



FABRICATING REALITY: KRISTNI SAGA'S HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ICELAND'S CHRISTIANIZATION

FABRICANDO A REALIDADE: A NARRATIVA HISTÓRICA DE KRISTNI SAGA E A CONSTRUÇÃO DA CRISTIANIZAÇÃO DA ISLÂNDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Christianization of Iceland as presented in one of the main sources about this event, the *Kristni saga*. It presents an overview of modern scholarship regarding this theme and demonstrates how it relates to Old Norse narratives, especially Icelandic sagas. It then discusses the issue of how narratives and discourses construct and frame reality and how this influences what can be said regarding past experiences. Taking these reflections into consideration, it proposes a new interpretation of *Kristni saga*'s narratives of missionary activities before the general agreement to change religious practices in the *alþingi* of the year 999/1000. It concludes by showing how the author of *Kristni saga* not only presents an agenda to be discarded by the modern historian pursuing information on past events but constitutes reality itself as it determines what can be informed about the past.

KEYWORDS: CHRISTIANIZATION OF ICELAND; KRISTNI SAGA; DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY.

RESUMO

Este artigo discute a cristianização da Islândia conforme apresentada em uma das principais fontes sobre esse evento, a *Kristni saga*. Ele apresenta uma visão geral da pesquisa moderna sobre esse tema e demonstra como ela se relaciona com narrativas em Nórdico Antigo, especialmente as sagas islandesas. Em seguida, ele discute a questão de como as narrativas e discursos constroem e moldam a realidade, influenciando o que pode ser dito sobre experiências passadas. Considerando essas reflexões, o artigo então propõe uma nova interpretação das narrativas da *Kristni saga* sobre atividades missionárias antes do acordo geral para mudança nas práticas religiosas no *alþingi* dos anos 999/1000. O artigo conclui demonstrando como o autor da *Kristni saga* não apenas apresenta uma agenda a ser descartada pelo historiador moderno em busca de informações sobre eventos passados, mas constitui a própria realidade ao determinar o que pode ser informado sobre o passado.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: CRISTIANIZAÇÃO DA ISLÂNDIA; KRISTNI SAGA; CONSTRUÇÃO DISCURSIVA DA REALIDADE.

One of the episodes within the extensive tradition of conversions passed down by medieval narratives is undoubtedly the conversion of Iceland around the turn of the first millennium A.D. This conversion stands out from other conversion processes depicted in medieval narratives as it presents itself as 'peaceful and consensual.'¹ Unlike more or less contemporary conversion experiences, such as those of the Norwegians, Danes, and Slavs, the Icelandic case does not seem to exhibit, at first glance, a coercive element on one hand, nor a radical restructuring of the political organization on the other. This places the Icelandic case in a unique position regarding the conversion process when compared to other experiences reported in the medieval period, both prior and subsequent.

Since at least the conversion of the Franks to Catholicism, through their wars with the Saxons, followed by the Saxons' conflicts with the Danes and Slavs, extending to the conversion of the Baltic peoples at the end of the medieval era, the expansion of Christianity has been notably associated with policies of conquest, territorial expansion, and subversion of the socio-political orders in European territories, leading to profound changes in sociocultural organization methods. This culminated in the emergence, by the end of the Middle Ages, of an ethnic, cultural, and political configuration whose echoes are still observed today in the context of the old continent.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the conversion of Iceland between the years 999 and 1000 A.D. has been especially commented upon and investigated by specialists in historical and religious studies. It stands out as a profoundly different kind of experience, since most narratives, both medieval and modern, tend to stress how Icelanders adopted Christianity through common agreement at a General Assembly rather than through fighting and overthrowing previous societal, religious, and cultural standards.

In the context of modern historiography, established in the early 19th century in the European cultural sphere, the first significant work to address the issue of the conversion of Scandinavia, and within it, Iceland, from the Germanic-characteristic paganism to Christianity during the Middle Ages, was Peter Frederik Suhm's work titled '*Hvorfor den christne Lære fortrængte Odins*' published in 1798.² Suhm's work stands out in its time for seeking an explanation for the conversion of Scandinavia in the Middle Ages that diverged from the explanatory schemes prevalent at the time,

¹ JOCHENS, Jenny, Late and Peaceful: Iceland's Conversion Through Arbitration in 1000 *Speculum* 74, no. 3 (1999), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2886763>.

² SUHM, Peter F., *Suhmiana*, ed. NYERUP, Rasmus, Kammerherre og Kongelig Historiographes Peter Friderich Suhms samlede Skrifter 16 (Kjøbenhavn: Poulsen, 1799) See also LJUNGBERG, Helge, *Die Nordische Religion Und Das Christentum: Studien Über Den Nordischen Religionswechsel Zur Wirkingerzeit* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1940) and KUPFERSCHMIED, Irene R., *Untersuchungen Zur Literarischen Gestalt Der Kristni Saga*, Münchner nordistische Studien Band 3 (München: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2009).

which frequently referred to a notion of the superiority of the Christian religion over the practices of Scandinavian paganism.

