it is possible that the graves in the church are among the oldest that survive at the site, perhaps as early as the first phase of the church in the mid 1100s. Norse paganism continued in parts of Scandinavia well into the 12th century and that could be the case in Greenland as well. Even if the individual buried with tooth and knife pommel was wholly pagan (a very great assumption, considering their burial within a Christian church), inclusion within the church could indicate an enmeshment of social and spiritual conventions; a pagan member of a Christian community being shown the deference that was proper for their individual attitudes and the values of the community, as one of many possibilities.

Analysis of grave goods has until recently focused on what the grave goods say about the individual they accompany. It is more useful to assess them as representative of the forces at work in the world of the living, be these forces a cosmological belief structure, a sense of communal identity, or political or social performance. Rather than use the items buried with an individual to mark the ascendancy of one cosmology over another, they should be used to study the interplay between them (McCullough In Press).

The burials inside the church are curious, but are not in any way conclusively indicative of pre-Christian practice. They are, however, unlike other burials at Herjolfsnes and elsewhere in Greenland. Did this mean that the individuals interred within the church were separate in some sense from those buried outside and without goods? Their bodies were interred with items of significance. To whom they were significant and will no doubt remain a mystery.

#### *Holy Ground as a concept and in practice*

As assessed above, the Greenlanders appear to have had a preoccupation with what defines an appropriate place for burial. Gudveg's rune stick reflects at the very least a desire on the part of the community to see her represented in the

holy ground of the churchyard even if her physical remains were in the ocean. That the stick was interred in a previously occupied coffin where it could not be read and then covered with a stone perhaps suggests a method of those conducting the funeral for dealing with those who died problematically or in a way not specifically dealt with in communal practice. Written sources demonstrate multiple times that those with the means to return improperly buried bodies did so out of a sense of propriety or even a personal concern for the wellbeing of their deceased friend or relative (7.3). In Gudveg's case, burial at sea was not seen as sufficient for the needs of either her soul or the community responsible for its care.

In the Middle Ages the Christian conception of the world was less geographical and more cosmological. Jerusalem was the center of the Christian world, as demonstrated by the "TO" maps of the times (Fig. 96). The Church with its center in Rome occupied a conceptual space near to the center of the world, and despite the myriad of localized Christian practices and folk beliefs, Christendom was conceptually Europe. The nearer the edges of this conceptual Christian world, the nearer one was to monsters and dragons. Documents from the Archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen and the Vatican demonstrate the perception Greenland's place in this conceptual world as at the utmost margins of Christendom - as geographically and conceptually far from the center as it could be (4.4.3.)

This view, consciously or unconsciously, is played out in the emphasis placed on churchyard burials in Greenland. Burial outside the boundary of the churchyard was not acceptable, even for those who had likely been buried elsewhere in different circumstance such as the likely reinterred bundles at Brattahlid and elsewhere. Beyond the border of the cemetery in death was beyond the reach of the church as a physical representation of a conceptual notion. Interestingly, proximity to the church does not appear to have been as important as being inside the demarcated churchyard (Lynnerup 1998:65). In fact, the hypothetically problematic burials in coffin 30 lay very near the outside wall of the church. It appears that while there was a slight preference to be

buried near the church, the ground itself was considered no more sacred at the edge of the churchyard than very near the actual church structure.

To a Greenlander, burial outside a churchyard was to be buried at the actual edge of the world. To the west were no further churches and no priests or bishops, only cultures about which they knew very little and lands they had barely explored. The churchyard was a pocket of the known, a piece of the center of the world.

### *7.5.3 Case Study: V-51 Sandnes*

Sandnes (modern Kilaarsarfik) was settled approximately in the year 1000. Unlike the better-known sites in the Eastern Settlement, there is no name in the written sources for who originally claimed Sandnes. According to *Landnámabók* "others went to the Western Settlement" shortly after the Eastern Settlement (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:90; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 49). Sandnes is located not far from the Farm Under the Sand in the heart of the most heavily settled portion of the Western Settlement (Arneborg et al. 2012: 29). Zooarchaeological evidence suggests that Sandnes underwent a change from a herding to a hunting economy in the 12<sup>th</sup> century associated with a structural reorganization of the farm (McGovern et al. 1996:116).

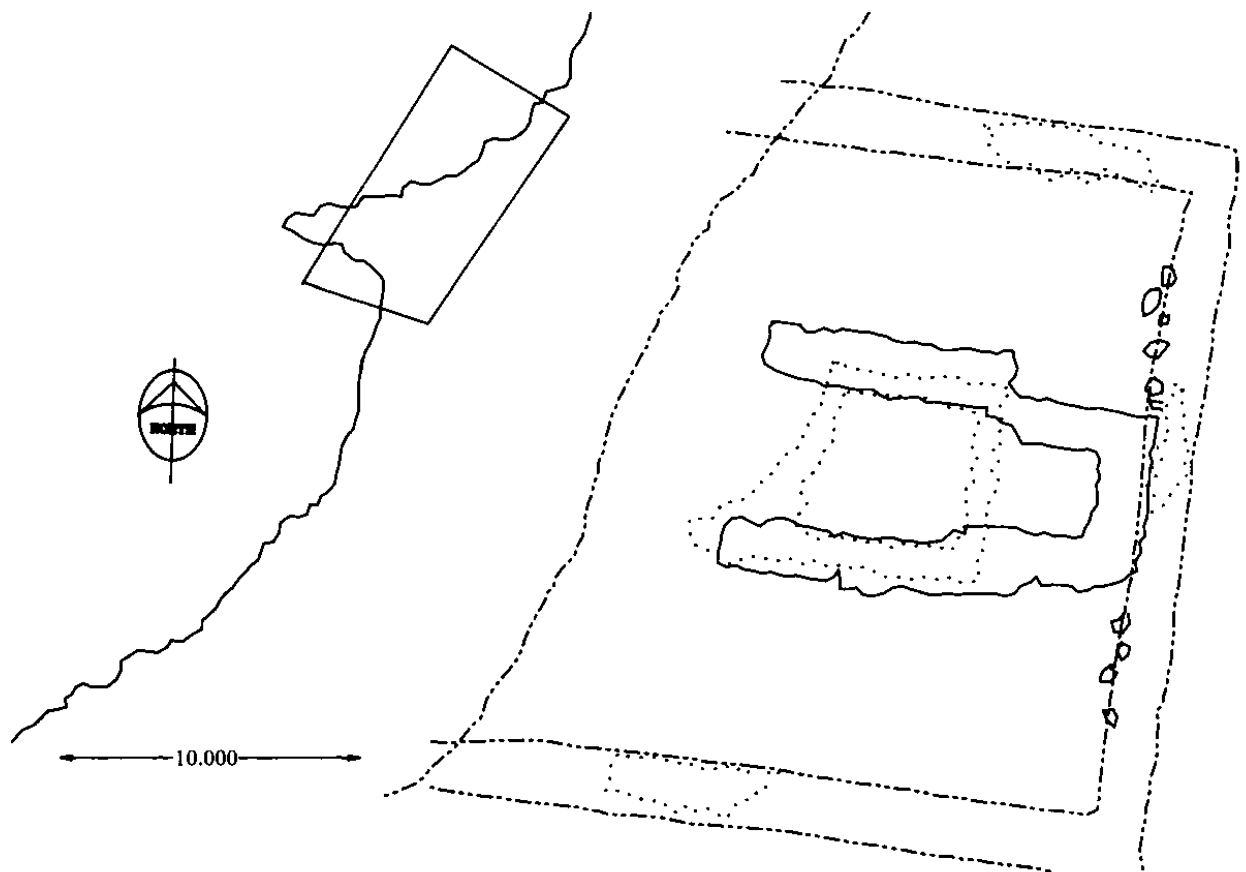


Figure 91: Composite plan of Sandnes church and churchyard. Solid lines based on maps by Roussell (1932, 1936) and Nørlund (1930). Dotted lines based on Bruun (1918). Box in upper left approximate position of Nørlund and Roussell's excavation field (Lynnerup 1998, Fig. 18)

Sandnes is believed to be the only church in the Western Settlement mentioned in Bardarson's account, stating "this was for a time the cathedral and bishop's seat" (Ivar Bardarson, *A Fourteenth-Century Description of Greenland*, [Line] 124; Derek Mathers (trans) 2009, 81). Bardarson describes the site as empty (probably recently so) by the time of his writing in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, a statement corroborated by carbon dating of site middens (McGovern et al. 1996:104). Considering the period of use of the church, its location, and the similarities of name, Sandnes and Stensnes most likely both refer to this site.

