HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Early Religious Practice in Norse Greenland:

From the Period of Settlement to the 12th Century

Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs

Andrew Umbrich

September 2012

Háskóli Íslands
Hugvísindasvið
Medieval Icelandic Studies

Early Religious Practice in Norse Greenland:

From the Period of Settlement to the 12th Century

Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs

Andrew Umbrich
Kt.: 130388-4269

Leiðbeinandi: Gísli Sigurðsson

September 2012

Table of Contents

List of Pictures

1.0 Introduction

The Norse colony in Greenland existed from its discovery and settlement by Eiríkr rauði in 985/6 until its decline in the 15th century. The exact causes of this decline are widely disputed and are the topic of many books and papers but will not be discussed in this paper due to its complexity and lack of relevance to this thesis. The exact population of Greenland is unknown but modern estimates place the population of both Eastern and Western Settlements to between 3000 and 5000 at the peak of the colonies and an overall population during the colonies' existence at about 70 000[1]. The history of this period is not well known for there are no accounts written by the Greenland Norse yet the memory of Greenland remained alive in archaeology, the medieval Icelandic Sagas, contemporary knowledge, Grœnlendinga þáttir (Tales of Greenlanders), Icelandic annals, and several other works. Its status became known as an independent but secondary settlement from Iceland with its own political organization and connections to Norway. Contact between Greenland and the rest of the world was not well recorded but there is much evidence that suggests that trade was abundant[2]. Scholars believe that communication between Greenland with Norway and Iceland started strong but slowly deteriorated or eventually stopped sometime during the 14th and 15th centuries. All the sagas written about or that include Greenland were written at least 200 years after its settlement (1200 C.E. +) and were not based on accurate historical knowledge, rather they were based on multiple oral traditions both contemporary and older, hearsay from travelers and merchants, and creative fiction by the authors. The sagas kept the memory of early Greenland alive and portrayed an image of the remote land which included tales and notions of savage paganism, the supernatural including trolls and other monsters, outlawry and exile, and an unforgiving harsh and barely inhabited wilderness which served as a perfect setting for Icelanders to explore and meet physical and religious conflicts in a heroic narrative. It can be discomforting for readers and scholars to know that Greenland's history will never be fully known. Fortunately we can still gather much information and a lot can be said without too much doubt.

[1] Seaver, Kirsten A. *The Frozen Echo: Greenland and the Exploration of North America ca A.D. 1000-1500.* Stanford: Standford University Press, 1996: page 202.

[2] Kirsten Seaver devotes an entire chapter in her latest book *The Last Vikings* (pages 101-116) on Greenland's foreign trade. She talks about the lucrative walrus tooth and narwhal horn trade and explains how they may have been kept hidden or secret for economic gain; this may also explains as to why there are few written documents and we know so little on communication between Greenland and the rest of the world.

Norse Greenland scholarship assumes that in the founding of Norse Greenland Christianity already existed[3]. However, very little work has been done on this topic and little has been said for certain. There have been a few works done on the topic but they are only brief summaries and they assume information rather than provide evidence for it. Early religious practice in Greenland is usually just a side note on the topic of settlement or a small chapter in a larger body of work and few authors go into any real detail. In fact, there is actually a lot of information on the topic and many reasonable conclusions can be drawn. How many Icelanders were Christian at the time of Greenland's settlement? Were there any pagans? Did Greenland ever officially convert to Christianity and, if so, when? These questions cannot be answered with complete certainty. However, an awareness of what is known and unknown about religion in Greenland can help answer these questions. One of the biggest problems with this topic is that there is a large lack of written material available. The most troubling thing about this subject is that there are two conflicting forces at play, each telling a difference story; the first is the written record that suggests Greenland was first inhabited by a pagan majority with a Christian minority, while the second is the archaeological record which suggests the land was held by a solely Christian society exempting one stone loom-weight depicting Thor's Hammer and a stick inscribed with runes possibly relating to Norse mythology. Because of these opposing records, the historical record must consult other forms of evidence or means in which more information can be synthesized in order to come to a good understanding of the topic. Therefore, this thesis will be focusing on the historiography of the topic, that is, who has written on this topic and what we currently know because of previous scholarship. I will use this scholarship in conjunction with the written record and their inherent problems, in order to interpret a plausible conclusion. The archaeological record will be consulted and used to show what we can know through the analysis of farm and church ruins, skeletal remains, graveyards, and some objects of possible pagan significance. I will also show how the Icelandic settlers that came to Greenland were of Gaelic-Norse origin – and therefore many were likely Christian – and how that will affect the

[3] Here is a list of several publications, from the past 70 years, (there are many other examples, these are but a few) all stating that Greenland was likely Christian from the inception of settlement or right after:
-Kristjánsson, Jónas. *The First Settler of the New World the Vinland Expedition of Thorfinn Karlsefni*. Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2005: page 11. He states "Christianity came to Greenland, as it did in Iceland, about the year 1000".
-Arneborg, Jette. "Greenland and Europe." In *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, edited by William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward, 304-317. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000: page 311. She states the settlers "converted to Christianity before they arrived".
-Keller, Christian. *The Eastern Settlement Reconsidered.* Oslo, 1989: page 211. He states "a number of the first settlers may have been Christians already on their arrival in Greenland".
-Stefansson, Vilhjalmur. *Greenland.* London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1943: page 69. He states "Both countries [Iceland and Greenland] were already partly Christian at the meeting of the millenniums".

historical record. Fortunately there are many things that we do know. The following is a list of evidence that will be discussed and analyzed in different sections of this thesis:

1. *Landnámabók*, and therefore *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga*[4], agree that a Christian man travelled with Eiríkr rauði to Greenland upon settlement.
2. *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga* both claim Greenland was pagan during the period of settlement. They both also acknowledge that Greenland was eventually converted to Christianity.
3. Both *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga* contain pagan and Christian characters. The pagans are viewed negatively and the Christians are viewed positively. Both result from authorial bias, the authors are obviously Christian as the texts are written from a Christian perspective.
4. *Landnámabók* records the initial settlement of Iceland, and specifically the region of Breiðafjörður, as being settled by many Gaelic-Norse people from the British Isles. Icelandic DNA analysis supports this[5]. The British Isles had been Christian for hundreds of years before Iceland was converted and many of the settlers in Breiðafjörður were already Christian and households may have been of mixed faith.
5. Archaeology has only ever found two pagan-related objects in Greenland; a depiction of Thor on a stone loom-weight, and a stick carved with runes possibly describing Norse mythology.
6. All archaeology points towards a Christian society. There have been no pagan burials found. There are many churches, graveyards and graves (earliest ones are from the late 10th century), objects and art for Christian use or depictions thereof, all of which support a Christian society.
7. Like Iceland, as well as most Norse countries, Greenland would not have been a perfect example of a "proper" Christian society. Rather, it would have been a looser form of Christianity with leftover pagan ideals or practices, Christianity would later become more structured and orthodox.
8. The Icelandic sagas and their writers were not well informed on the actual state of Greenland and its history. There was no cumulative or collective knowledge of Greenland in writing, in oral tradition, and social memory by Icelanders and the rest of the world.
9. The Norse colonies in Greenland were Christian before their disappearance in the 15th century.

[4] Both of these sagas are referencing *Landnámabók* on this point.
[5] Sigurðsson, Gísli. "The North Atlantic Expansion." In *The Viking World*, edited by Neil Price and Stefan Brink, 562-570. New York: Routledge, 2012: page 564.

1.1 Scholarly Works and Sources Used in This Study

There are several works that have greatly contributed to the creation of this thesis. Leslie Abrams' *Early Religious Practice in the Greenland Settlement,* Jonathan Grove's *The Place of Greenland in Medieval Icelandic Saga Narratives*, and Gísli Sigurðsson's works *Greenland in the Sagas of Icelanders: What Did the Writers Know - And How Did They Know It?* and *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*. All of these works have greatly aided my research for this topic. Abrams work is important because her article addresses the same topic as this thesis with a few exceptions: her work is more of a summary than a detailed study; it lacks several areas of research, and is left rather open ended in its conclusion without any clear solution. I should mention, however, that this thesis would be the poorer without having had some of her research. Grove's article is not directly useful to the topic of this thesis but does help it indirectly; Grove analyses how the saga writers themselves imagined Greenland when writing the sagas rather than what we can know of Greenland based on them. This analysis helps put all the written evidence into perspective and allows a thorough understanding of the written source material as well as their authors and how it can be used effectively. Lastly, Sigurðsson's article and book must be acknowledged for his work on the Icelandic oral tradition which helped me frame and structure this thesis in light of the sagas. Understanding the oral versus the written tradition, as well as using Grove's work to help imagine how the saga writers viewed and imagined Greenland, helped me read the sagas and allowed me to interpret them better than I would have previously. Ari Þorgilsson (Ari hinn fróði) and Snorri Sturluson are the only known authors of the sources discussed in this work. Ari's *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, Eiríks saga rauða* (*ESR*[6]), and *Grœnlendinga saga* (*GS*[7]) are the main sources discussed in my thesis, although many other Icelandic Family Sagas –such as *Auðunar þáttr vestfirzka, Fóstbroeðra saga, Jökuls þáttr Búasonar, Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss, Króka-Refs saga, Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls,* and *Flóamanna saga* are used by Grove and Sigurðsson in their works to arrive at their conclusions. *Heimskringla* and *Grœnlendinga þáttr* will also be briefly used.

[6] *Eiríks saga rauða* for the remainder of this paper will be shortened to *ESR*.
[7] *Grœnlendinga saga* for the remainder of this paper will be shortened to *GS*.

1.2 Inherent Problems with This Study: Written Sources and Archaeology

There are many problems when dealing with the topic of religion and faith in Greenland. The most frustrating problem is that no absolute answers can be drawn from this thesis – we cannot say "X number of Greenlanders were Christian while the rest were pagan" – but there are many things we can discard as implausible and unlikely from the very beginning, as well as other evidence that suggests more certitude. By gathering all my evidence and research together I feel confident in stating that at the end of this work I will be able to draw a conclusion that will be convincing and credible. The written material for this subject is inherently biased and scarce. Sagas are the bulk of the written material used in my thesis, and like with all sagas, it is difficult to evaluate their historical merit. Furthermore, we have nothing written by Greenlanders and must rely on Icelandic Sagas – for written material – to determine anything about Greenland. As with all research using sagas it must be noted that there are many problems when trying to use them for historical information: the sagas were written in different locations in Iceland, were written in different centuries, the authors had access to different books and had different individual knowledge, the oral sources from which many authors based their stories on came from different traditions, all authors had different narrative talents, and the locations where they were written are unknown. We do however have an idea for the dates of most of the sagas, none of them are exact but many are approximate, manuscripts, on the other hand, are much easier to date[8]. The archaeology for this topic is a lot clearer and easier to work with but is not without problems of its own; archaeology in Greenland is problematic because so few sites have been excavated and/or dated. Many of the sites that have been dated and excavated are not all relevant to this study for they are dated much later than the settlement period. However, these younger sites are not entirely useless. There are 16 churches claimed to exist by information from various texts, and archaeology has found many of these. However there is only one church in Norse Greenland from the settlement period that can be used in this thesis. Archaeology clearly shows that Greenland was organized as a Christian society and shows almost no evidence of paganism at all. The difficulty in this study is to determine to what extent we can use these dated and undated sites to determine the religion of the Norse in the settlement period.

[8] Sagas are notoriously difficult to date and are very problematic; seeing as many of them are originally composed through the oral tradition, are authorless, and we do not know where most were written. Furthermore, many of the manuscripts are in very poor condition; many are missing leaves or have lost content due to wear and tear. There are many different ways to date a manuscript; linguistics and philology, through illuminations and illustrations, through the analysis of the manuscripts' physical materials (binding, ink, and leaves), through content, and much more. For further information on this topic consult Einar Ó. Sveinsson's essay *Dating the Icelandic sagas: An Essay in Method*. Full information on this work can be found in my bibliography.

Luckily there are more than ruins to analyze; there are also objects and skeletons. The objects are few and only two can be associated with paganism and the skeleton remains are numerous but nameless and many undated – we cannot know for certain who the remains belong to but there is reason to believe that most are from the settlement period and would be notable figures such as that of the leader of the settlement (Eiríkr rauði) and his family. There are no tombstones or written markers for the graves.

Paganism in Norse scholarship has many issues of its own. Unfortunately most of what we know of Norse paganism has come to us through Christian sources. There are two main written sources that exist which have informed scholars on Norse paganism: *The Prose Edda*, also known as the *Younger Edda* or *Snorri's Edda*, and *The Poetic Edda*, also known as the *Sæmundar Edda* or the *Elder Edda*. Both works were composed in the 13th century. There is also a lot of archaeology that contributed much to our knowledge of Norse paganism. Considering that our notions of Norse paganism are derived from these Christian sources it makes our knowledge of the content very limited and highly speculative; the sources are hard to trust and are full of Christian bias but it is all that remains to us to analyze. This will not be discussed in much detail in this thesis but it is important to note.

1.3 Origin of Greenland Settlers and Greenlandic Law

The settlers in Greenland all came from Iceland, but more importantly, from specific parts of Iceland, according to what the texts tell us. Breiðafjörður is the primary region from which Icelanders emigrated to Greenland. Therefore it is important to trace the settlers from Breiðafjörður back to their origins prior to their settlement of Iceland, which is only about 100 years from the Greenlandic settlement period. These Icelanders were mostly of Gaelic-Norse origin from the British Isles and many were Christian. Knowing this greatly affects how we are to view the Icelanders in Greenland. Using *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*, the *Vínland Sagas*, and DNA evidence we are able to trace the origin of the Greenlanders and Icelanders. Furthermore, through this study, I will analyze the context of Norse Christianity and how it was different from other places in Europe. The Norse may have had an inherited cultural mindset portraying Christianity as a domestic religion[9] fit for women, slaves, and

[9] Abrams, Lesley. "Early Religious Practice in the Greenland Settlement." *Norse Greenland: Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008 - Journal of the North Atlantic* 2 (2009): page 62. She claims "Christianity belonged primarily to the society of slaves and women—the politically incompetent".

Stefansson, Vilhjalmur. *Greenland*. London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1943: page 57 and 69. He writes "The Christians were generally women; for in that day Christianity was considered an effeminate or pusillanimous religion. Appropriate for women, servants, and slaves."

children while paganism was viewed as strong; therefore many chieftains may have been pagan among a Christian household. It is also possible that the Norse were a homogenous people; in Scandinavia and the North Atlantic regions. With all this in mind, I will also use Icelandic law as a model for how Greenland may have adopted their own legal system to create a better picture of Greenland overall, in the attempt to facilitate understanding of religion in Greenland.

And also, "the religion [Christianity] was still [immediately prior to the official conversion] unfashionable – looked upon as proper for women, slaves, and the lower grades generally, but as effeminate and scarcely fitting to men of rank and spirit."

