

THE JOURNAL OF  
MEDIEVAL MONASTIC STUDIES

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MEDIEVAL MONASTIC STUDIES

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(2015)

Edited by

Janet Burton  
and Karen Stöber



BREPOLS

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D/2015/0095/82

ISBN: 978-2-503-55398-6

ISSN: 2034-3515

Printed on acid-free paper

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# NO SOCIETY IS AN ISLAND: SKRIÐUKLAUSTUR MONASTERY AND THE FRINGES OF MONASTICISM\*\*

Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir

Shortly before the turn of fifteenth century, Sesselja Þorsteinsdóttir and her second husband, Hallsteinn Þorsteinsson, donated their land at Skriða in Fljótisdalur in East Iceland to the bishop of Skálholt, Stefán Jónsson, for the foundation of a new Augustinian monastery. It was given the name *Skriðuklaustur*. On the same occasion, a friend of the couple, Halldór ‘the rich’ Brynjólfsson, bestowed on the monastery the largest gift it ever received in the form of farms and other properties. Sesselja had had seven children by her first husband, Einar Ormsson; however, their marriage was forbidden by the church on grounds of consanguinity, as Einar was her second cousin. When he died, the irregularity of their marriage was made official due to disputes about the children’s inheritance, and Sesselja and her children were excommunicated. It may thus be assumed that Sesselja and her second husband donated the land at Skriða in atonement for her sins.

\* Adapted from John Donne’s (1572–1631) poem, *No Man Is an Island*.

\*\* This research was made possible by support from the University of Iceland Research Fund, the Research Council of Iceland, the Icelandic State, and the Leonardo da Vinci Fund.

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**Abstract:** The prevailing view has long been that the monastic houses operating in medieval Iceland functioned somewhat differently than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. The results of an archaeological investigation of the ruins of the Augustinian monastery of Skriðuklaustur in East Iceland (1493–1554) show how the objectives of monasticism appeared in the buildings and artefacts uncovered. The investigation reveals how social systems can cross borders without necessitating fundamental change apart from that triggered by the constant process of hybridization. No less importantly, the results from the Skriðuklaustur monastic site demonstrate that cloistral institutions, wherever they operated, should by no means be observed as a passive element of monasticism. Rather, they should be approached as interactive participants in developments across regions and time.

**Keywords:** Western monasticism, hybridization, Middle Ages, Skriðuklaustur Monastery, Iceland



Figure 31. Map of Europe. Skriðuklaustur monastery was located in East Iceland.

During the period from 2002 to 2012, an archaeological investigation was undertaken on the ruins of Skriðuklaustur monastery, which operated from 1493 until 1554. This monastic site is the only one in Iceland — and the northernmost in Europe — to have been excavated in its entirety (Fig. 31). Prior to the excavation, very little was known about the monastery's purpose, its internal activities, and social context, and its location was similarly forgotten. Field survey work to identify the monastery site began in 2000. Twelve years later, the excavation had unearthed a cloistral complex covering an area of 1500 square metres and the graves of around 300 individuals.<sup>1</sup>

The excavation at Skriðuklaustur monastery showed that, through charity work carried out by the monastery during difficult times in the sixteenth century,

<sup>1</sup> Kristjánsdóttir, *Sagan af klaustrinu á Skriðu*.

Sesselja's gift considerably improved the lives of people in East Iceland. Equally importantly, the excavation provided fundamental new knowledge about medieval monasticism in Iceland. The prevailing view had hitherto been a rather nationalistic one, that is, that Icelandic monasteries and nunneries functioned somewhat differently than their counterparts elsewhere in the Roman Catholic world. Their significance for Icelandic medieval society has usually been regarded as minor, with their few inhabitants living apart from the rest of the society. When Skriðuklaustur monastery was built, however, the layout of other medieval Catholic monasteries outside Iceland was used as a frame of reference and meaning, even though local building materials — turf, rock, and driftwood — were used in its construction. The monastery graveyard was likewise at odds with the prevailing view of monasticism in Iceland: it appears to have been a final resting place not only for members of the order but also for the sick and infirm, and for the lay brothers and sisters who helped operate the monastery for the betterment of society.

In this article, the monastery at Skriðuklaustur is used as an example of a hybrid form of monasticism, a fringe form existing at the frontiers of medieval Europe. Hybridization refers to the process of combining different lifestyles through interactive contacts. The term is used to examine how old and new traditions and habits are negotiated for the management of everyday life. Through this examination, the author attempts to clarify earlier interpretations of the 'distinctiveness' of monastic houses in Iceland by demonstrating that the collective and historical memory of medieval monasticism has been deconstructed in a society that has been Lutheran since the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century.