P. F. Suhm, on the other hand, suggests in his conclusion that the crucial factor for the adoption of Christianity by the Scandinavian populations during the medieval period was directly linked to the association of elites, especially the royal powers undergoing a period of organization and centralization, with the Christian religion.³ According to Helge Ljungberg, Suhm's great merit was to incorporate an element of rationality guided by Enlightenment principles (of which Suhm was an adherent) to produce his interpretation of the process of the conversion of Scandinavia.⁴

In the second volume of his work *'Bekehrung des norwegischen Stammes zum Christenthume, in ihrem geschichtlichen Verlaufe quellenmäßig geschildert,'*⁵ published in 1856, Konrad Maurer presents a comprehensive investigation into the institutional conditions for the conversion of the Scandinavian peoples during the Middle Ages, drawing partly on the preceding works of P. F. Suhm. He suggests, at times, the strong appeal that the institutionalization of the Christian religion might have exerted on the pagan Scandinavians. Maurer also introduces a notion in his investigations, the echoes of which are still observed in the exploration of this theme today: the discrepancy that hypothetically existed between a real conversion—meaning an actual change in the religious perspectives of adherents of the new religion—and a merely formal conversion, concerning ritual procedures and public declarations of religious adherence.⁶

Through this distinction, Konrad Maurer speculates about an internal versus an external conversion, a subjective transformation versus an objective one. According to Ljungberg⁷, Maurer also played a fundamental role in distinguishing between a 'high' religion, which is institutional and theological, and a 'low' religion, linked to superstitions and everyday rites. In this sense, he took the initial steps toward a conception of the religious and ecclesiastical history of medieval Scandinavia focused on discussing continuities and ruptures in the realm of religious practices, contrasting institutional ruptures or the 'high' religion with ritualistic continuities linked to the 'low' religion.

³ SUHM, Peter F., *Suhmiana*, ed. NYERUP, Rasmus, Kammerherre og Kongelig Historiographes Peter Friderich Suhms samlede Skrifter 16 (Kjøbenhavn: Poulsen, 1799), 167ff.

⁴ LJUNGBERG, Helge, *Die Nordische Religion Und Das Christentum: Studien Über Den Nordischen Religionswechsel Zur Wirkingerzeit* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1940), 2.

⁵ MAURER, Konrad von, *Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen Stammes zum Christenthume: In ihrem geschichtlichen Verlaufe quellenmässig geschildert* (München: Kaiser, 1856), Band 2.

⁶ MAURER, Konrad von, *Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen Stammes zum Christenthume: In ihrem geschichtlichen Verlaufe quellenmässig geschildert* (München: Kaiser, 1856), Band 2, 327ff., 392ff.

⁷ LJUNGBERG, Helge, *Die Nordische Religion Und Das Christentum: Studien Über Den Nordischen Religionswechsel Zur Wirkingerzeit* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1940), 5.

Until the end of the 19th century, there was a tendency to analyze the process of religious change through an institutional prism. However, in Maurer's work, one can already discern the germ of the questions and problems that would characterize the investigation of the religious practices of transitional medieval Scandinavia in the subsequent centuries. Particularly, the interrelationship between elements of paganism and Christianity—both concerning ritual practices and in terms of mythologies, possible associations, and interferences between the current religious perspectives — becomes the focal point of attention in investigations of this period. Even though sometimes with diametrically opposed perspectives, this is the direction in which the investigations of Axel Olrik⁸, Vilhelm Grønbech⁹, Fredrik Paasche¹⁰, among others, are presented.

Concurrently, and primarily stemming from Maurer's notion of continuity in ritual practices within the so-called 'low' religion, studies within Germanic studies, linked to the ideals of pan-Germanism and Nazi fascism, rapidly developed towards a controversial exploration of the Scandinavian religious past. This exploration was marked by a combative opposition between an imagined purity of Germanic mythology and ritual against an invader and corruptor perceived as Roman/Mediterranean and above all, Semitic/Judaic. *'Midgards Untergang'*¹¹ by Bernhard Kummer, published in 1927, somewhat inaugurates this trend that would dominate investigations in the field of Nordic religions until the late 1940s in Central Europe.

As a contrast and somewhat independently from the debates presented thus far, we find the work of Helge Ljungberg, *'Den nordiska religionen och kristendomen: Studier över det nordiska religionsskiftet under vikingatiden'*,¹² published in 1938. With Ljungberg, for the first time, there is an investigation that seeks to comprehend the psychological mechanisms behind the religious change occurring in medieval Scandinavia. Influenced by new historiographic trends aiming for greater interdisciplinary approaches among historical studies, sociology, and psychoanalysis, Ljungberg shifts attention away from the institutional and essentially formal aspects that had hitherto characterized the discussion. Instead, he brings forth elements tied to psychology, mentalities, and the realm of intellectual history as the focus of his discussion on the conversion of Scandinavia.

⁸ OLRİK, Axel, *Nordisk Aandsliv I Vikingetid Og Tidlig Middelalder* (København och Kristiania, 1907).

⁹ GRØNBECH, Vilhelm P., *Religionsskiftet I Norden*, Religionshistoriske smaaskrifter (Kjøbenhavn og Kristiania: Gyldendalske boghandel, Nordisk forlag, 1913).

