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Becoming Christian: A Matter of Everyday Resistance and Negotiation

STEINUNN KRISTJÁNSDÓTTIR

The diverse appearances of church buildings, iconography and altered burial practices have commonly been used to exemplify the expansion of Christianity in early medieval Europe. Less emphasis has been placed on how the common European dealt with the Christian transformation in daily life, perhaps because of the tendency in research to distinguish ritual actions from secular. To *become Christian* did not necessarily entail greater religiousness or deeper religious devotion but centred rather on how people synchronized their everyday lives, both religious and secular, in accordance with Christian doctrine and the laws imposed by the Roman Church. However, social transformations do not emerge exclusively from political or administrative institutions, such as the Church or other ruling authority; they also emerge interactively, through the general public, who are equally capable of exercising power by taking part in societal discourse. With reference to examples from early medieval Iceland, this article argues for the application of Foucault's theory of power relations and everyday resistance to research on the adoption of Christianity, beyond time and space.

Keywords: post-colonialism; power relations; Foucault; dualism, Christianization

INTRODUCTION

Research on the Christianization process in Northern Europe has long focused on the interactive encounters between the Christian religion and the various regional and local pre-Christian beliefs that flourished concurrently across the Continent (see, e.g., Andrén 2005, 2014, Nordeide 2011a, Brink 2013). However, less, but growing, attention has been devoted to the way the Europeans organized their day-to-day life in accordance with Christian doctrine without making binary distinctions between churchly and worldly activities (see, e.g., Simpson *et al.* 2005,

Pluskowski 2010, Gilchrist 2012, Milek 2012). In fact, becoming Christian need not have involved greater religiousness or a deeper devotion to the Christian faith, although such devotion must surely have existed in many cases. What it did involve was the Roman Church's implementation of new laws, norms and guidelines affecting the daily life of common Europeans and provoking responses from them. Thus the Christian transformation was far from being a one-sided affair, forced upon the people by ruling authorities such as the Church, kings or chieftains. It was brought about also by the

general public who, according to Foucault's theory on power relations and everyday resistance, are equally capable of exercising power by participating in the discourse of the society (Foucault 1982, 1988, 1994). Explicitly, according to Foucault (1994), power is not possessed but is exercised through communication involving reciprocal reactions among individuals and groups. Christianity may therefore be seen as a long-term transformation organized through everyday resistance, reactions, negotiations and compromises made by all members of society in response to tensions and nuances constantly arising between traditional and post-traditional habits in everyday life.

In this article, the dichotomous categories – pre-Christian and Christian, sacred and secular, public and private – are set aside. It is argued that to become Christian was a simultaneous ecclesiastical and worldly transformation taking place at all levels of medieval European society. The late 11th-century church site at Þórarinnsstaðir in East Iceland is used to exemplify this and to show how Icelanders became Christian by dealing, through reciprocal interaction, with new and old traditions after the Conversion to Christianity in Iceland around AD 999/1000. The site features the various ecclesiastical and secular commodities of the far-reaching network of Christianity in early medieval Europe (Kristjánsdóttir 2004). In fact, building a church involved much more than a confession of Christian faith or meeting the need to gain access to a religious place; it was a part of becoming Christian that simultaneously brought economic and political wealth to the church owner. In this manner, church buildings, as material expressions of Christianity, may be regarded as examples of all-seeing panopticism, which, according to Foucault (1977), is a strategy for power and control.

Not only did medieval Northern Europeans begin to build ecclesiastical buildings such as churches while adopting Christianity; they likewise began to modify their homes. Icelanders, for example, gradually replaced the traditional

Viking Age longhouses with dwelling houses featuring several separated rooms united by a central passage. These changes have frequently been interpreted through the lens of functional rationalism as an adaptation to the cooling climate of medieval times or, more recently, as having taken place while pre-Christian ritual practices were moved from dwelling houses into separately built churches. In this article, however, the focus is directed at whether the impetus for the gradual alterations can be viewed as the result of the new family strategies imposed by the Roman Church through monogamous marriage and clerical celibacy (Magnúsdóttir 2001, Karras 2012). The consecration of sexual relationships obviously challenged the traditional knowledge of cohabitations in Nordic societies, which had long been based on alternative forms of extramarital union, involving important property exchanges and inheritance of wealth.

THE TENSION BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW

All societies are compounded of networks of relationships that are constantly evolving due to new knowledge encountered and dealt with through cross-cultural contacts. Thereafter, societies receive the participants in these contacts and influence what they become, while these participants influence society through their reactions. In this manner, the process of *becoming* may prove a useful lens through which to examine power relations and everyday resistance during the adoption of Christianity in early medieval Europe because of the innovative networks of relationships and knowledge that Christianity brought about. 'Becoming' is applied not as a means of defining binary relations and the resistance of one against the other, or some sort of assimilation of two clearly delineated parts – for instance, pre-Christian and Christian, secular and sacred – but rather as a means of studying the reactions arising due to the reciprocal struggle between old and new habits and norms. Specifically, the old and

the new may be observed not as two distinct mechanisms but rather as coexisting elements and premises that are constantly overlapping.

James Deetz (1977) used the process of becoming to clarify the interaction between European colonists and indigenous groups in America during the 17th and 18th centuries. With his research, which is based on a post-colonialist approach, he criticized the prevailing ideas about cultural plurality or binary relations and called for a more complex understanding of cultural contacts appearing in daily life. Instead of trying to identify blended elements or untainted cultural traits from each of the groups concerned, he focused on how the material culture reflected their world-views in the new context of a colonized society. Deetz argued that both groups – the European colonists and the natives – became American in their own way by resisting and compromising within and between old and new habits in everyday life.

The concept of becoming can be used to examine all developing and transforming processes in which new forces and struggles are produced and reproduced through continuous communication. For instance, it has been used to describe other cultural contacts occurring during immigration processes, such as the encounters between Canadians and the Icelanders who migrated to Canada in the late 19th century. This study shows that immigrants moving from Iceland to Canada were seen as having become Canadians by dealing with new habits in their everyday practices, which were often watered down by memories of old habits from their native country. In this manner, the tension between traditional and post-traditional habits was coloured by the immigrants' awareness of their old Icelandic identity and their new Canadian identity (Edwald 2012).