### *The Development of Western Monasticism: A Frame of Meaning and Legitimation*

In order to understand monastic activity in medieval Iceland, it is necessary briefly to review the general development and ambitions of western monasticism. Its beginning is commonly traced back to the fourth century, with origins in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, whence it spread westwards to Europe. After a period of decline, usually traced to the Viking raids from the late eighth to tenth centuries, monasticism experienced a gradual reawakening in tandem with the growth of the Christian faith during the Middle Ages. As is well known, the steady growth of Christianity resulted both in the Christianization of the inhabitants of northern Europe and in a massive expansion of monasteries and new orders in the eleventh

and twelfth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of monasteries and nunneries were established across Europe, including hundreds in Scandinavia. Alongside larger and more open monastic institutions of canons, monks, and nuns, *anchoritism* continued as one type of celibate religious life.<sup>3</sup> As a result of the expanded emphasis and objectives of western monasticism, developed through the overall reforms of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, cloistered institutions opened up not only to all who were in need of either physical or mental shelter, but also to those who wanted to contribute to the monastic life through devotions or charity work. By contributing to the monastic life and work, people could purify themselves of their sins and reduce the torment awaiting them in Purgatory.

Therefore, monasteries and nunneries in northern Europe — as elsewhere — typically housed a secular workforce as well as communities of sick, needy, poor, and aged people. They gradually became centres of Christian knowledge and the physical work of healing, writing, handcraft, art, and gardening. This, in turn, secured income for the operation and administration of the monastic houses, although they always depended on support and supervision from ecclesiastical authorities, founders, and benefactors who ensured that management was up to standard. These supporters required that donations be properly managed and that the monastery maintain its credibility and appeal in the eyes of the community. Indeed, the founders' gifts were meant both to better the society and to purify themselves of their sins.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth noting that the ambitions of the tenth-century monastic revival were to rekindle the monastic life and overcome the issues that had plagued monastic communities during the ninth century, not least of all their vulnerability to the Vikings.<sup>5</sup> One aspect of this revival was a general campaign to prevent secular authorities from unduly influencing monastic affairs. This resulted in a lengthy struggle between ecclesiastical and worldly authorities over laws and legal jurisdiction, ownership of valuable properties and goods, influence and power — a struggle that, in northern Europe, culminated in the Protestant Reformation.

<sup>2</sup> Aston, 'The Expansion of the Monastic', pp. 9–11.

<sup>3</sup> Aston, 'The Expansion of the Monastic', pp. 11–18; Hughes-Edwards, *Reading Medieval Anchoritism*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*; Stöber, *Late Medieval Monasteries*; Kerr, *Life in the Medieval Cloister*; Jamrozak, 'Spaces of Lay-Religious Interaction', pp. 36–58.

<sup>5</sup> Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders*, p. 45.

### *Icelandic Monasticism is European Monasticism*

Scanning the history of medieval Iceland reveals clearly that Icelandic society was no less engaged in the development of the Christian faith and monasticism during the Middle Ages than it had been in Viking expansion earlier. The Vikings settled in Iceland during the last quarter of the ninth century; nearly one and a half centuries later, in AD 1000, the leading chieftains made sweeping changes in the country's structural government by submitting to the regulation of the Catholic Church in Rome.<sup>6</sup> The integration of the new regulation and the subsequent founding of new monastic houses, which in turn considerably strengthened the authority of the church in the country, did not take place effortlessly or without resistance from secular society.<sup>7</sup> Ongoing secular resistance to clerical dominance emerged most clearly in official disagreements between lay landowners and the clergy over ecclesiastical reforms. These disputes, collectively known in Iceland as the *staðamál* ('the issue of *staðir*'), centred on rights of ownership and management of church goods and benefices.<sup>8</sup>

Another cause of the persistent disagreements between ecclesiastical and secular authorities was the Christian relationship structure of monogamous marriage and clerical celibacy imposed by the Roman Catholic Church through canon law. Monogamous marriage challenged the norms of cohabitation that were based on extra-marital relationships, such as concubinage and companionship in Iceland, and even in some other Viking settlement places in northern Europe. These forms of cohabitation, which obviously ran counter to church law, were extremely important both economically and socially for inheritance, private alliance networks, and political power among both secular and worldly authorities. Extra-marital relationships did not disappear until after the Reformation, not because of the teachings of the church, but because by that time the aristocracy was based not on kinship but on service to the king.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of resistance from worldly authority, the church grew apace. During the Roman Catholic period in Iceland (c. AD 1000–1550), up to ten monastic institutions operated at eleven locations, the oldest of which, Þingeyrarklaustur,

<sup>6</sup> Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, pp. 39–41.

