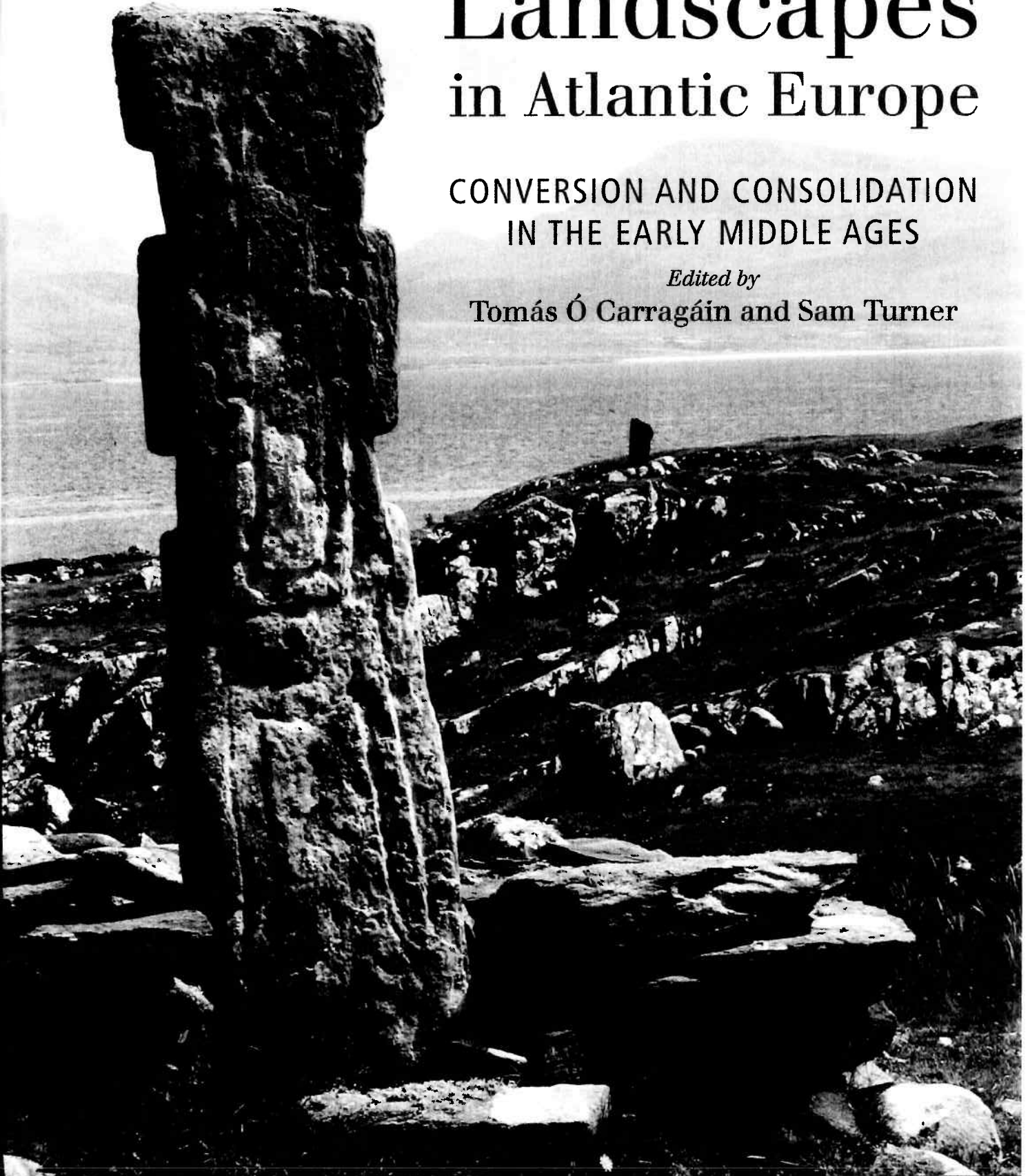


# Making Christian Landscapes in Atlantic Europe

CONVERSION AND CONSOLIDATION  
IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

*Edited by*

Tomás Ó Carragáin and Sam Turner



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Alternative histories on the  
making of the early Christian  
landscape of Iceland

Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir

Movements of people often promote a process of hybridisation, arising from the cross-cultural encounters they bring about. Such encounters are not about the assimilation of different cultural traits but about constant fusion and re-creation resulting from sustained contact. One mode of life or ideology does not necessarily overtake the other; they can each struggle to survive or blend into something new. The emergence of the different branches of Christianity into medieval societies must have involved such interactive processes as, for example, the encounter between Roman and Iron Age Scandinavian cultures that provoked the features that gradually characterised the pagan Norse religion. Iceland was colonised during a period of increased mobility of the European population in the late ninth century. Roughly a century afterwards, Icelanders formally converted to Christianity. In this chapter, the making of the early Christian landscape of Iceland will be considered as a case study in hybridisation, mobility and interaction through alternative histories from the church sites of Þórarinsstaðir in Seyðisfjörður and Geirsstaðir in Hróarstunga, and the burial site at Þórisá in Skriðdalur.

**T**HIS CHAPTER is about the making of the Christian landscape in early medieval Iceland. What makes the subject particularly motivating is the fact that the island had only been inhabited, reputedly by Norse Vikings practising pagan religion, for roughly a century when Christianity was adopted there as a national religion. The fact is, however, that the settlement of Iceland took place during a period of extensive movements and interaction by non-Christian and Christian Europeans, promoting a process of social hybridisation arising from the resultant cross-cultural encounters. Such encounters are not necessarily about the assimilation of different social or cultural traits but about constant fusion, negotiation and re-creation resulting from sustained contact outside or inside the country.

The chief question here is thus how the material expressions of religiosity, non-Christian and Christian, appear in the archaeological remains found in early medieval Iceland. Was Christianisation there a result of ongoing missionary activity on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe or based on an unorganised process of infiltration of the new world views of Christianity into the non-Christian one, or both?

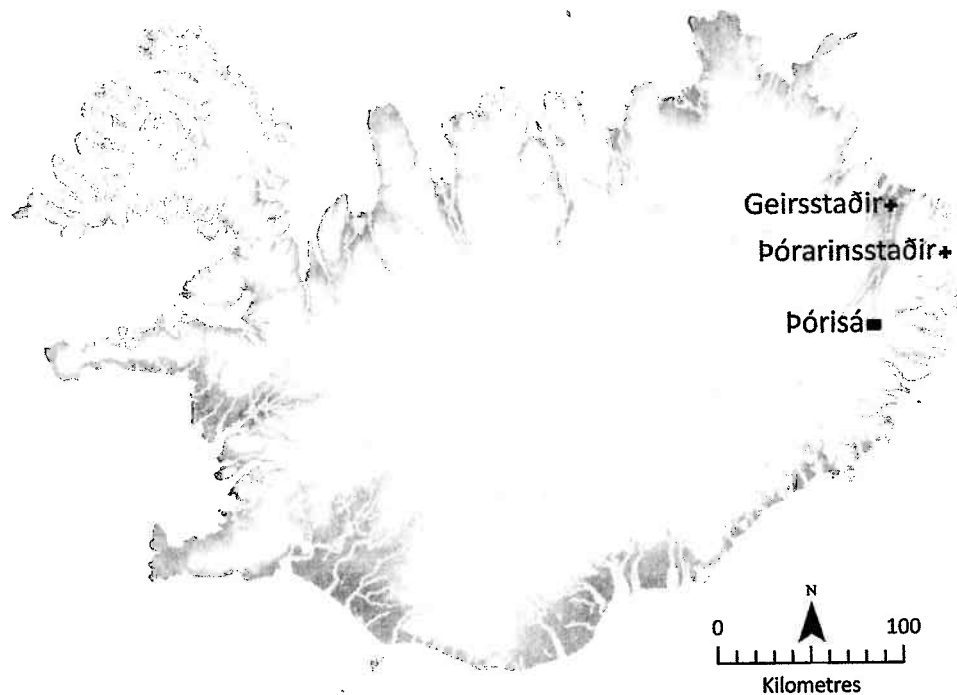


Figure 20.1 Map of Iceland showing the location of the sites mentioned in the text.

Does the material perhaps display the different branches of faith that were flourishing in Europe during the Viking Age (AD 800–1000)? In the search for answers this chapter will consider some material expressions of religiosity from early medieval Iceland including burials, church buildings and artefacts. In particular, it will consider three sites in eastern Iceland, each of which represents an alternative history on the making of the early Christian landscape of Iceland. These are the church sites of Þórarinsstaðir in Seyðisfjörður and Geirsstaðir in Hróarstunga, and the burial site at Þórisá in Skriðdalur (Figure 20.1). First, however, a brief introduction will be given on the prevailing history of Early Medieval Iceland.