### *Churches*

Roussell dated the first phase of the church at Sandnes to the 11<sup>th</sup> century - the same time as the first phase of construction at the farm - with the chancel a later addition, though he stated that his investigation "provided nothing definite" (Roussell 1936:27). No earlier churches or phases are recognised here,

although the dramatic rise of sea level at Sandnes could easily have erased evidence of an earlier structure. (Arneborg et al. 2012:29). Jansen later agreed with Roussell that the chancel was from the 1100s based on an apparent use of the "Carolingian-Greek foot" as a unit of measurement employed in its construction, though measurement units could not be determined in the nave (Jansen 1972:108).



Figure 92: Arrowhead from the cemetery at V-51 (Roussell 1936, Fig. 78)

The style of the church is of a Romanesque, bipartite design consistent with other 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century churches in Greenland. If Sandnes had a church from its very earliest days, it would be surprising if it were the same church that is visible today. By the time of Roussell's excavations the church was only accessible during low-tide, the level of which had significantly changed since Daniel Bruun's investigations 25 years earlier (Roussell 1936:14).

Both settlement and church were in operation from the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the mid 14<sup>th</sup>. Bardarson blamed the emptying of the settlement on encroaching Inuit, a hypothesis Roussell apparently accepted (Roussell 1936:27; Mathers 2009:81). A possible Inuit arrowhead was recovered from the cemetery at V-51, but could also be of a type used in southern Labrador and Newfoundland (Fig. 92) (Seaver 1996:26). Lynnerup catalogs five skulls with possible sling shot wounds from Sandnes, but these are not definitive (1998:88-93). Though there is no archaeological basis to suggest widespread aggression by the Inuit, Western Settlement farms were emptying during this time. A study published in 2007 examining the presence of carrion eating ectoparasites within a dwelling at V-54 Nipaatoq dramatically concluded at least one case of starvation (Panagiotakopulu et al. 2007:304). C<sup>14</sup> dates of the only other excavated church in the Western Settlement, V-7 Anavik, also suggest a mid to late 14<sup>th</sup> century end date (572 ± 50 BP) (Lynnerup 1998:23; Arneborg et. al. 2012: Table 15-16).

## *Cemetery*

Due to the dramatically changed landscape at V-51, the shape of the churchyard is poorly defined. Roussell's excavations revealed a wall extending out from the edge of the chancel and a highly disturbed western dike (Roussell 1936:26). Lynnerup superimposed a number of previous archaeologists plans of the churchyard into one composite map which indicates the churchyard likely had an interior width of 21.8m and interior length of 31m (Fig. 91) (Lynnerup 1998:25-26)

As of Lynnerup's major study in 1998, 192 human specimens were recovered from V-51 with a minimum number of 123 individuals (1998:35). This is the highest in Greenland with the exception of Ø29a Thjodhild's Church in the Eastern Settlement. Lynnerup's model estimates a total of 1174 burials in the cemetery over a period of 300 years (1998:110). Very little of the churchyard has been excavated, and what has been has mainly been from the outer edges of the churchyard.

Burial practices such as shrouding or coffin burials do not occur here, though the cause of this may be taphonomical more than anthropogenic. The continuous submergence of the site at high tide has likely dissolved organic material, though in Nørlund & Roussell's study area, not yet so submerged as the rest of the churchyard, several wooden artefacts were discovered.

In addition to the whole and fragmentary crosses, wooden grave goods were discovered in Nørlund & Roussell's excavation, both a finely carved crucifixion scene and what appears to be a pax or osculatorium, both presumably buried with an important figure in the settlement, perhaps a priest of the church (6.3.1). As seen with the bishop's burial from Gardar, members of the clergy could be buried with liturgical items, but if the individual at Sandnes was in fact a member of the clergy there is no other evidence for this practice.

### *Stone markers*

Interestingly, no grave markers have been recovered at Sandnes. Despite the preservation of wooden objects in individual graves, the majority of the stone churchyard dyke has been washed away; perhaps any earlier stone grave markers met a similar fate.

### *Abnormal burials*

Within the sections of the cemetery that have been excavated, only one burial has thus far stood out as in any way deviant from the standard east-west orientation observed in both settlements: one individual in the western churchyard was excavated seemingly on its side with head facing south. According to Roussell, only the head and upper torso were preserved, making the complete interment difficult to assess (Roussell 1936:16); it is possible that the interment was altered or disturbed by other burials.

### *Discussion*

The taphonomical issues of Sandnes make it a curious site to analyze. It can be confidently stated that V-51 was the heart of the Western Settlement, in operation as an administrative hub and social gathering place for the nearby farms. As such, the visible beliefs and practices there may be interpreted as the “default” for the surrounding area and perhaps the Western Settlement as a whole.

The liturgical items from the churchyard – such as the pax - illustrate the spread of verifiable liturgical convention in Greenland, though the dating of these objects is problematic due to the shortcomings of archaeological method at the time.

The lack of stone markers is interesting, though the presence of devotional crosses expands the chronological and geographical window in which these objects were used in Greenland.

## 7.6 Chapter Discussion & Conclusions

Comparing these case studies with additional findings from other sites, the organization of Greenlandic cemeteries consists of pockets of practices that are either subsequently abandoned or not widely practiced throughout Greenland. Child burials, for instance, seem to be slightly clustered at early sites (7.4). Similar practices are documented in Scandinavia (Lynnerup 1998:62). Such practices are perhaps reflective of earlier convention. Church burials, including one infant burial, have been found only in the largest churches and appear to have been a privilege reserved for wealthy families as well as the clergy and was perhaps an attempt to secure and maintain the goodwill of wealthy land owners (Vebæk 1991:31; Lynnerup 1998:63). Gender segregation in burial is seen at Brattahlid I with more men buried on the north side of the churchyard and more women buried on the south, but not elsewhere (Fig. 5).<sup>25</sup> This burial segregation has parallels in Iceland, Sweden, and Bornholm, suggesting an origination of the practice in Scandinavia (Steffensen 1943:229; Cinthio 1993:271; Kieffer-Olsen 1993:118; Wagnkilde in Lynnerup 1998:62). Segregation by gender is not absolute in any of these sites, however, and again it seems that Brattahlid I shows an early practice that did not survive the institutionalization of the Greenlandic church in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### 7.6.1 Churchyard Longevity

Figure 92 shows the periods of burial in Norse churchyards from available C<sup>14</sup> dating. Churches Ø-29a II & III, Ø-83, Ø-105, Ø-162 do not contain datable skeletal material. Ø-33 was dated by grave charcoal as opposed to skeletal material; Ø-47 Gardar's C<sup>14</sup> dating comes from a sample of three skeletons in the northern chapel and cannot be considered conclusive. At Ø-1 sample dates were taken from upper levels (Arneborg et al. 2012, Tables 1,3,5,10,12); Arneborg 2012; Madsen 2014, Table 8.1).

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, trends may be more visible at Brattahlid I than elsewhere due to it being the only churchyard in Greenland excavated in its entirety.