¹⁰ PAASCHE, Fredrik, *Kristendom Og Kvad: En Studie I Norrøn Middelalder* (Kristiania: H. Aschehoug & Co. (W. Nygaard); Det Mallingske Bogtrykkeri, 1914).

¹¹ KUMMER, Bernhard, *Midgards Untergang: Germanischer Kult Und Glaube in Den Letzten Heidnischen Jahrhunderten*, Veröffentlichungen des Forschungsinstituts für vergleichende Religionsgeschichte an der Universität Leipzig 2. Reihe 7 (Leipzig: Pfeiffer, 1927).

¹² LJUNGBERG, Helge, *Die Nordische Religion Und Das Christentum: Studien Über Den Nordischen Religionswechsel Zur Wirkingerzeit* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1940).

Examining academic production until the mid-20th century reveals a strong inclination towards prioritizing textual sources, especially sagas and skaldic poetry, in shaping interpretations of Iceland's Christianization. However, this was often done without a careful consideration of the inherent literary nature of these textual sources. Consequently, the content of these narratives was frequently taken at face value, and works from diverse contours and contexts were amalgamated in interpretations to support the narrative concerning the historical process under analysis. While this approach had its merits in acquiring fundamental knowledge for understanding the historical dimensions of Iceland's conversion and Christianization—particularly in light of new reflections introduced by structural linguistics and structuralism in general—upon closer scrutiny of the textual interrelationships and interdependencies of the materials investigated, its procedures tend to reveal weaknesses.

Within this context emerged two new approaches to the religious phenomenon in the medieval Scandinavian context. On one hand, there was the incorporation of new methods for selection and analysis of textual materials relating to both conversion and preceding religious practices. Without these, the interpretative framework remains incomplete. Researchers like Dag Strömbäck¹³ shifted focus towards considering the Christianization and conversion of Iceland in textual documents through the lens of intertextuality, textual genealogies, and issues of transmission and circulation of written documents. On the other hand, archaeology underwent a significant restructuring in its methods and practices, aiming to distance itself from dependence on textual information to signify its findings. Olaf Olsen's investigation concerning the continuity of cultic spaces, as seen in '*Hørg, hov og kirke*,'¹⁴ is significant in this regard.

Contrary to historical and archaeological perspectives that previously posited continuity in spaces of ritual practices between the pre-Christianization period and the subsequent era where the formations of parishes and their physical structures were observed, Olsen concludes that there are no archaeological indications supporting such continuities. These purported continuities seem more to be a construction of narratives seeking legitimization of new power spaces by referencing their antiquity.

Writing in the mid-1990s, Orri Vésteinsson incorporates contributions from various fields of study—archaeology, literary and linguistic studies, and historical studies—to offer a new interpretation of Iceland's conversion and Christianization. His approaches and scope have become

¹³ STRÖMBÄCK, Dag, *The Conversion of Iceland: A Survey*, Text series / Viking Society for Northern Research 6 (London: Viking Society of Northern Research, 1975).

¹⁴ OLSEN, Olaf, *Hørg, Hov Og Kirke: Historiske Og Arkaeologiske Vikingetidsstudier* (København: (Luno), 1966).

characteristic of investigations on the subject since then. At the outset of his work, Vésteinsson states his intention not to understand a singular aspect of Icelandic historical experience—the conversion and Christianization—but rather the process of forming Iceland itself as a social, cultural, and political space. He approaches this formation through the lens of the institutionalization of Christianity on the North Atlantic Island. His study introduces themes valued in current historiography, such as identity formation, the significance of spaces and powers, and, overall, an approach largely rooted in a deliberate attention to subjective elements of historical experience.

According to Vésteinsson, “there is another dimension to this approach. It is the question of what defines a Christian society, a question most students of Christian missions and conversions must sooner or later grapple with.”¹⁵ In this article, we start from the same question, although the paths taken in the investigation diverge from the analysis of ecclesiastical institutionalization employed by Vésteinsson to address this inquiry.

Focused on the discourses presented in narratives of Iceland's conversion and Christianization in the Middle Ages, this investigation examines how these discourses, as social practices, not only describe an objective reality grasped through experience and transmitted by tradition but actually construct past realities discursively. They establish the narrative content guiding interpretative models or patterns available for historiographical investigation. In this sense, the investigation moves away from the perspective that views the source text as a repository of objective information about the past and begins to observe it as a subjective construction, inherently intentional, and therefore not exempt in the process of gathering, organizing, producing, and reproducing knowledge about the experience.

Thus, the text is a product of its author or compiler and does not exist independently of them. The information contained in the text is what the author chose to convey. Simultaneously, the absent information is also their choice. Therefore, the author is an active participant in the composition process of the source document and should be analyzed alongside the information provided. The past accessible to the modern historian, from this perspective, is the past that the source's author chose to grant access to their (hypothetical) contemporary reader. More than a vehicle of information, it is a filter, a prism determining which elements and how they will be transmitted.