### The background

The Conversion of the Icelanders to Christianity was a formal event that took place according to the *Book of Icelanders* (Íslendingabók) at the ancient parliament, Alþingi, around the year AD 1000.<sup>1</sup> According to this legendary description, recorded by Ari Þorgilsson in the early twelfth century, the missionary Þangbrandur was sent to Iceland in the late tenth century by the king of Norway, Ólafur Tryggvason, himself a recent



Christian convert. Þangbrandur converted some of the leading chieftains in Iceland, including Hallur of Síða, Hjalti Skeggjason, and Gissur the White. This caused a conflict in the Icelandic general assembly, Alþingi, in AD 1000, which raised the possibility that the population would split into two groups following different laws: the traditional laws and those of the Christians. However, Hallur of Síða made a deal with the still-pagan law-speaker, Þorgeir Þorkelsson Ljósvetningagoði (who reigned from AD 985–1001), who lay under his cloak for three days contemplating the matter and ultimately convinced the non-Christians to accept baptism.<sup>2</sup>

The archaeological record largely supports this legendary description of events at Alþingi. Neither is there any reason to doubt that Iceland was colonised during the late ninth century by the Norse Vikings, as Þorgilsson describes in the *Book of Icelanders*. In fact, no archaeological evidence has so far been found that indicates an earlier date for the permanent settlement of Iceland: there are no buildings, artefacts, or environmental changes that point towards other scenarios. Nevertheless, there are very vague indications that some people may have lived seasonally on the island as early as the beginning of the ninth century. They were probably seasonal fishermen, seafarers and perhaps Irish hermits, but apparently they did not stay long enough to establish permanent settlements.<sup>3</sup> Many of those that followed the first settlers to this more or less uninhabited island in the North Atlantic during the following decades may also have been non-Christian Vikings or farmers, settling in many areas of Iceland but bringing with them Christian wives and slaves from Ireland or Scotland, whose descendants converted formally to Christianity around a century later, as the literary narratives tell us.

The Icelandic Conversion to Christianity that took place at the general assembly in AD 1000 may thus undeniably be viewed as a momentous episode in the expansion of medieval Roman-Catholic Christianity in Iceland and Europe. This event was reported initially by Adam of Bremen in his chronicle *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* in 1075, then in Ari Þorgilsson's adventurous account in the *Book of Icelanders*, and later in *The Story of the Conversion* (*Kristni saga*) and other Icelandic sagas, including *Njal's Saga* and *Laxdæla Saga*, which tell how the leading chieftains in Iceland made sweeping changes in the country's structural government by submitting to the regulation of the Catholic Church in Rome.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise inscribed, the legendary narratives found in the *Book of Icelanders* and the *Sagas* about settlement and Christianisation also laid the foundations for the prevailing, official history of Iceland. Nevertheless, this picture of the early Christian landscape of

Iceland may be far too one-sided, or at least greatly oversimplified, wherein one habit replaced another. In these sources, only one perspective is presented, an officially recorded one, viewed from above. The material evidence, on the other hand, provides synchronously the basis for alternative histories from 'below': histories of everyday life, cultural or social, which also reflect the experience of those who were outside the central structures of power. The textual accounts on the settlement and the Christianisation of Iceland are not necessarily wrong but they may represent only a limited view of these events and processes.