Surely, in a post-colonial approach the process of becoming need not be seen as involving interactive relations between different cultures and societies, such as between natives and colonists, at all. It can also centre on the study of social change in general and

how material culture and habits are commonly negotiated for the management of everyday life. In fact, all cultural forms and identities *are* the creation of mutual colonial encountering, which means that the movement of people and things across spaces constantly invents improvised values, habits and identities. As the examples above suggest, in post-colonial studies, fixed boundaries such as those between classes, gender, people, nations, religious worlds and culture are eliminated and emphasis placed instead on coexistence and sustained encountering. At the same time, post-colonialism underlines Foucault's ideas about power as being exercised by all participants in society, those who occupy a minor place in the ideal society – the subalterns – as much as the general public, the ruling authority, or the elite (Said 1978, Spivak 1988, pp. 24–28, Bhabha 1994, Gosden 2001, pp. 241–247, 2004, p. 3, Young 2009, pp. 13–25).

As the stated circumstances suggest, the concept of becoming can be used to describe all social transformation and development beyond time and space. Further examples can be found in modern-day computerization, when people became computerized by buying computers or not but simply resisting doing so when encountering the new technical world, or in the modernization process in general, which is based on the tensions of modernity: people became modern by progressively resisting the old way of living and inventing new utensils and machines for their old homes (see, e.g., Sølund 2000, Thomas 2004, Russell 2005, Loren and Beaudry 2006, Rúnarsdóttir 2006, Prescott and Glørstad 2011). Similarly, the Christian transformation brought about new knowledge that was coloured by tensions between old and new habits taking place through mutual and provocative communication among all those involved in its development. Hence, during the Christianization process in early medieval Europe, new implements, ideas and habits were gradually integrated into everyday life throughout the Continent. Some of them were matters of religiosity while others were

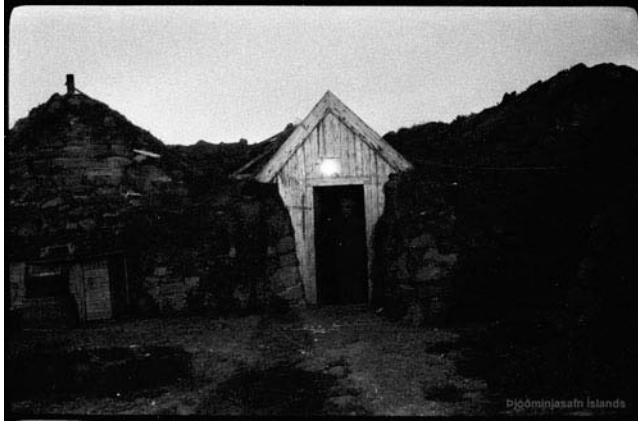


Fig. 1. *A turf house with a cross carved on the portal* (© National Museum of Iceland, photographer Ragnar Ásgeirsson).

not – and some were both – but all improvised existing values and identities (see Fig. 1).

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized here that the Christianization of Europe is still ongoing and will not end as long as Christianity exists. Christianity has been growing for more than 2000 years and has become one of the largest world religions. It is tied together through its practice, having grown out of Judaism, although Christian material symbols, such as churches, iconography and burials, all vary in accordance with their geographical and cultural spread (Lane 2001, pp. 148–149, 162). Thus, a pure-bred pre-Christian or Christian faith has never existed because both are kaleidoscopic outcomes of their sustained meeting. So becoming Christian should be approached as an uneven reciprocal process, not only chronologically and geographically but also individually and collectively, as is shown in the following text, with examples taken from its initial stages during early medieval times in Iceland.

HOW ICELANDERS BECAME CHRISTIAN

While the myth of a cultural unity shared by the Norse Vikings has rightly been renounced

and attention drawn instead to heterogeneity in Viking Age Scandinavian culture, it can nonetheless be stated that the expansion of Western Christendom brought about a new world view that was shared by the inhabitants of Scandinavia and Europe (see, e.g., Hugason 2000, Price 2002, Svanberg 2003, Behrend 2007, Abrams 2012, Andrén 2014). From AD 590 to AD 1517, the Roman Church, headed by the Pope, dominated the Western world through its complex and wide-ranging network of archbishoprics. As time passed, the Pope appointed all the European archbishops, who in turn chose each bishop in their respective archbishoprics (Lane 2001, pp. 148–181, Sindbæk 2007, p. 70).

Icelanders officially submitted to the legislation of the Roman Church and converted to Christianity at the turn of the 10th century, as the societies in the Orkney and Faeroe Islands, Norway and Greenland did soon after. Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England and Germany had all adopted Christianity some centuries earlier, and Denmark had done so around AD 965. At the same time, the eastward expansion of Christianity resulted in the baptism of the Slavs and, a few centuries later, the Finns and the Balts. The Church in Iceland belonged to the archbishopric in Hamburg-Bremen until 1104,

when the first Nordic archbishopric was established in Lund. From 1153 to 1537, the two bishoprics in Iceland, Skálholt and Hólar, were the part of the archbishopric in Nidaros, along with Norway, Greenland, the Faeroes, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. Northern Europe also had two other archbishoprics, in Lund and Uppsala, with provinces covering Denmark, Sweden and Finland (Slupeki and Valor 2007, pp. 366–381, Sigurðsson 2008, pp. 66–77, Nordeide 2011a, pp. 74–79, Salonen 2013, p. 189).