<sup>7</sup> Olsen, 'Den danske middelalderklostres', pp. 7–26; Aston, 'The Expansion of the Monastic', pp. 9–10.

<sup>8</sup> Stefánsson, *Staðir og staðamál*; Skórzewska, *Constructing a Cult*, pp. 38–39, 202–03; Sigurdson, *The Church in Fourteenth-Century Iceland*.

<sup>9</sup> Magnúsdóttir, *Frillor och fruar*.

was founded in 1133. In addition to these institutions, indications are preserved in church records of three shorter lived monasteries: Bær in Borgarfjörður, Keldur in Rangárvellir, and Saurbær in Eyjafjörður.<sup>10</sup> The monastic institution at Bær was established as early as 1030 but closed some decades later. A similar attempt was made in Norway in 1028, when a monastic institution was established at Nidarholm.<sup>11</sup> This endeavour failed, as had the one in Iceland, perhaps due to a lack of understanding from the surrounding community so soon after the country's official conversion — an understanding that was essential in order for the monastic institution to thrive. The last monastery established in Iceland before the Reformation was Skriðuklaustur, founded in 1493. Why most of Iceland's monastic institutions were successful while others were not cannot be explained solely by the supposed lack of acceptance from the local society or even by their dependency on initial support and supervision from ecclesiastical authorities. The monasteries at Keldur in Rangárvellir and Saurbær in Eyjafjörður were closed down shortly after they were established, but both were owned by secular chieftains who had officially taken a stance against the Roman Catholic Church in matters regarding the management of church goods and benefices — and oddly enough, even in marital matters.<sup>12</sup> All of the other monastic institutions were founded on behalf of the bishops in Iceland or their close kinsmen, including Viðeyjarklaustur, which was operated successfully for more than 300 years. It was founded by two secular chieftains, one of whom was the brother of the bishop.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, written documents mention the presence of ten anchorites and anchoresses in Iceland from the time of its settlement until the turn of the thirteenth century, indicating that this form of monasticism may have existed in medieval Iceland, as it did elsewhere in Europe during this period. Accounts of hermits living in ninth-century Iceland bear signs of being apocryphal, but later anchorites and anchoresses are clearly historical persons. These were men and women with clear connections to ecclesiastical institutions through family bonds or permanent residency.<sup>14</sup> On closer examination, it is worth noting that

<sup>10</sup> Jónsson, 'Um klaustrin á Íslandi', pp. 170–81, 240–41.

<sup>11</sup> Gunnes, 'Klosteranlegg i Norge', p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> Stefánsson, *Staðir og staðamál*; Magnúsdóttir, *Frillor och fruvar*; Sigurdsson, *The Church in Fourteenth-Century Iceland*, pp. 207–08.

<sup>13</sup> Jónsson, 'Um klaustrin á Íslandi', pp. 241–45.

<sup>14</sup> *Biskupa sögur*, I, 70–71, 203–08, 365–68, 375, 454, 466, 478; Jónsson, 'Um klaustrin á Íslandi', pp. 174–79.

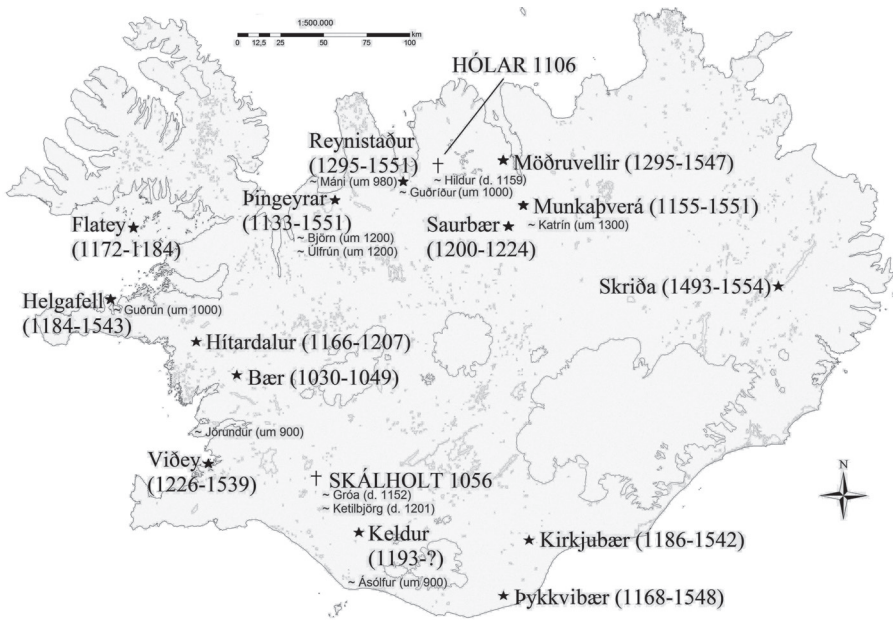


Fig. 32. Active monastic institutions in medieval Iceland.

the backgrounds of the anchorites and anchoresses in Iceland are identical or similar to those of anchorites in other countries in Europe.<sup>15</sup> To date, however, no research has been done on anchoritism in Iceland (Fig. 32).