Moreover, it is necessary here to emphasize that the author's choice and agenda do not solely consist of clearly defined intentions for that same author. When composing the narrative, besides their deliberate objectives, the author is also constrained by a series of factors that form the horizon of possibilities for their apprehension of the world. Departing from the conceptual universe available to

¹⁵ VÉSTEINSSON, Orri, *Christianization of Iceland, the* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

them, the author interprets and gives meaning to the world surrounding them. Following Arthur Schopenhauer's line of thought, as the author creates the narrative about experience, in representation, the author effectively creates the world for themselves. This process occurs within the realm of conceptualization and signification of phenomenal experiences, the only ones accessible to the mind, shaping them in will and expressing them in the representation of the world. For the German philosopher:

“‘Die Welt ist meine Vorstellung:’ – dies ist eine Wahrheit, welche in Beziehung auf jedes lebende und erkennende Wesen gilt; wiewohl der Mensch allein sie in das reflektirte abstrakte Bewußtsein bringen kann: und thut er dies wirklich; so ist die philosophische Besonnenheit bei ihm eingetreten. Es wird ihm dann deutlich und gewiß, daß er keine Sonne kennt und keine Erde; sondern immer nur ein Auge, das eine Sonne sieht, eine Hand, die eine Erde fühlt; daß die Welt, welche ihn umgiebt, nur als Vorstellung da ist, d. h. durchweg nur in Beziehung auf ein Anderes, das Vorstellende, welches er selbst ist.”¹⁶

Considering, therefore, the world and experience from this perspective, as well as the information that can be offered about both, it becomes evident that the text-document bearing witness to the past is not merely a representation itself, but indeed a representation of another representation. Hence, new challenges are imposed on researchers for the interpretation of materials related to human experience.

To a large extent, albeit indirectly, the underlying reflections of Schopenhauer's thought resurface in sociology and cultural theory in the second half of the 20th century, where significant influence has been imparted on the study of history, especially concerning religious phenomena and religious practices. In the field of sociology, a seminal contribution in this direction is from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their work 'The Social Construction of Reality.'¹⁷ As Dreher discusses in his article regarding constructivism, the trend initiated by the Austrian and Slovenian sociologists:

'Berger and Luckmann describe the task of the sociology of knowledge as the study of the social construction of reality; to be more precise, as the analysis of the social construction of the world within the dialectical relationship of objective and subjective reality. Departing from but reaching far beyond Alfred Schutz's phenomenologically oriented sociology, they establish a sociological theory with the potential to bridge the gap between subjectivism and objectivism.'¹⁸

¹⁶ SCHOPENHAUER, Arthur, *Die Welt Als Wille Und Vorstellung*, 3., verbesserte und beträchtlich vermehrte Aufl., Hauptwerke der grossen Denker (Paderborn: Voltmedia, 2005), 27.

¹⁷ BERGER, Peter L. and LUCKMANN, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990, 1966).

¹⁸ DREHER, Jochen, The Social Construction of Power: Reflections Beyond Berger/Luckmann and Bourdieu *Cultural Sociology* 10, no. 1 (2016): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975515615623>.

It is observed, therefore, that according to the propositions of these sociologists, there is an alignment with those of Schopenhauer, as they direct their attention to the dialectical relationship between the objective and the subjective in constructing the reality of the world. Indeed, for Berger and Luckmann, this dialectic stems from a materialistic conception of sociology that was previously prevalent, notably departing from it to incorporate subjectivity as a constituent element of the notion of reality. Here, they distance themselves from the German idealist philosopher, for whom reality properly exists within the will and therefore exists before all experience and representation, which constitute the phenomenal world.

The contribution of Berger and Luckmann, therefore, lies primarily in the amalgamation of the phenomenological element with the materialist, enabling a more effective analysis of material reality by incorporating subjective elements into the constitution of the meanings of the experiential phenomenal world. For the historian, this represents a fundamental contribution, offering pathways to address the gap between experimental reality and the narrative (or representation) of this reality fixed in the text-document.

Bringing these reflections closer to the field of historical investigation, we encounter the work of Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann concerning the notion of cultural memory. In his book "Das kulturelle Gedächtnis,"¹⁹ Jan Assmann starts from the notion of *konnektive Struktur*, which "*bindet den Menschen an den Mitmenschen dadurch, daß sie als 'symbolische Sinnwelt' (Berger/Luckmann) Einen gemeinsamen Erfahrungs-, Erwartungs- und Handlungsraum bildet, der durch seine bindende und verbindliche Kraft Vertrauen und Orientierung stiftet*".²⁰ Therefore, the idea of cultural memory, which serves as a guiding element for the collective actions of cultural groups and confers identity upon them through mechanisms linked to experience, expectations, and collective action spaces, closely resonates with Berger and Luckmann's notion of the social construction of reality. Indeed, Assmann's argument points towards a collective and deliberate effort in the construction of memories that sustain the socio-cultural cohesion of specific groups. According to the author, "*bei der Erinnerungskultur [...] handelt es sich um die Einhaltung einer sozialen Verpflichtung. Sie ist auf die Gruppe bezogen. Hier geht es um die Frage: 'Was dürfen wir nicht vergessen?'*"²¹. And further, in a

¹⁹ ASSMANN, Jan, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung Und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen*, 8. Aufl., C.-H.-Beck Paperback 1307 (München: C.H. Beck, 2018).