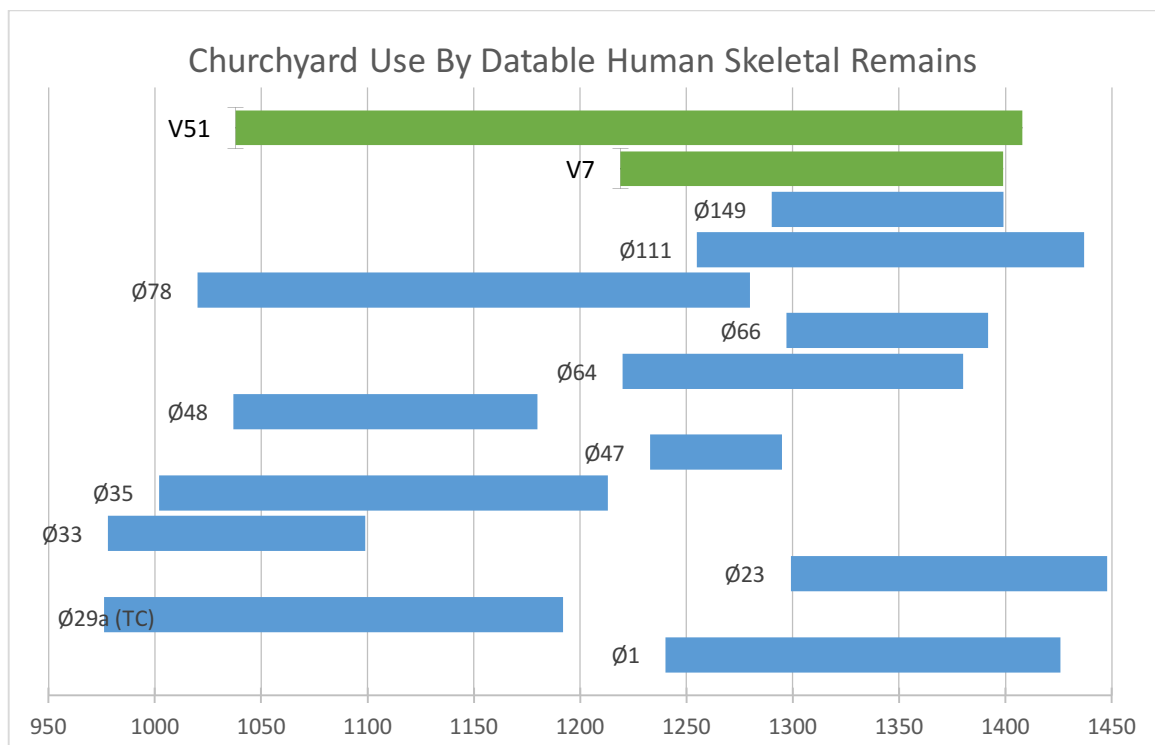


Figure 93: C<sup>14</sup> dated burials

What the available data show is the period of time in which people were buried in the various churchyards. Ø-29a I “Thjodhild’s Church” had a functional cemetery well after Brattahlid II was built, suggesting possible use as a family chapel. V-51 Sandnes has the longest scope of datable burials, testifying to its importance in the Western Settlement.

### 7.6.2 Visibilities and markers

The business of burial appears to have been mostly anonymous in Norse Greenland, yet a surprising number of stone markers are present. Most markers do not contain the name of the deceased. It perhaps suggests that the practice of naming the dead was used only in specific circumstances or even an ideological adherence to a humble interment in accordance with Christian principles. Indeed, monumental burials are nonexistent in Greenland as opposed to aristocratic or other high-status burials in contemporary Europe (O’Sullivan 2013). Like the stone markers, wooden devotional crosses may have been used as markers at Herjolfsnes, but this does not appear to have been their primary function. When Nørlund and Stenberger excavated

Brattahlid III 10 stone markers were uncovered, including a recumbent cross slab, a child's grave with a headstone, and a stone set grave inscribed with runes translating to "Ingibjorg's Grave" (Fig. 94 & Fig. 95) (Nørlund & Stenberger 2010:42-46). It is noteworthy that so many were placed outside the church. In England there was a shift toward stone slabs within the church after the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Saul 2009:13). This is not so at Brattahlid III, and burials inside the churches at Herjolfsnes, Gardar and the Benedictine convent show no signs of internal cross slabs.

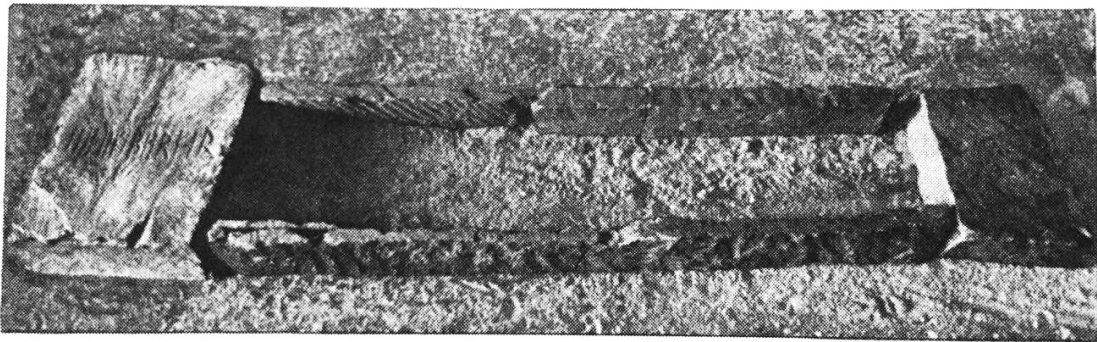


Figure 94: "Ingibjorg's Grave" at Brattahlid III (Nørlund & Stenberger 1934, Fig. 21)



Figure 95: A child's grave with headstone at Brattahlid III (Nørlund & Stenberger 1934, Fig. 43)

At least two stone markers have been discovered out of context; the door lintel near Herjolfsnes as discussed above, and another in similar circumstances found on Napassut island in the Middle Settlement region (Nørlund 1924:16-17; Vebæk 1991:16-18).

To mark a grave, even with an anonymous stone, intimates a memorial for a specific person, or at least to provide a visual focal point to draw the attention of the living. Some inscribed with crosses or with inscriptions of prayer demonstrate a dedication of the deceased to Christ, similar to the practices of incorporating crosses onto domestic objects (6.4.2.4). To mark with a blank headstone or slab makes for a conspicuous anonymity, perhaps symbolizing the oneness of the Christian faithful in death and the eschewing of earthly individuality while at the same time emphasizing it in the world of the living.

Burial markers also served as reminders for the living to pray for the repose of the dead. Stones such as these were silent reminders for the living to engage in “prayerful assistance” and speed the deceased through Purgatory (Saul 2009:120). The concern for the soul in the spiritual wilderness of Greenland was demonstrated in life through everyday acts of devotion such as the sign of the cross. The use of burial markers may signify a continuance of this concern beyond death.

### *7.6.3 Kin Burial*

Burial of kin groups in Greenland has to this point been determined by burial arrangement, and not without ambiguity. The ‘family’ burial at Sandnes consisting of two adults and two sub adults was originally interpreted by Roussell as a family taken by plague or similar trauma has since been identified as two adult women with children (Lynnerup 1998:24). The four occupants of the grave could of course be related, but this particular instance demonstrates the difficulties of determining kin. The mass grave at Brattahlid I may also contain several related individuals. To date no major DNA analysis has been conducted on the extant Norse remains, and it appears that this will be the only way to conclusively determine kin relationships in burial practices.

The paucity of grave goods in Greenland may have been a manifestation of the belief that “the dead had moved away from an earthly world separated by gender and class to a paradise without these constraints” (O’Sullivan 2013:5). However, the presence of coffins, sometimes lidless and bottomless can be interpreted in the meaning of their most basic function: containment, definition, and separation of the body.

It is possible that the purpose of the coffin in Greenland was to separate the body from the rest of the churchyard and retain a sense of individual or familial personhood among the dead. Generally, coffins were built in the grave and not used to transport the deceased. Lidless and bottomless coffins define the burial horizontally, separating it from other interred individuals on the same burial plane. Additional corpses could be placed within the coffin at a later date, often mingling the bodies. It seems likely that these later additions were descendants of the first interred, identifying them with their ancestors by mingling physical remains in a space separate from other, unrelated bodies, yet still firmly within the protective realm of the churchyard. Double burials within a coffin would then be seen as defining a relationship between the two individuals. To the medieval mind, disturbing the bones in a cemetery to inter the more recently deceased was practical and not particularly problematic, as the belief in the resurrection of the dead would ensure that the body itself would be restored to its original state (Robb & Harris 2013:147). Removing a body from sacred ground or denying its interment was far more of an issue. Suicides, the unbaptized, and other problematic deaths could be excluded from a community in death by denying their burials among its members in good standing. Coffin burial, in some sense, would define a permanent place in the churchyard for individuals fortunate, wealthy, or insistent enough to have one.

#### *7.6.4 Conclusions*

At the peak of Greenlandic Christianity in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, burial customs allowed a certain amount of variance in practice in order to demonstrate inclusion the European Christendom. Considering the practical concerns of traveling from settlement to settlement across the formidable

landscape of southern Greenland it is hardly surprising that certain traditions would be represented unevenly in the archaeological record. This makes the fact that every non-fragmentary Greenlander excavated has been found in a churchyard all the more significant. As demonstrated, burial practices reflected a concern for relation to the conceptual centrality of the Church as opposed to the unknown lands further to the west. The church was seen as a representation of Christendom and its physical presence contained spiritual and conceptual significance. Bone bundles, reused coffins, and absentee burial may be seen as evidence of the perceived power of consecrated ground. Whether they were reinterred pagan burials or disturbed earlier burials moved to make room for new ones they remained within the bounds of the churchyard, as if the physical location was of greater importance than the condition of the physical remains.