2.0 Historiography

2.1 Lesley Abrams' Early Religious Practice in the Greenland Settlement

Leslie Abrams wrote a short article on the subject of Christianity but, as I hope to demonstrate in this paper, her conclusions on the topic were insufficient and lacking. She is very cautious in her article and has good reason for this, however, it is possible to push it farther than she did and to state reasonable assertions on the topic rather than leave it as open-ended as she did. She neglects to look at the origins of the Icelandic settlers of Greenland, and does not use her own information to attempt any assertive conclusions. Abrams claims the "the question of how the transition from one religion to another worked in practice can only have hypothetical answers[10]" which is true yet she allows this statement to rule her conclusions on the topic. She ends her paper with exploring all the possibilities: the Greenlanders may have been pagan majority among a Christian minority, they may have been a Christian majority among a pagan minority, or they might have been a hybrid of both. I think it is possible to push further than this and assert more than she is willing to try. She does however bring up many important points that are useful to this thesis, claiming "no matter how the church wanted it to be seen, conversion was not something effected in a moment[11]"; this is important to acknowledge because it complicates the subject. If conversion was effected in a moment as *Íslendingabók* presents it, with the Lawspeaker contemplating the fate of religion in Iceland under a blanket then this thesis would be a lot simpler[12]. However, even in *Íslendingabók* it is mentioned that the eating of horse meat and the exposure of infants were to remain and also that paganism would be allowed to be practiced but only in private. This would mean that there were still many who desired to remain pagan so even in a convenient story such as this it is not absolute conversion and those who would practice paganism would do so in private and we would not be able to record these people or their number. In the Greenlandic case, we have two stories of conversion[13] but both are from the *Vínland Sagas* and were not written by a Greenlander, and we also know it is unrealistic to picture a sudden conversion. Abrams also compares conversion methods of African

[10] Abrams, Lesley. "Early Religious Practice in the Greenland Settlement." *Norse Greenland: Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008 - Journal of the North Atlantic* 2 (2009): page 52.
[11] Ibid., page 53.
[12] "Íslendingabók." In *Íslenzk fornrit I: Íslendingabók: Landnámabók*, edited by Jakob Benediktsson, 3-28. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968: page 16.
[13] We have the story of Leifr's conversion of Greenland by command of the Norwegian King Óláfr Tryggvason as well as Þjóðhildr´s attempts to convert her husband Eiríkr rauði; his refusal to convert resulted in his wife refusing to sleep with him until he converted. Both stories are given to us from the Vinland sagas and will be discussed later, in length.

missionaries to the Greenlandic case[14]. This comparison is not perfect for obvious reasons of geographical and cultural differences between Africa and Greenland, but it remains useful. It would have been interesting had she compared conversion methods and the inception of Christian communities in the North Atlantic region: the Faroe Islands, the British Isles, Iceland, and even Norway and Denmark would be useful. But this also presents many problems for they are not well documented. She is also skeptical of the skeletal remains found in the graveyard surrounding Brattahlíð; she claims that these remains may have been reburied from other sites (possibly pagan?). However, there was only a couple of graves in the entire site that archaeologists believe to be a reburial; mainly, one pit that contained the disassembled remains of 13 people. These people are believed to have shared a common fate and to have had their remains found/gathered and eventually moved to the graveyard. Besides this one mass grave and a couple others, and according to Krogh, there is no reason to think that any other of these graves contain reburials. Reburials were not uncommon in Christian communities but archaeological interpretation suggests that most of these graves were original and untouched. These graves will be further discussed in chapter 4. Abrams also points out that the "Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum (Adam of Bremen) claims that Christianity had "recently" arrived to Greenland, written in the 1070s[15]" but the term "recently" is ambiguous. How long? And how many people were converted? She also points out a very important consideration for this topic; the fact that Christianity in Norse history was often a domestic religion and was considered belonging "primarily to the society of slaves and women — the politically incompetent"[16]. This suggests that the men and chieftains may have been pagan among a Christian household; such as the case of Eiríkr rauði who the sagas claim remained pagan his whole life despite his family's conversion to Christianity (however Leifr was also Christian). Another issue raised by Abrams is that there may have been churches in early Greenland but there was no official Church. There was no official religious organization until the 12th century, at least. Greenland did not have its first bishop until the early 1120s; it was recorded in the Icelandic annals that in 1121 Greenland's bishop Eiríkr upsi Gnúpsson set out to look for Vínland[17]. Lastly, another very important consideration is raised in Abrams' article, for what reasons would the Greenlanders have converted? For material reasons such as wealth, power, social status, and legal order? Or for

[14] Ibid., page 54.
[15] Ibid., page 56.
[16] Ibid., page 62.
[17] Sigurðsson, Gísli. *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method.* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004: page 265.

philosophical considerations such as life after death, right and wrong, spiritual considerations, …etc? I find Abrams' results convincing,

> "The choice involved material considerations (would the new religion bring greater wealth?), political considerations (would it increase the king's power?), social considerations (would it strengthen family ties?), or legal considerations (would it keep better order?). These are clearly matters of authority, not faith, matters of practical living, not believing. The touchpoint was the performance of ritual, which acted as a binding force, but also clarified who did not belong. While faith was extremely important, it was faith in the new power that really mattered…the sagas portray Christ as a more effective overlord and a better patron, and offer his superiority in this department as a good reason to convert. These are material, not philosophical or theological considerations[18]."

Abrams article was very useful in my research and I owe the article acknowledgement for helping as much as it did but her work should not be considered definitive. Her article lacks important areas of evidence and is too short to cover all the required material. She did not utilize archaeology to its maximum potential, did not investigate the Gaelic-Norse origins and their relationship with Christianity, and she did not examine the possible causation of Greenland's conversion based on its legal structure and its relationship to Iceland's legal system – I will be covering this in Chapter 5. Unfortunately she did not have access to Grove's or Sigurðsson's research which are both very important and would have added much to her article.

2.2 Jonathan Grove's The Place of Greenland in Medieval Icelandic Saga Narratives

This article is of particular significance because it allows the reader of the Icelandic sagas to understand how the saga writers viewed Greenland and why they depicted Greenland as it was: a remote far away land in which savage pagans consort with trolls and practice magic in a barren wilderness. With this information we are better able to sift through the fictional elements of the sagas in order to try to come as close to the real Norse Greenland as possible, while staying aware that most of it may be fictional to begin with. Grove uses *Auðunar þáttr vestfirzka, Grœnlendinga saga, Eiríks saga rauða, Fóstbroeðra saga, Jökuls þáttr Búasonar, Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss, Króka-Refs saga, Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls,* and *Flóamanna saga* to show how the saga writers used Greenland as a literary device for good storytelling. Grove concludes that not only was Greenland used as a literary device but it also served as a method "employed to define the horizons of Icelandic self-identification" and "provides the

[18] Abrams, Lesley. "Early Religious Practice in the Greenland Settlement." *Norse Greenland: Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008 - Journal of the North Atlantic* 2 (2009): page 54.

liminal context within which he [the Icelandic protagonist] first displays the strength of purpose that will find its reward in more prestigious settings, and finally transform his status at home[19]". The saga writers were not interested in giving accurate historic portrayals for their stories; they wanted to use Greenland to create a dynamic environment for their characters to shine. Grove points out that Greenland was often used in the sagas as a place for exile[20] for it was viewed as the known limits of the western world[21], only adding to its remoteness. Furthermore, the sagas make "Greenland a theater for the religious conflicts and the ambiguities remembered as having attended the transition from paganism to Christianity[22]". With this in mind it is easy to see why Grove's research is important for this work. Also it is only in the Icelandic Sagas which Greenland is used in a narrative setting; therefore we only have these sagas to consult for information on Greenland and only *ESR* and *GS* are directly useful to this paper. Grove's work compliments well with Gísli's work on the oral tradition of Iceland; more details on this will be found below.

2.3 Gísli Sigurðsson's Greenland in the Sagas of Icelanders: What Did the Writers Know - And How Did They Know It? and The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method

This paper would not be the same without Sigurðsson's work on the oral tradition. I will not go into much detail about his work *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method* because it would not serve this thesis. However I cannot write this thesis without mentioning it. His book explains how the Icelandic oral tradition was used in combination with the written tradition to help create the sagas. The section on *ESR* and *GS* (the *Vínland Sagas*) is of particular significance because Sigurðsson was able to determine which route the Greenlanders took to reach the various places in Vínland[23] by comparing the two sagas to modern day knowledge and scholarship of the area. Also, in his article *Greenland in the Sagas of Icelanders: What Did the Writers Know - And How Did They Know It?* is useful because he analyses the Icelandic Sagas (the same ones as listed above in the paragraph on Grove) by comparing and contrasting them all to see if we can see a

[19] Grove, Jonathan. "The Place of Greenland in Medieval Icelandic Saga Narrative." *Norse Greenland: Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008 - Journal of the North Atlantic* 2 (2009): page 32.
[20] Ibid., page 34.
[21] There are also Vínland, Markland, and Helluland which are even farther west than Greenland but we do not know how well those areas were mapped at the time nor do we know how many people were aware of their existence. However, there are many references of Vínland and Hvítramannaland in many different sources which may suggest that Vínland was well known at the time, and for a while after its discovery. Greenland would certainly have had a better social memory for these places. See footnote #26 for more details.
[22] Ibid., page 38.
[23] It is often the case that the term "Vínland" is used to encompass Markland and Helluland as well as Vínland. In this paper I will be referring to Vínland as a grouped term to define the geographical region in North America that was explored and temporarily settled by the Norse.

continuous written/oral tradition or whether the saga writers knew different information about Greenland from different times than one another. He writes,

> "It is…by no means certain that we should assume that those who wrote the sagas of Icelanders were in a position to detain information about Greenland from other books. We should also be cautious in assuming that the saga tradition was evenly spread and equally well known in all of Iceland at all times[24]."

Sigurðsson concludes that the Icelanders had very little shared knowledge or memory of Greenland and that the sagas show knowledge of Greenland in different times and places. He also points out that a large number of Icelanders had inherited a shared memory of the British Isles[25] and Norway through a common past. Whereas, those in Iceland did not live in Greenland and therefore could not have formed a shared memory from which information could be drawn. Furthermore he concludes that the picture of Greenland is identical in different sagas but is fragmentary, the sagas seem to reflect individual experiences in different places in Greenland, the sagas do not make a complete and unified overall picture of Greenland, there was no particular agenda in preserving the memory of Greenland (unlike Vínland[26]), and that stories of Greenland came and went with seafarers and merchants[27]. He also includes a couple of examples that prove that some authors did not use *Landnámabók* and its contents for information in the saga[28].

In combining the information from both Grove and Sigurðsson we are given a method that allows us to read the sagas in a critical fashion; we are given the means to create an informed interpretation that will allow for a better reading of the sagas. With these two articles one can start to make plausible assumptions in order to determine a sense of historical accuracy. However, it is never clear if historical information can ever really be drawn from the sagas, but these two articles help narrow that margin of uncertainty. Sigurðsson's article does not deal with the topic at hand but his book does. He maintains that the Greenlanders were likely Christian from the beginning of settlement due to archaeological evidence found during the excavations of Þjóðhildr's Church (more on this in Chapter 4) and due to evidence of their

[24] Sigurðsson, Gísli. "Greenland in the Sagas of Icelanders: What Did the Writers Know - And How Did They Know It?" In *Stanzas of Friendship*, edited by Natalja Yu., Konovalova, Irina G., Melnikova, Elena A., Podossinov, Alexandr V. Gvozdetskaja, 73-90. Moscow: Dmitriy Pozharskiy University, 2011: page 76.

[25] Ibid.

[26] There was use in preserving the memory of Vínland for certain groups of people. The natural resources of Markland (especially) were of great value to Greenlanders and people in need of wood. This knowledge may have been kept secret for monopoly on trade but it may also have been public. For the significance of keeping the memory of Vínland alive, see Ljungquist's *The Significance of Remote Resource Regions* referenced in my bibliography for more detailed information. His article is very informative but does not belong in this thesis.

[27] Ibid., page 90.

[28] Ibid., page 82. In *Fóstbroeðra saga* the author does not use the contents of *Landnámabók*, whereas the authors of *ESR* and *GS* do. Perhaps the author of *Fóstbroeðra saga* was ignorant of the work or perhaps he simply chose to ignore the information it provides because it did not suit the purpose of the narrative.

Norse-Gaelic roots and the previous exposure to Christianity (more on this in Chapter 5)[29]. However, Sigurðsson challenges Grove in one aspect: he disagrees with his assumption that we can assume that knowledge of Greenland was based on a continual and cumulative oral tradition[30]. Sigurðsson does an excellent job in his article of proving that we cannot make that assumption and I find Sigurðsson's conclusion to be more reliable.

2.4 Conclusion

To conclude, these three articles are of paramount importance for this thesis. Abrams's article was the first work I consulted when starting my research, she really helped in laying down the ground work for the topic by providing a good summary. However, as I have mentioned before, reading her article also allowed me to see further areas of research that were needed for a more complete picture of all the evidence available. Because her work is short it is limited and it lacks many important details. Furthermore, her conclusions are not wrong but they are purposely open-ended, cautious, vague, and she entertains all the possibilities even if some are more likely than others. This is a safe approach but the purpose of this thesis is to take all the previous arguments on religion in Greenland and all the information known in order to add to the debate, eliminate the weakest or unlikely theories, and to hopefully attain a better sense of historical accuracy. Concerning Grove and Sigurðsson they are important not because they give me relevant information on the topic of religion – although both touch the topic briefly – but because the process and approach they allow me to use in order to access the information I need is useful. This critical approach allows me to properly understand the written source material, the Icelandic Sagas, which are inherently problematic and hard to analyze. Grove's article gives the reader the ability to understand, to our best efforts, how the authors of the sagas imagined and created Greenland through their narrative. Once we understand this notion, we can critically read the sagas referring to Greenland and eliminate these creations. Through Grove's work we are able to determine that the sagas imagined Greenland in a very fantastical fashion in which many realities are greatly exaggerated. The authors' views on paganism, savagery, and the remoteness of Greenland are three prime examples of blatant embellishment while the mention of trolls and the supernatural are clearly imaginative creations for the use of good storytelling. In Sigurðsson's two works we are given the tools from which the reader can distinguish between oral and written traditions

[29] Sigurðsson, Gísli. *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method.* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004: page 260.
[30] Sigurðsson, Gísli. "Greenland in the Sagas of Icelanders: What Did the Writers Know - And How Did They Know It?" In *Stanzas of Friendship*, edited by Natalja Yu., Konovalova, Irina G., Melnikova, Elena A., Podossinov, Alexandr V. Gvozdetskaja, 73-90. Moscow: Dmitriy Pozharskiy University, 2011: page 74.

as well continual and broken/disconnected oral traditions. Both his book and his article deal directly with Greenland. However in combining the methods of Grove and Sigurðsson, one is given an educated lens in which one can view and apply to all the sagas to properly tackle the subject of religion in Greenland. Sigurðsson determines that most of the sagas relating to Greenland are based on disconnected oral traditions that contain little to no common social memory of Greenland. This is especially evident when he presents numerous examples of sagas that share some common knowledge of works such as *Landnámabók* while others do not employ it. Furthermore, concerning the *Vínland Sagas*, he makes it clear that the sailing instructions from Greenland to Vínland do not come from a written tradition but from an oral one, they were written for visualization of the travel markers and directions. There are many more great sources on Greenland but none of them really tackle the subject at hand. It is worth mentioning the contribution of Kirsten A. Seaver because her work was used for much up-to-date information on Greenlandic history; she has published a lot on Greenland and most of it is very current. Ólafur Halldórsson's *Grœnland í Miðaldaritum* is also a very useful ressource for studies in medieval Greenland, he meticulously deals with all the texts from a philological standpoint. However his work deals mainly with texts that concern later periods of Greenland and not the settlement period; for those reasons I have not referenced him in this thesis. There are many other authors referenced in this thesis but a lot of the work is quite dated and requires a lot of attention in sorting through current and outdated information. I should also mention that many articles that are referenced in this thesis are thanks to the proceedings of the 2008 Hvalsey Conference.