²⁰ ASSMANN, Jan, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung Und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen*, 8. Aufl., C.-H.-Beck Paperback 1307 (München: C.H. Beck, 2018), 16.

²¹ ASSMANN, Jan, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung Und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen*, 8. Aufl., C.-H.-Beck Paperback 1307 (München: C.H. Beck, 2018), 30.

more subsumed manner, “*Erinnerungskultur hat es mit ‘Gedächtnis, das Gemeinschaft stiftet’, zu tun*”.²²

Based on Assmann's thoughts, a "culture of remembrance" aims to establish the necessary identification criteria for organizing the future, planning, and hope, and therefore, it primarily relies on "forms of reference to the past." According to him, “*die Vergangenheit [...] entsteht überhaupt erst dadurch, daß man sich auf sie bezieht*”²³, suggesting that the past, as a guiding element for actions in time, only appears on the human horizon when experience is referenced through time consciousness. Thus, in seeking to establish a form of control over actions in time through planning and hope for a specific outcome, it becomes necessary to grasp the notion of temporality in consciousness. This ensures that the past, yesterday, is preserved from oblivion, as an intangible experience, by constantly being made present through referencing the past within consciousness. The past constructed through this process directly and indirectly influences the socio-cultural context of societies. Consequently, it does not represent the past itself but rather the past desired or imagined to be. Narratives about the past serve as vehicles through which this desired past is formed.

This intricate process of constructing historical narratives is explored in this article using a text-document that narrates the Christianization process in medieval Iceland. It characterizes one of the central narratives in Icelandic identity promotion during the period following Christianization and amidst the crisis during the Sturlungar era, which resulted in the effective loss of Iceland's purportedly independent status as a North Atlantic island, leading to its submission to the Norwegian crown initially and later to the Danish crown, until the 20th century. The *Kristni saga*, the narrative analyzed in this investigation, stands out as privileged material for discussing the construction of a socio-cultural Christian identity in Iceland, echoes of which can still be recognized in historiography to this day.

THE KRISTNI SAGA:

The *Kristni saga*, or the *Saga of the Christianization*, is a narrative composed in Old Icelandic, possibly between the first half of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century. This narrative survives only in a manuscript fragment dated from 1306-10, produced by Haukr Erlendsson (1260-1334), known as *Hauksbók*. In this manuscript, Haukr created his own version (autograph) of

²² ASSMANN, Jan, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung Und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen*, 8. Aufl., C.-H.-Beck Paperback 1307 (München: C.H. Beck, 2018), 30.

²³ ASSMANN, Jan, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung Und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen*, 8. Aufl., C.-H.-Beck Paperback 1307 (München: C.H. Beck, 2018), 31.

Landnámabók, an account of land-taking in Iceland, which includes the narrative of Christianization. However, the surviving fragment extends only from Chapter V to Chapter XV of a work that originally comprised eighteen chapters, as deduced from a copy made in the 17th century by Jón Erlendsson, containing all the chapters. The origin of the narrative itself is controversial. While early investigations tended to view Haukr Erlendsson as the composer of the text in the early 14th century, later studies convincingly presented the thesis that Haukr probably encountered the narrative, or a form of it, among the documents he used in composing his work.²⁴ Irene Kupferschmied points out that the authorship of the *Kristni saga* remains undetermined, as none of the hypotheses raised so far has proven convincingly definitive. The author shows that besides Haukr Erlendsson, possible authors considered have been Sturla Þórðarson (+1284), his contemporary Styrmir Kárason (author of a version of *Landnámabók*, now lost), or even Oddr Snorrason.²⁵ Given the persisting debate, this work follows the stance (not uncontested) of the saga's editor in its most recent version in the *Íslenzk Fornrit* collection. In this case, as stated by Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, *höfundur sögunnar er óþekktur*²⁶ — the author of the saga is unknown.

Despite the undetermined authorship, it is possible to acquire a series of insights into the composition of the work as it presents itself to us currently. This understanding provides better comprehension of its contextual writing, the author's intentions, and the possible objectives of the narrative in its connection with the Icelandic literary universe of the 13th and 14th centuries. This comprehension is partly achieved through an analysis of the intertextualities resulting from the author of *Kristni saga* employing other available texts during the narrative's composition, which have survived over time and are accessible for contemporary researchers to investigate the choices and forms through which these diverse texts engage with each other.

Moreover, significant information about the composition of the work can be gleaned from the text itself. This approach refrains from considering the text as a mere transposition from the universe of experience to the narrative universe. Instead, it acknowledges the text as a reformulation or an effective construction of a universe within the narrative that may or may not have a more or less direct connection with experience.

Regarding the specific historiographical narrative, considering both the objective parameters — the author's choices concerning the available material at the time of composition — and subjective

²⁴ GRØNLIE, Siân, ed., *Íslendingabók. Kristni Saga.: The Book of the Icelanders, the Story of the Conversion*, Text series / Viking Society for Northern Research 18 (London: Viking Soc. for Northern Research, 2006), xxxiiff.

