



THE SAGAS AND CONVERSION HISTORY: *KRISTNI SAGA* AND OTHER TEXTS

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There is a wealth of written sources from the Middle Ages about Iceland's conversion to Christianity, and a corresponding wealth of critical literature attempting to reconstruct this key event. Yet the lack of any contemporary sources to lean on has created enduring uncertainties as to how exactly the medieval texts should be interpreted: the earliest source for the conversion, Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, was written over one hundred years after the historical events took place (in c. 1122-33), and the others, all to various degrees derivative of Ari, were written between c. 1200 and 1400. The best known are Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Kristni saga*, the *kristniþættir* in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and *Njáls saga*. Attitudes towards the historical reliability of these sources have varied greatly, although the general consensus of opinion has always been that Ari alone is fully trustworthy. It has not, however, proved possible or desirable to dismiss the other sources altogether, both because Ari's account in itself is so unsatisfactory, and because the later works contain many intriguing additional details. While Ari gives only a vague picture of Þangbrandr's mission to Iceland and leaves many questions unanswered in his fuller account of the legal conversion, later sources tell in detail of Þangbrandr's exploits, substantiated in part by skaldic verses and place-names. They also tell of two earlier missions, led by Þorvaldr Koðránsón and Stefnir Þorgilsson, of which the first in particular is problematic material, with its miracles, chronological impossibilities and edifying commentary. Any reconstruction of Icelandic conversion history has to take into account the stories contained in these later texts, if only to dismiss them as religious propaganda or downright fabrication. In this paper, I would like to look at some of the ways in which historians have handled the sources on the conversion, and then suggest that these may not be so different from how a medieval historian, the compiler of *Kristni saga*, approached his work.

Typical of early accounts of Icelandic conversion history is a more or less uncritical use of all the available sources, with little attempt to distinguish levels of reliability. Perhaps the most rigorous is the German law professor Konrad Maurer's *Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen*



Stammes zum Christenthume, published in two volumes in 1855-56. Maurer uses a complete range of sources, all translated in full, and ordered according to a strict chronology of events. Although aware that some texts may contain unhistorical features, he argues that these serve “als Beleg für die Sinnesweise der Zeit” (“as evidence for the mentality of the time”) and best provide the reader with “eine lebendige Anschauung” (“a vivid depiction”).¹ The general reliability of the conversion accounts is taken for granted, and his commentary focuses mainly on chronological difficulties, legal issues, and the political reasons for Iceland’s conversion. Maurer’s work provided the foundation for Björn M. Ólsen’s study *Um kristnitökuna árið 1000 og tildrög hennar*, written in commemoration of the 900th anniversary of Christianity in Iceland, and dedicated to Maurer. Drawing selectively on a wide range of sources, Ólsen weaves his material into a plausible whole, and develops at length Maurer’s analysis of Icelandic political history.

Interestingly, both men acknowledge in theory the greater reliability of Ari’s work, but in practice rely heavily on later, more detailed accounts of the conversion. Ólsen sums up his approach thus: “Filgjum vjer frásögn Ara, það sem hún nær, enn hendum það úr öðrum sögum, er oss þykir næst sanni” (“We follow Ari’s narrative, as far as it goes, and take from other accounts what seems to us nearest the truth”).²

If Maurer writes in the tradition of Ranke, aiming for objectivity and scientific rigour, the church histories by Adolf Jörgensen, Bishop Jón Helgason and John Hood, published between 1874 and 1946, are rather different in nature.³ Here the sources on the conversion are conflated with little regard for their differences, and no particular prominence is given to Ari. Nor is the religious motivation behind these three works in any way concealed: Jörgensen and Jón Helgason openly express their Christian sympathies, warmly praising the evangelical missionary Friðrekr, and condemning the violent approach of Stefnir and Þangbrandr.⁴ Hood, who was stationed in Iceland during the Second World War, writes to acquaint the English with the character of the Icelandic church and the inaccuracies, personal reminiscences and occasional flights of fancy in his work all suggest that he is engaged in creating an atmosphere rather than reconstructing past events. In particular, he privileges stories showing the “spirit” of the Icelandic church; on how some Icelanders preferred to be baptised in warm springs, he remarks: “Some might say that a certain tepidity has marked the Christianity of the nation ever since; others that the incident illustrates its practical common sense”.⁵