3.0 The Sources

3.1 Brief Summary of Old Iceland Sagas in Scholarship

The Icelandic Sagas represent one of the largest medieval collections of written material, even in comparison to English, French, German, and Italian literature. The sagas are divided into 7 categories: Fornaldarsögur (Legendary Sagas), Konungasögur (Kings' Sagas), Íslendingasögur (Sagas of Icelanders or Family Sagas), Samtíðarsögur (Contemporary Sagas), Heilagra manna sögur (Saints' Lives), Biskupa sögur (Bishops' Sagas), and Riddarasögur (Chivalric Sagas and Translated Romances). Unfortunately not all the sagas are translated but many from all 7 categories are available in multiple languages. The "Golden Age" of saga writing began in the 12th century but its peak was in the 13th, this is the time period when most of the sagas are believed to have been written. The purpose of this section is not to give a full explanation of the sagas and their historiography but to present a very basic and introductory summary[31]. This biggest problem that has troubled scholars since they started studying the sagas was the validity of the sagas as historical sources; whether the main events presented in the stories actually happened or not. In the 19th century saga scholarship believed that sagas were written down verbatim from the oral stories from which they were based on. Gradually throughout the 20th century, pioneered by Curt and Lauritz Weibull as well as Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (for Landnámabók), this opinion shifted considerably and scholarship no longer trusts the sagas as sources of history, rather, they are now used to represent mentality, ideas, social structure, farm life and everyday customs of the Norse. Many archaeologists have outright rejected the sagas for their validity as historical sources due to their constant unreliability. As Sigurðsson points out in his book, it has been a common trend to read the sagas with a critical eye for flaws and to reject them; he argues that we can turn this around and read the sagas with a critical eye for what is correct in the sagas[32], using them to their fullest potential rather than their outright dismissal. Another big problem facing scholars was the saga relationship between the oral tradition (the original source of many of the sagas) versus the written tradition (the written saga itself as well as other written sources than the sagas that they may be referencing). Gabriel Turville-Petre traced the origins of saga writing from oral genealogical traditions through the Christian

[31] For more information on the topic of Old Icelandic literature (inclusive of sagas and all other literature) one should consult the following two works for detailed information. Both references are filled with excellent articles written by some of the best known scholars. They are:
-Ross, Margaret Clunies, ed. *Old Icelandic Literature and Society.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
-McTurk, Rory, ed. *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

[32] Sigurðsson, Gísli. *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method.* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004: page 254.

narrative of saints' lives. And in the early 21st century, Gísli Sigurðsson and Tommy Danielsson continued the discussion on the oral tradition with breakthrough studies on the topic (Sigurðsson's work is discussed in better detail in Chapter 2).

3.2 Íslendingabók and Landnámabók

Íslendingabók and *Landnámabók* are arguably the most important Icelandic texts in existence. Their contents are based off of the oral tradition and are problematic in identifying their historical validity[33]. *Íslendingabók* is thought to have been written between the years 1122-33 and was put together by Ari Fróði, information in *Landnámabók* may have been first compiled around the same time and perhaps by Ari Fróði as well – yet it is not known for certain. Both works are written much later than the events they describe, *Landnámabók* exists in five manuscripts and the earliest known version is dated to the second half of the 13th century but could be later. *Íslendingabók* is a work on Icelandic history divided into ten chapters dealing with the following: 1. Settlement of Iceland, 2. Bringing of Laws from Norway, 3. Establishment of Alþingi, 4. Fixing of the Calendar, 5. Partition of Iceland into Judicial Quadrants, 6. Discovery and Settlement of Greenland, 7. Conversion of Iceland to Christianity, 8-10. Bishops and Lawspeakers in Iceland. Chapter 6 is of great importance to this thesis for it explains the discovery of Greenland by Eiríkr rauði and gives us important dates, the following is the entire chapter,

> "Land þat, es kallat es Grœnland, fannsk ok byggðisk af Íslandi. Eiríkr enn rauði hét maðr breiðfirzkr, es fór út heðan þangat ok nam þar land, es síðan es kallaðr Eiríksfjǫrðr. Hann gaf nafn landinu ok kallaði Grœnland ok kvað menn þat myndu fýsa þangat farar, at landit ætti nafn gótt. Þeir fundu þar manna vistir bæði austr ok vestr á landi ok keiplabrot ok steinsmíði þat es af því má skilja, at þar hafði þess konar þjóð farit, es Vínland hefir byggt ok Grœnlendingar kalla Skrælinga. En þat vas, es hann tók byggva landit, fjórtán vetrum eða fimmtán fyrr en kristni kvæmi hér á Ísland, at því es sá talði fyrir Þorkeli Gellissyni á Grœnlandi, es sjálfr fylgði Eiríkr enum rauða út[34]."

This passage tells us that Eiríkr rauði came from Breiðafjörður in Iceland and discovered Greenland 14 or 15 winters before Iceland's formal conversion to Christianity in the year

[33] It is important to note that *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* are things of great pride for Iceland for they record the inception of Iceland and hold important genealogical information. Furthermore *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*, although the information in both were obtained orally, are different than the Icelandic Sagas. They both serve different purposes: the sagas were not written with the intent of recording actual facts, rather they wanted to portray the people and events in a narrative context, and the latter were written for the purpose of historical documentation. This is an important distinction and this distinction allows for different readings than of the sagas. If we dismiss *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* for historical information, as is often done with the sagas, then we would have to rewrite Icelandic history and an incredible amount of Norse history would have to be revised and reworked. The oral tradition is not necessarily always faulty and it can be at times trusted (with a grain of salt), and indeed we must trust it at times, yet it is always prey to fiction as well. Therefore if we are to trust these two monumental works of Icelandic history then we must also keep an open mind to other works that are informed from the oral tradition as well, such as the sagas.

[34] "Íslendingabók." In *Íslenzk fornrit I: Íslendingabók: Landnámabók*, edited by Jakob Benediktsson, 3-28. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968: page 14.

1000. It also tells that he founded Eiríksfjǫrðr in Greenland, saw old Inuit remains, and that Þorkell Gellison was informed of this information by someone who had accompanied Eiríkr.

Landnámabók is a detailed account of the settlement of Iceland, it describes over 3000 individuals, 1400 settlements, and for each settler it is said where they settled and a brief genealogy is provided as well as some short anecdotes at times. It also describes the first 435 settlers in Iceland. It is important to this work because it describes in detail the life of Eiríkr rauði and how he came to discover and settle Greenland. It describes the journey that Eiríkr took, "Svá segir Ari Þorgilsson, at þat sumar fóru fimm skip ok tuttugu til Grœnlands af Borgarfirði ok Breiðafirði, en fjórtán kómusk út; sum rak aptr, en sum týndusk[35]." Around five hundred people first settled with Eiríkr rauði, Seaver estimates[36]. *Landnámabók* even lists the prominent settlers and their chosen settlements,

> "Eiríkr nam síðan Eiríksfjǫrð ok bjó í Brattahlíð, en Leifr son hans eptir hann. Þessir menn námu land á Grœnlandi, er þá fóru út með Eiríki: Herjólfr Herjólfsfjǫrð; hann bjó á Herjólfsnesi, Ketill Ketilsfjǫrð, Hrafn Hrafnsfjǫrð, Sǫlvi Sǫlvadal, Helgi Þorbrandsson Álptafjǫrð, Þorbjǫrn glóra Siglufjǫrð, Einarr Einarsfjǫrð, Hafgrímr Hafgrímsfjǫrð ok Vatnahverfi, Arnlaugr Arnlaugsfjǫrð, en sumir fóru til Vestribyggðar[37]."

This list is important because it provides important information on place names, which in turn gives archaeologists help in locating sites that remain to be found. In *Landnámabók* there are two more important parts that directly relate to this thesis. It is written that "Þorkell var dysjaðr í túni í Hvalseyjarfirði ok hefir jafnan gengit þar um hýbýli[38]." This is a written example of a pagan burial, however a mound thought to be the one mentioned in this passage was excavated and no evidence of a grave was found. Lastly, aside from the men listed above that travelled with Eiríkr it is mentioned that a Christian man came along and composed a poem on the journey. This is the passage,

> "Herjólfr enn yngri fór til Grœnlands, þá er Eiríkr enn rauði byggði landit. Með honum var á skipi suðreyskr maðr kristinn, sá er orti Hafgerðinga drápu; þar er þetta stef í:
>
> Mínar biðk at munka reyni
> meinalausan fara beina;
> heiðis haldi hárar foldar
> hallar dróttinn yfir mér stalli[39]."

[35] "Landnámabók." In *Íslenzk fornrit I: Íslendingabók: Landnámabók*, edited by Jakob Benediktsson, 31-398. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968: page 133.
[36] Seaver, Kisten A. *The Last Vikings*. New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2010: page 25.
[37] "Landnámabók." In *Íslenzk fornrit I: Íslendingabók: Landnámabók*, edited by Jakob Benediktsson, 31-398. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968: page 134.
[38] Ibid.,
[39] Ibid., page 132-4.

It is interesting to note that the text specifically mentions a "maðr kristinn" (the Christian man). The fact that he is being defined and named entirely by his religion might be a marker that his person or his origin do not stand out as much as his faith. Unfortunately, we are not given this Christian man's name nor do we know anything about him save that he composed a short poem. It is unlikely that he was the only person of Christian faith on board to Greenland but the fact that no others have their faith explicitly exposed is troubling; perhaps the man was mentioned only for his poetic contribution. This mention might also highlight that in the memory of the colonization of Greenland, that a Christian presence was remembered among the settlers. If this does represent a memory of an actual event then it is not important whether one or many men of Christian faith were written in the settlement account, it is only important that Christianity was remembered as accompanying the voyagers. Details are often lost in the preservation of stories through oral transmission; although, often it is the case that the main idea or concept of the story have historical validity. Stories are memories although these stories are liable to many changes such as through the influence of other stories or the implements of exaggeration and distortion through time and from transmission from one person to another. Stories are often easier to remember than actual events and details due the natural process of constant repetition in the telling of the story, and stories do affect our perception of reality.

3.3 Eiríks saga rauða

This saga is the longer of the two *Vínland Sagas* (by about 25%) and contains more Christian rhetoric than *GS*. To our best knowledge, the two sagas were written independently of each other but were likely based on the same information stemming from a continuous oral tradition. *ESR* is preserved in two manuscripts Hauksbók (early 14th century) and Skálholtsbók (early 15th century), Hauksbók is dated to 1303-10. Both versions were based on an original that was composed after 1263, which in turn was based off an earlier version from the early 13th century. Both sagas were written just over 200 years after the time that the narrative take place. This saga is of great value to the topic of Greenlandic religion. Furthermore, the *Vínland Sagas* describe the discovery of North America, specifically the east coast of Canada, around the year 1000. In the 1960s the site named L'Anse aux Meadows was found and proved to be a Norse settlement (although a temporary one) located in modern day Newfoundland. Although this topic is heavily addressed in both the *Vínland Sagas*, and is in fact the main bulk of events of the sagas, this will not be discussed much

because it strays too far from the topic of religion in Greenland, but it will be referenced several times.

ESR never explicitly states that Greenland was pagan but it states that Leifr Eiríksson went to Norway and visited King Óláfr Tryggvason and was sent by him as a Christian missionary to convert Greenland to Christianity, thus implicitly stating that Greenland was pagan. The saga says of Leifr's return, "er hann kom kristni á landit[40]". However, modern scholarship does not accept this story of conversion and views it as an act of propaganda on behalf of King Óláfr Tryggvason[41]. *Heimskringla* has this to say of Leifr: "Óláfr konungr sendi ok þat sama vár Leif Eiríksson til Grænlands at boða þar kristni, ok fór hann þat sumar til Grænlands"[42]. It would be very convenient for this thesis if this story of conversion proved to be true but unfortunately we must take it with a grain of salt. The saga does not list all the Christians in Greenland but it does list several notable ones: Eiríkr's wife Þjóðhildr, Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir, and Leifr Eiríksson. *ESR* says of Leifr's return,

> "Hann boðaði brátt kristni um landit ok almenniliga trú ok sýndo mǫnnum orðsending Óláfs konungs Tryggvasonar ok sagði, hervsu mǫrg ágæti ok mikil dýrð fylgði þessum sið. Eiríkr tók því máli seint, at láta sið sinn, en Þjóðhildr gekk skjótt undir ok lét gera kirkju eigi allnær húsunum. Þat hús var kallat Þjóðhildarkirkja. Hafði hon þar fram bœnir sínar ok þeir men, sem við Kristi tóku. Þjóðhildr vildi ekki samræði við Eiríkr, síðan hon tók trú, en honum var þat mjǫk móti skapi[43]."

Þjóðhildr is famous in the saga for having converted to Christianity and having had the first church in Greenland built at her home in Brattahlíð; furthermore, she refused to sleep/live with Eiríkr while he remained pagan. Eiríkr, as the saga relates, stubbornly remained pagan, refusing the efforts of his son and wife. Guðríðr is clearly the most important character in the saga and plays a crucial role throughout; she is defined by her faith in Christianity and is the template of a good Christian which all others in the saga are compared, especially Freydís Eiríksdóttir[44]. Guðríðr also participates in the pagan ritual (the most famous and elaborate pagan ritual in all of the sagas) with the Seeress Þorbjǫrg in order to help the community overcome famine. One could almost label the episode as an instance of religious diversity. And Leifr, as explained above, is important for his supposed missionary role. Þórhallr

[40] "Eiríks saga rauða." In *Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 195-237. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957: page 212.
[41] Seaver, Kisten A. *The Last Vikings.* New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2010: page 76.
[42] "Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar." In *Íslenzk fornrit XXVI*, edited by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1941-51: page 212.
[43] "Eiríks saga rauða." In *Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 195-237. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957: page 212.
[44] These two characters are at moral odds throughout *GS*. Even their names put them in religious opposition; in Guðríðr's name the –Guð means the Christian "God" while Freydís' name is derived from Freyr and Freyja, Norse gods. Furthermore, *ESR* uses the term "laungetna" (p.221), to describe her, which means illegitimate. Making her an illegitimate daughter also invalidates her worth by default.

Gamlason is a minor pagan character with a minor role but his paganism echoes strongly within the saga; he composes a poem to Thor and prays to him and a beached whale appears to the starving travelers, however, since the meat was procured by pagan prayers/poetry it turns to be foul and makes everyone sick[45]. In response they pray to the Christian God and are given good fish to eat. Þórhallr is later enslaved in Ireland and dies after composing two more poems to Thor and Odin; this is clearly a punishment by the author[46]. The mention of this episode serves to show the inherent bias provided by the author of *ESR*, who clearly favours Christianity and wants to show the consequences of practicing paganism. In Chapter 6, Þorsteinn Eiríksson's ghost complains about being buried in unconsecrated ground (In Greenland, Christians were supposedly buried on their farms before this episode) and wants to be buried by the church, the saga writes: "Lík þeira Þorsteins váru færð til kirkju í Eiríksfjǫrð", this can give insight into pre- and post- conversion attitudes[47]. It is said that the animated body of Þorsteinn tells Guðríðr that God wants Christianity changed to its proper form[48]. There is another example of a Christian reburial in Egils saga; in chapter 89, Egill's bones get reburied in a church, the saga states "at Þórdís hafi látit flytja Egil til kirkju[49]." More discussion on this topic will take place in Chapter 4. It is also interesting that all the bodies buried in Greenland, in the saga, are put into coffins[50]. Another instance of interest, concerning Christianity, is when the Vínland party take two of the First Nations' children (Skrælings) and baptized them; this portrays the Greenlanders as especially religious people, evangelizing and baptizing heathens[51]. There is no way of knowing whether this event ever happened or not.