In Iceland, the Reformation occurred in two stages: in 1541, in the bishopric of Skálholt, to which Skriðuklaustur belonged; and in 1550, in the bishopric of Hólar. However, the Danish king who ruled Iceland at that time did allow some of the monasteries and nunneries to operate until their inhabitants had found a new residence. Skriðuklaustur was finally dissolved in 1554.<sup>16</sup> At the time of the Reformation, the monasteries and nunneries owned 13 per cent of all farms in Iceland, and during its sixty years of operation, Skriðuklaustur owned forty farms, most of them in east Iceland.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Aston, 'The Expansion of the Monastic,' pp. 11–18; Hughes-Edwards, *Reading Medieval Anchoritism*.

<sup>16</sup> Guðmundsson, 'Íslenskt samfélag,' pp. 212–45; Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, pp. 39–41; Kristjánsdóttir, *Sagan af klaustrinu*.

<sup>17</sup> Ísleifsdóttir, *Síðbreytingin á Íslandi*; Kristjánsdóttir, *Sagan af klaustrinu*, p. 267.

Thus, some of the monastic houses in Iceland were run for only a few years, while others continued to operate for centuries. Eleven were monasteries and two were nunneries. All are assumed to have belonged to either the Augustinian or the Benedictine Order. This was most likely because the rural milieu in medieval Iceland, a country featuring no cities or towns with military forces, was best suited for these two orders. Although the Augustinian brethren were canons and not monks and nuns, as were as the Benedictines, both orders formed their own monastic communities.<sup>18</sup>

### *Remembrances of Monasticism in Iceland*

The history of research on medieval monasticism in Iceland is well established. Even so, most publications on Icelandic monasticism take the form of short essays or subchapters in compendia on the medieval history of Iceland. The obvious lack of interest in the history of monastic institutions in Iceland during the Middle Ages may be explained in part by the general lack of surviving evidence. Even the ruins of medieval monastic houses have disappeared from view. Many monastic place names, however, are preserved, but only in two cases is their precise location on the old monastic farmsteads known for certain. Moreover, the majority of Roman Catholic objects and relics were removed from monastic houses at the command of the Danish king following the Lutheran Reformation in the 1550s. Extant descriptions of the medieval monastic buildings in Iceland are quite fragmented, and the very few documents preserved from these religious institutions — such as the charters, annals, and muniments (*máldagar*) preserved in *Íslenskt fornbréfasafn* (Latin: *Diplomatarium Islandicum*) — mainly contain general information about their establishment or about local economic and political affairs.

The first scholar systematically to investigate monastic sites in Iceland was the Icelandic manuscript collector Árni Magnússon, whose research dates from around 1700 (only 150 years after the Lutheran Reformation in Iceland). The notes preserved from Magnússon's survey not only give important insight into how Icelanders of his day understood monastic houses, but they also provide useful descriptions of their ruins (where visible) or their possible location on a given farmstead. During his visits to former monastic sites, Magnússon recorded the various explanations he had been given for the loss of the written documents of these institutions. In some cases they had — surprisingly or not

<sup>18</sup> Aston, 'The Expansion of the Monastic', pp. 16–20.



— either been eaten by calves when spread out to dry, or blown away in storms.<sup>19</sup> However, Magnússon's most important observation is that monastic houses at farms were constructed as separate buildings, not as extensions of the farmhouses themselves.<sup>20</sup> This contradicts later interpretations of monastic housing and localization. Even in relatively recent book chapters on architecture in medieval Iceland, medieval monastic institutions are depicted as operating in farmhouses or in buildings whose architecture did not differ greatly from existing farmhouses in Iceland.<sup>21</sup>

This portrayal of medieval monasticism in Iceland is grounded in a deeply entrenched notion of a scarcity of building resources on the island, which prevented monasteries and nunneries from fulfilling shared basic objectives. This interpretation is in line with an enduring nationalistic approach to the interpretation of Icelandic history, which appeared first in publications from the late nineteenth century. These writings are heavily influenced by the rhetoric of the Icelandic independence movement. The aim of such works was to trace various features of the island's past that could be identified as national characteristics of Iceland.<sup>22</sup>