Miracles and legends are problematic even for the devout among these early historians, and meet with a variety of different fates. Maurer and Jørgensen both include the supernatural and legendary in their work, but make note of the less believable anecdotes: Maurer twice points out the presence of decorative additions in Þorvaldr's mission, and expresses strong doubts on the subject of Þangbrandr's youthful adventures.⁶ The early twentieth-century histories tend to leave out miracles, but are less critical about other legendary material: Ólsen, for example, relates a number of apocryphal events from Þorvaldr's mission, but omits the battles with heathen spirits and berserks, and the miracles by which God protects his people. He keeps a brief description of Þangbrandr's youth, cautiously prefaced with "er sagt" ("it is said") in deference to Maurer, but quietly passes over the magician Galdra-Héðinn who, according to the sources, caused the earth to swallow up Þangbrandr's horse.⁷ This is, interestingly, the only supernatural event Jón Helgason sees fit to include; but, much as he may have appreciated its dramatic qualities, he distances himself from its historical truth by introducing it as "í Følge Sagnet" ("according to the story").⁸

An alternative to either accepting the miracles uncritically or omitting them altogether was to strip away the supernatural while salvaging whatever could be rationalised. In *Þorvalds þáttur*, for example, there is an account of how the heathens were miraculously prevented from burning Bishop Friðrekr in his home, and Ólsen suggests that this is in fact a mangled reminiscence of a *féránsdómur* ('court of confiscation') held outside Friðrekr's home after he was outlawed. At some point the legal context was forgotten, and the fact that the heathens left without harming the bishop was reinterpreted as a miracle.⁹ Similarly, Sigurður Nordal has shown that Þangbrandr's horse could actually have sunk into the ground in the area mentioned in the sources, Mýrdalssandur. Giving examples from the nineteenth century, he points out that, after a volcanic eruption, glacial cavities are formed under the sand that easily give way if they are ridden over. Historians, he argues, must learn to distinguish between events themselves and the supernatural explanations later given to them: although doubt now seems more scientific than faith, both are based on equally weak foundations ("Það er nú einu sinni svo, að efinn þykir vísindalegri en trúin, þótt hvortveggja sé á jafnveikum rökum reist").¹⁰

As faith in the historical reliability of the sagas diminished in the course of the twentieth century, an increasing dependence on Ari came to dominate writing about the conversion. In his *Íslendinga saga*, Jón Jóhannesson echoes Ólsen's comments on the reliability of Ari's



work “það sem hún nær” (“as far as it goes”), but is equivocal about the later sources: “Rit þessi eru mjög varhugaverðar heimildir, þótt þau geymi sjálfsagt ýmis forn minni, svo sem vísur” (“These texts are very dubious sources, although they clearly preserve various old memories, such as verses”).¹¹ Emphasis on the absolute trustworthiness of Ari, coupled with doubt as to the value of other sources, is also characteristic of Sigurður Líndal’s work in the first volume of *Saga Íslands*.¹² Both men use *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and *Kristni saga* only when there is nothing else to go on, and even then exercise extreme caution, retaining only the bare outlines of the narrative. Once they reach the period covered by Ari, they stick closely to his account: Jón supplements it with skaldic verses, place-names and a few incidents from *Landnámabók*, but Sigurður is wary even of these modest additions: “Hit verður aftur að mestu látið liggja milli hluta, sem aðrar heimildir greina” (“What the other sources say will again mostly be ignored”).¹³ The studies of the conversion by Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson and Dag Strömbäck both stress Ari’s authority and the secondary nature of the other sources, and the most recent attempt at reconstruction by Jenny Jochens mentions later versions of Þangbrandr’s mission only to illustrate “the accretion of information and the increased theological sophistication of the authors”.¹⁴ A minority have gone so far as to question even Ari’s reliability, noting among other things his close relationship to the descendents of Gizurr the White: Richard Fletcher, for example, describes his narrative as “too good to be true”.¹⁵