In other respects, the historical memory of how Christianity came to Iceland is based largely on a single legend preserved in *Íslendingabók* (*The book of Icelanders*), which describes the adoption of the Christian faith as a single event occurring around AD 999/1000 and entailing the conversion of all Icelanders. According to this legendary account, recorded by Ari Þorgilsson in the early 12th century, the missionary Þangbrandur was sent to Iceland in the late 10th century by the king of Norway, Ólafur Tryggvason, himself a recent Christian convert. According to Þorgilsson, 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, and introduced 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 (reigning from AD 985 to 1001), who lay under his cloak for three days contemplating the matter and ultimately convinced the pagans to accept baptism (*Íslendingabók* 1968).

The Icelandic Conversion to Christianity that took place at the general assembly in AD 999/1000 can undeniably be viewed as a momentous episode in the expansion of medieval Roman-Catholic Christianity in Europe, when other societies were about to convert or had already done so. Moreover,

Þorgilsson's account has greatly influenced the subsequent understanding of the Christianization process in Iceland as a unilateral, top-down act enabling the worldly authority figures – the Icelandic chieftains – to retain their leading position by inventing Christian legislation. Indeed, Ari Þorgilsson's story is a well-written metaphoric account of how the official acceptance of Christianity, the Conversion, may have taken place in Iceland – or even in other areas of Europe. It describes the leading chieftains making sweeping changes in Icelanders' everyday life by applying Roman Catholic guidelines and laws as a part of the country's structural government, but it largely excludes the reactions to that act and how those reactions affected the process of becoming Christian in Iceland. In essence, then, Þorgilsson's story describes only the theory but not the practice.

As is emphasized above, cultural evolution is always based on relationships and knowledge; therefore, as soon as there is a reactive relationship, there is power for everyday resistance against or acceptance of cultural transformations. Power relations do not exclude the use of violence on behalf of the ruling authority to force changes, but at the same time they offer everyone engaged in the societal discourse the possibility of resisting, no matter how oppressive the society is (Spivak 1988, pp. 24–28, Foucault 1994, Young 2009, pp. 13–14). The earliest resistance to the new Christian guidelines in Iceland appeared when the actual Conversion took place. It centred on three different dispensations, approved by the Pope, on continued exposure of infants, consumption of horseflesh and the private practice of pagan rituals (Aðalsteinsson 1999, Karlsson 2001, pp. 33–37). All three of these dispensations were in opposition to basic church laws and norms in one way or another; for example, the exposure of infants can be viewed as an act equivalent to abortion, which is forbidden in Roman Catholicism. However, Icelanders and other Catholic Europeans continued requesting other dispensations as time

went on, such as asking permission not to use bread and wine during communion services in churches. This was denied because of the importance of using bread and wine to become the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ in Christian teachings (DI I 1857, pp. 513–514).

Still, as is emphasized above, the struggle was certainly not one-sided. In some cases, the Pope had to protest formally against behaviour that ran counter to Christian doctrine and laws, for instance, when Icelanders and other Germanic groups in Europe did not comply with the Christian construction of monogamous marriage and clerical celibacy. The integration of the doctrine on the desire and lusts of the self as an ever-threatening burden obviously challenged the prevailing traditions of sexual unions based on alternative forms of extra-marital relationship (Magnúsdóttir 2001, Gilchrist 2012, p. 124, Karras 2012, pp. 25–31). In addition to prohibiting the traditions of concubinage and companionship, the Church forbade marriage between persons related to each other by blood, such as siblings, first, second or third cousins or close relatives from a previous relationship. Studies show, however, that the Church was quite tolerant of deviations from these tenets, as papal dispensations on marriage-related matters were relatively common in the Nordic countries throughout the Catholic period, although not all petitioners received the dispensations they requested (Magnúsdóttir 2001, Salonen 2013, pp. 181–208). During the period AD 1438–1531 alone, dispensations were given in 145 cases in the archbishopric in Nidaros, including 10 in Iceland (Jørgensen and Saletnich 2004, pp. 31–52).

However, soon after the adoption of Christianity, the Christian monogamous marriage appears to have become the most common form of sexual union among the laity throughout Europe, including Iceland. Companionship, on the other hand, grew in importance among the clergy and, to some extent, among chieftains as well, particularly

during the 14th century, and did not disappear until after the Reformation (Magnúsdóttir 2001, p. 214). Companionship among the clergy was vigorously opposed by the Church, of course, not least because of the children produced by such relationships. Nonetheless, it is well known that abbots, priors, priests and even bishops had children throughout the Catholic period in Iceland, just as they did elsewhere in Europe (Jørgensen and Saletnich 2004, Karras 2012). The most famous clerical person in Iceland is the bishop Jón Arason, who was executed in 1550 along with his two sons because of their resistance to the Danish monarchy in Iceland. Their execution historically marks the end of the Catholic period in Iceland (Ísleifsdóttir 1997, pp. 258–264). Arason fought against the Lutheran Reformation while simultaneously resisting the Roman Catholic Church by boycotting its rules on clerical celibacy. Indeed, one of his daughters was married to a son of the prior of Skriðuklaustur monastery. Furthermore, two of the priors there were buried in the monastic cemetery at Skriðuklaustur with their companions and children as late as the early 16th century (Kristjánsdóttir 2012, pp. 158–166). Oddly enough, one of the most famous worldly chieftains in Iceland, Jón Loftsson, had eight children with five wives. One of his sons, Páll, later became a bishop in Skálholt. Similarly, the historian and politician Snorri Sturluson fathered several children with his concubines and two wives. Ruthlessly, he gave all his daughters to men who had the capacity to strengthen his position in the ongoing power struggle of that time (Magnúsdóttir 2001, pp. 48, 68).

Nevertheless, the resistance to other-worldly ideas of physical temptations emphasizes that extra-marital relationships mattered greatly as a source of friendship, inheritance and wealth (Magnúsdóttir 2001, Karras 2003). To become Christian was not merely about a transformation of religious life, but also about how the Christian world-view was articulated and given meaning in all spheres of life simultaneously: the

ecclesiastical and the worldly, the private and the official. The examples above emphasize that the mutual encounter between the old and new ways of living was based not only on religion but also on secular premises. In addition, the fact that the laity began practising monogamous marriage soon after the Conversion, whereas the clergy and chieftains did not, highlights the uneven progress of the Christian transformation, depending on the privilege it conferred.