The author of the saga had an agenda when writing *ESR*. Not only did the author want to give a good Vínland story, promote Christianity, the author also wanted to glorify Guðríðr and Þórfinn Karlsefni, the great-grandparents of the bishops Þorlákr Runólfsson of Skalholt and Bjǫrn Gilsson, as well as being the great-great-grandparents of Brandr Sæmundarson of Hólar, which are the ending words of the saga[52]. Furthermore, Þórfinn Karlsefni, his wife,

[45] Ibid., page 224-5.
[46] Ibid., page 225-6.
[47] Ibid., page 217.
[48] Besides wanting all the future dead to be buried on church ground, he also informed Guðríðr that Garðar, the one who first had the disease and spread it, should have his body burned.
[49] "Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar." In *Íslenzk Fornrit II*, edited by Sigurður Nordal. Reyjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1933: page 105.
[50] "Eiríks saga rauða." In *Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 195-237. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957: page 215. Sigrid the farmer's wife is buried in a coffin. This is an interesting sidenote because, despite archaeological evidence, provided below in Chapter 4, shows that very few bodies were put into coffins. This is likely an assumption by the author assuming that all Christian burials at the time were done with coffins. There were a couple of coffins found in the graveyard, discussed in Chapter 4, but it was uncommon.
[51] Ibid., page 233.
[52]""Eiríks saga rauða." In *Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 195-237. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957: page 237.

and their descendants are also made to be important by the saga's informative introduction of Þórfinn's devout Christian ancestor Auðr djúpúðga[53]. Þjóðhildr is also related to Auðr djúpúðga, making Þórfinn related to Eiríkr's family as well. The combination of Guðríðr's Christian devotion, Þórfinn's Christian heritage, as well as Þórfinn's prestige of being related to Greenland's leading chieftain (and his wife establishing the first church), all together make for a very important social and holy marriage that eventually leads to important religious descendants. It is also interesting to note that the genealogical information provided of Auðr djúpúðga is cited in *ESR* from *Landnámabók*; this is an example of when the saga authors reference *Landnámabók* as source for history[54]. See page 30 for a picture of the family tree of these characters.

What kind of historical information can we draw from this saga? It is difficult to say. It is possible that Leifr was baptized in Norway and may have met with the king yet modern scholarship seems unconvinced that he was responsible for the Christian conversion of Greenland[55]. He may have returned to Greenland and spread a message of Christianity but whether he was properly and officially trained to formally convert Greenland in the name of the Christian Church is another matter altogether. We have no way of knowing if this story happened or not, and if it did, to what extent. It is possible that this story of conversion is propaganda for the glory of the Norwegian Christian Missionary King, Óláfr Tryggvason, added by a Christian author situated in an already converted Iceland. Concerning Þjóðhildr, we have no way of telling whether her refusal to sleep with her husband is a true story but we do have archaeological proof (in the location marked in the saga) for the church to which her name is attributed. The question of Eiríkr's faith is a difficult one; no scholarship seems to challenge it and there is no reason to do so, yet it remains to be said that it is impossible to prove or disprove. However, since we have a lot of information on Eiríkr from the main four sources discussed in this chapter it is probable that he was a well-remembered figure in social memory; he was a notable figure in both Iceland and Greenland. Furthermore, his faith in paganism can be disputed but nothing can be said for certain. Guðríðr, on the other hand, is a character riddled in Christian bias. As mentioned before, one of the main purposes for the writing of the saga is likely to glorify the ancestors of the three Icelandic bishops (Auðr djúpúðga as well), all descended from Guðríðr and her husband. The question of the strength of her faith, as described in the saga, will always be up for scholarly debate. However,

[53] Ibid., page 195.
[54] Ibid. This is citing *Landnámabók* (page 136). *ESR* also quotes *Landnámabók* again on page 201-2.
[55] See footnote #42.

considering the author of the saga and all the possible bias, it is also very possible that much of what is told about Guðríðr is exaggeration and fiction created for the author's purpose. Guðríðr's participation in the pagan ritual with the Seeress is likely fictitious, as is the entire ritual itself; this ritual is famous in saga scholarship and has been the topic of much debate[56]. Freydís will be discussed in the next sub-chapter. The character of Þórhallr is interesting for the treatment of pagan characters in the saga and the dire Christian consequences of practicing paganism, as seen in the saga. Þorsteinn and the supernatural episode concerning the raising of dead bodies was likely included to deliver the author's Christian values on how the dead should be buried and treated. However it could also represent an actual event in which the dying words of a man were later interpreted as coming from a ghost; people then and now hold belief in ghosts. Furthermore, the capture of the First Nations' children is at best doubtful but the author included the episode to create imaginative storytelling and concerning the baptism, perhaps to educate the audience on the proper religious procedure when adopting non-Christian children.

3.4 Grœnlendinga saga

GS is the shorter of the two sagas but it is equally important for information concerning the religion of Greenlanders. There is a lot of narrative events and information that differ in this saga to that of *ESR* but there are also many similarities, they are obviously based on the same oral information but were written at different places, times, and by different people, giving them each a distinctive narrative feel. *GS* seems to have a different narrative purpose than *ESR*; the former seems to place more importance of the actual travels to Vínland while the latter is more concerned with glorifying Guðríðr´s Christianity. As opposed to *ESR*, *GS* blatantly states at the beginning of the saga that "Heiðit var fólk á Grœnlandi í þann tíma[57]." Again, we also have the appearance of the Christian "suðreyskr maðr" (from the Hebrides[58]). As well as the list of the Icelandic settlers in Greenland as quoted, like in *ESR*, from *Landnámabók*. Furthermore, we are given more information about Christianity in Greenland. The saga says that shortly after Þorvaldr died that "Grœnland var þá kristnat, en þó andaðisk Eiríkr rauði fyrir kristni"[59]. It is interesting to notice that the mention of Eiríkr rauði's death

[56] Mitchell, Stephen A. *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsilvania Press, 2011. See page 97 for a comprehensive discussion on this topic.
[57] "Grœnlendinga saga." In *Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 241-269. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957: page 245-6.
[58] Sigurðsson, Gísli, ed. *The Vínland Sagas.* Translated by Keneva Kunz. London: Pengion Books Ltd., 2008: page xii.
[59] "Grœnlendinga saga." In *Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 241-269. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957: page 256.

before official conversion to Christianity is noted by the author, almost as if his death was needed for the transition from paganism to Christianity (a literary device?). Eiríkr rauði and his family were definitely the most important of all the Greenlanders due to his prestige for initiating settlement in Greenland. He had the best farmland and his wife's church became the centre for Christianity until it was replaced by Garðar. It is logical to assume he had the greatest authority among the chieftains and that his stern rebuttal of Christianity and his desire to remain pagan may have had a social effect on the overall populace. Perhaps after his death – and his body was likely eventually buried or reburied in a Christian manner – it allowed for an official unanimous acceptance and conversion of Christianity even after Iceland's official conversion. Grove puts this notion in context when he describes what the saga author might have thought in the composition of *GS* when he states, "the pre-Christian religion of the first Icelanders was pardonable [by the author], the intransigent paganism of Eiríkr Rauði and his generation is made a symptom of cultural backwardness [in the sagas] in a time of religious transformations[60]." Moreover, even with the mention of Eiríkr's death in *GS* it is not possible to construct a precise timeline in years, in attempting to figure out the year in which Greenland converted seeing as *GS* says Greenland converted after his death. In *ESR* Eiríkr is still alive after the death of Þorvaldr, in *GS* Eiríkr dies after Þorvaldr, also, Eiríkr's death is never mentioned in *ESR* and the readers are led to believe that he is still alive at the end of the saga. Therefore, we have no way of accurately dating the time of conversion through the *Vínland Sagas*. It should be noted that these sagas have different views of chronology and it may not be useful to compare them to the modern dating system.

The author makes it a point, however, that even after Christianity was introduced that "Þá var enn ung kristni á Grœnlandi" and it likely had an effect on faith and practice and we can infer that the author assumes that they were not yet proper Christians[61]. There are two more interesting instances of religion in this saga worth noting, both of which are a bit confusing and show Christian bias by the author. Both instances include the pagan Þorsteinn svarta[62]. The first is when Þorsteinn svarta is introduced to Þorsteinn Eiríksson and the former explains that he is of another faith (paganism) than Þorsteinn Eiríksson, but claims that he believes it (paganism) to be inferior to Þorsteinn Eiríksson's faith (Christianity)[63]. The second

[60]Grove, Jonathan. "The Place of Greenland in Medieval Icelandic Saga Narrative." *Journal of the Atlantic North* 2 (2008): page 38.
[61] "Grœnlendinga saga." In *Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 241-269. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957: page 257-8.
[62] "The Black" or "Black" was a suitable name given to pagans by saga authors to emphasize their paganism. Sometimes their skin is described as more black or even blue than normal people, to give them a more savage appearance, and to highlight the differences between the Christians and the pagans.
[63] Ibid., page 258.

is when Þorsteinn svarta buries his dead wife in a coffin, despite his acknowledgement of being not a Christian[64].

The character of Freydís Eiríksdóttir in this saga is unique. Unlike *ESR*, we are told that Freydís is a full daughter of Eiríkr and not an illegitimate daughter or half-daughter. In Chapter 7, Freydís decides to lead an expedition to Vínland. From the very beginning, Freydís betrays her partners (who own the boats for the journey) and secretly hides extra men on one of the boats. After they travel, load their goods, and prepare to leave, Freydís betrays her two partners by initiating a massacre[65] so that she gets the full share of the profits and ensures that none of the victims of her betrayal live to tell the deed. After a year, her crime is uncovered and three men from the trip are put to torture by Leifr, they tell him the whole story and explain his sister's leading role. Leifr explains that it is not his place to punish his sister's misdeeds but that he is certain that she and her descendants will surely pay for her crimes. The fact that Leifr is making the important decisions implies in the saga that his father has died or is too old to lead and that he has assumed his father's role in leadership of the colony. No one but a chieftain could make such decisions on such crimes. I find this relevant to mention because Freydís' actions in causing the massacre have had a lasting impression in saga scholarship. It is not said that her vile nature is caused by belief in paganism but she is negatively described from the moment of her introduction within the saga, anticipating her future bad deeds. At the end of the saga we are given the last details of Guðríðr's and Þórfinn Karlsefni's life together as well as the mention of their descendants, the bishops named above in *ESR*. It is also said, in the ending words of the saga, that "Ok hefir Karlsefni gørst sagt allra manna atburði um farar þessar allar, er nú er nǫkkut á komit[66]." This does seem to instill a sense of legitimacy to the saga because, although we know the saga is inspired from the oral tradition, we are finally given the name of a source of someone that was there. Unfortunately we have no way of knowing if the author is telling us the truth or not. If we are to believe that the saga is based off the actual tales of Þórfinn Karlsefni's voyages then perhaps it is possible that Freydís' massacre was so terrible that it was remembered orally for a long time, in Greenland and in Iceland. Whether they happened the same way is by no means certain. If this is the case then I am suggesting that the author of the saga purposely named her with the intention of associating her with paganism and

[64] Ibid., page 259.
[65] 30 men and 5 women are killed in the massacre. Initially the women are spared because the men do not want to kill them but Freydís finds an axe and slays them anyways.
[66] Ibid., page 269.

portrayed her negatively from her introduction to the saga to justify her evil actions as stemming from an evil person. There is no other record of Freydís (or any other of the characters mentioned) in any other saga, written document, or piece of archaeology. I suggest that her name may have been created for the saga authors' purposes, to create stark contrasts between Christianity and paganism, if she ever even existed at all.

Overall, *GS* gives a lot of information concerning Christianity and paganism in Greenland, during and right after the settlement period. Much of it is complicated to properly interpret but it is not impossible. The mention that Greenland was pagan, at the beginning of the saga, followed by the statement that it was fully converted, although still in infancy, is too convenient to be true. It's too easy and too simple; it is not believable that all the colonists in Greenland went from being completely pagan to completely Christian, the timeline is too short[67]. This is just the author making convenient story arcs for the population of Greenland as a whole and for the narrative. However, it is probably true about Greenland having Christianity in a stage of infancy; I do not find it plausible that all Christians in Greenland were very orthodox, the lack of the official Church would make that difficult as well as the factor of Greenland's isolation. There is no way to know if the Christian man from the Hebrides actually accompanied the initial settlement party but the mention of his accompaniment should not be ignored. The fact that Eiríkr died before Greenland's supposed conversion is plausible and we have no way of verifying it at all but the inference of the author that he died right before conversion is likely false, and even if he didn't it is not likely that he would have converted based on what we are told of his character. As in *ESR*, the episode with Þorsteinn and the risen bodies, for logical reasons, is hard to believe and the fact that he admits his pagan faith to be inferior to the Christian faith is also unlikely; generally speaking, people of any kind of faith rarely admit their faith is inferior to another. As mentioned above Freydís, the severity of her actions, her personality, and her name may all be exaggerated and/or fiction. Lastly, when the saga mentions that the accounts described are based off of actual tales recounted by Þórfinn Karlsefni it is also likely true for he did end up moving back to Iceland and has important descendants. His memory would not be difficult to preserve. Yet, the details might have been easily altered or deliberately changed through

[67] Greenland was settled in 985 or 986 and the events of the saga happen somewhere between the year 1000 and 1010. This timeline is approximate, of course. Considering Iceland's official conversion in comparison to Greenland, we know that Iceland was never entirely pagan nor was it entirely Christian after the conversion, adopting a new faith is a lengthy process. Even if the people officially adopted a new faith and its practices, it would take time for a new faith to be developed.

authorial agency and limitations of information being correctly transmitted orally or from word to mouth.

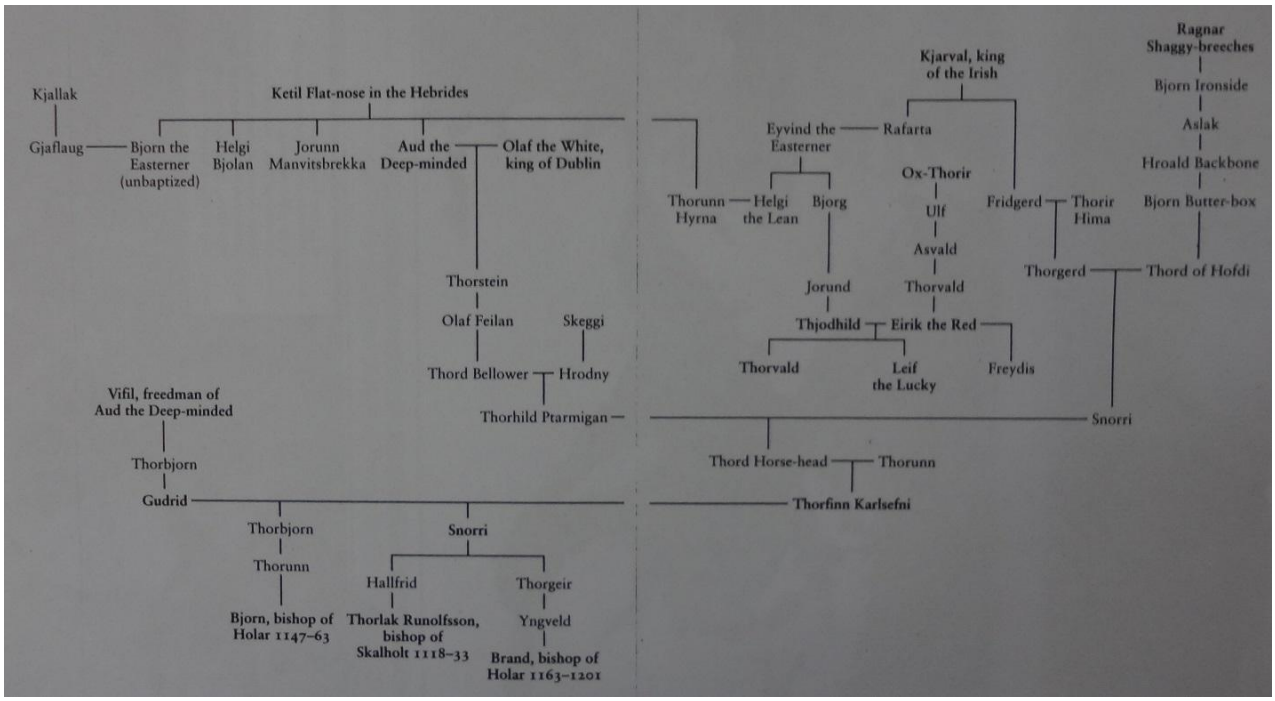

Figure: 1 Family tree of the Greenlanders and the Vínland voyagers.