²⁵ KUPFERSCHMIED, Irene R., *Untersuchungen Zur Literarischen Gestalt Der Kristni Saga*, Münchner nordistische Studien Band 3 (München: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2009), 45ff.

²⁶ STEINGRÍMSSON, Sigurgeir, *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 1:clv.

aspects — as Skinner asserts, understanding 'what the author intended to achieve when doing what was done,'²⁷ since writing a historiographical text is, indeed, an act — permits an insight into how an author, through their text, irrespective of their identity, constructed a discursive 'reality' of the past. This constructed 'reality' eventually crystallized narratively as 'history' in subsequent investigations on the subject.

Before delving into the analysis of *Kristni saga*, it's crucial to outline certain parameters defining the contextual structure of the work to be examined. Two of these parameters have already been indicated: the uncertainty regarding the authorship of the work and its possible composition date in the first half of the 13th century.²⁸ In addition to these, it's essential to highlight that *Kristni saga* is undeniably a compilation of materials concerning the Christianization of Iceland, drawn from other works composed slightly before the *Kristni saga* itself. In this context, there is a consensus on the significance of *Íslendingabók* — the Book of Icelanders — narrating the history of Iceland's discovery and colonization by Scandinavians from the 9th century, its initial socio-political organization, Christianization, and the early years under ecclesiastical tutelage, particularly emphasizing legal and tax-related issues. Another significant text is a *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, recounting the story of the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason. However, discussions persist about which version of these works was used by the author of *Kristni saga*.

Regarding *Íslendingabók*, debates linger on whether the utilized version was the surviving version to this day, an allegedly abbreviated version, or the first version of the work, also named *Íslendingabók*, mentioned by Ari Þorgilsson in the surviving text's introduction, which is believed to have been more extensive than the one that reached us. Despite speculation in this regard, both works likely originated from the same author, differing only in their length and detail.²⁹

The scenario surrounding the history of Óláfr Tryggvason is more intricate. Óláfr Tryggvason is certainly one of the characters with the most abundant stories and variations regarding his deeds, being among the first to have narratives composed in Iceland. In the sixth chapter of *Kristni saga*, the

²⁷ Cf. “The fundamental reason is that, if we wish to understand any such text, we must be able to give an account not merely of the meaning of what was said, but also of what the writer in question may have meant by saying what was said. A study that focuses exclusively on what a writer said about some given doctrine will not only be inadequate, but may in some cases be positively misleading as a guide to what the writer in question may have intended or meant.” SKINNER, Quentin, *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*; in *Visions of Politics*, ed. SKINNER, Quentin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 79.

²⁸ KUPFERSCHMIED, Irene R., *Untersuchungen Zur Literarischen Gestalt Der Kristni Saga*, Münchner nordistische Studien Band 3 (München: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2009), 46.

²⁹ Cf. KUPFERSCHMIED, Irene R., *Untersuchungen Zur Literarischen Gestalt Der Kristni Saga*, Münchner nordistische Studien Band 3 (München: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2009), 20–47; GRØNLIE, Siân, ed., *Íslendingabók. Kristni Saga.: The Book of the Icelanders, the Story of the Conversion*, Text series / Viking Society for Northern Research 18 (London: Viking Soc. for Northern Research, 2006), xxxii–xxxv.

author refers to a certain 'saga of Óláfr Tryggvason,' yet it isn't evident to which known version this indication pertains. According to the *Kristni saga* author in the aforementioned excerpt, “Óláfr konungr fór af Írlandi ok austr í Hólmgarð, en ór Hólmgarði til Nóregs, sem ritat er í sögu hans, ok bauð þar kristni allri alþýðu.”³⁰ Therefore, it's understood that the author of *Kristni saga* consulted and likely had at hand a version of the saga of the Norwegian king. However, the issue arises concerning which among the many narratives was used, given that there isn't a direct copy of the known texts, and the information inserted appears in many of the sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason. This predicament becomes even more complex due to the impossibility of precisely dating the composition of the text, whose variation places *Kristni saga* in potential contact with all available variants of the narrative of the Norwegian king in the second half of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th.

Added to these philological and codicological problems is the very nature of the *Kristni saga* text, which has been interpreted in various ways over the centuries. Starting from the designation appearing in Jón Erlendsson's copy, one comprehends that the text should be identified as a saga, a term that in modern language, although derived from Old Norse, does not always carry the same meaning as employed by medieval authors. Associated with the Old Icelandic verb *segja* — to speak, say, narrate, inform — in its past participle form, the term can be aptly translated simply as a story, in its broad sense, or a narrative, neither of which necessarily entails the idea of an epic narrative as the term assumes in modern language.