It is equally possible that Greenland represents an evolving perspective of "holy ground" as a concept. As we see in Gudveg's coffin, the mere presence of a stick with her *name on it within the ground itself* speaks to the perceived importance of this practice, as opposed to earlier practices such as that of the Icelandic settler Aud the Deepminded (ca. 834-900), who according to *Landnámabók* "was buried at the high water mark as she'd ordered, because having been baptized she didn't wish to lie in unconsecrated earth" (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:110; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 55). Aud's desire to be washed away into the sea contrasts sharply with the precautionary measures seen in Gudveg's absentee grave. For Aud, a minority Christian in 9<sup>th</sup> century Iceland, to be washed out to sea represented a similar sense of unity with the Christian conception of the world. This belief likely stems from Zecharia 14:8: "And it shall come to pass in that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem: half of them to the east sea, and half of them to the last sea: they shall be in summer and in winter." For Aud, the sea represents a connection to Jerusalem, the center of her spiritual worldview. For the people who carved and buried Gudveg's name, it represented the metaphorical other, and action was needed to include Gudveg among the Christian faithful.



If there were non-churchyard burials during the early period of the settlement, by the time of its abandonment most evidence of these had apparently vanished, leaving for us only the final stage of burial practice. This final stage seems to suggest a solidification of practice, if not belief, with the apparent abandonment of gender segregation and nebulous social stratification within the churchyard itself. In fact, potentially “problematic” burials are found close to the church structure. Child burials at Brattahlid I and Herjolfsnes are buried at the gables (east at Brattahlid and West at Herjolfsnes). The boulder-capped Coffin 30 at Herjolfsnes is placed at the northeast intersection of the chancel and the nave. This practice potentially reflects a desire to bring the outside in, securing for the interred whatever spiritual benefit or protection the physical church itself could provide (McCullough In Press). In this vein, clusters of burials close to the church could be seeking the same thing – burial in proximity to the church could symbolize much more than social stratification.

To a Greenlander, to be buried within the churchyard was to await Christ's return as a part of a Christian community of the dead. There was some room for variance of practice, but the primary concern was to remain within the bounds of the churchyard and, by proxy, within Christendom.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Conclusions**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

This thesis has attempted to expand the conversation around cultural practices in Greenland, specifically those relating to belief. It is to be hoped that this work has contributed to a multidisciplinary approach to assess the beliefs and practices of a community that existed for roughly five centuries and yet left us with relatively little provenance and no self-referential historical documents. This approach has involved the examination of outside written sources, the morphology of church structures over time, portable material culture of a mostly modest nature, mortuary behavior, and placing these elements in their appropriate context. This approach attempts to observe artefacts and buildings as physical correlates for non-physical concepts and ideas, such as the physical etching of a cross which protected the body of an individual just as the symbolic power of the cross protected the soul.

More directly, this work attempts for the first time a major evaluation of Christianity's progression in Greenland from its inception to the level at which it was practiced in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century when the final Norse ships left the country. Saga and historical narratives have been challenged and accepted, the distribution and typology of churches has been applied to what is known of the Norse North Atlantic, and individual artefacts with religious connotations have been analyzed. This topic has not yet been a primary focus of scholarship, and it is hoped that this thesis will provide a starting point for future explorations of it. An interesting side effect of Greenland's emptying in the 15<sup>th</sup> century is that the nuances of the Christianity practiced there were formulated and evolved entirely prior to the Reformation. What story there is of Christianity in Greenland is uninfluenced by Reformation theologians or missionaries. We are then left with a window of into a form of Christianity practiced by a local population from the late 10<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries that has not been modified, or rewritten. The elements, not kings, pulled down the walls of Greenland's Norse

churches and as a result the ruins and churchyards remain more or less as they were at the time of their use.

While relying heavily on secondary review, this thesis is in many ways intended as a departure from some established trends in the understanding of Norse Greenland. The three most omnipresent of these trends are matters regarding the supposed collapse of the settlements, human practices in relation to the environment, and Norse exploration of the North American continent. While these questions have not been shunned wholesale, their legacies loom large and have dominated the field for most of its history.

### *8.1.1 The "Failed Society"*

The notion of Greenland as a failed society is, as has been addressed above (2.8), erroneous and based upon outdated suppositions. Early work on the subject was so preoccupied with what happened to the Greenlanders that less attention was paid to who they were and what they did. As the scholarly community has come to accept noncatastrophic explanations of the end of the Norse period in Greenland, the topic has again been revitalized in popular science which tends to lean on incomplete and outdated information (e.g. Diamond 2005:211-276). As a result, popular knowledge of the Norse in Greenland is frequently limited to that of a "mysteriously vanished" community. This thesis refutes such thinking by viewing the settlements honestly. The Norse occupied southern Greenland for nearly half a millennium through significant cultural and climatic changes (Madsen 2014:255). Suggestions that the Norse were too rigid to adapt are clearly erroneous. Dietary shifts and changes in architecture stand out as two of the most visible demonstrations of adaptation (though not exclusively ecologically driven) (Dugmore et al. 2012:3659, Keller 1989:174-175, Kristjánsdóttir 2015:38-41, Roussell and Degerbøl 1941:240-241). In the 15<sup>th</sup> century after a long and gradual realization that farming in Greenland was not as productive a business as it had been for their ancestors, the Greenlanders simply sought out better options elsewhere (Lynnerup 2014, 1998:128). There was no catastrophe, external or internal, that would provide a satisfactory explanation for the scholars of the



early 20<sup>th</sup> century who feared what it might mean if their post-Victorian idealized Norse civilization had been overcome by the Inuit, or the weather, or inbreeding, or pirates (Keller 1989:108; Nørlund 1936:150).

This thesis also avoids in depth discussions of ecodynamics and environmental anthropology when possible. Such studies have already been done, quite well and often, by others (see: Amorosi et al., 1994, Madsen 2014, McGovern 1992, 1981, Perdikaris & McGovern 2006). While some fascinating revelations regarding the lifestyle and practices of the Greenlanders have been discovered through this line of questioning, it ultimately is more relevant to the study of climate and the physical interaction of humans and their ecosystem. The contemporary relevance of ecodynamics and Greenland's superb location to study climate change both scientifically and historically has ensured that there is no shortage of research in this vein. As such, cultural studies of Greenland have emphasized ecofunctionalistic models of human behavior (McGovern 2000). This thesis proposes that other motivations can be detected in the archaeological and historical record. Midden analysis may tell us, for instance, how many walrus the Greenlanders ate over time, but not what it meant to bury their skulls in a church.

Finally, the North American continent and the Norse presence in it has not been discussed, primarily because it is an altogether separate field. The discovery of the Norse settlement in L'Anse Aux Meadows in 1961 caused a sensation that for a time made Greenland seem important only as a launching pad for the Vinland expeditions (Ingstad 1969). While the vast continent to the West would have contributed to the looming sense of geoconceptual marginality that this thesis argues for, there is little to suggest that the Greenlanders engaged the North American landscape well enough for it to become much more than a setting for fairy tales. Theories that the Greenlanders emigrated to North America as Greenland's climate grew more difficult have no basis in reality, despite their popularity in some regions of North America today (Holand 1969; Kolodny 2012).

## 8.2 Major Findings

### 8.2.1 Geoconceptual Marginality

The beliefs and practices of the Greenlanders are tied up in their perception of place. Greenland itself was a physical and psychic landscape upon which their sense of the world and their place in it was built. The world, as the Greenlanders saw it, was dual natured. A church was at one time both a physical space of turf, timber and stone and a spiritual shield from the dangers of the edge of the world (Ch. 4). Gudveg's rune stick was simultaneously an inscribed piece of driftwood and the mortal remains of a woman lost at sea (Ch. 6). The farms in which they lived were both the center of their world and perilously close to the edge of it. It has been shown through burial practices, writings, and individual artefacts that marginality was a prime concern for the spiritual wellbeing of the Greenlandic community. This marginality, too, was dual natured. The geographical environment in which they lived was and is an extreme one. The Greenlanders occupied the only habitable areas of the world's largest island, 80% of which is ice covered. Their nearest cultural neighbors were in Iceland, a four day sail in good weather across a notoriously challenging sea route back the way they came. Conceptually, they existed at the edge of the Ptolemaic *mappamundi*, which centered on Jerusalem (Fig. 96).