Analysis of monasticism in later publications on the history of Iceland is characterized by an emphasis on the passivity of monastic institutions, as well as their distinctiveness and separation from the rest of European culture. In one of the larger compendia on the medieval history of Iceland, published in 1980, monasticism is regarded as a plague in Icelandic society; by the author's account, monasteries and nunneries did little other than snatch the most valuable farms from Icelandic chieftains, reducing the earnings they could use to feed the poor and homeless.<sup>23</sup> A similar picture emerged in brief subchapters in volumes V and VII of one of the most ambitious publications on the history of Iceland in recent years, *Saga Íslands*, published in 1990 and 2004, respectively. In these volumes, monastic institutions are described as providing no social services whatsoever; the relative silence of written sources concerning monastic institutions is taken as confirmation of their merely superficial presence in the country.<sup>24</sup> In addition,

<sup>19</sup> Magnússon, 'Um klaustrin', pp. 32–47.

<sup>20</sup> Magnússon, 'Um klaustrin', p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Ágústsson, 'Húsagerð', pp. 293–95; Ágústsson, *Íslensk byggingaarfleifð*.

<sup>22</sup> Aðils, *Íslands saga*; Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga I*.

<sup>23</sup> Þorsteinsson, *Íslensk miðaldasaga*, pp. 111, 184.

<sup>24</sup> Þorsteinsson and Grímsdóttir, 'Enska öldin', pp. 135, 141–58; Þorláksson, 'Undir einveldi', pp. 126–28.

the permanent exhibition of the National Museum of Iceland, *The Making of a Nation: Heritage and History in Iceland*, which was opened after renovation in 2004, depicts monasteries and nunneries in Iceland as institutions of no importance and isolated from the local society.

Nevertheless, the theory of the insignificance of medieval monasticism in Iceland has been criticized in recent years. A book on the Reformation in Iceland, initially published in 1997 but republished in extended form in 2013, argues that the closure of the monasteries and nunneries had serious consequences for commoners in Iceland because it resulted in the collapse of the social network, as it did in Denmark and Norway.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in some cases scholars have based their research on the general aims of monasticism but nonetheless consider monastic institutions significant for medieval Icelandic society. In a very brief subchapter in volume II of *Saga Islands*, published in 1975, monastic institutions in Iceland are said to have had a dual role: as a venue for work and prayer and as a place providing shelter and assistance to the sick and the elderly.<sup>26</sup> The same view can be found in *Kristni á Íslandi*, which outlines the history of Christianity in Iceland from AD 1000–2000.<sup>27</sup>

However, in 2014 the Icelandic journal *Saga* published an article written by two leading scholars of medieval Icelandic history who criticize recent approaches to studies on monasticism. In their article, the authors underline the previously claimed insignificance of the monasteries and nunneries in Icelandic society and argue that they did not involve themselves with social matters, with the possible exception of a short period at Skriðuklaustur monastery.<sup>28</sup>

Although the lack of further data on monasticism in Iceland is obvious, there is still nothing to indicate that Icelandic monasteries and nunneries could in fact have been run differently from their counterparts in Europe. Apart from Skriðuklaustur, only two other monastic sites have been partly excavated: the monastery on the island of Viðey (Viðeyjarklaustur), excavated in 1987–1994, and the Kirkjubæjarklaustur nunnery, excavated in 2002–06.<sup>29</sup> Both sites are known for their long history of habitation, lasting from the tenth to the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the findings of the Viðey excavation did not

<sup>25</sup> Ísleifsdóttir, *Síðbreytingin á Íslandi*; Ísleifsdóttir, *Byltingin að ofan*.

<sup>26</sup> Stefánsson, 'Kirkjuvald eflist', pp. 81–85.

<sup>27</sup> Guðmundsson, 'Íslenskt samfélag', pp. 212–45.

<sup>28</sup> Guttormsson and Kjartansson, 'Siðaskiptin og fátækraframfærslan', pp. 119–43.

<sup>29</sup> Hallgrímsdóttir, 'Húsakostur Viðeyjarklausturs'; Kristjánsdóttir, 'Klaustureyjan á Sundum', pp. 29–52; Mímisson and Einarsson, 'Ora et labora', pp. 44–57.

with any certainty uncover the monastic houses themselves, but only the various stages of the island's farmhouse.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, the ruins at Kirkjubæjarklaustur were interpreted as indicating that the nunnery there was built and run in accordance with the norms of monastic observance in a building separate from the farm at Kirkjubær.<sup>31</sup> To date, there are no indications that any of the monastic institutions in Iceland were run either in the farmhouses themselves or in similarly constructed buildings.