3.5 Conclusion

The written source material that is left to us is the hardest of the information to sort through. We have four sources *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, Grœnlendinga saga*, and *Eiríks saga rauða* which are all giving a lot of information about Christianity. How are we to process all the information presented and categorize fact from fiction when the evidence given is contradictory, written more than two hundred years after the events they describe, are based off of written and oral traditions that are both disconnected and non-continuous, are inherently biased towards paganism and glorify Christianity, and are not based off of anything (that we know of) written in Greenland but likely from oral transmission? It is complicated to say the least but it is possible to a point. *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* (although they are not independent sources) both describe the discovery of Greenland by Eiríkr rauði, both state it was 14 or 15 winters before Iceland's conversion to Christianity (years 985 or 986), and both claim that Eiríkr came from Breiðafjörður. *Landnámabók* adds the following information: details of Eiríkr's life and Norwegian origins, quotes Ari fróði from *Íslendingabók*, gives the numbers of boats that left to Greenland, describes a pagan burial in Greenland, and tells of the Christian man from the Hebrides. I have already

discussed the value of both *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* in scholarship and validity, both are of paramount importance to Norse scholarship and although they are problematic sources they are valuable for analysis in this thesis. Furthermore, both works are quite meticulous and, unlike the *Vínland Sagas*, were not written for entertainment or narrative purposes. Therefore we must separate these two works from the sagas and their worth for contribution to this thesis. Seeing as a lot of information in the *Vínland Sagas* quotes *Landnámabók* on several occasions it must be assumed that the saga writers also viewed these works as historical sources, and to ignore the information from these works would drastically reduce any ability to form a coherent conclusion.

The *Vínland Sagas* are a completely different type of work that must be dealt with accordingly. They are stories first, history and mediums for moral lessons second – not that far off from a sort of medieval historical fiction. Furthermore, we do not know any of the authors but we can still see authorial intent, bias, and knowledge through the work itself. Where the *Vínland Sagas* are concerned, they both contain a wealth of possible facts concerning both Christianity and paganism. As I show, above, in both sagas, there is much information we can consider to be true, or at least "truth" taken with a grain of salt. There is much evidence we easily trust and there are many things we can outwardly reject. What we can take away from these sagas, after their analysis, is that there were certainly both pagans and Christians living together in Greenland simultaneously. It is impossible to say how many were of each faith but it can be said that prominent figures such as Eiríkr and Leifr were both pagan and Christian. It is also interesting to note that the sagas make no mention of any bishops in Greenland, possibly supporting the fact that there wasn't one until the 12th century. For these written sources to have any value at all for this thesis they must be compared to the archaeological record, because alone they cannot be verified in any way. Once we have a correlation between the written and material record, it is only then that we can start making real assertions and start drawing any good conclusions.

4.0 Archaeology

4.1 Brief Summary of Archaeological History in Greenland

In the early 20th century when Danish archaeologists came to Greenland to start excavations, they did not come blindly. It was well known that Greenland contained many Norse ruins but no one was certain as to how many there were and what state they were in. It was known that the Norse colony had vanished sometime in the 15th century but it wasn't until the 18th century that the Danes explored Greenland, ruins were visible from the coast. In the 1830s began the first systematic investigation into the Norse colonies in Greenland by the creation of the Kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab for Oldkyndighed (Royal Nordic society for Ancient Manuscript Research). During that time, Greenland was a Danish colony and requests from Copenhagen to Danes living in Greenland were given to explore and collect all information known about the Norse colonies. The result of this was the publishing of the three volume work *Grønlands Historiske Mindesmaerker* (Greenland's Historical Monuments) between 1838 and 1845. In 1903, Daniel Brunn went to Greenland and started excavations in the Western Settlement. In the 1920s and 1930s Poul Nørlund was in charge of excavations and did work in the Eastern Settlement. Aage Roussell assisted Nørlund at the excavations in Garðar and did a lot of work in the 1920s and 1930s. Following their work, Christen Leif Vebæk did work in the late 1930s to the early 1960s. After which Knud J. Krogh is best known for his work at Brattahlíð (1961-65) but worked in Greenland until the 1980s. In recent years Thomas H. McGovern is one of the most prolific writers and has worked on many archaeology sites in Greenland and is best known for his work on ecological systems and animal bones. Jørgen Meldgaard, Henrik M. Jansen, Ove Bak, Svend Erik Albrethsen, Claus Andreasen, Joel Berglund, Jette Arneborg and others have all participated in Greenland digs and have had impact on Greenland's archaeology and written history. In the first part of the 20th century the Danish had a certain monopoly on Greenland's archaeology, which is no longer the case today, and to a certain extent still consider themselves to be the most knowledgeable Greenland scholars.

There are many problems with archaeology in Greenland. One of the most frustrating things when trying to write Greenlandic history is the immense lack of dating and work on the ruins; there are just too many to date and excavate and not enough money, time, or people to do it all. This means that many sites are known but undated and unworked and that until they are properly excavated our knowledge of Greenland is limited. We can still know a lot of the

history and the people but there remains much to be known. And in particular concern to this thesis it is problematic because if there are more pagan relics or graves we have no knowledge of them. It should further be mentioned that the complete lack of written sources from the Greenlanders makes archaeology difficult as well. It is not to say that the archaeology needs to have written sources to validate it but it would be a great help, for the archaeology would also validate the written material. The evidence shows only two pagan-like objects and their dates are from the years of 985/6 – 1020 and all Christian archaeology suggests dates from the first years of settlement until sometime in the 15th century. Therefore, we have two very different time lines: paganism lasting 40 years or less and Christianity lasting 400 to 500 years. This ratio makes the likelihood of finding more pagan objects very slim. There is however some good news for Norse Greenlandic archaeology and Keller summarizes it well in the following passage,

> "The period of settlement was relatively short, i.e. something like five hundred years. Thus, contamination by constructions from before or after this period is a minor problem…the settlement was abandoned nearly five hundred years ago, leaving the buildings to collapse virtually undisturbed…the settlement was isolated in so far as it was surrounded by wilderness on all sides. There are, in other words, no neighboring settlements to create border problems…the ruins have suffered surprisingly little damage: Some have been lost due to the eustatic rise of sea-level and the advancement of glacier lobes, while a few have been ruined by the construction of Eskimo dwellings, modern housing construction, sheep-farms and airstrips. Also, a number of the ruins show minor traces of disturbance, most probably from Thule / Inuit hunters searching for metal. But the number of destroyed ruins can hardly represent more than a small percentage of the total remains, making the material very near complete…the area has been subject to a number of archaeological surveys, making a large amount of the material available for research[68]."

It is clear from his summary that the problems I mentioned above are only temporary. Eventually the ruins will be dated and excavated but it will still be a long time.

4.2 Greenland Churches and Farms

Norse Greenland prospered for about 500 years. In that time it is estimated that 4000 – 5000 people lived in the Eastern Settlement and about 1500 in the Western Settlement at their peak[69]. Concerning the period of settlement, as I have noted above, Seaver estimates the settlement population to about 500 people; this is estimated by calculating an average from 14 boats that were recorded to have made it to Greenland containing about 30 people per boat (more or less). This means the population would be a minimum of about 420 people, but it

[68] Keller, Christian. *The Eastern Settlement Reconsidered.* Oslo, 1989: page 111.
[69] It is not known when the "peak" of the Norse population was. Since little dating has been done and since most of the ruins still need excavation, we cannot know when the peak time was. It is estimated that 60 000 – 70 000 people in total lived in Greenland during their 500 year stay.

could have been higher as Seaver suggests due to our modern calculations on boat carrying capacities which estimate that about 40 tonnes could be supported, but the numbers could be lower also. Lynnerup in his article makes a good point about population size in the settlement of Greenland in ratio to bodies found and attributed to that time period; he claims that although the modern estimates place the height of Greenland's population between 4000-5000 people (in both settlements), that it may have taken the population of Greenland over 200 years to attain a population of 2000 people[70]. So by the year 1200, the population of Greenland may have attained about 2000 people, about 500 in the Western Settlement and about 1500 in the Eastern Settlement. About 600 Norse ruins have been found and about 500 of those are considered to be farms in the Eastern Settlement and 100 for the Western Settlement. However, since they have not all been excavated the true number of farms is but an educated estimate and it must also be said that these sites did not all exist at once but were built as the population of Greenland grew[71]. The Eastern and Western Settlements are about 500km apart and since there is no possibility for inland transportation, transport would have to be taken by boat; it was about a six day row with sails from each other. There are 16 churches[72] recorded to have existed in Greenland, this information comes from sagas and records from outside Greenland; to date we have found 13 of these churches. Unfortunately for this paper I only discuss Þjóðhildr's Church at Brattahlíð[73] because it is the only known church in the period of settlement but the remainder of these churches and their dispersion suggest that the colony was a strong Christian society from settlement until depopulation. As much as there is to say about the later churches and later Greenlandic Christianity much of it is not relevant to this paper because of the restrictions of the settlement period timeline.

Greenland received its first episcopal see in 1124, before this period there was no official Church or organization. We can still assume that Greenland was formally converted by law like Iceland, around the year 1000 – which will be discussed below in Chapter 5. Keller has much to say on the topic of early Christianity during and right after the settlement period and posits a couple of interesting theories that may help to understand. He posits that changes in church organization (as presumably forced by the Kings of Norway) "would have brought

[70] Niels Lynnerup, Søren Nørby. "The Greenland Norse: bones, graves, computers, and DNA." *Polar Record* 40, no. 213 (2004): page 109.
[71] Arneborg, Jette. "The Norse Settlements in Greenland." In *The Viking World*, by Neil Price Stefan Brink, 588-597. Suffolk: Routledge, 2008: oage 589.
[72] The written sources record 12 churches and 2 monasteries in the Eastern Settlement and 4 churches in the Western Settlement. This has been partially validated by Vebaek's efforts in the Eastern Settlement who has found many of these churches. See the work: *Vebæk, C. L. "The Church Topography of the Medieval Norse East Settlement in Greenland." In The Fifth viking Congress, by Bjarni Niclasen, 37-54. Tórshavn: Tórshavnar Býráð, 1965* for more information. There are also a number of small chapels that would have been without a priest in more remote locations or attached to farms, these are not counted as formal churches.
[73] Þjóðhildr's Church is technically a small chapel and not a formal church but since it was the first one in Greenland and its significance is so great it has been labeled as such.

about severe changes to the social structure of Norse Greenland. It is a possibility that the Greenlanders put up a successful opposition to these reforms, and hence won a reputation for paganism[74].” This reputation of paganism is what the saga writers describe in all the sagas pertaining to Greenland that are mentioned in Chapter 2. And although we cannot prove this, it does seem plausible. The Kings of Norway did not have a strong hold (if any) on Greenland until the 13th century and Greenland was a remote location, although not completely isolated. It could be that the Greenland Norse saw themselves on the fringes of the Norse world and may not have relished rule from a land so far away. Keller also discusses the origin and influence of the Irish on circular churchyards in Greenland and Iceland when he posits,

> “The circular churchyards in Iceland and Greenland are however, most probably evidence of a Celtic Christian style. And it may indeed be asked if this stylistic feature also symbolized a Celtic Christian faith. Whether this tradition was brought to Iceland by Irish monks or by Norse Christians can be subject to discussion. But I see no reason to doubt that it be brought to Greenland with the people of Norse heritage[75].”

He then discusses whether we can actually attribute the circular churchyards to Celtic influence or whether it was simply a stylistic feature or simply a passive symbol. We do not know the answers to this question but I find it reasonable to mention and consider that these circular churchyards are of Celtic origin. It also reinforces the evidence I present in Chapter 5.

4.3 Graveyard and Skeletal Remains

In the summer of 1961 a hostel for school children was being built in Qassiarsuk, Greenland, when they uncovered an old church and churchyard. The National Museum in Denmark was informed and excavations began. It soon became apparent that they had unearthed Þjóðhildr’s church in Brattahlíð, in the eastern settlement. This churchyard contained 144 skeletal remains of the Norse settlers and the church and churchyard was dated from the end of the 10th century to the end of 11th century[76]. So far, 10 of the skeletal remains have been carbon dated and the ranges are between the years 894-1228, yet carbon dating is never exact but approximate and some of the estimates have a 100 year margin, the average dating, however, still remains in the 10th and 11th century margin[77]. By combining the dates of the skeletons, church ruins, and graveyard we can know that this cemetery is indeed from the time period

[74] Keller, Christian. *The Eastern Settlement Reconsidered.* Oslo, 1989: page 41.
[75] Ibid., page 199.
[76] Seaver, Kisten A. *The Last Vikings.* New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2010: page 28.
[77] Jette Arneborg, Jan Heinemeier, Niels Lynnerup, et al. "Change of Diet of the Greenland Vikin*GS* Determined from Stable Carbon Isotope Analysis and C14 Dating of Their Bones." *Radio Carbon* 41, no. 2 (1999): page 161.

described in the texts. This cemetery is significant because it is the biggest collection of skeletal remains ever found in Scandinavia[78]. Among the 144 remains, 24 are children, 65 are men, 39 are women, 16 are of unknown sex, and 15 are infants[79]. So far, between 1921 and 1981, 450 skeletons have been excavated in Greenland – which are now kept at the Danish National Museum in the Laboratory of Biological Anthropology in Copenhagen. Therefore, the skeletons found in Brattahlíð represent 32% of the total ever found in Greenland. Some of the remains were found in coffins[80] but the rest were found buried in garments[81]. Krogh in his book maintains that this cemetery was the only Christian cemetery in all of Greenland during its use, and that it is thought that all Christians in Greenland, in that time, would have been brought to this cemetery, even from long distances such as the Western Settlement or possibly even from other remote areas where people were known to have previously died[82]. In *Grœnlendinga þáttr*, there is an instance in which people are told to strip flesh from the bones of the deceased and to boil their bones in order to make carrying their bones to the church much easier[83]. Perhaps this was common practice for moving bodies that were found or were located far from any settlement. All the remains, save two[84], aside from their clothing were found without any other objects. They were all facing east with their arms put to their sides, as was the Scandinavian custom[85]. Furthermore, among the remains found was a pit with bones piled in disarray, upon the reconstruction of these skeletons it was discovered that they belonged to 13 different individuals (6 of the skulls were placed facing eastward), 12 men and 1 child. These remains may have been reburied in this churchyard from pagan burials; it was common among Christian Norse societies to rebury pagan burials in Christian cemeteries. The fact that these bones were all buried together may hint that they all shared a common fate together; perhaps they perished in battle or were part of a ship's crew. There are also a couple of bundles of bones placed in no particular order that are also thought to be

[78] Krogh, Knud J. *Viking Greenland.* Translated by Helen Fogh. Copenhagen: The National Museum, 1967: page 38.