In this sense, it is worth underlining the attention given to the lack of female and child graves and the high frequencies of furnished *male* graves dating to the Viking Age in Iceland and Scandinavia (such as the one from Þórisá described below). They may thus be burials of a limited but influential group of people – the actual Vikings – and do not necessarily reflect the composition of the society as a whole during that time.<sup>5</sup> In addition, recent investigation of mtDNA sequences in the population of Iceland shows that the patrilineal lineage ancestry in the country was 80 per cent Scandinavian and 20 per cent Gaelic. Conversely, the matrilineal lineage ancestry there was 62 per cent Gaelic and 38 per cent Scandinavian.<sup>6</sup> In 2000, another intriguing study showed that the modern population of Icelanders is among the most variable of all Europeans at the mtDNA level.<sup>7</sup> This is in line with a 1973 study on ABO blood types, which indicated that 75 per cent of Icelanders belonged to blood type O. This was the highest proportion of this blood type in the northern world and is similar to the proportion of type-O inhabitants of Wales, Scotland, Ireland and the Faroe Islands. In Norway, Sweden and Denmark, blood type A is the most common.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, in recent years the myth of a cultural unity shared by the Norse Vikings has rightly been questioned and attention drawn to heterogeneity in Viking Age Scandinavian culture.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the expansion of Western Christendom was bringing about a world view that the inhabitants of Scandinavia and Europe gradually shared. The Catholic Church in Iceland, headed as elsewhere on the Continent by the pope in Rome, belonged to the archbishopric in Hamburg-Bremen until 1104, when the first Nordic archbishopric was established in Lund. From 1153–1537 the two bishoprics in Iceland, Skálholt and Hólar, were part of the archbishopric of Nidarós.<sup>10</sup>

Investigations on the emergence of the early Christian landscapes of Iceland therefore demand a broader view than just the meeting of two religious worlds – those of the non-Christians and the Christians – or a story based on a single event entailing the conversion of all Icelanders. The three following histories, drawn from the early

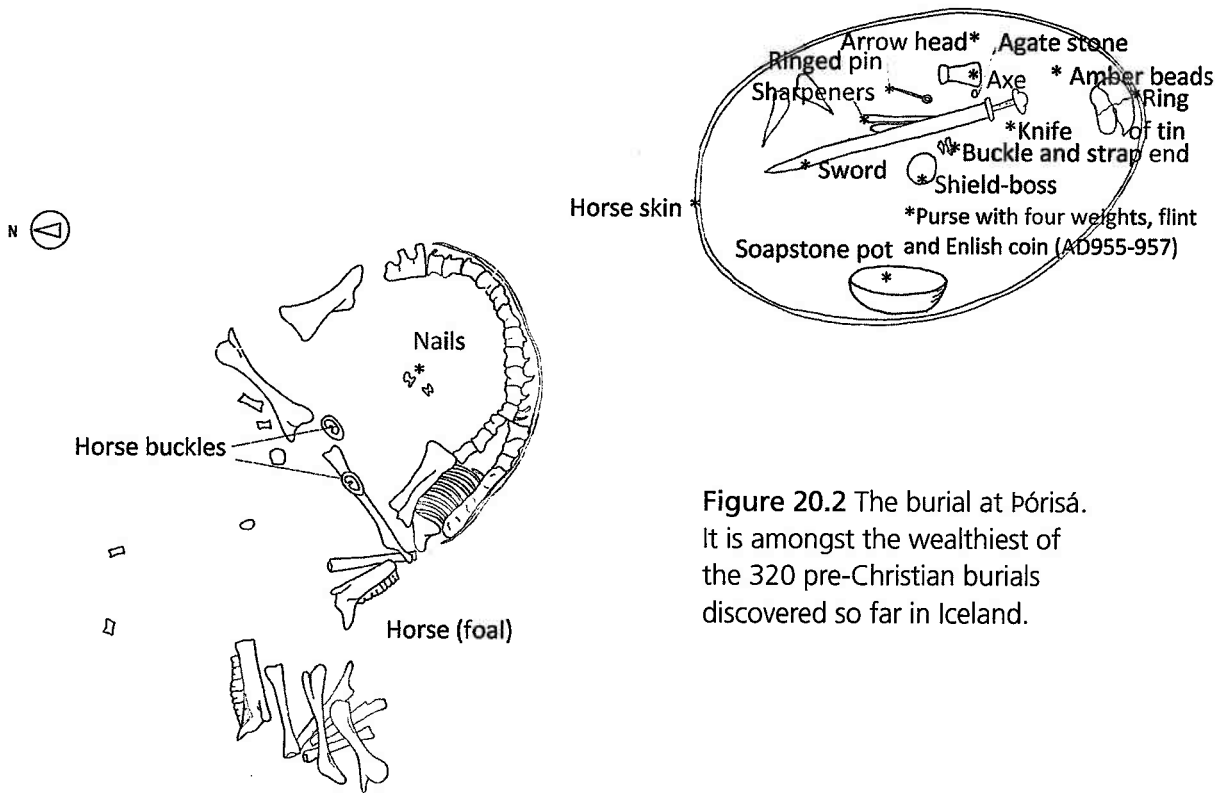
stages of the Christianisation process among Icelanders, all provide evidence for transnational contacts and everyday life among the inhabitants of this newly settled island in the North Atlantic, Iceland.