Simultaneously, *saga/sögur* refers to a specific type of narrative that evolved as a literary genre in Iceland from the 12th century. As such, it brings forth aesthetic, thematic, and literary characteristics closely related to the context of its production and circulation in the late medieval period. The significance of this literary genre for understanding and investigating the Middle Ages in Scandinavia, especially in Iceland, is immense. The temporal framework within which the 'sagas of Icelanders' — *Íslendingasögur* — operate is commonly referred to by specialists as the 'saga age' — *söguöld* — a period roughly between the years 930 and 1030 AD. This era marked the initial phase of socio-political organization within the Icelandic community following the colonization of the North Atlantic island. However, it's essential to bear in mind that not every Icelandic saga constitutes an *Íslendingasögur*, a saga of Icelanders, which is a narrower set comprising approximately forty texts within a literary universe that also encompasses sagas of kings — *konungasögur* — sagas of contemporary themes — *samtíðarsögur* — legendary sagas — *fornaldarsögur* — chivalric sagas — *riddarasögur* — hagiographic and episcopal sagas — *heilagra manna sögur* and *biskupa sögur* —

³⁰ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:15.

and excludes other narratives composed in the Icelandic vernacular during the same period³¹, such as tales — *þættir* — and romances — *lygisögu*.³²

Given this vast array of characteristics and possibilities, it remains essential to define which elements unite this entire textual corpus and to indicate how the *Kristni saga* fits within the literary genre of sagas, if indeed it is appropriate to categorize this narrative as a saga, as will be discussed. According to Margaret Clunies-Ross, “the saga is likely to have first taken shape as an orally generated and transmitted form which sometimes, but not always, acquired a written existence in later centuries.”³³ In this sense, it is understood that the narratives presented in sagas would have a unique aspect or character compared to other forms of literary narrative. Generally, it seems possible to consider the saga as a narrative genre beyond its written expression, a notion supported by a plethora of references to “*sögur*” for which no written record exists. While it cannot be asserted with certainty that these narratives were never transcribed, everything suggests that medieval authors referred to narratives in a general sense, including those preserved and transmitted solely orally, when writing about *sögur*.

Another important aspect of the characteristic constitution of sagas is that they are narratives in prose, although in some cases they are based on poetry, which may be integrated within them. Clunies-Ross indicates that

“a saga is not a poem, even though, [...] sagas often contain poetry and some, like certain kings’ sagas and sagas of poets, are largely based on poetry. It is important to establish this fundamental definitional divide, because there is plentiful evidence that poetry was the marked, elite form of the traditional Norse verbal arts. [...] We may say that the saga may – or may not – contain poetry, but is not defined by it. This means that the saga is not a prosimetrum in the strict sense of a text in which both prose and verse are necessary components.”³⁴

Sagas thus differ from other narrative forms, especially poetic narratives, which constitute a second major group of medieval Icelandic literary production. In accordance with these characteristics, we also find the *Kristni saga*. It is a prose narrative that presents, at various points,

³¹ ÓLASON, Vésteinn, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla Mál og Menning Academic Division, 1998); CLUNIES ROSS, Margaret, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, Cambridge introductions to literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511763274>.

³² LAVENDER, Philip, *Las Sagas Legendarias Y Los Romances*; in *El Mundo Nórdico Medieval: Una Introducción*, ed. BARREIRO, Santiago and BIRRO, Renan, 1st ed. (Buenos Aires: Sociedad Argentina de Estudios Medievales, 2017).

³³ CLUNIES ROSS, Margaret, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, Cambridge introductions to literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511763274>, 15.

³⁴ CLUNIES ROSS, Margaret, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, Cambridge introductions to literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511763274>, 15–16.

the insertion of poetic verses, composed in a manner characteristic of an era preceding the narrative's form as it appears in surviving manuscripts, serving as a pivotal element for the narrative's plot, although not an essential one. Nevertheless, categorizing the *Kristni saga* within the established frameworks defined by specialists for distinguishing medieval Icelandic texts poses significant challenges.

From a thematic and literary characteristic perspective, the text bears a striking resemblance to Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, being perceived as a historiographical text aimed at establishing the events that led to Iceland's conversion and their subsequent development. Unlike the saga proper, which generally follows the plot of a central character, local community, or family, the *Kristni saga* selects the theme of Christianity as the central character of its narrative. In this aspect, it ends up aligning with the *Landnámabók*, the Book of Settlements, whose focus, although developed through characters and communities, revolves around the narrative of Iceland's colonization. Perhaps as a result of this, as well as how surviving manuscripts are integrated into their respective codices, two hypotheses have been formulated about the *Kristni saga*.

Initially, it was believed that both this text and the *Landnámabók* originated from the extensive version of *Íslendingabók*³⁵, from which the Book of Settlements was first extracted, and then the remaining material was used to compose the *Kristni saga*. However, due to inconsistencies in this hypothesis, a second interpretation emerged, which remains valid to some extent among scholars of the subject. It suggests that the *Kristni saga* was a composition of Sturla Þorðarson, conceived as a transitional narrative between the period of the Settlement and contemporary narrative affairs, later materializing as the *Sturlunga saga*, a collection of texts between sagas and *þættir* that recount political disputes in Iceland between the 12th and 13th centuries, known as the Sturlungar era. This perspective is enticing as it allows for the vision of an uninterrupted narrative arc from colonization to the time of the supposed composer of the work, Sturla. However, this hypothesis relies on a series of unverifiable assumptions, making it difficult, based on the current documentary corpus, to confirm or discredit such a proposition entirely. Thus, for this investigation, the stance taken follows Steingrímsson's view, considering the *Kristni saga* a work of anonymous or unknown authorship.