Sea monsters and spiritual dangers lurked at the edges of these maps. Norse Christian practices in Greenland are reflective of a conceptual view of the physical and cultural worlds the Greenlanders inhabited, and not at odds with the prevailing views throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. To the Greenlanders and their European contemporaries, these worlds had a similar shape and their places in them were defined. This view is best exemplified by Isidore of Seville's description of the earth in *Etymologiae*:

The globe (*orbis*) derives its name from the roundness of the circle, because it resembles a wheel; hence a small wheel is called a 'small disk' (*orbiculus*). Indeed, the Ocean that flows around it on all sides encompasses its furthest reaches in a circle. It is divided into three parts, one of which is called Asia,

the second Europe, the third Africa. (Isidore. *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, XIV:ii; S. Barney et. al. (trans) 2006, 285)

The T-O maps of the Middle Ages are based off of this description by Isidore, showing Jerusalem at the center of the world by virtue of its conceptual significance. Maps containing northern extremes like Greenland were not drawn until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as Greenland was evaporating as a part of Christendom (Keller 1989:52). While this representation of the world may not have been believed to be a direct geographical representation, it defined and reinforced conceptual views of how the world was arranged (Camille 1992:16).



Figure 96: The Hereford Mappa Mundi (ca. 1300) featuring Jerusalem at its center and Europe on the lower left.

Documentary evidence has shown that church authorities had little idea where Greenland even was, and believed it to be populated with pygmies and green

people, living in a land so cold the inhabitants "noses had all fallen off" (Gad 1971:53; Keller 1989:52-61). Though geographical awareness of Greenland is not indicated on world maps until after the settlements were deserted, the limited documented contemporary knowledge of it consigns it to the margins of the world in a practice described by Camporesi:

Peoples fears were exorcised by dumping them on those who inhabited the edges of the known world, who were lesser in some sense; whether troglodytes or pygmies...the outskirts are felt to be infected zones, where all kinds of monstrosities are possible, and where a different man is born, an aberrant from the prototype who inhabits the center of things. (Camporesi 1996:79)

The one commonality of all burials in Greenland is a sense of enclosure within the protective boundary of churchyard, grave, or church itself. It appears that even as the Greenlanders were being described as noseless, green pygmies by their European counterparts throughout the five hundred years of settlement, they were keenly aware of their own perilous place at the edge of Christendom and the limits of the known physical world.

To the Greenlanders, the churchyard was a bubble of centrality in the world's margins. This, more than anything, describes the Greenlanders sense of their place in this conceptual medieval world. Their concern for burial within a boundary of consecrated earth is evident. Within this conceptual line symbolized by the churchyard, delineation of one individual from another occurs only in a few specific ways.

We can see the geoconceptual idea of Greenland represented in different ways. For a literate audience Greenland's reputation of backwardness and danger was spelled out in sagas and historical tracts. This educated audience would have been primarily part of the ecclesiastical and secular apparatus of power, whose views on Greenland may have been measurable through trade decisions or appointments of clergy. For the less-literate Greenlanders the idea of place is visible in other ways, like the rigorous importance of churchyard burial and preponderance of protective crosses and runic prayers on everyday items (Ch. 6 & 7).

We must remember, again, that for the final generations of the settlements Greenland was a place that had five hundred years of history, traditions, stories and practices. Both written and archaeological evidence suggest a growth and solidification of Christian orthodoxy took place over this time, as did the outlandish tales being told about Greenland in Iceland and elsewhere. These two disparate developments were intertwined – as Greenland became more frightening in story and reputation, its inhabitants worked to make it safer in reality by such methods as constructing new churches, carving the name of Mary on their weaving equipment and burning witches.

### *8.2.2 The supposed isolation of Greenland*

As the written sources demonstrate there was a great deal assumed about Greenland by outsiders. Among these assumptions was Greenland's isolation (3.1). Greenland, like Iceland, did not have the lumber resources necessary to build ships and as such relied on outside shipping for trade and transport. Leif Eirikson, for example, buys a foreigner's ship for his expedition to North America presumably as building one was not an option (*The Saga of the Greenlanders*, 1:2; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 21). The Icelandic Annals state that in 1189 a Greenlandic ship blown off course to Iceland was lashed together with baleen, further suggesting the limited options for Greenlanders taking to sea (Seaver 1996:66). As the reconstructivist archaeologists and historians began to investigate Norse Greenland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it should then be of little surprise that their analysis came to similar conclusions. Nørlund used the Herjolfsnes garments to assess how in touch the Greenlanders were with European fashion trends (Nørlund 1924:141-193). Edvard Bull suggested that the Norwegian royalty's broken promise of five trade ships a year was the economic death knell of the settlements (Bull in Keller 1989:80). Even grotesqueries like Hansen's *homo Gardarensis* suggested that the Greenlanders were so isolated as to actually devolve (Hansen in Kjærgaard 2014:360).

There is no denying, on a practical level, that Greenland posed a challenge for travel as a Norse settlement. Yet the goods produced by the Greenlanders

were in enough demand that there does not seem to have been any major shortage of monetary and cultural exchange between Greenland and the rest of its neighbors. While much has been made of the dwindling written records of ships between Greenland and Iceland over the course of 500 years, this should not trouble modern historians. The lack of written records of an influx of Greenlandic emigres coming to Iceland in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries is explained by the low numbers necessary to achieve negative population growth in Greenland: the Icelanders would hardly have noticed (Lynnerup 1998:128). One might make a similar argument regarding the decline of trade. Additionally, when the subject of the story isn't Greenland itself we see saga characters coming and going from Greenland with ease (4.3.1). Sigurðsson's suggestion that there was a knowledge of Greenlandic local geography in southwestern Iceland would support this, as would the discussions being had by church authorities regarding Greenland's tithes, church law, and marital claims (Sigurðsson 2011:100; Keller 1989:274-286).

Deemphasizing Greenland's supposed isolation is key to recognizing its place in the North Atlantic community. It is likely that Greenland's understanding of outsider perceptions contributed to their sense of place and influenced their practices.

### *8.2.3 Defining Christianization*

Christianization as a term suggests a group of people being led to believe a new or different set of ideas by some active force, usually from outside the community. This idea deemphasizes the role of communities and individuals in their own progression of belief. Certainly this is so in the case of so-called Constantinian conversion models, wherein the new religion is cast as a uniform set of beliefs implemented by a king or similar figure of authority (3.2). One of the more entrenched obstacles in postulating the form of Greenlandic Christianity is that every account describes the process of Christianization as transplantation from elsewhere. While the Christianization of other parts of the North Atlantic have been studied within the context of their own respective circumstances (Abrams 2007; Barrett 2005; Cant 1972; Vésteinsson 2000;

Morris 2001; Stummann Hansen and Sheehan 2006), Christianity in Greenland has always been depicted as an offshoot of another more established power. Archaeologically we see in the North Atlantic a number of communities where the process of becoming Christian appears far more bottom-up. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century the Church expanded its administrative infrastructure with the establishments of a new archdiocese at Nidaros to manage the bishoprics of the North Atlantic. The Christianization process of these communities was considered more or less finished as the formal administrative channels were finalized (3.8). But, as demonstrated in chapter 3, the process of Christianization had been underway in the North Atlantic for decades, (several centuries in Scotland and Ireland) prior to the familiar date of 1000. It may perhaps be useful to visualize Christianity in the North Atlantic spreading virally. As Hiberno-Norse settlers moved across the islands of the North Atlantic Christianity would have traveled with them. As these communities divided and multiplied into new locations Christianity divided and adapted into new “strains” depending on the needs and desires of the different communities in which it was incubated. In Faroe, for instance, where we see the proliferation of *baenhus* structures and place names we might hypothesize that this is a symptom of a local strain of Christianity. In a larger community like Iceland we see multiple strains in competition before changing yet again into a more or less stable, local variation (Kristjánsdóttir 2011). In such a view Christianization is more a product of person-to-person transmission and localized adaptation than something imported and imposed by a single source.

Christianization in this thesis, particularly where Greenland is concerned, is viewed as a process by which cosmological ideas are engaged with by communal and individual beliefs. In this view defining lines between outside and inside influences break down through the collective and singular acceptance or rejection of its different aspects. There is no obliteration of local or previously held belief in favor of a new and better cosmology, there is only a process by which beliefs and practices are processed into daily life.

There is no detectable evidence of a dichotomy between absolute paganism and absolute Christianity during the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Norse world.

Norse paganism, it has been argued, was not nearly so uniform as it has been assumed (Price 2002:54-55). As the preceding chapters have shown, neither was Christianity. As such, attempting to establish a date by which the Greenlanders stopped being entirely pagan and started being entirely Christian is not possible because they functionally never were either. What can be seen is the gradual homogenization of practice within the Greenlandic community, though this is less a matter of rejecting pre-Christian belief as it is the establishment of a Norse Greenlandic way of living and believing.