### The single grave site at Þórisá in Skriðdalur

In July 1995 a couple were taking a walk on the banks of the Þórisár River in the valley of Skriðdalur in eastern Iceland when they chanced upon an unusual-looking metal object sticking about 15 cm out of the ground. Upon closer examination they could see that this object resembled the tip of an ancient spear. What they had in fact stumbled upon was an intact burial site dating to the last phase of the Viking period in Iceland. It later became clear that the grave site was among the wealthiest of, however, only 320 grave-goods furnished pre-Christian burials discovered in Iceland so far (Figure 20.2).

The area chosen for the burial is today characterised by a highly eroded hillside but with a broad view throughout the valley, both to the north and south. In between the scree of this hillside, several grassy heaps of earth can be seen today scattered with some low-growing birch trees. It was in one of these that the grave was found, initially most likely in two separate holes that fitted the two bodies – of a man and a horse – before the eroding process of the area started. The river Þórisá runs in a deep canyon on the northern side of the grave, which had a north–south direction, with the horse at its northern end.

The deceased was a male, laid on his back in the grave with knees drawn up, which is a common position found in graves from the Viking Age throughout northern Europe. The grave was lined with skin, probably from a horse. This is the first example of a grave lined with skin discovered in Iceland, but the practice is common in Scandinavia. The man was thirty to forty years of age, judging by the condition of the teeth and skull, and of average height at 170 cm.<sup>11</sup> He was buried in full dress, accompanied by his horse and grave-goods totalling more than twenty objects. Besides the spear head the grave contained a sword, shield, axe, arrow head, knife, two whetstones for sharpening swords, a large soapstone pot, a ringed cloak pin, a buckle, a belt end, a stone of agate, a small tin ring, two amber beads and a small purse containing four weights, a flint stone and one English coin. Another coin was found during the conservation process but its initial placement is not known. The horse appears to have been young, and being only a foal would not have been ridden, but was most likely saddled and bridled, as shown by the



**Figure 20.2** The burial at Þórisá. It is amongst the wealthiest of the 320 pre-Christian burials discovered so far in Iceland.

bits, cinch rings and nails discovered at the site. The foal was killed before the burial, according to butchering marks on the skull.<sup>12</sup>

The dead man was obviously well equipped for his final journey. In his right hand he held the sword, nearly one metre long, and in his left the shield, as though prepared for a challenging battle. All that remained of the round shield was the iron boss and some fragments of wood. The sword, the axe and the spear head found above the inhumation were made of iron but with a hint of silver inlay. The sword is double-edged but does not easily fit into any Petersen type category. However, most likely it is a variant of a Petersen Type H, the most widespread variety of sword type in the Viking world from AD 800–950, while the axe is of type I and the spear of type K.<sup>13</sup> The two whetstones lay on top of the shield but each measure approximately 40 cm in length. Both were presumably imported from Norway but from different mines. Large whetstones have been interpreted as status symbols because they were rather rare and valuable, and probably used as commodity objects.<sup>14</sup>

The jewellery found indicates that the man was well-dressed. He most likely wore a cloak, fastened with the ringed cloak pin. The bronze buckle and belt end were both

decorated in the Borró style, very common in Viking Age Scandinavia but having its origins in ninth-century Norway. This is the first Scandinavian decorative motif used in Iceland, where it was current until at least the mid-tenth century.<sup>15</sup> The ringed pin has a cross motif, a Hiberno-Norse style dated to the end of the tenth century.<sup>16</sup> The purse was found by the man's waist but he also wore the two amber beads around his neck. These were probably imported from Denmark.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the soapstone pot is the only Viking Age one of this kind preserved in one piece in Iceland. It measured 35 cm in diameter and 12 cm in height. It had apparently been used for cooking before being placed in the grave as it was smutty on the outside. It is most likely imported from Shetland or Norway.<sup>18</sup>