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH AT ÞÓRARINSSTAÐIR

The early Christian church site at Þórarinsstaðir in Seyðisfjörður, East Iceland, is an example of how religious buildings and their belongings reflect both ecclesiastical and worldly contacts in early medieval Europe. The site was excavated in 1998–1999 and revealed, for what was then the first time in Iceland, a timber-constructed church building of two phases, dated to the early and late 11th century (Kristjánsdóttir 2004, pp. 84–95). Interestingly, the church buildings at Þórarinsstaðir appeared to be of the same form of construction as that characterizing many of the earliest churches found in Viking settlement areas in Northern Europe: an early type of stave church, here called a post church, notably one built of timber with earth-dug corner posts (McNicol 1997, Jensenius 2001, pp. 71–81).

The Þórarinsstaðir church was relatively small in both phases. The interior of the earlier church measured 4.8×2.7 m, including the choir. It had burned down and, when rebuilt, it was enlarged to the north and east to measure 6.4×4 m, also including the choir. Both phases were rectangular in shape, with a square choir and six corner posts each (Fig. 2). The earth-dug corner posts were relatively large compared to the size of the church building, measuring up to one meter in diameter. Identification showed that the churches, including the corner posts, were built of various types of driftwood,

including Siberian larch, Scots pine, Swiss stone pine and spruce, contrary to the contemporary traditions of using turf and stones as the main building material (Kristjánsdóttir *et al.* 2001). Since the discovery of the Þórarinsstaðir church, at least three other post churches identical to the Þórarinsstaðir church have been discovered in Iceland (Byock *et al.* 2005, Zoëga 2013, Zoëga and Bolander 2014).

The frequency of early, privately built timber churches in Iceland and a large part of Northern Europe has attracted steadily increasing attention from researchers in recent years. An intensive survey in Iceland's Skagafjörður valley shows, for example, that almost all farms had their own churches or a graveyard around AD 1100 (Zoëga and Sigurðarson 2010, see also Lane 2001, p. 151, Kristjánsdóttir 2004, p. 133, Nordeide 2011a, p. 88, Friðriksson and Vésteinsson 2011, pp. 55–56, Brink 2013, pp. 30–31). What is particularly noteworthy is how similar the early post churches found in Northern Europe are in construction (see, e.g., Christie 1982, p. 77, Jensenius 2001, pp. 71–81), as though the same architectural model – a catalogue of an ideal early church building – had been circulating during the Christianization period. Thus the post churches could be an indication of such an ideal for a religious place, invented by the Catholic Church through the Nordic archbishopric in Hamburg-Bremen, to which Northern Europe belonged until 1104. Not only does this demonstrate the close ties among European peoples through the far-reaching network of Christianity, but it simultaneously raises questions about the roles of architectural knowledge transformed by architects, builders and craftsmen as agents of Christian ideals.

However, private churches built on farms owned by lay landowners appear not to have had any obvious social place or function where they were built, so soon after the Conversion, other than as a response to the new church laws and regulations. They may

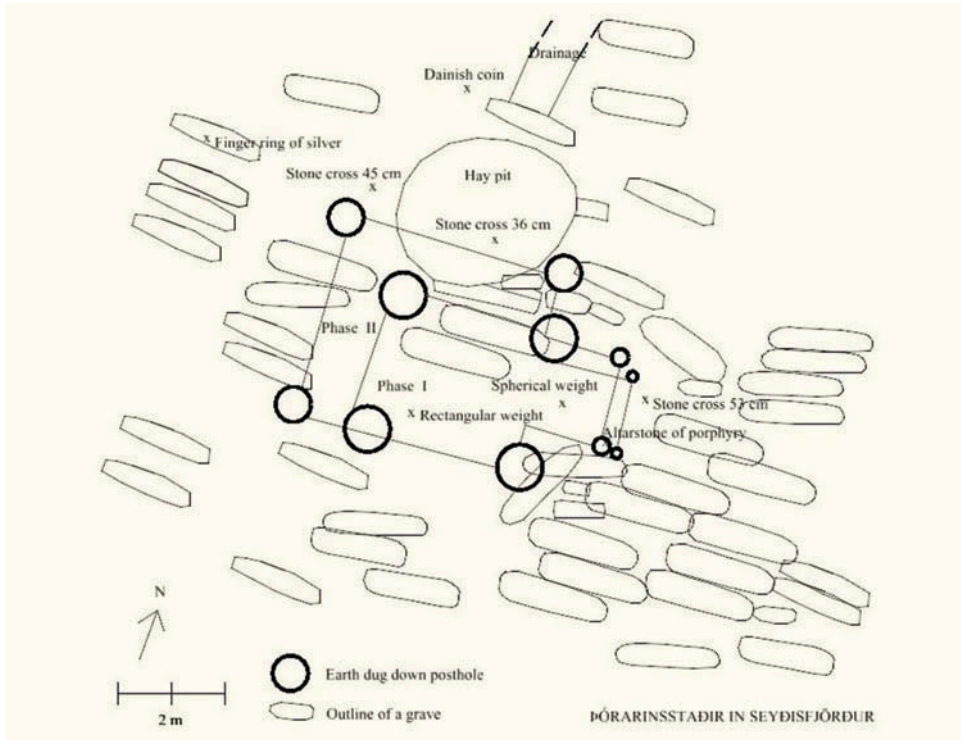


Fig. 2. *The post church at Þórarinsstaðir, both phases with graves* (© author).

well have been founded because of growing religious awareness or a practical need for access to a church (Nordeide 2013, pp. 4–7, Jensen 2013, p. 223). Yet it is plausible that they were established for economic and political reasons – in order to take advantage of Christian teaching. Specifically, building a private church secured economic capital and wealth for the owner. In building a church, the owner was officially taking a stance against basic church rules because the Catholic Church was intent on preventing secular authorities from unduly influencing churchly affairs (Stefánsson 2000, p. 35, Sigurðsson 2011, pp. 89–91). In fact, the Roman Church’s long-held aim of breaking away from the control of the secular aristocracy in Europe resulted in a lengthy struggle between ecclesiastical and worldly power over laws and legal jurisdiction. In Northern Europe, this struggle first appeared through

the Church’s battle against the raids of the Vikings. Later on, primarily during the initial periods after the Vikings’ gradual conversion in the 10th and 11th centuries, the struggle centred mainly on the ownership and management of church goods and benefices. In Iceland, these disputes are collectively known as the *staðamál* (“the issue of *staðir*”). The first significant conflict began in 1179, and the second, which started in 1275, ended successfully for the Church in 1297. After that, the Church began to adapt its own beneficial church system in Iceland (Stefánsson 2000, Sigurðsson 2011).