The Norse colonization of the North Atlantic proceeded more or less in chronological order from east to west, leaving Greenland as the final permanent Norse community established in the final decades of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This does not mean, however, that the community established there followed the same progression of societal, political, and religious transition but on a delayed timeline. Greenland's Christianization occurred contemporaneously with the rest of its neighbors.

Kristjánsdóttir's argument that Christianity is an ongoing process of everyday influence and resistance is particularly useful here. The lack of physical evidence for the sagas insistence of a pagan community in Greenland is less surprising when considering Christianization in this regard (2015:42). The year 1000, as has been demonstrated in Chapter 3, may have marked a formal political adoption of Christianity in the region, but in every case the discourse was already underway by then. As a result, the likelihood of a primarily non-Christian group of *landnamsmen* and their families arriving in Greenland in the 980s and 990s is slim. The first Greenlanders were a community of people who were already engaged in the daily business of action and reaction to Christianity.

The significance to this study is evident: that the presence of pre-Christian Norse religion is not necessary to discuss Christianization. The settlers who left Iceland for Greenland in 985 were leaving from a setting where Christians were, while still a minority, a political and social force growing in strength and on track to become the focus of the *Althing* a mere fifteen years later (Byock 2001:298-



300). For the settlers, the discourse of conversion would have been an important issue of their time and likely one in which they had a personal stake. The Hebridean poet aboard Herjolf's ship, if real, would have lived his whole life in a region permeated by constant interaction between Christian and pagan. His referral to God as a "monk tester" has been interpreted as a sign of familiarity with the Irish ecclesiastical tradition (Smyth 1989:173). It can be argued that the official status of Christianity and its role in society was on the minds of Norse communities from Norway to Greenland in the 980s and 990s, regardless of whether said communities were just being established as in Greenland or battled over as in Orkney.

The conflict and cultural trauma of this process in Iceland affected the form of Christianity taken there. Kristiansdottir has argued (2015) that Christianization was interpreted differently according to class, with many landowners and chieftains eschewing prohibitions on concubinage and other traditional methods of maintaining social and political standing. The problem faced at the *Althing* of 1000 was not just the matter of establishing a state religion; it was to find a way through the morass of new and old values, allowing the powerful members of both factions to maintain their position without losing face. Established Icelandic farmers who made the financial investment to build a church on their land ignored clerical celibacy as a means of keeping the church generated income in the family. While agitating missionaries in Iceland in the decades leading up to the turn of the millennium were in some cases backed by the Norwegian crown, few were Norwegian. Enterprising Icelanders readily took the lead in the development of the Icelandic church and, it seems, put the social order first. The cultural memory of the period leading up to and immediately after the conversion, by the time it was committed to writing in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, is that of a near-miss civil war. The Icelandic relationship with Christianity is tied up with preventing the destruction of a society. It may be this experience that colored the backwater reputation of the Greenlanders in the eyes of the saga writers (4.3).

### 8.3 A Theoretical Progression of Greenlandic Christianity

A recurring argument through this thesis is that as Greenland developed as a distinct community its observance of Christianity became, if not more orthodox in a formal sense, at least more entrenched. Adherence to Christianity helped define just who the Greenlanders thought they were and what their place was in the geoconceptual world they inhabited. Based on architectural, material, and written sources the following is a speculative account of this progression.

In the final decades of the 10<sup>th</sup> century – “fifteen years before Christianity was adopted by law in Iceland” or 985 – a group of settlers left western Iceland to settle in Greenland. Christian missionaries were actively trying to convert the Icelanders during this time (*The Book of Settlements*, 1:90; H. Pálsson (trans) 2007, 49). Allegedly Thorvald Kodranson, an Icelander baptized abroad, arrived in 981 and by 986 was expelled from Iceland for two killings related to his mission. Stefnir Thorgilson, another Icelander who violently assaulted pre-Christian centers of worship and also was outlawed, followed him, at the behest of Olaf Tryggvasson. Thorvald and Stefnir’s violent methods prompted the *Althing* to pass the ‘kin-shame’ laws which demanded prosecution of family members who insulted the gods. The third 10<sup>th</sup> century missionary was the “great manslayer” Thangbrand in 997, whose mission was also characterized by violence. (Byock 2001:298-299). Olaf Tryggvasson’s efforts at imposing Christianity were defined by violence and combative approaches. The killings and legal proceedings relating to them characterized the final years of the 10<sup>th</sup> century for the Icelanders, and it is important to note that the settlers of Greenland were departing from areas afflicted by increasing sectarian violence. The makeup of this first generation of land-takers in Greenland was likely religiously diverse. The written sources emphasize the paganism of the first settlers but make references to Christians within the first wave of emigrants (*The Saga of the Greenlanders*, 1:1; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 19; *Eirik the Red’s Saga* 1:4; K. Kunz (trans) 1997, 4-7). The archaeological evidence for pagan practice is slight but as discussed above may not be as visible in the material record. By the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> century Greenland’s Christian subcommunities were building *baenhus* style churches in the Eastern Settlement (Arneborg et

al., 2012, 2005). These churches were likely proprietary in nature and established on and near well off farms including Brattahlid and Gardar (Krogh 1976:308, 1967:90-91). Similar churches were being constructed in Iceland at this time, which had just formally adopted Christianity at the Althing of 1000 (Kristjánsdóttir 2011:428).

The formal establishment of a Christian infrastructure in Greenland began in the mid to late 11<sup>th</sup> century. Larger stone churches began to appear, Brattahlid II possibly as early as 1050 and initially constructed with a circular churchyard like its *baenhus* predecessors (Arneborg et al., 2005:28-29; Nørlund and Stenberger, 2010). This period roughly overlaps with Adam of Bremen's accounts of Greenlanders petitioning for a bishop (4.4.3). This change would indicate that by the mid 11<sup>th</sup> century Greenland's Christian population was large or dominant enough to seek incorporation into the wider North Atlantic ecclesiastical structure. The construction of Brattahlid II suggests that such a decision was affiliated with the family of Greenland's "paramount chieftain", though the location of the Bishop's residence and cathedral was ultimately established at Gardar in 1126. 1126 marks a convenient date to declare that Greenland was "officially" Christian, though it had likely been the majority (or even primary) religion for a century or more.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic written sources began to appear that expressed concern regarding the Christianity of the Greenlanders. This may have stemmed from the more dramatic conversion process that informed Icelandic cultural memory. Greenland's reputation as a spiritually dangerous place began at this time, perhaps informed by differing practices and a less formalized conversion process in Greenland. In Iceland, for instance, Christian place names proliferated after the Althing of 1000 (4.5). Christian place names from Greenland, if there were any, did not survive in written sources from the time. The *Saga of Eirik the Red* and its comfortably Constantinian account of Leif Eirikson's mission and the wholesale conversion of Greenland in all likelihood never took place (Jóhannesson 1962). A singular moment of political conversion as described in Iceland would surely have survived in some account, suggesting that the ascendancy of

Christianity in Greenland was lower key and more gradual than that of their Icelandic neighbors. Considering the near civil-war that occurred at the Althing in 1000, the Christian practices observed in Greenland may have struck the Icelandic literati as lax or even heretical, despite Iceland's own nonconformity to church norms (5.10.2).

From the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the 14<sup>th</sup> century church authority in Greenland became more codified according to evidence of parish systems and tithe records (Keller 1989:219-221; Vésteinsson 2009). Ivar Bardarson was likely acting in an administrative capacity in Greenland in the early 1300s, perhaps to oversee church reforms or to bring tithe and taxing systems up to date (Keller 1989:258; Mathers 2009:76). By Bardarson's time the church was the largest land owner in Greenland, and as its role in the daily life of the Greenlanders increased so too did concerns about marginality. By the 1300s Greenland, despite yet another shift in church architecture, had been thoroughly cast as a place of the Other in the written imagination of the North Atlantic world (4). The bishops of Gardar who actually took the trouble of making the journey to their diocese would have been steeped in this reputation. This may explain, in fact, why only eight out of thirteen of them are known to have taken up residence in the Bishop's seat (Arneborg 2005:91). In the settlements themselves we can see this anxiety unfolding through the archaeological record. Thor's Hammers and bear tooth amulets became crosses and Marian inscriptions (6.4.4. & 6.4.5). Protective crosses were worn and etched on serving ware and tools (6.4.2). Bones were collected and redeposited in the churchyard (7.3). The constant presence of Christian symbols became the norm.