The grave had thus a mixture of local, Scandinavian, Baltic and Insular derived objects dated throughout the whole Viking period. Had it not been for the English coin found in the purse, archaeologists might have assumed that the grave belonged to one of the early Icelandic settlers. The coin, however, was minted between the years 955–957 during the reign of King Eadwig.<sup>19</sup> The other coin was, on the other hand, minted for King Edmund, between the years 939–946.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, a sample of the human bone has now been radiocarbon dated to the later tenth century, the last phase of the Viking Age.<sup>21</sup>

This makes the grave in Skriðdalur valley one of the latest burials of its type found in Iceland. The artefacts show us that the custom of placing a large number of objects in specifically chosen graves was still practised close to the time of the decree of the Alþingi that Christianised Iceland in the year 1000. Recent work in Europe has shown that grave-goods could be used in Christian burials, as much as in non-Christian ones. Thus, instead of relating them to a specific religious faith, the grave-goods should, rather, be seen in other ways, for example as part of the theatre of mortuary practices, or as indicators of the local status and wealth of the deceased.<sup>22</sup> The presence of the grave-goods in the burial at Þórisá therefore does not necessarily indicate a specifically pre-Christian burial but rather the burial of a Viking: a travelled man buried with his personal belongings, including a full weapon kit. He may also have been honoured at his funeral with gifts from members of the local society: a soapstone pot charred from cooking food, an agate stone for luck and a young foal for food or future travels.

Nevertheless, and of no less importance, the diversity, rarity and value of the grave-goods, with origins across the whole North Atlantic area, point towards contacts abroad and encounters with people from distant lands.

## Geirsstaðir church

In the summer of 1997, the remains of one of four visible structures at an abandoned farm at Geirsstaðir (Litli-Bakki, Hróarstunga District) were investigated by total excavation. Geirsstaðir was an inland farm, located in a treeless and grassy area close to the banks of the great glacier river Jökulsá á Dal. It is not mentioned in any written sources but the site was identified thanks to the remains of several buildings, including a long house, and a boundary feature.<sup>23</sup> During the investigation, the connection between the ruined buildings was also determined by test pits. According to analysis of the volcanic tephra layers lying beneath and above the ruins, all the buildings at the farm (and also the boundary bank) were constructed shortly after a volcanic eruption in Grímsvötn in the late ninth century. Furthermore, the tephra analysis showed that the farmstead had been abandoned for at least one century when the volcano Öraefajökull erupted in the year 1362.<sup>24</sup> The farm may thus be classified with certainty as a previously unknown early farmstead.

The investigation of the structure revealed a small, simply constructed turf building that was interpreted as a church or a chapel. The building's interior measured 3 x 6 metres. Like many churches it had an east–west orientation with its entrance facing west. This is a different orientation to the other buildings on the farm. On the eastern side of the church clear signs of a small choir measuring 1 x 1.5 m were found.

The building was erected on a platform and was shaped by earth dug out of a small hillside. Its walls were made of turf and consisted of two parallel lines of turf-made wattles filled with earth. The floor was similarly clearly marked and also of earth. It was thickest in the middle of the house and thinner next to the walls, which suggests that the floor was not covered with planks. In addition, three pairs of post stones were uncovered in it. No traces of the wooden posts themselves were found, but the posts probably functioned as the load-bearing element for the roof of the building. No signs of any other interior features were found, except for a stone bench along the northern long wall (Figure 20.3, colour section).

Microanalysis of samples taken from the floor layer shows it consisted mainly of moss, which was generally used in Icelandic houses for drying a wet floor made of earth. Some traces of sedge were also found in the floor layer, showing that the building was only in use periodically, as sedge does not grow in houses that are in constant use. The lack of charcoal in the floor layer showed clearly that the excavated building was not heated while it was in use. Neither did the excavation of the structure reveal any sign of a

hearth; the building had neither been used for cooking food nor as living quarters. No artefacts were found during the excavation, suggesting the building was not used for storage. The only artefact found at the farmstead site was a sharpener that came to light in a test pit dug in the longhouse ruin. However, fragments of human bone were uncovered in a probable grave beside the southern wall of the excavated building. These fragments consisted of a part of a cranium (*processus temporalis*) and two smaller fragments of a hand (*phalanx distalis* and *corpus phalangis proximalis*). One of the fragments was radiocarbon dated to AD 890–1010.<sup>25</sup>