The Skriðuklaustur site differs from the monastic sites at Viðey and Kirkjubæjarklaustur in that its ruins appear to have remained intact since the monastery was closed in 1554. The excavation at Skriðuklaustur revealed the ruins of a building that consisted of several small cells, a church, and a cloister garden with a fountain — that is to say, all the basic structural elements that a monastery needed in order to function as such and in accordance with the universal monastic agenda (Fig. 33). Moreover, the complex at Skriðuklaustur was much larger than anticipated, albeit small compared to those found in more densely populated societies on the European mainland. As is noted above, the monastic complex measured 1500 square metres in all. By comparison, the average farmhouse in Iceland measured only about 100 square metres at that time.<sup>32</sup>

### *Different from what?*

The church is the only part of the monastic complex at Skriðuklaustur that could be considered somewhat different from the general arrangement of monasteries, as it was located on the monastery's south side. In consequence, the cloister garden was situated north and east of the church, and the monastic houses were arranged in accordance with this. The entire complex was enclosed with a fence of turf and rocks that encircled the church and the cemetery. Although this arrangement may be construed as contradicting the liturgical ideal, it was not unknown in monasteries and nunneries in England, Denmark, and Norway, where a considerable number of religious houses placed the church on the south or even the west side.<sup>33</sup>

The church building was furnished with imported relics and religious images, including statues of both the Virgin Mary and St Barbara, both of whom carried

<sup>30</sup> Hallgrímsdóttir, 'Húsakostur Viðeyjarklausturs'.

<sup>31</sup> Mímisson and Einarsson, 'Ora et labora', pp. 54–56.

<sup>32</sup> Kristjánsdóttir, *Sagan af klaustrinu*, pp. 64–65.

<sup>33</sup> Møller-Christensen, *Æbelholt kloster*, p. 26; Gunnes, 'Klosteranlegg i Norge', pp. 90, 96, 107; Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, pp. 128–33.



Fig. 33. The plan of Skriðuklaustur monastery and graveyard. Map by the author.

symbolic weight for the monastic community. In the monastic building (which was attached to the church by a narrow corridor), steps found in two rooms indicate that it was two storeys high. One set of steps — located centrally in the building — may mark the division of the monastery into sacred and secular areas. The rooms reserved for the use of religious inhabitants were all located in the western range of the complex, whereas rooms for secular inhabitants were located in the northern and eastern ranges. It is, however, worth underlining that such a division was not based on the dichotomy of sacred and secular in the sense of religious rationality, but on general hierarchical premises in monastic houses.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Brück, 'Ritual and Rationality', pp. 313–14.

Such a hierarchical division of space is thought to have become more common and more apparent with the emergence of reformed monasticism in eleventh and twelfth centuries, when contacts with the outside world became much more codified. Evidence from Benedictine and Cistercian houses, at least in some areas of Europe, shows that lay people or visitors from the outside were not allowed to wander freely around in monastic houses, and certainly not in the parts reserved solely for the religious inhabitants. Their access was restricted to the secular area: the guesthouse, the infirmary, and the outer court more generally. Founders of monasteries and nunneries, as well as their benefactors, were quick to complain if the operation of the institutions they had established or supported fell below expectations or if rules were not followed, as their donations needed to be properly managed.<sup>35</sup>

One of the very few written documents preserved from the monastery at Skriðuklaustur indicates that the prior there, Narfi Jónsson (1496–1507), once faced difficulty in preserving the division between the secular and sacred areas. The documented incident occurred when one of the canons, Jón Jónsson, allowed two students, Jón and Guðrún, to wander freely around the sacred area and even to touch some of the relics in the church. This was absolutely forbidden, and all the relics had to be ritually purified again.<sup>36</sup> This officially documented statement (and the punishment meted out to the canon) must have sent a clear message to the surrounding community that universal rules of monasticism were followed in Skriðuklaustur monastery. Because the monastery depended on its benefactors, it needed to maintain its credibility in the eyes of the community and demonstrate that its management was up to standard. Its reputation was at stake.

### *Material Remains of Piety and Mercy*

No traces of animal husbandry were detected at Skriðuklaustur monastery, as such activities must have taken place at the farm, which was located approximately 150 metres away.<sup>37</sup> Seeds from imported apples were discovered, however. Furthermore, analysis of samples from the site shows that gardening was carried

<sup>35</sup> Stöber, *Late Medieval Monasteries*; Jamroziak, 'Spaces of Lay-Religious Interaction', pp. 41–44.

<sup>36</sup> *Íslenskt fornbréfasafn*, IX, 245.