The current caution about written sources for the conversion is most succinctly expressed by Peter Foote in his entry “Conversion” in *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*. There he states that, among the many medieval Icelandic texts, “a few contain a limited amount of what must be judged authentic information about the progress of Christianity in Iceland”.¹⁶ The problem lies in working out exactly where this authentic information is to be found. Like others, Foote distinguishes between Ari and later conversion narratives, concluding that Ari’s account, “as far as it goes”, has “unassailable authority” both because we can trace its source and transmission and because of its unconventionality. The value of the other texts, dismissed in part as “inferential embroidery” and “literary construction”, is more difficult to judge, but Foote does note that missionary sermons on St Michael “might rest on genuine reminiscence”, and that most significant are “skaldic stanzas in which the hostility that Christian preachers might meet from Icelanders appears to be authentically reflected”. Here the encouraging words “genuine” and “authentically” are set against the uncertainties of “might rest”, “might



meet”, “appears to be”, just as Ari’s “unassailable authority” is qualified by “as far as it goes”, by now a familiar expression of frustration on the part of scholars. Ari is reliable, but does not tell us enough; the other sources tell us more than enough, but unfortunately we do not know how far to trust them.

The tendency to group together all sources other than Ari, rather than characterising them individually, has perhaps prevented historians from moving on from this impasse. Like the later histories mentioned here, medieval accounts of the conversion were written for different purposes and with differing degrees of historical acumen; it would be strange indeed if Ari were the only medieval Icelander writing about the conversion capable of distinguishing historical fact from legendary accretion. An inability to distinguish between fact and fiction is, however, very much the accusation levelled at the monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson (died 1218), from whom much of the material in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and *Kristni saga* appears to derive. Jón Jóhannesson describes him as “trúgjarn” (“credulous”), writing solely to increase the glory of Christians, and this verdict has been extended to both the works connected with him: Sigurður Línal, for example, remarks that they “virðist fremur verið að lýsa undri og stórmerkjum en raunverulegum atburðum” (“seem to have been illustrating wonders and miracles rather than real events”).¹⁷ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson couples *Kristni saga* with Oddr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, describing it as “one more example of uncritical history writing in the service of church and religion”.¹⁸ And, more recently, Diana Whaley has grouped the two together as “relatively sober, if somewhat hagiographical narratives”.¹⁹ Yet, even when two sagas share a common source, they may approach it in radically different ways: although *Kristni saga* may derive some of its content from Gunnlaugr, there is much to suggest that it is neither uncritical in its handling of this material nor hagiographical in its aims.

It has often been noted by literary critics of the saga that *Kristni saga* works according to “historical principles”; and its connection with the well-known historian Sturla Þórðarson, suggested as early as 1878 by Oskar Brenner, increases the likelihood that it is in fact a serious work of history to be classified alongside Ari and *Landnámabók*.²⁰ In his *Gerðir Landnámabókar*, Jón Jóhannesson argues that the saga was composed by Sturla from a variety of sources as an appendix to his version of *Landnámabók*; both he and Finnur Jónsson conjecture that it was intended as a link between this and the contemporary sagas in a



compilation covering the history of Iceland from the settlement to Sturla's own times.²¹ This would explain why it begins with a reference back to the final chapter of *Landnámabók* in Sturla's and Haukr's versions, includes parallel lists of the most important chieftains in the country, and tails off into genealogies similar to those in *Sturlunga saga*.²² It can certainly be seen as part of a process of "historisering och ytterligare 'kristnande'" ["historicising and further 'christianising'"] characteristic of the revisions in the *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* redactions of *Landnámabók*.²³ That *Kristni saga* was composed by Sturla Þórðarson has recently been questioned on several different grounds and cannot be regarded as certain without further investigation, although it remains a strong and attractive possibility.²⁴ It seems beyond doubt, however, that the saga was compiled in conjunction with a redaction of *Landnámabók*, and this in itself, together with the saga's presentation of conversion history, suggests that closer attention should be paid to its historical credentials.