[79] It is surprising that not more infants were found, considering the high infant mortality rate in that time. However the law allowing the exposure of infants to the wild (to die) was legal under Icelandic law. We can assume that Greenlandic law was similar or the same as Iceland but this issue will be discussed below. It should also be mentioned that this custom was abolished (in Iceland) in 1016 by King of Norway, Óláfr II.

[80] The finding of coffins is interesting for several reasons. It is known that pagan inhumations were put in coffins, yet it is also believed that this may represent transitional Christian burial customs. Coffins are also a standard Christian burial practice. The fact that there are so few coffins found in this graveyard may represent a specific Greenlandic Christian custom for burials or it may have a more practical answer, namely that coffins were made of wood and wood was very scarce and precious to Greenlanders, as well as Icelanders. It would be logical to assume that wood to make a coffin may be a great waste. One of the main reasons for returning journeys to Markland was for the acquisition of wood; they would load their boats with timber. This is recorded in both the *Vínland Sagas* as well as the archaeological record, in which a lot of wood non-native to Greenland has been found; this wood may come from Canada or Norway but may also represent arctic driftwood.

[81] According to Christian custom, bodies had to be buried clothed and could not be naked.

[82] Ibid., page 30.

[83] "Grœnlendinga þáttr." In *Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 273-292. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957: page 273.

[84] One man was found with a knife in his shoulder which was certainly the cause of his death. The other was in the grave of a woman, two glass beads were found on either side of her head and were thought to have been earrings. Se Krogh, page 31, for more details.

[85] An old custom relates that Jesus Christ was buried facing west. The dead might have been facing east to face their God on the Second Coming or to face Jerusalem. However, simpler explanation is that they faced east to see the rising sun.

reburials. This churchyard eventually fell into disuse and a new church and churchyard was built right beside it. Aside from the couple of bundles and the pit found containing bones in disarray, there is no reason to believe that any other grave was moved or displaced from their original burial. It is stated in *ESR* that, "Lík þeira Þorsteins váru færð til kirkju í Eiríksfjǫrð"; perhaps this represents some of the bodies found in bundles or in the pit, but there is no sure way to know. Seeing as this cemetery was found around Þjóðhildr's church in Brattahlíð it represents the oldest cemetery in Greenland as well as the bodies from the first settlers. No pagan grave has been found in Greenland up to date. This does not mean that they do not exist, but it is seems unlikely that any will be found. Furthermore, pagan graves can be notoriously difficult to find, as Keller states, "In late Viking Period graves in Norway were evidently influenced by Christian burial customs. They are often inhumation graves without visible surface constructions. This is even the case in Iceland, where cremation burials are virtually unknown[86]." It is very difficult to find graves when they have no markers, many times these graves are found by accident. It is also the case that pagan graves were located in burial mounds, which are very easy to see even from a distance but no such graves have revealed themselves in Greenland.

There have been Christian graves found with objects from later periods in Greenland which some scholars claim to belong to pagan burial practices, but Ljungquist points out that "[Norðsetur and hunting] may well have been considered a male rite of passage and the hunt itself could have been associated with both status and magic. This is, for example, suggested by a ritual burial of walrus skulls at the episcopal see and cathedral at Garðar[87]". This does not necessarily represent pagan belief; it may in fact, just be a cultural custom for hunters of great worth and may have been seen as especially manly. However it should also be noted that Scandinavian society has always been known to include pagan traditions and customs to Christianity and their lifestyles in general, but it does not represent pagan ritual and practice of religious beliefs.

This cemetery is also of considerable worth because it validates many aspects of the *Vínland Sagas* which are discussed above. Unfortunately we are unable to state "this is Eiríkr rauði's grave or this is Leifr's grave or Þjóðhildr's…" because there is no way to identify the graves. There are no tombstones or written markers and, as stated above, none of the graves contain

[86] Keller, Christian. *The Eastern Settlement Reconsidered.* Oslo, 1989: page 179.
[87] Ljungqvist, Fredrik Charpentier. "The Significance of Remote Resource Regions for Norse Greenland." Edited by Henrik Williams. *Scripta Islandica* (Swedish Science Press) 56 (2005): page 32.

any personal objects that would lead to the identity of an individual. As I have previously mentioned, there is no way to tell if anyone in the *Vínland Sagas* were actually real people, we have nothing but written stories to remember their existence – however this is often the case with many historical figures. If they were real people and they were buried in Greenland in a Christian manner it is likely that they would be buried in this cemetery, it is the most logical place. It was a custom of Christianity then to bury the most important religious or community leaders and their families close to the walls of the church or even right along them, touching them. In the picture provided below one can easily see the bones of some women touching the church walls and some men are buried very close. Perhaps these represent such people as Eiríkr and his family.

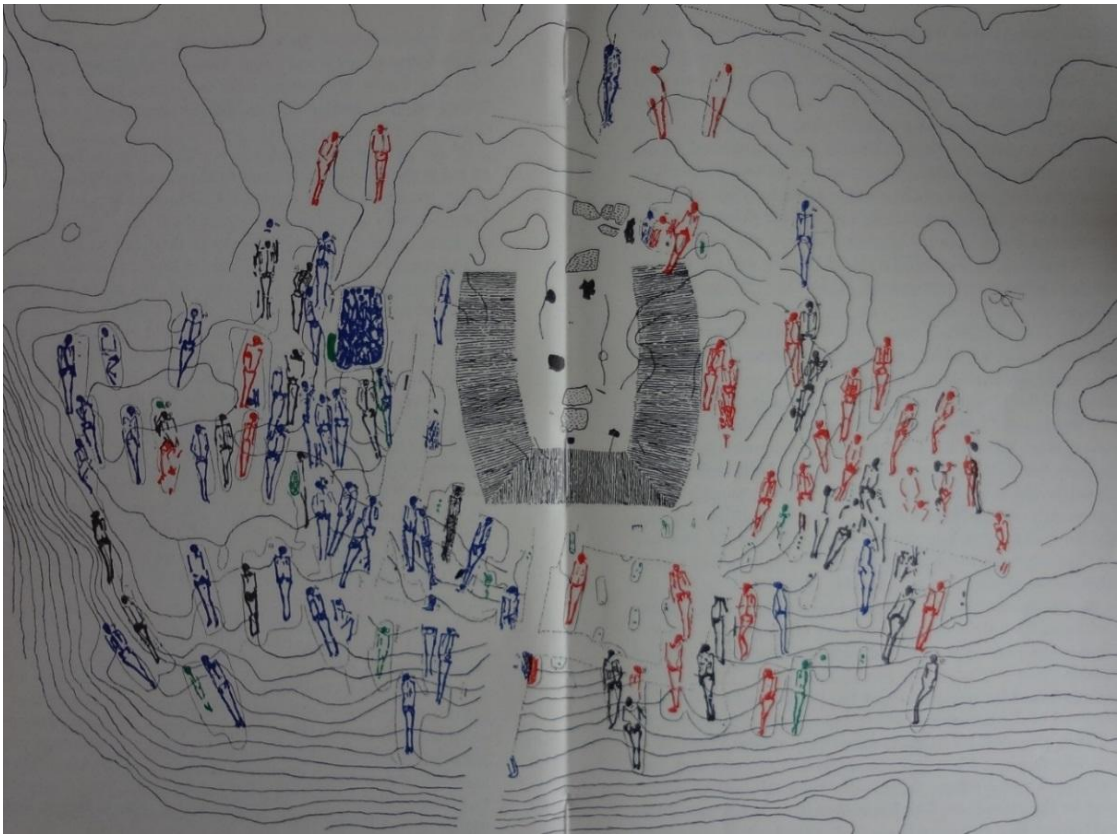

Figure: 2 Krogh's drawing of the cemetery surrounding Þjóðhildr's church during the excavations of 1962-5. Red indicates women, blue indicates men, and the children are in green. The church walls are shown with heavy shading.

4.4 Pagan proof

There are only two objects that have been found in the history of Greenlandic archaeology that we can directly attribute to paganism during the settlement period. When Brattahlíð was excavated in the 1960s a fractured steatite loom-weight decorated with Thor's hammer was

found. There is no evidence that this is a loom-weight with Thor's hammer etched into it for Thor's blessing, making it an object of paganism, for it may simply be a piece of art attached to a common household item. But for the sake of the counter argument of this paper I will consider it a possible pagan object. The other object is a wooden stick found carved with runes in the excavation labeled Ø-17a in Narsaq. The stick measures about 43 centimetres in length and is 1 to 2 centimetres across and is almost square in sections. It was found in two pieces but was glued together. According to runic interpretations by Danish runeologist Erik Moltke and carbon dating the stick at Narsaq is dated to the settlement period of 985 to about 1020. On side B of the stick the fuþark runic alphabet is written. Side C and D have so far not been interpreted but Vebæk claims, "It seems to consist of a number of so-called *Løn*-runes, i.e. runes with a magical secret arranged in a code-system; possibly the man who carved the runes has concealed his name there[88]." But there is no evidence for this since we do not know what those runes mean. On side A, the runes read:

"+ o : sa ÷ sa ÷ sa ÷ is ÷ osa ÷ sat + bibrau ÷ haitir ÷ mar ÷ su ÷ is ÷ sitr ÷ o ÷ blan—[89]*"*

Once transcribed to standard Old Norse the text reads:

"Á sæ, sæ, sæ, es Ása/ása sat/sát. ⟨bibrau⟩ heitir mær sú es sitr á Blán[i](?)/Blán[um](?)[90]*"*

My translation:

On sea, sea, sea (where [the] Ása sat/watch) (where [the] Ása ambush) Bibrau is named [the] virgin/maid who is sitting on Blán—

Unfortunately the rest of the text is missing; Moltke interprets the fragmented word "Blán" to represent either blue sky or vault of heaven and claims that Blauin (which he believes "Blán" derives from) is the "name of the giant from whose skull the vault of heaven was formed on the day of creation[91]." There can be many interpretations to this text but I like Vebæk's:

> "The sense of these obscure words might be the following: the sea is deceitful; the asa-gods (whom you cannot always trust, or who are not always friendly towards you) are on their watch with stormy weather and rough sea. But Bibrau (except for

[88] Vebæk, C. L. "An Eleventh-Century Farmhouse in the Norse Colonies in Greenland." In *The Fourth Viking Congress*, edited by Alan Small, 112-118. London: Oliver and Boyd, 1965: page 116.
[89] Stocklund. *Runic Dictionary: GR 76.* 2008. http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php?if=runic&table=mss&id=21335 (accessed July 23, 2012)
[90] Ibid.
[91] Vebæk, C. L. "An Eleventh-Century Farmhouse in the Norse Colonies in Greenland." In *The Fourth Viking Congress*, edited by Alan Small, 112-118. London: Oliver and Boyd, 1965: page 116.

> this inscription the name is unknown), that virgin who is sitting in the blue sky, will take care that we reach our destination safely. Furthermore, to emphasize the power of the stick, the rune-alphabet has been carved in one of the sides. The fuþark was the most powerful magic factor to defend and protect one[92].”

This is, of course, pure speculation. The exact meaning of the text, which we will never know in full, is not important to understand in full. It could also have a more secular meaning; it does not need to be so mythological. It could mean something simple: it could be written by a lovesick person who longs for a woman named Ása but has Bibrau. What needs to be considered is to what extent this is a pagan object or simply a piece of carved wood alluding to Norse mythology which both pagans and Christians would be acquainted with. Unfortunately we cannot say which it is.

Figure: 3. Steatite loom-weight from Qassiarsuk decorated with Thor's hammer.

[92] Ibid.,

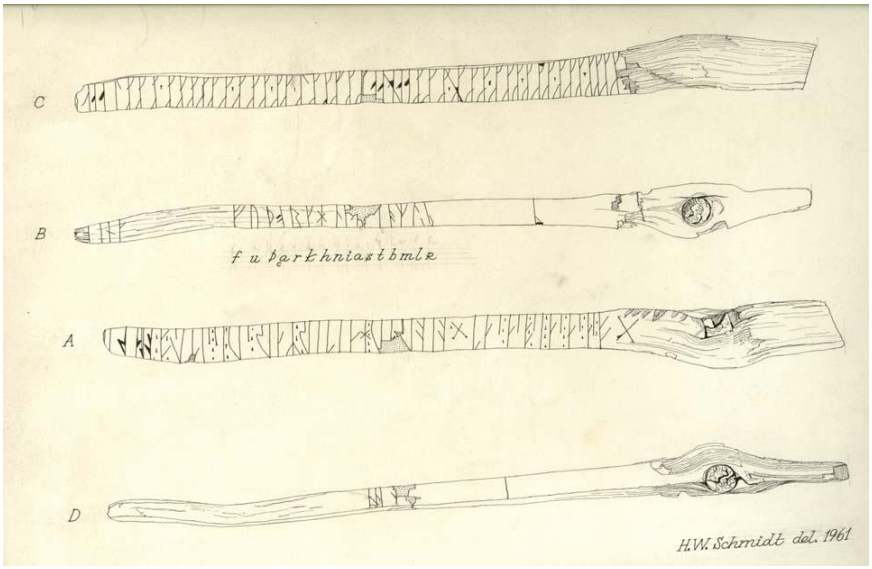

Figure: 4 A drawing of the Narsaq stick. Sides are indicated by the letters on the left hand side.

4.5 Conclusion

To conclude, archaeology is probably the most important source of information that we have for Greenland because the finds are by themselves objective and unbiased. However, the archaeologists who interpret, find, and work on the archaeological sites are subject to bias and error; over time it is hoped that these subjective biases and errors can be overcome. Archaeology, like textual analysis, is always a work of interpretation. In the Greenlandic case, seeing as the written record is so poor in numbers (not content), we must heavily rely on archaeology for the best result possible. Archaeology in Greenland is very rich, over 600 farms or sites that seem similar have been found but many more sites remain to be found. Of the known sites, very few have been entirely excavated or dated. Fortunately, as Keller points out so well, the sites in Greenland are in good health and rather well preserved and are just waiting for the proper man-power and time to work them. We know that there are about 16 most important of these churches is Þjóðhildr's church at Brattahlíð, not only is it the only relevant church to this thesis but it was the centre of social and political Greenland during the initial settlement period. The Eastern Settlement is by far the larger of the two and contains many of the most important sites, however the Western Settlement is still rich in archaeology but it is not relevant to this thesis[93]. The church has a churchyard with graves containing the remains of 144 people all of which show evidence of a Christian society. No pagan graves

[93] For more information on one of the most important sites in the Western Settlement, one should consult Joel Berglund's work *The Farm Beneath the Sand*, listed in my bibliography.

have ever been found to date but two pagan-like objects do exist; the first is the loom-weight portraying Thor's hammer and the second is the runestick found at Narsaq. Both of these objects are of questionable pagan origin; the loom-weight may simply be a representation of art and the runestick may only be a portrayal of mythology, or simply a personal and secular text written by an unknown individual. Yet it must also be considered that these two objects are of great worth to paganism and do in fact represent objects that may at some stage have belonged to people having faith and practicing pagan religion. Loom-weights can be become very old and this particular one could have been used for many generations; the depiction of Thor's hammer could have been put there at any time, not necessarily at the time of settlement. The problem remains that these are only pagan-like objects in existence found in Greenland. We can conclude from the analysis of the archaeological record that it is likely that the majority of the Greenlanders were Christians. We cannot say to what extent their devotion was as Christians, and whether they mixed elements of paganism or not, but we know that there was no official Church or Bishop until much later, that is in the early 12th century.