No matter what the owner’s purpose in maintaining a privately owned church – for religious or economic reasons – it had to be demonstrated that the church fulfilled the requirements of the Christian agenda. The material expressions of Christianity through the church buildings, with their symbolic

iconographies as holy places, may bear testimony to Christian practice but can also be observed as panopticons and, thus, metaphors of control and power giving instructions on how to behave. Oddly enough, panopticons must, however, be understood in themselves as active agents; therefore, accepting that the church (as a building) acts upon us demonstrates at the same time that the role of things goes beyond functionalism (Foucault 1977, Miller 2010). In fact, the church at Þórarinsstaðir possessed all the basic structural elements that a religious institution needed in order to function as such. Not only was it built in accordance with a well-known architectural style, but the excavation also showed that it owned three free-standing stone crosses and an imported altar stone made of green porphyry. In addition to this, a quarter of a Danish coin was found just outside the church and two weights inside it. The church building was also surrounded by a cemetery with 58 graves, one of them containing a silver ring with common Viking age decoration (Kristjánsdóttir 2004). These elements all point towards a discursive resistance involved in becoming Christian.

MATERIALIZING CHRISTIANITY

The possessions of the Þórarinsstaðir church are of particular importance for the analysis of the process of becoming Christian, as they underline the far-reaching network of Christianity and the knowledge it spread through Europe. The stone crosses found at the site are the oldest ones preserved in one piece that have been discovered in Iceland to date (Fig. 3). The crosses measured 36 cm, 45 cm and 53 cm high, respectively. They were all free-standing outside the northern and eastern gables of the church, facing the North Atlantic Ocean. Their small sizes may indicate that they were grave markers, although this is not certain because none of them was found attached to any particular grave. All were cut in *tufa*, a type of volcanic



Fig. 3. One of the three stone crosses found at Þórarinsstaðir (© National Museum of Iceland).

stone found in many areas in Iceland, including the mountainous areas of Seyðisfjörður. Although the crosses are made of local material, as is the church itself, their shape makes it clear that they were made according to a well-known design. This may indicate the consciousness of the church owner, as well as the knowledge of the craftsman, of how metaphorically to become Christian – religiously or not (see, e.g., Nordeide 2013, p. 8). Indeed, the new codes and ethics proposed by the Church were likewise an important factor in the initial process of becoming Christian by shaping and influencing people’s minds.

Contemporary crosses similar to those from Þórarinsstaðir are well known in Western Europe. The vast majority of them are found distributed along the west coast of Norway, in eastern Norway and the British

Isles and on the Continent. Only a few are preserved in Denmark, Sweden and Finland (Nordeide 2011b, pp. 128, 133–139). Generally, stone crosses and cross slabs on the west coast of Norway are seen as the result of influences originating in the British Isles (Birkeli 1973). Recently, however, it has been pointed out that the early stone crosses bear signs of other impulses that could, for example, be traced to missionary activity undertaken on behalf of the archbishopric in Hamburg-Bremen (Nordeide 2011a, p. 79, 2011b, pp. 135, 139–140). The three specimens found during the excavation at the Þórarinsstaðir church site could all have been made under local influences, but they can also be classified as cruciform models originating from such contexts on the Continent and in Norway.

The altar stone discovered on the site, however, is the only known ecclesiastical relic assigned to the church at Þórarinsstaðir. Importantly, it signifies the religious function of the building as a church, as it was found lying close to the southern posthole in the choir area, showing that it was used for divine services. Such altar stones were usually laid in frames of wood on the altar or carved into the top of the altar if the altar itself was not of stone; alternatively, a priest could carry a small altar stone with him while conducting services outside the church. In either case, the altar stones had to be formally blessed by the bishop before use (Lárusson 1980, pp. 114–115, Tesch 2007, pp. 50–51). Interestingly, one of the 145 dispensations given in the province of the archdiocese of Nidaros from 1438 to 1531 concerns a request to use a portable altar in locations outside the area for which permission had initially been given (Jørgensen and Saletnich 2004, p. 51).

The altar stone from Þórarinsstaðir is green in colour, with white dots. It measures 2.5 cm deep, 5.5 cm long and 6.3 cm high (Fig. 4). Its sides are polished but its ends are not, and both ends may possibly have been broken. Porphyry – the rock from which the altar stone found at Þórarinsstaðir is made –



Fig. 4. An altar stone of porphyry was found close to the southern posthole in the choir area of the church building at Þórarinsstaðir (© National Museum of Iceland).

originates from mines in Greece, but the altar stones themselves were produced in Cologne and Trier in Germany, initially as early as the 7th century (Tesch 2007, pp. 52–53). Several small altar stones made almost exclusively of green porphyry have been found in early medieval contexts, churches or towns, in Germany, Sweden, Wales, England, Scotland and Ireland, such as in the Hiberno-Norse town in Dublin. The small altar stones are regarded as having been brought to the British Isles through pilgrimage or Christian mission, for use as relic covers in larger altars or as portable ones (Lynn 1984, Colman and Elsner 1995, Tesch 2007). This could be true of the altar stone from the church at Þórarinsstaðir if it was not an indication of clerical dealing and interference in the Christianization process. Either way, the presence of the altar stone primarily highlights the involvement of the new world view and the becoming of Christianity.