By the dawn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the settlements had retracted (Madsen 2014:255). A changing climate made Norse style farming more difficult in the southern fjords. Volcanic eruptions and the arrival of the Black Death in Iceland caused depopulation events that may have motivated Greenlanders to claim the now vacant land there (Lynnerup 1998:128). As Greenland's population declined the importance of tangible expressions of belief did not. New churches were constructed up until the very end of the settlements. Greenland's vitality as a settlement was consistently just above the subsistence level. The ability of

the community to recover from bad harvests, disease, and other factors was limited. Considering this it may seem unwise in hindsight to invest the time and resources into building a church when the community was already in agricultural and economic decline, but this is a result of the functionalistic thinking that has influenced the field for decades. We must look at the construction of the church from the perspective of the builders. To them, be it to demonstrate piety or to pray for a reversal in fortunes, such a project was as vital as any they could undertake. Lynnerup (2014) using the sunk cost theory has aptly demonstrated how such late church building initiatives have fooled archaeologists into believing the collapse of the settlements was an abrupt and catastrophic incidence.

The assumption has traditionally been that monumental construction is a task for societies that have a surplus and struggling communities would be dedicated to more practical concerns. This assumption misses a major point in the study of the beliefs of a community. Religious beliefs sustain individuals and communities *in difficult times*. It should not be surprising that a community would invest in a gesture of religiosity during times of economic and social stress. Difficult times often see religious revivals and demonstrations of belief. Whether expressed as defiance against adversity or confidence in renewal, these expressions are to be expected. In the Christian tradition this message has been extensively stressed. An appropriate example comes from St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, which calls for mankind to "glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation worketh patience" (Romans 5:3). In the case of Greenland, the insistence upon displays of communal worship demonstrates the extent to which Christianity informed the sense of identity and conduct. Religious participation has been demonstrated to provide psychosocial benefits to individuals and communities for coping with trauma and the anxieties of life (Pargament 1997:131-162; Soenke et al. 2013). So long as the last inhabitants of the Eastern settlement were a community, the community would continue to express its beliefs.

The question of whether or not the Greenlanders *should* have been building churches after it was obvious that the settlements were nearing their end is

actually a question of little historical and archaeological value. It pigeonholes the story of the Greenlanders into a cautionary allegory for perceived environmental or cultural threats to current society. What deserves to be emphasized and is attempted in this thesis is the understanding it can provide of a community at the edge of their known physical and spiritual worlds.

The Greenlanders continued to Christianize themselves and their places through marking their environment physically over the course of five centuries. To interpret the material remains of the Greenlanders' beliefs we must attempt to put ourselves in a pre-Reformation state of mind. The 'faith' so heavily emphasised by Luther and Calvin and Knox, the personal relationship with God, with a deep conviction of the reality of Christ's divinity beyond the physical world – these are misleading when interpreting the evidence before us, and perhaps even beyond the scope of archaeology. What archaeologists can approach are the physical manifestations of belief. A cross, for instance, inscribed on a bowl, a loom weight, or a sewing needle was not a reminder of belief, it was belief. It was an imminent and present force that was materially accessible and carried with it a certain efficacy. To inscribe the cross on an object was to perform an act of devotion and interact with the cosmological threads that bound one's individual and communal identity. In the landscape of Greenland, which was viewed quite literally as the furthestmost limit of Christendom, such actions were necessary in a place so spiritually dangerous. We may see this same phenomenon reflected in the insistent burial of the dead within a clearly defined churchyard. In the geoconceptual understanding where the Greenlanders were, a church Christianized a landscape; a loom weight Christianized a home. These physical performances established the boundaries that separated Christendom from the wilderness.

It may be helpful to think of such performances of belief as the process of crafting a specialized tool. As a Norse person might have created an antler comb with the intention of using it for straightening their hair, so too might they have etched a charm on a piece of wood with the intention of using it to fight off disease. The comb and amulet are both tools specialized to their task, their physical form imbued with their function. To take the analogy a step further, if

the physical environment of Greenland was imbued with a sense of dread, digging an irrigation channel with a cross incised spade demonstrates a "Christian" incursion into the unknown. In a marginal space such as Greenland, the spiritual health of the individual and community required maintenance, and the buildings, amulets, and inscriptions were the tools of that trade rather than symbols of it.

Acknowledging the literal imminence of belief in every day practice is key to understanding the development of Christianity in Greenland, and indeed, many other parts of Christendom throughout the Middle Ages. It is of particular importance in Greenland as a reflection of the Greenlanders' perceived sense of place. The people living at this limit of Christianity equipped themselves with the weapons and armor of spiritual defensive warfare, constructing a spiritual fortress in the wilderness that, while not as visible as a military fortress was still very much constructed and maintained through physical enterprise.

Those final few who sailed away or were buried in Greenland did so in the context of a community continuously reminding itself and others of who they were.

#### **8.4 Future Research**

Archaeological research in Greenland is likely to expand in coming years. Due to a record level melt of the ice sheet and the favorable political environment for mineral development Greenland stands to see a substantial amount of economic development and with it an increased demand for information on environmental impact and climatology (Boersma & Foley 2014; Fausto et al. 2016). Such concerns will likely continue to prioritize ecodynamics over cultural archaeology. However, should the number of excavations increase presumably more data will be made available to researchers outside these ecological fields.

This thesis reevaluates over 100 years of excavations with differing goals, priorities, and assumptions. Many of the larger excavations were conducted with what appears to be abandon to a modern archaeologist, providing interesting artefacts but obscuring contexts and datable features. The primary

concern of future archaeological research in Greenland should be an intentional broadening of the data available to those researching cultural aspects of the Norse period. Future research of a cultural nature would benefit greatly from a comprehensive program of modern excavation and analysis. Below are posed a number of research suggestions with the potential for a high yield of information.

Of the 600+ known Norse sites in Greenland only 95 have been probed between 1723 and 2011, and of these only 42 have been subjected to a substantial excavation (Madsen 2014:73-74, Tab. 4.1). Any broad conclusions drawn from this small number must acknowledge how radically the picture may change with a greater number of excavations.

Regarding matters of Christianization an obvious starting point is the further excavation of churchyards. As of this writing the only Greenlandic churchyard that has been completely excavated using modern techniques is that of Brattahlid I. Brattahlid I is not a large churchyard but Krogh's digs there in the 1960s revealed potential reinternments, mass burials, infant and neonate burial, and gender stratification among the first generations of settlers. Nørlund and Roussell's work provided some similar information, but in many cases otherwise fascinating discoveries are left tragically vague. Comprehensive excavations of the Q-form or *baenhus* churches may reveal patterns or variations in burial practices among the earliest wave of settlers. Considering the small community of settlers and similarities of church structures it is tempting to assume that burial practices were consistent from site to site, though this cannot be determined without complete excavations. If burial practices are revealed to be uniform they may potentially indicate a close-knit Christian community with established practices. To the contrary, variation in burial may indicate a Christian community that was new and still establishing its values and practices in geographical pockets within a new community.

Domestic spaces and residences, particularly those away from major farms, may also reveal evidence of belief and practice in everyday life. So far there is a large body of artefacts containing religious inscriptions or imagery (Chapter



6), but many of these come from major farmsteads that are home to one or more churches. The question is whether or not such a prolific amount of religious imagery extends beyond these formal religious sites. Excavating these with an eye toward datable material culture may illuminate the earliest settlement period. In 2014 a small, isolated hut was discovered near the Sermeq Kangilleq Glacier. The unique assemblage of artefacts contained bones from a variety of animals, as well as a several personal items including a comb, a portion of a knife, a copper bucket and gaming pieces. While the items are currently under evaluation, their connection to pagan practice has been postulated by Christian Madsen (Christian 2016). This discovery illustrates the potential for new discoveries that could dramatically shift our understanding of the religious practices were conducted in the remote regions of Norse Greenland.

Over the past 100 years three features in Greenland have been suspected of being pagan burials (7.2). Roussell's claim of a burial at Hvalsey lacks supporting evidence, though there are more questions relating to the feature at V-51 Sandnes. Test excavations of ruin 29 at Brattahlid, however, actually yielded burnt bone and steatite half a century ago and it is surprising that the feature has not been completely excavated considering its potential significance (Jansen 1972:100-101). Excavating these features – at least those at Sandnes and Brattahlid – would allow archaeologists to put the issue to rest and at least identify new aspects of both farms.

Dendrochronology has yet to be employed in dating wooden artefacts from the period. Coffins, tools, liturgical items, and devotional crosses should be surveyed to determine suitability for analysis. The challenges posed by the marine reservoir effect when dating skeletal material from cemeteries and middens can be mitigated with supplemental testing of wooden artefacts. For instance, analysis of devotional crosses from the Eastern and Western Settlements, if suitable, could aid in determining the span of time during which the practice was in use. Dendrochronological analysis of Coffin 30 at Herjolfsnes could illuminate the timing of Gudveg's absentee burial and allow us to understand this ritual better.