Now that the archaeological record has been reviewed we can now compare and corroborate it with the written sources from Chapter 3. In Haukadalur, Breiðafjörður, Iceland, following the descriptions of *Landnámabók*, archaeologists in the mid-twentieth century and again in the late 1990s excavated Eiríksstaðir. Brattahlíð and Þjóðhildr's church were found by accident in the 1960s in what we were later able to label as Eiríksfjǫrðr[94]. The distance between the church and the farm also match saga descriptions, and excavations of the site prove that this was an important site for the entire history of the settlement. It is possible that Greenland's Althing was first situated at Brattahlíð (as it was Eiríkr's home) and later moved to Garðar, if indeed there was an Althing[95]. *ESR* and *GS* are also corroborated by archaeological evidence of the site L'Anse aux Meadows in modern day Newfoundland, Canada, which proves that the Norse went to Vínland around the year 1000. The number of archaeological sites also agree with *Landnámabók*'s description of the number of boats (and therefore settlers) that successfully settled Greenland, especially when compared to the number of skeletal remains. Contrary to the *Vínland Sagas*, we have only two pagan-like objects found despite the description given by the sagas claiming the population was all

[94] Brattahlíð ("steep-slope") was selected for its excellent farm land, which is still the case today.
[95] Seaver, Kisten A. *The Last Vikings.* New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2010: page 31. She mentions that the Saga of the Sworn brothers mentions that an annual assembly was held at Brattahlíð, this assembly was likely very similar to the Althing in Iceland.

pagan from the beginning. Furthermore, the cemetery around Þjóðhildr's church proves that most bodies from the settlement period were buried in a Christian manner, not in a pagan one. Therefore with the combined help of archaeology and the written sources we can conclude the following:

1. Greenland was settled, en masse, around the year 985, matching the written record. Brattahlíð and Þjóðhildr's church also exist as described in the sagas.
2. The journeys to Vínland are real and the site at L'Anse aux Meadows confirms, beyond a doubt, that the Norse explored there in a very similar way described in the sagas.
3. The sagas both claim that Greenland was first pagan and eventually became Christian, although the archaeology suggests that Greenland was Christian from the very beginning of the settlement rather than at a later period because there are no signs of Christianization. Furthermore, evidence suggests that Greenland remained as a highly Christian society (the numbers of churches and chapels and their locations in close proximity to farms, as well as graves attest to this). The exact number or percentage of Christians is not possible to determine but if we use the evidence of the 144 remains found in the Brattahlíð cemetery to represent the settlement population of Greenland as a whole, then the population could be said to be entirely Christian.

From these three points we can conclude that the written sources agree with the archaeology on a very broad basis. We are able to determine that the Norse did settle Greenland, journeyed to Vínland, and that the Norse population was indeed Christian. The details of the sagas cannot be confirmed but perhaps future finds will change that. The sagas are full of details but before they were confirmed by archaeology they were just stories, now they can be viewed as historical fiction. The following Chapter will use the evidence of the previous chapters to help contextualize the remaining evidence for this thesis.

5.0 Origin of Norse Greenland Settlers

5.1 The Origin of the Icelandic Settlers in Greenland

One of the most important factors supporting this paper is the origin of the Icelandic settlers in Greenland. This particular area of research was completely ignored by Abrams' article yet is paramount to properly understanding the topic of religion in Greenland. Christianity, as the sagas tell us, was legally accepted as the official religion in Iceland in the year 1000; however, Iceland was no stranger to the new official religion. When Iceland was settled many of the settlers had been Christian as their ancestors had been for generations, perhaps longer. However, many settlers were also pagans and refused to acknowledge the "new" religion. Irish Christians – commonly called Papar – had already been living in Iceland before the arrival of the Norwegian and Gaelic settlers, although as *Íslendingabók* tell us, when they learned that many of the new settlers were not devout Christians they left the island[96]. The settlers of Iceland came from several regions, many of them were Norwegians directly from Norway but many had been living in the British Isles for several generations; many Norwegians had lived in Ireland from the years 807 - 870[97]. Most settlers came from Ireland but the Orkneys, Shetland, and Scotland (Caithness and Sutherland) were among the regions in the British Isles that Norwegians had also settled prior to Iceland. Many of the natives from those regions followed the Norse families, were enslaved, came as wives of the Norse, or immigrated independently. *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók* are invaluable sources for this information; they list the settlers and most of their origins[98] as well as some anecdotes about prominent or important individuals. Stefansson, in this book, writes a lot about this topic and supports this throughout his work[99]. It is well known that many Icelandic chieftains had Irish wives and that in Iceland polygamy and slavery were in practice; many concubines were Irish, slaves were Irish, and many Irish families left with Norwegians to Iceland upon settlement[100]. This was proven when the Human Genome Project used Icelanders as a sample population – for Iceland had detailed genealogical records and was a small and isolated population – when they decoded the human genome they discovered that the most satisfactory interpretation of the evidence showed that the male population's DNA was

[96] "Íslendingabók." In *Íslenzk fornrit I: Íslendingabók: Landnámabók*, edited by Jakob Benediktsson, 3-28. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968: page 5.
[97] Stefansson, Vilhjalmur. *Greenland.* London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1943: page 56.
[98] It is, however, not useful to list every single person and their origin for this paper. Rather I will be summarizing information that is already common knowledge.
[99] Even though his work is dated it is still based on information from *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*.
[100] The story of Auðr djúpúðga in *Landnámabók* is but one example of Gaelic settlement in Iceland.

composed of 80% Scandinavian and 20% Gaelic, while the women were 40% Scandinavian and 60% Gaelic, these are not fixed but approximate percentages[101]. Also, many Icelanders had married or enslaved the Scots as well. Furthermore, Christian priests in Iceland were not necessarily celibate and often got married and had families, thus propagating the numbers and influence of Christianity[102]. Trade, communication, and plunder also took place most often in the British Isles, especially Ireland; where kings, earls, and other nobles, particularly those related to Icelandic chieftains were visited. Viking plunderers often went to Ireland where they,

> "Carried away practically an entire farm – the farm with his wife, family, and servants, and with his domestic animals and household goods. The Vikings stealing at least enough of the hay and grain to feed the stock on the way to Iceland and probably tearing down the buildings for timber which, from the earliest time, was scarce in the northern Island[103]."

Gísli Sigurðsson made a great map showing the settlement areas of the Norse-Gaelic and Gaelic settlers, it can be seen on page 47 of this thesis[104]. If one looks to the Breiðafjörður region on the map, you will notice that it is one of the densest regions settled by these people. It must be also pointed out that the region of Breiðafjörður is where Eiríkr rauði's family had initially settled and it is also the region from which most the Icelandic immigrants to Greenland came from. Stefansson also confirms this when he writes of Eiríkr's first voyage to Greenland in 981 that, "the slaves and freedmen, and perhaps some of the others will have been Irish, but most of the party were Icelanders of Norwegian ancestry or of Norwegian-Irish mixed[105]." After Eiríkr returned to Iceland in 984 to "sell" the idea of Greenland to the Icelanders before leaving in 985-6 for settlement en mass. There are other finds that confirm this origin of mixed ancestry. In the 1960s when L'Anse aux Meadows was discovered in Newfoundland a ringed pin was found in the ruins. This particular spot was built and discovered by the Greenlanders, by Þórfinn Karlsefni as well as Eiríkr rauði's children. And it is interesting to know that the pin is of Gaelic-Norse design, specifically Viking Dublin[106]. Þjóðhildr's church and its churchyard is circular and may also be of Gaelic influence or design. This pin and the circular churchyard do not prove anything in themselves but they do

[101] Sigurðsson, Gísli. "The North Atlantic Expansion." In *The Viking World*, edited by Neil Price and Stefan Brink, 562-570. New York: Routledge, 2012: page 564.
[102] Stefansson, Vilhjalmur. *Greenland.* London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1943: page 56.
[103] Ibid., page 57.
[104] Pálsson, Herman. *Keltar á Íslandi.* Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1996. Sigurðsson's map is based on Pálsson's reading of the settled areas.
[105] Ibid., page 54.
[106] Sigurðsson, G. (2004). *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method.* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press: page 260.

add weight to the argument that the people of Greenland and West Iceland were of mixed ancestry.

Aside from the lack of written evidence, there is another factor that would make the number of Christians difficult to count, that is that initially Christianity has been interpreted as a domestic religion fit for women, children, and slaves. Many chieftains may have preferred to be pagan rather than Christian because of the heroic legacy left from pagan ideals. For chieftains, paganism may have been a strong religion that promoted heroic and warrior values, while Christianity could have been thought as a weak religion fit for the meek and compassionate. Eiríkr rauði was likely one of these chieftains, preferring to be part of a strong belief system rather than a weak one; as described in *ESR* and *Landnámabók*, he had a rough past which included many violent and lethal conflicts as well as exile. So it is possible that households in Iceland and in Greenland could have had their religious beliefs divided by categories of leader and subordinate, chieftain and everyone else. Even if the household and immediate family was entirely Christian (which was the case for Eiríkr rauði's family), the chieftain may still have been pagan. Furthermore, if the chieftain was pagan it may be impossible to know whether his family or household were pagan or Christian; in *Landnámabók* we are given the names of the main settlers and, at times, some anecdotes about them, but these do not always include all the names and religious beliefs of their families, retainers, and/or slaves. The opposite is also true. So, for statistical reasons, if chieftains were representative of their farmstead's religion, it could be very inaccurate. The reason I find this relevant to the context of Greenland is that the saga writers of the *Vínland Sagas* claim that Greenland was pagan. Could this have been a result of first generation Greenlandic chieftains like Eiríkr rauði, a pagan, and other pagan chieftains, right before Iceland's and perhaps Greenland's formal religious conversion, being the official representation of religious belief in Greenland for all people? Obviously, I cannot prove this argument but I find it plausible enough to mention and consider as an alternate reason for the saga's claim of Greenland's early heathen status.

Figure: 5 Areas settled by people from the British Isles, both of Norse and Gaelic origins. Compiled by Gísli Sigurðsson from Hermann Pálsson, *Keltar á Íslandi* (based on *Landnámabók* evidence).

5.2 Greenlandic Law

Little is known about Greenlandic law during the Norse period. However what little we know is helpful for understanding Greenlandic identity and therefore useful for properly understanding religion in Greenland. The most important point that must be made on this topic is that the Norse people during the medieval period may have been a more or less homogenous people. They shared the same culture, language[107], same types of architecture for farms and houses (and more), had more or less the same customs when it came to religion (Pagan and Christian) and burials, wore many of the same fashions, shared much of the same technology, they had a connected common history, and shared in mythology and art as well as many other things[108]. And for the purpose of this paper, Greenland also shared the same type of climate as Iceland and they also even tried to farm the same way but eventually

[107] Language in Scandinavia, shared the same language that we call today Old Norse. This language did not change until the 12th or 13th centuries it became divided into Norwegian, Danish, Faroese, Icelandic, and Swedish. Modern Icelandic is still very close to Old Norse and is legible to most modern Icelanders.

[108] For more information see Gräslund's *How did the Norsemen See Themselves? Some Reflections on "Viking Identity".*

turned to a more active hunting lifestyle that is better suited to the conditions in Greenland. It should be noted that Iceland was different than the rest of the Norse and it is often the case that evidence found in Iceland is used to represent the Norse as a whole. Iceland was equally Norse and Gaelic. Yet they were not so different that they cannot be included in the shared traits mentioned above, nor did all the Norse share all these things completely, but they did do so enough to compare them generally.

But what do we know of Greenlandic law? Not very much. However, I hope to show in this section that Greenland adopted the same type of legal structure as Iceland as it had adopted all other aspects of Icelandic Norse/Gaelic culture. Páll Sigurðsson wrote a very useful article titled *The Law of the Nordic Community in Medieval Greenland and its Jurisdictional Status* and although it is not long, it does provide all the modern research on this topic. He points out that we should assume that Greenlandic law,

> "Must have been very similar to the rules of law in effect in Iceland because of the relatedness of the nations and for various other obvious reasons. No Greenlandic lawbook or compilation of law has been preserved, but a very few passages in the Icelandic *Grágás* manuscripts certainly refer to the legal status of Greenlanders in respect of Icelandic society[109]."

Furthermore, Stefansson had the same thoughts, claiming, "It is believed that in the establishment of the Parliament, and during its first years, the laws of Greenland were identical with those of Iceland[110]." Páll Sigurðsson goes on to explain that Greenlandic law was likely preserved orally, like the case of Iceland in the first centuries, in which a designated Lawspeaker would preserve the laws from one speaker to another orally and would speak the law at the general assembly of the thing, as was also done in Iceland. Lastly he points out that,

> "We have no historical sources from Greenland about law speaking, that is, the verbalization of the laws and other duties of the law speaker. Rather, we have to conjecture that its broad outlines were similar to what went on in Iceland while the law was as yet unwritten…We can conjecture with fair certainty that Greenland's settlers took with them the fundamental rules of Icelandic law, as they were before and around 1000 A.D. Later a legislative assembly, a *thing*, must have been founded (conceivably patterned to some extent on the Icelandic *Althingi* at Thingvellir), and also some kind of judicial system was established that satisfied their needs fairly well. If the judicial system had been very weak, the community would hardly have thrived in the way it did[111]."

[109] Sigurðsson, Páll. "The Law of the Nordic Community in Medieval Greenland and its Jurisdictional Status." In *Aspects of Arctic and Sub-Arctic History*, by Jón Skaptason and Ingi Sigurðsson, 51-61. Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press, 1998: page 53.
[110] Stefansson, Vilhjalmur. *Greenland.* London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1943: page 69.
[111] Sigurðsson, Páll. "The Law of the Nordic Community in Medieval Greenland and its Jurisdictional Status." In *Aspects of Arctic and Sub-Arctic History*, by Jón Skaptason Ingi Sigurðsson, 51-61. Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press, 1998: page 53-5.

Furthermore, in *Grœnlendinga þáttr* (Tale of the Greenlanders), it is made explicitly plain that there were regular things held at Garðar[112]. Unlike the *Vínland Sagas*, *Grœnlendinga þáttr* is concerned with a lawsuit and explains a lot about Greenland law. However it does not ever state that Greenland was pagan but the tale opens with the need of acquiring a bishop for an official church presence in Greenland[113]. The purpose of this section is not to list all the Greenlandic laws that we can surmise or guess from the sagas, rather it is simply to show that even in law it is plausible to assume that Greenland followed Iceland. If this is the case, and we can cautiously assume it, then it is possible that Greenland also followed Iceland in a formal conversion from paganism to Christianity, that is, if paganism was even much practiced or had many practitioners. The conversion to Christianity was made into Icelandic law. Iceland before the conversion was not even entirely pagan and could not be if we consider the Norse-Gaelic roots as well as the Gaelic populations living among the Norse, even if we do not have lists of every single Christian (nor do we have that for the pagans) it is more than reasonable to assume that Iceland was a land of mixed religious belief and that the conversion simply formalized their religions to one single religion, and by putting it into law, aided in the ousting of paganism. We do know that Iceland, at the time of conversion, allowed for paganism to be practiced in private[114] and also formally allowed the pagan traditions of eating horse meat as well as allowing the exposure of infants to the elements. Therefore, if we accept that Greenland was an Icelandic Norse/Gaelic colony populated by a population from Iceland that shared a homogenous culture and custom (as mentioned above), then it is logical to accept that they probably also shared the same type of legal structure. Iceland did after all consider Greenland to be an extension of Icelandic settlement. Bearing all of this in mind, I find it reasonable to assume that Greenland likely accepted the formal conversion of Christianity after Iceland adopted it into law, Greenland may have been a bit late due to their isolation from Iceland and may only have heard of it sometime after it took place, perhaps when a trading vessel came from Iceland.