The Danish silver coin found at Þórarinsstaðir was only a quarter of coin (i.e. cut coin) but is still identifiable as imitation of an Anglo-Saxon coin minted during the reign of Harthacnut (in 1035–1042) (Holt 2000, pp. 85–91). In pre-Christian and Christian Europe, coins were used not only for monetary transactions but also for rituals

and as personal jewellery. Coins of all kinds from all periods have thus been found in hoards, buildings, graves and water, and, in addition to their monetary role, they have been used as jewellery throughout their history. They were also used as amulets, badges, offerings, vows and donations, to mention a few examples of their ritual use during both pre-Christian and early Christian times (Gilchrist 2008, Nordeide 2011a, pp. 82–84, Gullbekk 2012, Hall 2012). Monetary offerings to buildings are particularly well documented in Western Christendom, with more than 50,000 single coins (whole, bent or cut) discovered in Scandinavian churches alone. These have been interpreted mainly as offerings because they are most commonly found beneath church floors, although some have been found in the surrounding cemetery (Nordeide 2011a, p. 84, Gullbekk 2012, pp. 1–8). At Þórarinsstaðir, the coin was found outside the church's northern wall, inside the cemetery. It was found lying in the ash layer of the burnt timber wall belonging to the earlier church building but did not show any signs of being burnt itself. In fact, the Danish coin was one of the essential factors for the dating of the phases of the church to the early and late 11th century, respectively (Kristjánsdóttir 2004, pp. 71–72). Coins found at church sites emphasize either resistance to change or a compromise between the old and the new, wherein old habits and traditions continue to exist, although the world around presents constant change. Still, the coin can likewise be interpreted as a sign that the church had been used as a venue for trading as well as for religious purposes such as donations or vows. This may also be true of the two weights found at the site, which could have been used to determine the value of the coin. The Danish coin and the weights, together with all of the other findings from the church site at Þórarinsstaðir, illustrate the presence of ongoing overseas contact during a time of migration and expansion, but they can also be viewed as evidence that Icelanders

were part of the network of Christianity in Europe.

The presence of the silver ring in grave no. 22 could be interpreted as a grave good, linking the site to traditional pre-Christian customs and thus signalling resistance to the new burial practices proposed by Christianity. However, jewellery and precious personal belongings are common in graves from both pre-Christian and Christian belief systems, just as the practice of burying the dead without grave goods is known in all periods (Lane 2001, p. 150, Gilchrist 2008, p. 121, Lund 2013, pp. 48–50). In general, then, grave goods cannot be regarded as tokens of religiosity of any kind but rather as miscellaneous, hybrid traditions of paying personal tribute to the dead. The ring in the grave at Þórarinsstaðir 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, linking pre-Christian motives to Christian traditions. Unfortunately, nothing that could have shed further light on the context of the find – human bones, teeth or traces of a coffin – could be observed in grave no. 22, owing to poor conditions for preservation of organic material at the site. The grave with the ring was found close to the entrance of the church, whereas the human bones found in other areas of the cemetery were slightly better preserved.

Nevertheless, the osteological analysis made on the sparse skeletal collection indicates that the women were buried on the northern side, the men on the southern side and the children grouped around the choir (Kristjánsdóttir 2004, pp. 53–55). This spatial division of graves is also a well-known tradition from other early Christian graveyards in the Nordic countries; the distribution is verified both in written laws and by archaeological material (see, e.g., Nilsson 1994, p. 46, 77–87, Zoëga 2013, pp. 17–20). According to other archaeological investigations, the practice of arranging graves in accordance with

the individual's age and sex seems to have been replaced before the turn of the 12th century, perhaps earlier, by the practice of arranging them according to social relationships or blood ties uniting family members in death, as still is done in contemporary and later parish churchyards (Jonsson 2009, pp. 158–162). The separation of men, women, and children in the earliest cemeteries may thus be seen as a reaction to the extra-marital strategies still in existence at that time, with more complex family ties within each household than was common later on, during the Catholic period. While the Danish coin and the silver ring may symbolize resistance to new traditions of Christianity or their syncretic fusion with earlier ones, the spatial division of the dead by sex and age underlines the compromises made in accordance with the premises of the Roman Catholic Church.

THE EARLY MEDIEVAL HOME IN ICELAND

The significant alterations that early medieval homes in Iceland underwent as a whole during the early phases of Christianization process may prove a useful source of information in the examination of the process of becoming Christian and the everyday resistance involved. The home possesses important information on social changes, as it can be seen as a microcosm of the surrounding societal structure while embodying a symbolic meaning memorized by the resident. The society is not limiting, however, but actually enabling because of the reciprocal interplay among the dwelling house, the residents and its structure (Bourdieu 1977, Giddens 1984). Inevitably, architecture is always a product of culture, interactively creating models for the social structure, as the Þórarinsstaðir church site exemplifies with its utensils, symbolizing Christian imaginary and motifs in a society that is becoming Christian. Architecture does not develop spontaneously, however, but evolves with the help of architects and craftsmen who

reciprocally become bearers of the culture behind their construction, as does the creator of the church building with its religious iconographies and symbols. At all events, the cause of the severe but gradual alteration of the architecture and layout in the dwelling houses in Iceland centres not only on how Icelanders adapted their everyday lives to accord with a new world view and became Christian, but also on how people make things and things make people (Miller 2010, pp. 47–49).

In fact, the architecture and layout of dwelling houses has been at the centre of research since the dawn of modern archaeology in Iceland. Over 30 ruins of dwelling houses have been excavated so far, dating from the settlement period and onwards (Vésteinnsson 2004), providing vast opportunities for further study. In spite of some flaws regarding uneven geographical and temporal division of the sites chosen for investigation, it is generally accepted that the earliest type of dwelling house in the newly settled society of Iceland began to change significantly, in terms of both building techniques and inner arrangements, in the early 11th century (see Vésteinnsson 2004, 2010, for further discussion of the limitations of the material) (Fig. 5).