What is it that characterises *Kristni saga* as a work of history rather than hagiography or fiction? First, while Iceland's conversion is for Oddr and Gunnlaugr the achievement of a saintly king of Norway, in *Kristni saga* it is treated separately as a subject in its own right. The saga presents itself in its opening sentence as a history of Christianity in Iceland – "Nú hefr þat, hversu kristni kom á Ísland" ("This is the beginning of how Christianity came to Iceland") – and this is rare in the Middle Ages, where conversion is more usually subordinate to other themes.²⁵ Second, *Kristni saga* is the only source on the conversion to unite the early missions to later church history: it opens with the stories of Þorvaldr, Stefnir, and Þangbrandr, goes on to tell in detail of events in Norway and the legal conversion of Iceland, and ends with an account of the first two native bishops, Ísleifr and Gizurr. Like nineteenth- and early twentieth-century histories, it makes use of a variety of different sources in order to reconstruct these events: Gunnlaugr's lost life of Óláfr Tryggvason, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Heimskringla* and, of course, Ari's *Íslendingabók*.²⁶ Ari is followed closely for the lives of Ísleifr and Gizurr, and also used in part for the account of the legal conversion; Þorgeirr's speech, for example, is closer to Ari in *Kristni saga* than in any other source. Where Ari is lacking, however, other sources are used, both to embellish Ari's narrative and to provide information where he gives none. For events in Norway, the compiler relies heavily on *Heimskringla*, and more slightly on *Laxdæla saga*; and, while Gunnlaugr's work is laid as a basis for Þorvaldr and Stefnir's missions, at least one miraculous episode, Friðrekr's victory over the two berserks, is replaced by the more believable and socially meaningful account in



Vatnsdæla saga.²⁷ Other details have been added either from sources no longer known to us or from oral tradition: Eyjólfur Valgerðarson's prime-signing, the additional information about Vetrlíði's death, Snorri's role in the conversion of the Westerners, a verse by Brandr víðförli on Þorvaldr's death.²⁸ The impression we are left with is that of a careful historian handling a large number of sources, struggling like his successors to interpret the material at his disposition and fit it into a historical mould.

One of Maurer's priorities, as we have seen, was to place the events leading to the conversion in chronological order, and chronology also seems to have been a priority for the compiler of *Kristni saga*.²⁹ At the beginning and end of the saga, he adds chronological notices, dating Þorvaldr's mission and Gizurr's death from the settlement, and he follows Ari in connecting the conversion to the date of Óláfr Tryggvason's death.³⁰ Whereas *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* groups events thematically or shapes them into semi-independent units, *Kristni saga* divides them up to form an ordered and continuous narrative: Þangbrandr's youth, his misbehaviour in Norway, Hjalti's outlawry, and Þorvaldr and Stefnir's travels, all narrated out of chronological order elsewhere, are carefully placed in sequence in *Kristni saga*.³¹ The order of events within individual missions is also significantly different from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and, although it is sometimes thought to be more original, is probably due once again to the reworking of the compiler. In particular, Þangbrandr's mission has been extended from two to three years, apparently to accommodate Óláfr Tryggvason's early arrival in Norway, and the consequent need for all the missions to begin a year in advance.³²

Genealogical and topographical information has been added throughout the saga, rooting events more firmly in time and space. To the account of Koðrán's conversion, for example, the compiler appends a notice about his son Ormr's marriages and children, and further family details are added to the account of the legal conversion, concerning both Ormr and a certain Þorleifr of Krossavík. In the section based on Ari, a brief genealogy of Jón Ögmundarson follows notice of his consecration as bishop, and the saga ends with a somewhat longer genealogy of Hafliði.³³ The compiler cites a large number of place-names not found elsewhere: Ormr, he tells us, buys land at Hvanneyri in Borgarfjörður, Þangbrandr's ship is wrecked south of Kálfalækur, and the Westerners are baptised after the legal conversion at Reykjalaug in southern Reykjadalur.³⁴ That he had particularly close connections with the Borgarfjörður area in the west of Iceland is clear from an episode found only in *Kristni saga* that was probably



written down from oral tradition.³⁵ When Þangbrandr attempts to leave Iceland for the first time, his ship is driven to land at Hítará: “Þar heitir nú Þangbrandshróf niðr frá Skipahyl, ok þar stendr enn festarsteinn hans á bergi einu” (“That place is now called Þangbrandshróf down from Skipahyl, and the boulder to which he fastened his ship’s cable still stands there on a cliff”). He then proceeds to Krossaholt (hill of crosses), where he sings mass and raises crosses; and, somewhat later, he engages in battle against Kolr and Skeggbjörn “á fitinni ofan frá Steinsholti” (“on the meadowland down from Steinsholt”), where the graves of the victims are still clearly visible: “Þar er haugr Skeggbjarnar á fitinni en aðrir váru jarðaðir í Landraugsholti þar hjá fitinni, ok sér þá enn gørla kumblin” (“Skeggbjörn’s burial mound is there on the meadow, but the others were buried at Landraugsholt beside the meadow, and the cairns can still be clearly seen”).³⁶ Here not only the place-names, but also the physical landscape bear witness to the events of Þangbrandr’s mission, and increase the historical value of the saga.