The lack of finds in the church ruin and the circumstances concerning the probable grave at Geirsstaðir could indicate that items associated with the church were removed when the farm was abandoned. In *Grágás*, which was written in 1122–33 and is the oldest Icelandic code of law, it is implied that when a church was abandoned, its possessions – including human bones from graves – should be moved to the nearest church. A church owner who failed to abide by this law was required to pay a fine to the bishop.<sup>26</sup> These laws are regarded as having been written in the context of the initial organisation of the Icelandic church but such removal of human bones from Christian graves has been discovered archaeologically at other early church sites in Iceland.<sup>27</sup>

The discovery of the human bones at Geirsstaðir, together with the other results from the excavation there, the architecture of the building, and the analysis of the floor layer, support the theory that the building was a simply constructed turf church, used as a private chapel for the people living on the farm during the early Christian period in Iceland. The site provides interesting evidence for the early practice of Christianity in Iceland – possibly as a result of individual initiative – that is close in time and space to the single burial at Þórisá.

### Þórarinsstaðir church

A third alternative history from Iceland's early Christian landscape is provided by the farmstead at Þórarinsstaðir in Seyðisfjörður, located at the opening of one of many deep fjords on the eastern coast of the island. According to written resources, Þórarinsstaðir was inhabited from the time of the settlement of Iceland in the late ninth century and was named after the first settler there, Þórarinn. The farmstead was abandoned in 1963.<sup>28</sup>

The church and the graveyard at Þórarinsstaðir were first discovered by accident in 1938. Two workers were digging a pit on a small hilltop approximately 50 m away from

the farmhouse in order to store hay there during the winter.<sup>29</sup> Soon, however, the remains of a previously unknown church building and graveyard began to appear in the hay pit the men were digging. The two workers were understandably amazed to discover two human skeletons and the foundations of a wall in the pit. The site was not examined more closely at the time of the discovery. No further study was conducted there until exactly sixty years later, when the excavation began in 1998. By the end of the 1999 excavation season, the work at the site had revealed a church building of timber construction in two phases that have been dated to the early and late eleventh century respectively.

The earlier church had burnt down but when consequently rebuilt it was extended north and east (Figure 20.4, colour section). The earlier church measured 4.8 x 2.7 m, including the choir, but the later one 6.4 x 4 m. During the excavation, sixty graves were discovered in the surrounding graveyard, with women buried on the northern side, men to the south, and children grouped around the choir. This is a well-known custom from other early Christian graveyards excavated in Scandinavia, including Iceland. According to the results of radiocarbon dating on the human bones, the graveyard was in use from the tenth century until the early twelfth.

From the outset these results seemed extremely promising for further investigations, as the church buildings at Þórarinsstaðir appeared to be of the same type as many of the earliest churches found in areas of Viking settlement in northern Europe. They were built entirely of timber, were rectangular in shape with a square choir in some cases and, most importantly, were built with large corner posts dug into the ground.<sup>30</sup> The walls thus functioned as the bearers of the roof. Identification showed that the corner posts in the Þórarinsstaðir church were up to 1 m in diameter in the earlier church and made of Siberian larch that commonly drifts to the shorelines of Iceland.<sup>31</sup> The later church had considerably smaller corner posts than its predecessor and stones had been added to the outside of the timber walls that faced the hillside.

It is important to note that most other churches excavated in Iceland can be distinguished from this specific type of early Christian timber church, which provides the first excavated archaeological evidence for an Icelandic church building similar to the earliest churches of Viking Scandinavia. This type of church is often regarded as the forerunner of the famous stave-churches and may thus be called a 'post-church' (*stolpekirke* in Norwegian). Since the discovery of the Þórarinsstaðir church, at least four other post-churches identical to the Þórarinsstaðir church have been discovered in Iceland.<sup>32</sup> However, the discovery of the timber church building at Þórarinsstaðir was



not the only important find at the site. The artefacts excavated in both phases of the church building are of particular interest. They included three stone crosses, one of which is the earliest known example from Iceland, an altar stone made of green porphyry most likely imported from the Mediterranean area, a decorated silver ring, a Danish coin minted in the reign of Harthacnut (AD 1035–42),<sup>33</sup> two weights and a bead.



Figure 20.5 One of three stone crosses found at the Þórarinsstaðir church site.