<sup>37</sup> Pálsdóttir, 'Archaeofauna'; Hamilton-Dyer, 'Skriðuklaustur Monastery'; Konráðsdóttir, 'An Archaeoentomological Research'; Konráðsdóttir, 'Archaeoentomological Analysis of Samples from the 2008 Season'; Konráðsdóttir, 'Archaeoentomological Analysis of Samples from the 2011 Season'.

out at the monastery. Its occupants grew cabbages, turnips, and (even more importantly) a number of well-known healing plants, such as field garlic, nettle, and valerian, which were not native to Iceland during the Middle Ages.<sup>38</sup> The discovery of vegetables and healing plants at the monastery site accords well with contemporary gardening practices at monastic sites outside Iceland, though the range of plants at Skriðuklaustur certainly reflects the limited possibilities offered by Iceland's harsh environment. Among the finds at the site are eighteen lancets, scalpels, and pins, which may have been used for surgical and healing purposes. The statue of St Barbara discovered in the choir of the church was produced in Utrecht in the fifteenth century. St Barbara was known as one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, a group of saints venerated for their particularly effective protection against disease.<sup>39</sup>

The graves excavated in the monastic cemetery at Skriðuklaustur, 298 in all, provide important information about the inhabitants of the monastery, as all such institutions were obliged to bury those who died in their charge. Given that the monastery was only run for sixty years in a relatively small community, this is a very large number of burials. Clearly, it was not only a resting place for the brethren. Bones of foetuses, neonates, young children, adolescents, and adults (both men and women) were discovered in the graves. Interestingly, many of the skeletons showed identifiable signs of various chronic diseases, illnesses, or traumas: syphilis, tuberculosis, hydatid disease, lung infection, cleft palate, gum diseases of various kinds, broken bones, and scurvy, in addition to some unidentified infections.<sup>40</sup> The cemetery itself was clearly divided into four hierarchical areas, each serving a different group of residents: patients, lay people, brethren, and benefactors. According to this division, 150 were patients, 130 were lay people, and up to 20 were benefactors or brethren.<sup>41</sup>

The skeletons, surgical equipment, healing plants, and building complex broadened the view of the central function of the monastery at Skriðuklaustur,

<sup>38</sup> Harðarson, 'Klausturgarðar á Íslandi', p. 103; Shaw, 'Analysis of Soil Samples'.

<sup>39</sup> Kristjánsdóttir, *Sagan af klaustrinu*, p. 99.

<sup>40</sup> Zoëga, 'Fornmeinafræðileg rannsókn'; Pacciani, 'Anthropological Description of Skeletons from Graves No. 4'; Pacciani, 'Anthropological Description of Skeletons from Graves No. 5'; Pacciani, 'Anthropological Description of Skeletons from Graves No. 83'; Pacciani, 'Anthropological Description of Skeletons from Graves No. 123'; Collins, 'An Osteological Analysis of the Human Remains from the 2009 Excavation Season'; Collins, 'An Osteological Analysis of the Human Remains from the 2010 Excavation Season'; Ahlin Sundman, 'Osteological Analysis'.

<sup>41</sup> Kristjánsdóttir, 'The Tip of the Iceberg', pp. 54–58.

as they strongly indicate that the monastery may have functioned as a hospital and guesthouse, with a large secular workforce. As has been emphasised previously, this departs radically from the prevailing interpretation of Icelandic monasteries and nunneries as being small and averse to providing social services to the wider community.

All in all, this evidence and the use of naturally available materials to build the monastery demonstrate that the local environment — natural and social — did not prevent medieval Icelanders from taking an active part in the work of western monasticism. Excavated material from Skriðuklaustur and surviving documents from the monastery show that, from the outset to the bitter end, the monastery was an ambitious and well-run institution with a multitude of secular clients who obviously had faith in it. The above-mentioned incident involving one of the canons illustrates that the prior did his best to preserve the good reputation his monastery had gained.

### *The Story from Skriðuklaustur*

The history of Skriðuklaustur monastery underlines that it was neither inactive nor separate from the general movement and development of monasticism, nor was it isolated from the surrounding community in Iceland. Other monastic institutions established in Iceland or elsewhere in northern Europe have yet to be investigated from this vantage point. Western monasticism was pan-European and perhaps benefited, even more than any other social network in Europe, from sharing the same language, Latin.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, in spite of monastic institutions' shared, uniform function, their emphasis varied according to their local societal context. They grew out of the differing demands and desires of the surrounding communities wherever they were established. Certainly, not all monasteries and nunneries ran hospitals or provided active caregiving, as was the case at Skriðuklaustur. Many medieval hospitals were, however, attached to monastic and religious orders, such as the Augustinians or the Benedictines. This was true in particular of communities of canons, such as the Augustinians, which were known for serving the poor and the sick throughout Europe, through both nursing and education.<sup>43</sup>