Perhaps most interesting is the way in which the compiler handles legendary and miraculous events deriving from the work of Gunnlaugr which, as we have seen, posed major problems for later historians. Many of the implausible anecdotes found in other sources on the conversion have disappeared, although, it seems, more on the basis of relevance to the subject than on strictly historical grounds: Þorvaldr’s exemplary rescue of Sveinn Forkbeard, for example, is omitted, while Þangbrandr’s apocryphal visit to a Bishop Hugbert of Canterbury (who in fact lived about two centuries later) is still in place. One serves only to glorify Þorvaldr; the other is relevant both to Þangbrandr’s character as missionary and to his later encounter with Óláfr Tryggvason. Most heavily edited is Þorvaldr’s mission, perhaps unsurprisingly given its generally acknowledged lack of historicity. Whereas *Þorvalds þáttr* tells of Þorvaldr’s unpromising youth, the prophecy of his future greatness, and his virtuous life as a Viking under the leadership of Sveinn Forkbeard, *Kristni saga* mentions only briefly his engagement in various raids. Likewise, while the *þáttr* tells of the great esteem and riches Þorvaldr gained after his departure from Iceland, honoured by the Emperor of Constantinople and given lordship over all of Russia, *Kristni saga* cursorily sends him on merchant journeys for fourteen years. Later, we are told that he was buried at the church of John the Baptist in Russia, and that “kalla þeir hann helgan” (“they call him a saint”), but who exactly “they” are is not specified, and the lukewarm nature of the praise is clear by comparison with the saga’s parting comment on Friðrekr: “Ok er hann maðr sannheilagr” (“And he is a genuinely holy



man”).³⁷ It is worth noting that the more eulogistic account of Þorvaldr’s final days was first dismissed as apocryphal by Maurer, and clearly this was an opinion the compiler of *Kristni saga* would have shared.³⁸

When miracles are included in the saga, they are often reworked to preserve the plausibility of the account. This is not to claim, as some have, that the compiler of *Kristni saga* was a rationalist at heart;³⁹ but signs and wonders, with their religious and exemplary value, are not generically appropriate to history in the way they clearly are to hagiography; the total lack of miracles in Ari’s account of the conversion provides a precedent. Particularly interesting is the case of Koðrán’s conversion, which in *Þorvalds þáttr* is something of a *tour de force*, including speeches contrasting paganism and Christianity, three appearances from a disguised devil, and a final triumphant rejection of heathenism on the part of Koðrán. The moral of the whole is clear from Koðrán’s parting words to the heathen spirit, in which he describes it as “flærdar fullan ok miok v megin” (“deceitful and very weak”), and lauds “þess guð dóms er miklu er betri ok styrkari en þu” (“the divinity that is far better and stronger than you”).⁴⁰ The scene is hardly recognisable in *Kristni saga*, coming to less than a quarter of its length in the *þáttr*. Replacing the didactic exchange between Koðrán and Þorvaldr is the terse report: “Þorvaldr bað föður sinn skíraz, en hann tók því seinliga” (“Þorvaldr asked his father to be baptised, but he responded with reluctance”). Koðrán gives no exposition of his pagan beliefs and, indeed, the very existence of the spirit he worships is put into doubt by the use of second-hand report, unendorsed by the compiler: “At Giljá stóð steinn sá, er þeir frændr höfðu blótat, ok kǫlluðu þar búa í ármann sinn” (“At Giljá there stood a rock to which he and his kinsmen used to sacrifice, and they claimed their steward lived in there”). After Friðrekr has processed around it three times, the rock bursts apart, but Koðrán’s subsequent decision to convert is described in indirect speech in a strikingly low-key manner: “Þá þóttiz Koðrán skilja, at ármaðr var sigraðr” (“Then Koðrán thought he understood that the steward had been overcome”).⁴¹ The ‘steward’ himself fails to put in an appearance, and the verbs *kǫlluðu* ‘claimed’ and *þóttiz* ‘thought’ emphasise the strongly subjective nature of Koðrán’s experience.