At first, annexes were added to the old traditional single-room longhouse that the settlers brought with them to Iceland, in order to take over open-air activities such as food production. From the 11th to the 13th century, the main single-room hall also decreased in size and became one of several separated rooms of the dwelling house, along with the annexes that were later used as kitchens, pantries and even bathrooms. As time went on, special rooms, so-called *stofa*, serving as extra living quarters, became common and the entire complex was united by a central passage. This latest development can be seen in particular in farmhouses dating to the 13th to 14th century (Ágústsson 1982, pp. 255–268, Vésteinnsson 2010, pp. 30–32).

From time to time, hypotheses have been suggested in an attempt to explain what

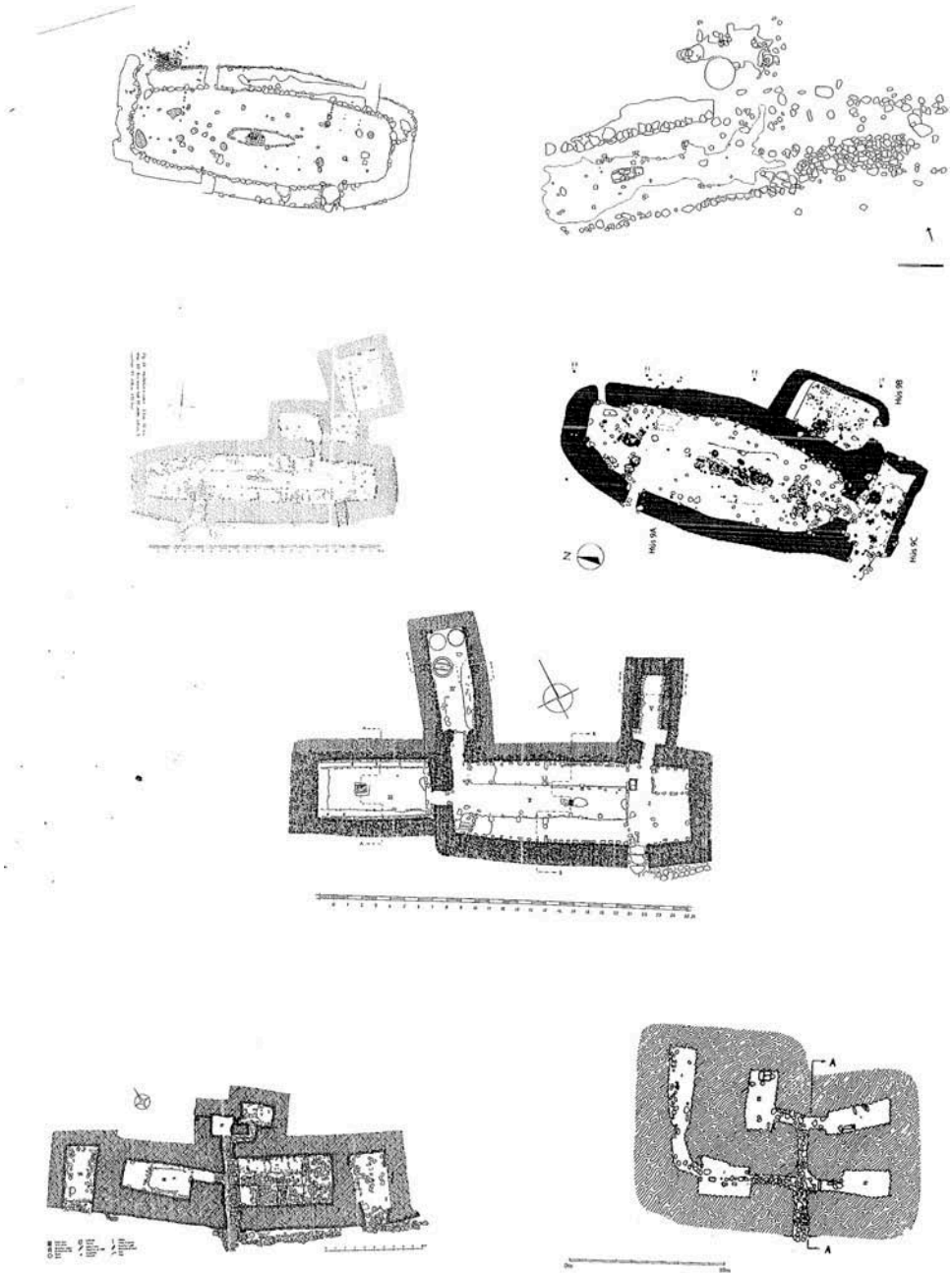


Fig. 5. Examples of excavated dwelling houses in Iceland showing the alterations the Icelandic homes underwent during the period AD 800–1550 (© Vala Gunnarsdóttir).

triggered the alterations of dwelling houses in Iceland, just as elsewhere in Northern Europe where similar changes appeared. Most of

these are based on the approaches of evolutionism and functionalism, although evolutionary interpretations have been the most

dominant and long-lived. In Iceland, the multifunctional structures of the dwelling houses have been understood as an indication of their evolution from being simple to being complex (Magnússon 1973, pp. 5–80, Ágústsson 1982, pp. 255–268). As regards the functionalistic approach, on the other hand, focus has been directed mainly at adaptation to the environment. Cooling climate during medieval times and the supposed lack of timber in Iceland, both for building and for fuel, is seen as the main reason for the architectural alterations. It is thought that dividing the longhouses into several smaller rooms in annexes and extensions made it easier to warm them up and required less timber for construction than did the larger single-room halls (Ágústsson 1982, pp. 255–268).