It is worth noting that the stone crosses may be linked to missionary activity on behalf of the archbishop's seat of Hamburg-Bremen (Figure 20.5).<sup>34</sup> This could certainly be the case, since the Roman Catholic Church in Iceland belonged to the archbishopric there until 1104, when the first Nordic archbishopric was established in Lund.<sup>35</sup>

Several small altar stones made almost exclusively of porphyry, such as the one discovered in the church at Þórarinsstaðir, have been found in early medieval contexts in Wales, England, Scotland and Ireland, such as in the Hiberno-Norse town in Dublin, as well as in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland. The small altar stones are regarded as having been brought to these areas through pilgrimage or Christian mission, for use as relic covers in larger altars or portable ones.<sup>36</sup> This could be true of the altar stone from Þórarinsstaðir, highlighting the involvement of the new world view of Christianity in Iceland. The silver ring in grave no. 22 is, on the other hand, an example of a grave-good in a Christian grave. It is made of a

rounded silver thread, connected on top with a knot that also serves as a decoration. This is a well-known method of decorating jewellery dating back to the Viking period. The ring was most likely placed in the grave as a possession of the deceased.

In addition, the religious significance of the crosses and the altar stone supports the interpretation of the building as a church, while the coin and the silver ring give a clear indication of the date of the remains. The other artefacts – the weights and the bead – belong to the end of the Viking Period and the beginning of the Christian medieval

era.<sup>37</sup> The building at Þórarinsstaðir was equipped with all elements needed for an early Christian church. The architecture, as much as the artefacts found, may be interpreted as the material expression of the organised mission of Christianity.

### The making of the Christian landscape in early medieval Iceland

The textual history – which normally gives a view from above – should not be allowed to overwrite histories like the ones discussed in this chapter, which have been obtained from ‘below’. The three sites at Þórisá, Geirsstaðir and Þórarinsstaðir may themselves be evidence for different historical alternatives in a period of migration and religious change. First, the single burial site at Þórisá with a mixture of local, Scandinavian, Baltic and Insular derived objects represented the inhumation of a wealthy and well-travelled man. Second, the simple turf church at Geirsstaðir was probably built on personal initiative to serve the people of a single farm. Third, the Þórarinsstaðir church is likely to have been an international mission centre that was closely linked to the ruling elite and the decision made at Alþingi in the year 1000; it was a local religious centre with all the standardised equipment needed for a Christian church.

The alternative histories presented here, beside Þorgilsson’s inspiring account in *The Book of Icelanders*, all reveal glimpses of a complex picture of Icelandic society around the year AD 1000. However, these are certainly not the only alternative histories that could be written about the early Christian landscape of Iceland and how Icelanders became Christian. Additionally, the number of Viking burials containing grave-goods found in Iceland deserves further consideration. They are surprisingly few: only 320 graves thought to be non-Christian (with assorted grave-goods) have so far been discovered in 170 locations in Iceland and, as previously noted, the majority were those of adult males, despite the fact that as many as 40–50,000 people – men, women and children – are believed to have migrated and lived in the country during the Viking Age.<sup>38</sup> Even though a systematic survey of pre-Christian graves has not yet been performed for the whole of Iceland, it is not likely that a great many more will come to light. Indeed, beside grave-goods of local, Scandinavian, Baltic and Insular origin, 135 of the 320 graves contain grave-goods decorated with Christian symbols, indicating clear contacts between the Icelandic settlers, non-Christians and Christians.

Furthermore, a recent investigation based on survey and textual study indicates that private churches or chapels, turf- or post-churches, were present on most farms in the century around or shortly after the Conversion.<sup>39</sup> Another study, based on results from

test-pit excavation on ruins found in only one district in the north, Skagafjörður, showed that most farms there had their own Christian graveyards, some with chapels or churches, around that time. Most had fallen out of use around the turn of the twelfth century when the official organisation of the Icelandic church was becoming more and more effective and the parish church system was brought into existence.<sup>40</sup>

The scarcity of pre-Christian graves and the high frequency of early churches or graveyards may indicate that the Christian landscape of Iceland was in the making from the point the island was settled. Oddly enough, the material expressions of religiosity, presented above as burials, church buildings and artefacts dating to early medieval times, demonstrate first and foremost the close ties of Icelanders to other European peoples, whether Christian or non-Christian. The cultural contacts made through the expansions of pre-Christian beliefs and the different branches of Christianity constructed together the social identities and landscapes in Iceland just as they did elsewhere in Europe.

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## CHAPTER 20

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