The compiler uses a similar method when telling of the heathens’ attacks on the first church in the north, led by Klaufi and Arngeirr. In *Þorvalds þáttr*, Klaufi’s first offensive is aborted because the church is believed to be on fire: “En er þeir nalgaðuz ok gengu i kirkiu garðinn.



kendo þeir ákafligan híta ok sa mikla gneista flaug vt í glugga kirkiunar. foro þeir brottu við þat at þeim þótti kirkian full af elldi” (“And when they drew near and went into the churchyard, felt the intense heat and saw huge sparks flying out of the church windows, they went away because they thought the church was on fire”). In *Kristni saga*, we are told neither that heat is felt nor that real flames are seen: “En er þeir kómu í kirkjugarðinn, sýndiz þeim, sem eldr fyki út um alla gluggana á kirkjunni, ok fóru því brott, at þeim sýndiz öll kirkjan elds full” (“And when they came into the churchyard, it seemed to them as if fire were flying out of all the church windows, and they went away because the whole church seemed to them to be on fire”).⁴² The repetition of *sýndiz* ‘seemed’ here suggests that the flames belong in the minds of the aggressors; they have no external reality.

Finally, there is the markedly legal and political tone of *Kristni saga*’s narrative, reminiscent of the line taken by Maurer, Ólsen, and later scholars. Not only is there no religious rhetoric about the heathen persecution of Christians, but the compiler of *Kristni saga* twice underlines the presence of good men in the heathen party, most noticeably to explain why no battle broke out before the legal conversion: “En þó váru þeir sumir, er skirra vildu vandræðum, þóat eigi væri kristnir” (“And yet there were some who wished to prevent conflicts, although they were not Christians”).⁴³ Heathen attacks are seen less as the result of generalised malice and intolerance, and more in the context of a legal conflict: Þorvaldr and Friðrekr are prevented from attending the assembly only after Þorvaldr has committed his killings, and the heathens plan to burn down Friðrekr in his home subsequent to his outlawry. Likewise, Þangbrandr is outlawed after his killing of Vetrliði and Þorvaldr, and his next clash with heathens is occasioned by a further breach of law, his theft of food from Skeggbjörn and refusal to restore it.⁴⁴ The saga’s tensions are not so much ideological as political: the strained relationship between Norway and Iceland comes clearly to the fore in the scenes involving Óláfr Tryggvason, from Kjartan’s demand for honour in exchange for baptism, to the king’s threats to repay the Icelanders for their reception of his messenger. Gizurr and Hjalti’s defence of their countrymen attributes Þangbrandr’s failure as a missionary not to his moral unsuitability, as in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, but to his nationality: “En Þangbrandr fór þar, sem hér, heldr óspakliga, drap hann þar menn nokkura, ok þótti mönnum hart at taka þat af útlendum mönnum” (“But Þangbrandr behaved there as here, in a very unruly manner, he killed several men there, and people thought it hard to take that from a foreigner”).⁴⁵ Indeed, the very decision to detach Icelandic conversion history from the lives of Norwegian kings



emphasises in a politically significant way the independent role of the Icelandic chieftains in the conversion of their country. This may explain why the compiler fails to list, like Ari, the foreign clerics who visited Iceland, jumping fifty years from Gizurr the White's success at the Althing to his son Ísleifr's consecration as bishop.⁴⁶

In conclusion, although *Kristni saga* contains much of the same material as *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, its approach is entirely different, and this should be taken into account when evaluating its potential as a historical source. Chronological order is observed, historical context is provided, the fullest and most reliable sources are selected, miracles are pared down to the strictly relevant, and a legal and political outlook replaces the exemplary and religious emphasis of Oddr and Gunnlaugr. In all, the compiler's methods are not so different from those of some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians, and the saga has the additional merit of being many hundreds of years nearer to the events, at a time when oral tradition about the conversion was still alive. Although the compiler could not make reliable history out of unreliable, he could and did rework his sources according to the principles associated with Ari, the writing of apparently objective history with an eye for chronological and genealogical detail. What he adds, omits and changes from the sources in front of him is therefore worthy of our attention: at the very least it shows how a serious historian in the thirteenth century approached the source material available to him and adapted it into a detailed and plausible history of Iceland's conversion to Christianity.