Nevertheless, along with growing criticism of evolutionism and functionalism in recent years, it has been emphasized that access to timber cannot have triggered significant changes in Icelandic dwelling houses because turf was one of the main materials used for construction from the time the earliest inhabitants brought the longhouse tradition to Iceland and until the 19th century. Only the post churches were built exclusively of timber. The tradition of using peat instead of timber for fuel is old as well. Furthermore, the inside measurements of the house shows that the average size of the dwelling houses did not increase even though the layout changed (Vésteinsson 2002, p. 156). Generally, there is nothing that points towards any pre-Christian utensils for the performance of rituals being kept in the dwelling houses and removed from them due to the Conversion. Neither is it obvious whether the houses became more practical or more advanced after having changed from a single-room building to a multi-cell structure.

In fact, functionalism, rationalism or human adaptation tends very often to become our default gear for explaining social changes. Although such processes may sometimes be some sort of co-factor behind

different alterations, they rarely give adequate attention to the active role of culture and society (Miller 2010, pp. 42–78). Traditionally, the mechanisms of Christianity have been sought not in homes but rather in churches, iconographies and burials, most likely due to the tendency in research to analyse religious activities in terms of dichotomous categories, such as of ritual vs. secular (see, e.g., Brück 1999). Certainly, becoming Christian did not necessarily involve greater religiousness but rather how people synchronized their everyday life – its religious and secular aspects – in accordance with Christian doctrine and laws, in church as much as at home. The household as a residential centre of both production and consumption does, accordingly, embrace a dual domestic and ritual function (Gilchrist 2012, pp. 114–115).

The recent criticism has nevertheless entailed different approaches to the subject based on social and economic factors or even feminism. In his studies on farm mounds, Vésteinsson (2010) relates architectural alterations to changes in household structure and ideology, reflecting the increased authority of the household manager – in this case, the housewife – who could by then effectively control and demarcate the different tasks of the home. All household activities thus took place in one spot, resulting in the emergence of the farm mounds that are primarily found in northern Norway, Greenland, the Faeroes and Orkney, in addition to Iceland, from the late Viking Age onwards. This is a valid hypothesis on the sudden emergence of farm mounds, but it does not explain what triggered the changes in the household structure and ideology that in turn changed the layout and organization of Nordic homes.

As is noted above, this article argues that much of the motivation for the alterations taking place in early Christian homes can be found in the church laws that introduced monogamous marriage as the ideal form of companionship throughout Europe, exemplifying at the same time the reciprocal

interplay among house, residents and society. Investigations show that domestic houses in English towns changed drastically with a shift towards the nuclear family structure during the 14th century (Rees Jones 2003, p. 202, Gilchrist 2012, pp. 114–115, 118–124). This underlines the aforementioned reciprocal interplay. The undivided longhouse of the Viking Age may thus mirror the then-current household forms based on partnerships of various kinds. However, to no less a degree than Christian marriage between a man and a woman, all the extra-marital unions and relationships then practised were based on strict rules regarding, for instance, loyalty towards the concubine's guardian, companions, other household members and children, all of whom had equal rights and status in the household (Magnúsdóttir 2001, Karras 2012). The rules of the time indicate that all family members may have lived together as a unit under one roof, independent of being defined as husbands, housewives, concubines, grandparents, servants, children or friends. After the Conversion, however, the gradually more segmented homes in early medieval Iceland indicate the differentiated, segmented and predefined tasks of family members only, such as of man and wife, perhaps grandparents, children and servants living in dwelling houses that were divided into several separated rooms.

The struggle among the Roman Church, the clergy and the secular power over the various manifestations of Christian teaching in everyday life lasted throughout the Catholic period, while the laity compromised much sooner in matters such as marriage and even burial practices. Therefore, the gradual alterations of homes underline the general acceptance among the laity of the Christian doctrine that physical temptation is a burden of humans and their abandonment of the extra-marital unions that may have provided more flexibility than monogamous marriage, with its strict margins. This is yet another reminder, that, according to Foucault's theories, power relations always consist, on the

one hand, of coercion and, on the other hand, of reaction on behalf of those who exercise power, irrespective of whether or not that power is held by formal authorities.

KNOWLEDGE AND THE RELATIONSHIP OF POWER

Clearly, the Christianization process was neither unilateral nor a rational top-down act enabling the worldly authorities to retain their leading position. On the contrary, it was minted by uneven, multilateral resistances and compromises in everyday life among the clergy, the worldly authorities and the laity due to the tension and combination between old and new knowledge, enabling all involved to exercise power and react. Thus, as is emphasized above, becoming Christian was not necessarily a function of greater religiousness or a deeper religious devotion but rather of how people manifested new knowledge in the structure of their society through their capacity to negotiate and compromise through everyday resistance. Explicitly, power relations are not the power itself but the capacity to act on others through resistance that can be exerted through a general reaction, obedience, opposition, ignorance, fight, enforcement, rejection, compromise or any action, but without necessarily any shared solution in the matter in concern (Foucault 1994, pp. 336–340).

Obviously, the Christian doctrine of physical temptations as a burden of humans was a new concept in Nordic societies, running counter to existing family structures and marital habits, which were extremely important for friendship, inheritance and economic wealth in the former societies of the Norse Vikings, including Icelandic society. Resistance to the new way of living emerged most noticeably in official disagreements between lay landowners and the Roman Church over ecclesiastical reforms but also in the various marital disputes that were in fact closely related matters. According to Foucault (1994, p. 331), the main objective of such struggles is not to attack institutions of power or a certain class or

group; instead, they should be seen as conducting the effects of oppression or change. The compromises and negotiations gradually made by the public, the church, the chieftains, craftsmen, builders and architects, due to the encountering of old and new traditions during the Christianization process, were materialized through new ecclesiastical buildings, such as the churches, iconographies, burials and, oddly enough, altered homes.

Taken together, the examples presented here show how Icelanders became Christian by dealing with new knowledge in their everyday practices that were coloured by memories of old habits. Therefore, becoming Christian involved the cultural construction of new identities: following innovative guidelines of Christianity in daily habits, which included interactively ecclesiastical and worldly affairs, while simultaneously striving to preserve the old way of living. In fact, Christianity was organized not by the Roman Church alone but mutually by all participants in the Christian discourse – and it still is.

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