[112] "Grœnlendinga þáttr." In *Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 273-292. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957: page 273 and 284.
[113] Ibid., page 273.
[114] Despite its tolerance to be practiced in secret, it is impossible to know how many pagans there were and to what extent paganism was practiced because it had to be conducted in secret by law. This greatly decreases our chances of ever knowing those statistics. Furthermore, this allowance for secret practice was eventually outlawed and Christianity became the only legally tolerated religion.

5.3 Conclusion

Hopefully I have shown that the Greenlander's origin, from Breiðafjörður, came from Norse-Gaelic settled areas in Iceland, who were all largely exposed or composed of Christians. Although we cannot say how many of these settlers were Christian, it would be wrong to ignore the possibility that many were of Christian faith, or that households (including slaves and freed men) were of mixed faith. Furthermore, if we accept Páll Sigurðsson's article on Greenlandic law, then we can presume that Greenland and Iceland had more or less the same legal structure. The Greenlanders all came from Iceland and had lived under Icelandic law prior to their departure to Greenland, and it is not unreasonable to assume that they continued to live under the same laws they had used for over 70 years (Iceland was legally organized in the year 930) and that they continued to follow and use Iceland as a model for legal structure. Therefore, combining what I have concluded from previous Chapters with this one, we can surmise that Greenland likely adopted the official conversion from paganism to Christianity around (or slightly later) the same time as Iceland in about the year 1000. Even though it is very doubtful that the Greenlanders had many pagans among them, legally they would have been allowed to practice paganism in secret for a short time. Furthermore, in many of the Icelandic sagas dealing with Greenland (listed in Chapter 2), the saga authors assume (or know?) that Greenland is covered by a legal system and incorporates such aspects as the thing and the Althing. So if we assume that Greenland acted like an extension of Iceland, legally and culturally although not subordinate to it, and that Greenlanders were probably more or less homogenous with the rest of the Norse world, that they came of Norse-Gaelic ancestry familiar with or practiced Christianity, that Christianity may have been considered a weak religion and paganism a strong one, and that the written and archaeological records corroborate each other (on the basics) then we already have a very strong picture of the Greenlanders and their religious beliefs.

6.0 Conclusion

The religious belief of the first generation of Greenlanders is a complicated one. However, as I have shown throughout this thesis there are many diverse ways and areas of research from which Greenlandic religion can be discerned. Historiography is the logical beginning point for this topic. Abram's article is the only modern piece of scholarship that deals with this specific topic; it was a great starting point for my research but as I mentioned in Chapter 2, her article lacks vital research. It is a great summary of the overall topic but since she is missing important aspects of the research she gives a plurality of conclusions, all of which are quite open ended, likely for reasons of scholarly caution. However as I will show in this conclusion, we can be a lot more assertive on this topic than she dared try. Grove's article is a great work full of useful research and is very informative; although the article itself says very little about religion in Greenland, it is nonetheless important for saga analysis and understanding the saga authors. Sigurðsson's works are paramount in understanding how to properly read and analyze the sagas concerning Greenland. Unlike Grove, his works go beyond how the authors imagined Greenland and searches for means of dissecting the traditions and methods of composition from which the sagas are based on. Without Grove, and especially Sigurðsson, one would only have a very superficial knowledge of Greenland saga interpretation and the conclusions drawn here and throughout my entire work would suffer for it. The written source material, although limited mainly to four works, is of incredible value to this thesis but without the proper tools to interpret them, as mentioned above, and barring any archaeological validation, they would be nothing but additional material for conjecture and not integral to this thesis. Seeing as we can better interpret them, with scholarly help, their value to Greenlandic religious belief becomes important and useful. Archaeology is the frame from which all the other information in this work tries to support because the material record shows a very convincing argument: Greenland was always overwhelmingly Christian. Unfortunately, we cannot solely rely on archaeology and we must support it with everything else that can be found. The origin of the Greenlanders as well as Greenlandic Law allow for all the previous information, including the archaeology, to be put into the proper context once the bare basics have been established (the time of settlement, the places, the people, etc). This context is the legal and social context of Christianity and how we can place it in early Greenland.

Were the Greenlanders Christian from the time of settlement? Most likely. Consider the following evidence: *Landnámabók* and *GS* both claim that a Christian man from Hebrides accompanied Eiríkr to Greenland, the existence and location of Þjóðhildr's church in the sagas and archaeology, 144 Christian burials found in the churchyard at Brattahlíð containing the bodies of the earliest settlers, the circular churchyard of possible Christian influence, the ring pin found in Newfoundland, both *GS* and *ESR* claim Greenland was officially converted to Christianity (although likely to have happened much earlier than claimed), no pagan grave has ever been found in Greenland, only two pagan-like objects have been found in Greenland yet they both poorly represent paganism, *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók* and DNA evidence suggest that the Greenlanders were of mixed Norse-Gaelic descent which increases the likelihood of Christian influence on the population as a whole, the Norse people were more or less a homogenous culture and people and there is no reason to assume that the Greenlanders were any different, and it is more than plausible that Greenlandic Law was adopted from Icelandic Law and that the official conversion to Christianity in Iceland was likely carried over to Greenland. All this leads to the conclusion that Greenland was a Christian society from the colony's inception. There were likely some pagans as well, but they would have been a small minority, and until we have found more evidence contradicting this, there is no reason to assume otherwise.

Concerning the *Vínland Sagas*, it might have served the authors to label Greenland as pagan as a literary device for which the Christian characters can shine in a heathen background. Much like Grove points out in his article that the saga authors used Greenland as a setting for heroic deeds by describing it as a desolate wasteland inhabited by savages and the supernatural, it may also be the case that the Vínland Saga authors used paganism in Greenland as a device to contrast Christianity, which they were trying to promote relentlessly. It may also be possible that Greenland was labeled pagan for three additional reasons: first, the Greenlanders may not have been the most ideal Christians and may have seemed a bit backward compared to more orthodox or proper practice of Christianity; second, it is possible that Greenland was viewed as pagan due to bad representation as mentioned in Chapter 5 by leaders such as Eiríkr and other chieftains; and third it may be exactly as Keller pointed out that Greenland was in a rebellious state towards Norway and won a reputation for paganism due its challenges to church reform, this could also be a storytelling device by people who did not know better. All of these possibilities are pure speculation, but they are plausible. Also, how much importance can be given to the two pagan-like objects? Should we

give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they are objects belonging to people of pagan faith and that there may be more like them to be found, among the many unexcavated ruins? Or should we consider the loom-weight to be an object of art and the Narsaq stick to be simply a secular message written by an unknown individual? Either way it is impossible to say for certain, but evidence would suggest that these two finds are not good representations of paganism.

Now that all of this evidence has been presented and discussed can we say Greenland was Christian for certain? No, we cannot, nothing is certain – save the archaeological and written corroboration. But it would be irresponsible and unreasonable to ignore all the evidence that points towards Christianity being the dominant faith and in existence from the very beginning of the settlement in Greenland. Just how Christian they were at the beginning of the colony is impossible to say but it is a fact that after the 11th century Greenland did have an official Church presence, a Bishop, an Episcopal See, and both settlements remained officially Christian. Furthermore, Adam of Bremen in the 1070s claims that Greenland was recently converted, yet we cannot trust that date because it is impossible to tell how long it would have taken word of Greenland's conversion to travel the seas and finally make its way to him. It is also unimportant whether Greenland was officially Christian or unofficially Christian, the fact that it was present is all that matters; its official status only allows for the official ousting of paganism (to whatever extent it existed) and to create a stricter practice of Christianity as commanded by the official Church. There is absolutely no doubt that Greenland remained as a solely and highly Christian population, written records and archaeology both firmly support this and we have absolutely no reason to doubt that.

The oral tradition is the root for most of the written evidence used in this thesis. Although it is subject to many exaggerations and fiction, it has been shown in this thesis and many works before it, that in the case of Greenland, the written sources are informative about early Greenland. As I have mentioned above, with archaeology we have been able to prove many of the basic events in the sagas: the colonization of Greenland, the journeys to Vínland, and details such as the existence of Þjóðhildr's church. This shows that the Icelandic people and their writers had some memory of Greenland and that it is not all false. Historical information can in fact be gained from the oral tradition; it is just difficult to sort through.

There is still a lot of time for Greenland to give up its remaining secrets. As I have hopefully shown, there still remains a lot of work to be done in Greenland, especially in the field of

archaeology. Perhaps if we are lucky, one day, we might find a book or text written by Greenlanders that will confirm or challenge our current notions. Since most of the farms and ruins remain undated and unexcavated, the official history of Greenland can still be greatly expanded and worked. Furthermore, the east coast and arctic region of Canada, scholars believe, still hold a lot to be uncovered as well. Seeing as these regions were explored and exploited by Greenlanders, it would be very beneficial for Greenlandic scholarship to discover more about these regions. Unfortunately, it is such a large region and contain areas that are very populated (in the case of Eastern Canada) it may be a very long time before we ever find anything else. So far, in the arctic, most finds have been found by blind chance. However, if there remains anything to be found, it is still on the surface and has not yet sunk!

Reference List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Family tree of the Greenlanders and the Vínland voyagers.

Sigurðsson, Gísli, ed. *The Vínland Sagas.* Translated by Keneva Kunz. London: Pengion Books Ltd., 2008: pages 72-3.

Figure 2. Krogh´s drawing of the cemetery surrounding Þjóðhildr´s church.

Krogh, Knud J. *Viking Greenland.* Translated by Helen Fogh. Copenhagen: The National Museum, 1967: pages 40-1.

Figure 3. Steatite loom-weight from Qassiarsuk decorated with Thor's hammer.

Abrams, Lesley. "Early Religious Practice in the Greenland Settlement." *Norse Greenland: Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008 - Journal of the North Atlantic* 2 (2009): page 55.

Figure 4. A drawing of the Narsaq stick.

Abrams, Lesley. "Early Religious Practice in the Greenland Settlement." *Norse Greenland: Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008 - Journal of the North Atlantic* 2 (2009): page 56.

Figure 5. Areas settled by people from the British Isles, both of Norse and Gaelic origins

Pálsson, Herman. *Keltar á Íslandi.* Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1996. This map has been compiled by Gísli Sigurðsson through Pálsson’s reading of Landnámabók.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

"Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar." In Íslenzk Fornrit II, edited by Sigurður Nordal. Reyjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1933.

"Eiríks saga rauða." In Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 195-237. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957.

"Grœnlendinga saga." In Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 241-269. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957.

"Grœnlendinga þáttr." In Íslenzk Fornrit IV: Eyrbyggja saga, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, 273-292. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957.

"Íslendingabók." In Íslenzk fornrit I: Íslendingabók: Landnámabók, edited by Jakob Benediktsson, 3-28. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968.

"Landnámabók." In Íslenzk fornrit I: Íslendingabók: Landnámabók, edited by Jakob Benediktsson, 31-398. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968.

"Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar." In Íslenzk fornrit XXVI, edited by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1941-51.

Secondary Sources:

Abrams, Lesley. "Early Religious Practice in the Greenland Settlement." *Norse Greenland: Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008 - Journal of the North Atlantic* 2 (2009): 52-65.

Arneborg, Jette. "Greenland and Europe." In *VikinGS: The North Atlantic Saga*, edited by William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward, 304-317. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000.

Arneborg, Jette. "The Norse Settlements in Greenland." In *The Viking World*, by Neil Price Stefan Brink, 588-597. Suffolk: Routledge, 2008.

Berglund, Joel. "The Farm Beneath The Sand." In *VikinGS: The North Atlantic Saga*, edited by William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward, 295-303. Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2000.

Gräslund, Anne-Sofie. "How Did the Norsemen in Greenland See Themselves? Some Reflections on "Viking Identity"." *Journal of the North Atlantic* 2, no. 2 (2009): 131-137.

Grove, Jonathan. "The Place of Greenland in Medieval Icelandic Saga Narrative." *Norse Greenland: Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008 - Journal of the North Atlantic* 2 (2009): 30-51.

Halldórsson, Ólafur. *Grænland í Miðaldaritum.* Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1978.

Jette Arneborg, Jan Heinemeier, Niels Lynnerup, et al. "Change of Diet of the Greenland Vikin*GS* Determined from Stable Carbon Isotope Analysis and C14 Dating of Their Bones." *Radio Carbon* 41, no. 2 (1999): 157-168.

Keller, Christian. *The Eastern Settlement Reconsidered.* Oslo, 1989.

Kristjánsson, Jónas. *The First Settler of the New World: The Vinland Expedition of Thorfinn Karlsefni.* Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2005.

Krogh, Knud J. *Viking Greenland.* Translated by Helen Fogh. Copenhagen: The National Museum, 1967.

Ljungqvist, Fredrik Charpentier. "The Significance of Remote Resource Regions for Norse Greenland." Edited by Henrik Williams. *Scripta Islandica* (Swedish Science Press) 56 (2005): 13-54.

McTurk, Rory, ed. *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Mitchell, Stephen A. *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsilvania Press, 2011.

Niels Lynnerup, Søren Nørby. "The Greenland Norse: bones, graves, computers, and DNA." *Polar Record* 40, no. 213 (2004): 107-111.

Pálsson, Herman. *Keltar á Íslandi.* Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1996.

Ross, Margaret Clunies, ed. *Old Icelandic Literature and Society.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Seaver, Kirsten A. *The Frozen Echo: Greenland and the Exploration of North America ca A.D. 1000-1500.* Stanford: Standford University Press, 1996.

Seaver, Kisten A. *The Last VikinGS.* New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2010.

Sigurðsson, Gísli. "Greenland in the Sagas of Icelanders: What Did the Writers Know - And How Did They Know It?" In *Stanzas of Friendship*, edited by Natalja Yu., Konovalova, Irina G., Melnikova, Elena A., Podossinov, Alexandr V. Gvozdetskaja, 73-90. Moscow: Dmitriy Pozharskiy University, 2011.

—. *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method.* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Sigurðsson, Gísli. "The North Atlantic Expansion." In *The Viking World*, edited by Stefan Brink and Neil Price, 562-570. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Sigurðsson, Gísli, ed. *The Vínland Sagas.* Translated by Keneva Kunz. London: Pengion Books Ltd., 2008.

Sigurðsson, Páll. "The Law of the Nordic Community in Medieval Greenland and its Jurisdictional Status." In *Aspects of Arctic and Sub-Arctic History*, by Ingi Sigurðsson and Jón Skaptason, 51-61. Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press, 1998.

Stefansson, Vilhjalmur. *Greenland.* London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1943.

Stocklund. *Runic Dictionary: GR 76.* 2008. http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php?if=runic&table=mss&id=21335 (accessed July 23, 2012).

Sturluson, Snorri. "The Saga of Óláf Tryggvason." In *Heimskringla*, by Snorri Sturluson, 145-244. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009.

Sveinsson, Einar Ólafur. *Dating the* Icelandic sagas*: An Essay in Method.* Viking Society for Northern Research, 1958.

"The Church Topography of the Mediaeval Norse East Greenland." In *The 5th Viking Congress*, edited by Bjarni Niclasen, 37-54. Tórshavn: Tórshavnar Býráð, 1968.

Vebæk, C. L. "An Eleventh-Century Farmhouse in the Norse Colonies in Greenland." In *The Fourth Viking Congress*, edited by Alan Small, 112-118. London: Oliver and Boyd, 1965.

Vebæk, C. L. "The Church Topography of the Medieval Norse East Settlement in Greenland." In *The Fifth viking Congress*, by Bjarni Niclasen, 37-54. Tórshavn: Tórshavnar Býráð, 1965.