## **8.5 The state of the field in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In the early 2000s a celebration of the millennium since Norse settlement in Greenland and North America prompted a new wave of research on these topics. Conferences were held in Newfoundland in 2000 and Greenland in 2008, Thjodhild's Church was reconstructed at Brattahlid, and the field heard from both well-known and new voices on topics such as identity, literacy, art, and adaptation in the far reaches of the Norse diaspora (Gräslund 2009; Imer 2009; Kopár 2009; Ogilvie et al. 2009). For many of the same reasons listed above, much 21<sup>st</sup> century work is based on reevaluation of older excavations and material. The National Museum of Denmark has conducted numerous digs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the published results of which primarily concern radiocarbon dating and isotopic analysis (Arneborg et al. 2002; Lynnerup and Nørby 2004; Nelson et al. 2012). Greenland's surprisingly substantial collection of runic inscriptions has been recognised in recent years and is being cataloged and translated for a comprehensive text on the subject (Imer pers. comm.). Academically, the "demise" of the settlements is finally becoming less of a looming question as researchers demonstrate again and again that there was no catastrophic event that precipitated it. Generally speaking Greenland archaeology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been steadily leaving the shadow of the classical era excavations in the 1920s and 1930s. New research methods and technology have allowed scholars to answer questions that the first archaeologists would never have dreamed of asking. However, as these new questions and their new answers tell us a great deal about the climate, ecology, and agricultural methods of the Greenlanders, some of the old questions have yet to be answered satisfactorily. This thesis aims to be a new answer to an old question.

This thesis was partially prompted by a 2009 article by Lesley Abrams. Initially presented at the Hvalsey Conference of 2008, Abrams engaged the many assumptions historians and archaeologists have made about religious practice among the Greenlanders and established an outline for future research. This thesis largely agrees with her suggestions. As Abrams said: "Once Christian scrutiny and pressure to conform were more immediate, Greenland would

certainly have become more conventionally Christian, with Christian practice penetrating more fully into social norms (2009:63)". Other questions remain elusive with the evidence at hand, such as "whether some of the settlers in Greenland might have in fact stuck to their pagan ways for longer than has been assumed (ibid.)". Abrams' article remains one of the only examinations of this particular aspect of Norse Christianity in Greenland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and concludes with a call for greater archaeological engagement with the early church farms i.e. *baenhus* or Q-form churches. As previously discussed, Greenland provides fertile ground for the study of religious practice and its changes with established beginning and end periods and a defined geographical study area. More work can be done based on the material record thus far, but a broadening of the datasets for the late 10<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> centuries must incorporate new excavations.

Archaeologically the public imagination is poised to once again turn toward North America due to reports of potentially Norse sites on Baffin Island and Labrador ('Satellites help locate potential new Viking site in Newfoundland' 2016; Sutherland et al. 2015). Should either of these sites be conclusively demonstrated to be Norse a renewed search for North American Norse sites will likely follow. This may benefit Greenland archaeology in a similar way as the excavations of the Farm Under the Sand in the 1990s. The GUS excavations, with the benefit of modern archaeology, provided researchers with the life story of one single farm from its beginning to its abandonment. The purposing and repurposing of rooms, evidence of a fire, variations in owner's marks and more were uncovered in a datable manner (Berglund 1998:7-54). While early excavations went in search of interesting artefacts with little attention paid to context or provenance, the small artefacts from GUS told a more comprehensive story despite being less spectacular. If the Point Rosee site is Norse, a thorough excavation will provide more information on the life of the site and could likely illuminate the understanding of contemporary Greenlandic sites.

Greenland archaeology has arguably caught up with other areas in terms of methodology. The breadth of application of that methodology is, as yet,

unevenly distributed. There is much work for archaeologists of religion and culture to do in Greenland. The continued relevance and importance of climate and environment will likely provide that field with loudest voice in the coming years, but older historical assumptions about the Greenlanders themselves have been sufficiently challenged to open up the field for a new round of debate and exploration.

## **8.6 Coda: Two Witches**

The Icelandic Annals tell of a Greenlander who was sentenced to death for seducing another man's wife through sorcery. His name was Kolgrim and he is one of the few Greenlanders whose names have survived through contemporary historical accounts as opposed to saga sources. In 1407 the daughter of a visiting Icelandic law speaker named Steinnun Ravnsdottir had an affair with Kolgrim. He was prosecuted for having used *galdr* and magic chants to seduce her, a practice prohibited by Norwegian law through which he was allegedly prosecuted. Kolgrim was eventually burned as a witch, and Steinnun lapsed into madness and eventually death (Dasent 1894:427-428). This story, known only from a handful of lines in the annals, has prompted much speculation and study as to the nature of the crime and the punishment that followed. A modern reader may be tempted to assign the witchcraft accusation to the spiteful actions of a cuckolded husband, or Steinnun's madness to the traumatic experience of seeing a lover executed and her social standing irreparably damaged.

It is just as likely, however, that Kolgrim had been practicing some form of *galdr* in his wooing of Steinnun. The use and awareness of such practices at the time is well documented, and continued into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is important to the understanding of the Greenlanders and their beliefs that to them this manner of magic was very real. More mundane explanations for adultery have always existed, but in the Norse consciousness witchcraft as a culprit was on equal footing as a turbulent marriage or the desire for something new. For a woman in Steinnun's situation the symptoms of post-traumatic stress or other mental illness could have been understood as the after effects of sorcery without

diminishing their 'realness'. But this was no ordinary case of adultery. What Kolgrim stood accused of was not merely procuring Steinnun's body through his magic, but her literal soul.

Thus, when people came together at Hvalsey in 1407 for his execution, they came together in part to expunge a dangerous spiritual element from their community (Berglund 1982a:9-10). Regardless of the social and political elements at play in the sexual humiliation of a powerful foreigner, the end result was the burning of someone who brought dark spiritual forces to enter the protective circle of a Christian community. As demonstrated in the preceding chapters, very little would have been seen as a larger threat by the people of Greenland.

In many ways, the sad tale of Kolgrim and Steinnun is the terminus to the spiritual arc of Norse Greenland. While the burning in Greenland was considered noteworthy enough to be included in the Annals, several centuries earlier an Icelandic scribe wrote the tale of the pagan Thorbjorg the Volva and the Christian Gudrid the Far Traveller singing chants together at Herjolfsnes (4.3.3). In this tale the Christian farmers of Greenland invite the pagan fortune teller to their homes as a practical response to famine, and Gudrid reluctantly assists her on account of knowing the songs from her childhood. It is easy to project onto this tale the image of newly-made Christians whose new religion has not yet answered all their questions about famine, magic, or divination. The *Vinland Sagas* can be read as a diverse community getting by with occasional personal conflicts or as Christian propaganda demonstrating the superiority of the new faith over the old (Cavaleri 2008:46-50).

Wherever the truth lies in the historicity of the *Eirik the Red's Saga*, the differing approaches to a similar practice are striking. There is nothing in the story about Thorbjorg and Gudrid that renders it inherently ahistorical, and even if its particulars never happened it seems to reflect some aspects of actual practice (Price 2002:162). According to what is written, the late 10<sup>th</sup> century settlers of Greenland allowed for such magic to be conducted regardless of which specific religion it belonged to because that was how the world worked. The spiritual

dimension of their geoconceptual world allowed for interaction between skilled practitioners of *galdr* and *seidr* and the powers that it encompassed. The goal was to harness or at least consult said powers to address matters affecting the community. After 400 years, such practice was out of the question. Practitioners of these forms of sorcery were seen as operating outside the authority and supervision of the Church and threatened to pierce the spiritual wall that kept the frightening forces at the edge of the world at bay.

The last Norse in Greenland departed one or two generations after Kolgrim was executed, retreating back into more central regions of Christendom with their beliefs, traditions, and values that were shaped and sharpened at the edge of the world. Altars and relics were carried out of churches and onto boats. Little amulets and crosses kept to keep a Christian home were left behind – perhaps there was no need for them where their owners were going. Greenland was relinquished to the realm of speculation for Europeans even as English and Basque whaling ships began prowling the waters near Vinland. The generations of Greenlanders buried with such purpose in the churchyards from the beginning to the end of the settlements looked east to where Christ would appear on the last day, back toward the lands of their ancestors, back toward Christendom.

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