To answer the question why a monastic institution engaging in care for the poor and sick was established at the farm of Skriða in east Iceland in the late

<sup>42</sup> Aston, 'The Expansion of the Monastic', p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Aston, 'The Expansion of the Monastic', p. 23.

fifteenth century, it is essential to consider its social context. The monastery at Skriða was opened after a long succession of disasters: several plague epidemics, crop failures due to cooling climate, and major volcanic eruptions. Even syphilis may have become an epidemic in Iceland, if the numbers of such cases found in the monastic cemetery at Skriðuklaustur are any indication.<sup>44</sup> In the eastern quarter of Iceland, the situation may have been worse than elsewhere on the island, especially after a massive eruption in the Vatnajökull glacier area in 1477, about fifteen years before the monastery was founded. Archaeological investigations have ascertained that many farms in the area were gradually abandoned in the following decades because of the damage caused by volcanic ash, which suffocated the vegetation. The bishop of Skálholt, Stefán Jónsson, who had been educated in a monastery in France, must have known how the church was expected to respond to such a crisis situation: this was commonly done by founding a new Augustinian monastery.<sup>45</sup>

Skriðuklaustur monastery may thus have been run in accordance with the Order of the Holy Spirit, a rule initially established by Augustinians in southern France in 1180 and revived in the late fifteenth century. The Order of the Holy Spirit concentrated exclusively on running hospitals and is regarded as having greatly advanced medical knowledge of anatomy, surgery, and pharmaceuticals through its activities.<sup>46</sup> At the time Skriðuklaustur was established, so-called Houses of the Holy Spirit (*Helligåndshuse*) had become especially common in Denmark, which is significant in light of the fact that Iceland was then a tributary of the Danish king.

### *The Fringes of Monasticism*

As is mentioned earlier in this article, monasticism in Iceland has not been understood as a part of monasticism in Europe. Similarly, the history of Iceland is generally approached not as part of the history of Europe or its wider surroundings, but as a separate unit. In earlier research, the distinctiveness of the monastic institutions working in Iceland has thus been highlighted at the cost of ignoring their active role in the far-reaching network of western monasticism during the Middle Ages. The monasteries and nunneries are either viewed as

<sup>44</sup> Kristjánsdóttir, 'The Poisoned Arrows', pp. 410–13.

<sup>45</sup> Kristjánsdóttir, *Sagan afklaustrinu*, p. 333.

<sup>46</sup> Olsen, 'Den danske middelalderklostres', p. 10; Aston, 'The Expansion of the Monastic', pp. 23–24.



relatively insignificant for the growth of medieval society in Iceland or, conversely, understood as greedy competitors snapping up valuables from the Icelandic chieftains who exercised worldly authority in the country. This approach pits the dualistic interpretation, as in placing foreign against local and centre against periphery, giving a primacy to either one or the other, instead of examining the diverse forms of monasticism as a single whole.

Not only does the presence of over ten monastic institutions in Iceland during the Roman Catholic period (AD 1000–1550) indicate that monasticism had considerable influence in the sparsely populated country; the preserved charters, annals, and muniments show that monastic institutions in Iceland participated in a shared western monastic culture, while simultaneously adapting and fulfilling important functions for their surrounding communities. Oddly enough, the results of the excavation at Skriðuklaustur demonstrate how the objectives of monasticism — celibacy and charity — appeared in its building and artefacts, although these buildings and artefacts were made of local material and located on the outskirts of the Roman Catholic world. Indeed, the monastery exhibited a hybridized form of the uniform frame of a monastic society, with clearly defined rules and requirements, housing not only the brethren but also a relatively large community of sick, needy, poor, and aged. Obviously, it is not possible to assert whether Sesselja Þorsteinsdóttir was absolved of her sins by donating her land for the founding of Skriðuklaustur monastery, but it can surely be said that her gift contributed significantly to charity work in the surrounding community during the first half of the sixteenth century.

The knowledge from Skriðuklaustur underlines the significance of looking simultaneously inwards and outwards to understand the activities and role of monasticism in Icelandic society during the Middle Ages, because monasticism in Iceland is merely one of the fringes of the Roman Catholic world. Yet even though there is a core of shared basic objectives, the history of monasticism is full of exceptions, as it is formed by the interplay between individual choices and social inventions, triggered by the encounter of ideas and thoughts. Nothing springs spontaneously from a void. Iceland has never been an island in the sense of social and cultural development because it is part of a larger world-view, but this is what makes the study of western monasticism so interesting, with its countless fringes.

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