NOTES

¹ Maurer, 1965: vii-viii.

² Maurer 407, 416; Ólsen, 1900: 70-71.

³ Maurer viii.

⁴ Jørgensen, 1874-8: 274-75, 357-58; Jón Helgason, 1925-7: 31-32, 34.

⁵ Hood, 1946: 33.

⁶ Maurer 214, 218, 224, 385; cf. Jørgensen 276, 362.

⁷ Ólsen 16-22, 28-31.



- ⁸ Jón Helgason 40.
- ⁹ Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta 1: 297-98; Ólsen 20.
- ¹⁰ Nordal, 1928: 113.
- ¹¹ Jón Jóhannesson, 1956: 151-52.
- ¹² Líndal, 1974: 231, 240-41.
- ¹³ Líndal 241.
- ¹⁴ Strömbäck 18-25; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 1978: 55-57, 62; Jochens, 1999: 646.
- ¹⁵ Fletcher, 1997: 398.
- ¹⁶ Foote, 1993: 107.
- ¹⁷ Jón Jóhannesson 152; Líndal 248.
- ¹⁸ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 59.
- ¹⁹ Whaley, 2000: 165.
- ²⁰ Ólsen, 1893: 332-33; Brenner, 1878: 1, 155. The significance of *Kristni saga*'s attribution to Sturla is discussed in Foote, 1993b: 140-43.
- ²¹ Jón Jóhannesson, 1941: 16-19, 69-72; Finnur Jónsson, 1924: 571-72.
- ²² Kristnisaga, Þáttur Þorvalds ens víðfjóra, Þáttur Ísleifs Gizurarsonar, Hungrvaka: 1-5, 50-51, 53, 56-57; Íslendingabók, Landnámabók: 209-10, 286, 334-36, 394-97; Sturlunga saga: 51-56.
- ²³ Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 1974: 73, 79.
- ²⁴ Ólafur Halldórsson, 1990: 461-64; Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 72-73, 84.
- ²⁵ Kristnisaga 1.
- ²⁶ On the saga's sources, see Ólsen, 1893: 309-49, Jón Jóhannesson, 1941: 70-71, Siân Duke, 1998-2001: 345-66.
- ²⁷ Kristnisaga 8; Vatnsdæla saga: 124-26.
- ²⁸ Kristnisaga 3, 6, 24-25, 42, 43-44.
- ²⁹ Ólsen 1893: 330; Kristnisaga v.



³⁰ Kristnisaga 1-2, 43, 51-52.

³¹ Kristnisaga 14-16, 30-32, 43-44. Compare *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1: 149-50, 168, 298-301, 2: 64-65, 161-63.

³² Ólsen, 1893: 320-22.

³³ Kristnisaga 7-8, 40-41, 50, 56-57.

³⁴ Kristnisaga 7, 27, 42.

³⁵ Ólsen, 1893: 322.

³⁶ Kristnisaga 26.

³⁷ Kristnisaga 1, 13, 43. Compare *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1: 280-84, 298-300.

³⁸ Maurer 224; see also Jón Helgason 32.

³⁹ Ólsen, 1893: 347.

⁴⁰ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1: 288.

⁴¹ Kristnisaga 6-7. Cf. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1: 284-88.

⁴² Kristnisaga 10. Cf. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1: 292.

⁴³ Kristnisaga 29, 38. This explanation is adopted by Maurer 439-40, Ólsen, 1900: 84 and Jón Jóhannesson, 1956: 161. In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 2: 189, it is God's grace which prevents the heathens from attacking the Christians.

⁴⁴ Kristnisaga 12-13, 26-7. Contrast *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1: 294-98, 2: 158-9, where Þangbrandr's outlawry is not mentioned until after his return to Norway and he leaves Iceland only because his mission is not bearing fruit.

⁴⁵ Kristnisaga 34-35; *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 2: 164.

⁴⁶ Indeed, the one brief mention the foreign clerics do get is in the context of an unfavourable comparison with Bishop Ísleifr; see Kristnisaga 45-46.



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