From an organizational standpoint, the *Kristni saga* can be divided into two thematically distinct parts. The first part of the work, spanning from the first to the thirteenth chapter, delves into narratives linked to the early Christian missionaries who systematically engaged in the

³⁵ KUPFERSCHMIED, Irene R., *Untersuchungen Zur Literarischen Gestalt Der Kristni Saga*, Münchner nordistische Studien Band 3 (München: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2009), 20ff; GRØNLIE, Siân, ed., *Íslendingabók. Kristni Saga.: The Book of the Icelanders, the Story of the Conversion*, Text series / Viking Society for Northern Research 18 (London: Viking Soc. for Northern Research, 2006), xxxss.

Christianization of Iceland. The text suggests that the Christianization process had begun shortly before the island's conversion, in the famous decision made at the *alþingi* — the annual general assembly — around the year 999 or 1000. This initial section of the work focuses on three preachers or groups of Christian preachers: Þorvaldr Koðránsson and a certain bishop Friðrekr, Stefnir Þorgilsson, and Þangbrandr, who operated in Iceland roughly between 981 and 998.

On the other hand, the second part of the work deals with the actions of the first two Icelandic bishops, Ísleifr Gizurarson and Gizurr Ísleifsson, both having served in the episcopal seat of Skálholt. Between both parts of the *Kristni saga*, there is an observable temporal gap covering approximately fifty years between the Christian conversion at the *alþingi* and the election of the first Icelandic bishop, Ísleifr, in the mid-11th century, a period that the author hesitantly denotes with the phrase “*Hér váru fyrst útlendir byskupar ok kenndu kenningar.*”³⁶.

THE PREACHERS OF THE KRISTNI SAGA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE INDIGENOUS CHRISTIANIZATION IDEA

Based on the reflections made so far, a discernible trend emerges from the various research streams that have delved into the analysis of the *Kristni saga*. Broadly speaking, there's an evident focus on reliability and historicity within the saga's narrative, given its role as a central and relatively detailed account of Iceland's Christianization process. Simultaneously, while historiography is not oblivious to discussions concerning the narrative construction of the text and how it mediates between the researcher and the question of “*wie es eigentlich gewesen.*”³⁷ (how it actually was), it appears that current reflections have primarily sought a somewhat fruitless purification of the *Kristni saga's* text regarding the assumed “truth content” within the narrative. Conversely, among the studies centered on the *Kristni saga*, there appears to be a dearth of investigation concerned with the narrative as a construction in itself and the implications this construction bears on shaping reality³⁸ through the fabrication of a cultural memory³⁹ regarding Iceland's Christianization. These echoes resonate into contemporary discourses surrounding this historical process within historiography. A preliminary

³⁶ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:39.

³⁷ RANKE, Leopold v., *Geschichten Der Romanischen Und Germanischen Völker Von 1494 Bis 1535* (Leipzig e Berlin: G. Reimer, 1824), V–VI.

³⁸ Cf. BERGER, Peter L. and LUCKMANN, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990, 1966).

³⁹ Cf. ASSMANN, Jan, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung Und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen*, 8. Aufl., C.-H.-Beck Paperback 1307 (München: C.H. Beck, 2018).

analysis, albeit rudimentary and thus merely illustrative, may, however, already offer crucial indications of the potential of an approach based on such premises.

As highlighted, the saga commences its narrative by recounting the endeavors of purported missionaries, believed to have spearheaded the introduction of Christianity in Iceland from the latter part of the 10th century. Siân Grønlie, in an exploration regarding Iceland's conversion and the narratives crafted around it, notes that both the *Kristni saga* and Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* omit the presence of Christians in Iceland during the initial century of settlement.⁴⁰ While Ari refers to the presence of *papar* immediately before colonization, the author of the *Kristni saga* adopts a perspective portraying the arrival of Christianity in Iceland as an event stemming from the actions of converted Icelandic preachers who went abroad and acted as preachers and missionaries on the island upon their return from journeys. Thus, the author of the *Kristni saga* sets a pivotal starting point in their argument about the introduction and establishment of Christianity in Medieval Iceland, asserting it was fundamentally an internal endeavor, originating from Icelanders themselves and within their own interests, albeit not initially in a widespread or unanimous manner.

The first preacher, and purportedly the first Christian in Iceland according to the narrative of the *Kristni saga*, is believed to have been Þorvaldr Koðránsson. Following an introductory genealogy situating the character within Iceland's socio-political relationships in the Middle Ages — a characteristic feature of saga narratives — the author introduces, in line with the narrative-literary patterns of sagas, defining characteristics of both Þorvaldr and his father, Koðrán. Koðrán is described as an excellent man — *ágætr maðr*⁴¹ — according to the narrative, a term similarly used to characterize Þorvaldr, who is further described as *vinsæll*⁴² — beloved, popular. While this formulaic presentation is recurrent in sagas, the author's rationale for Þorvaldr's excellence and popularity among his peers is noteworthy. According to the *Kristni saga*, this acclaim is attributed to Þorvaldr's actions: “*hlutskipti þat, er hann fekk, lagði hann til útlausnar herteknum mönnum, allt þat er hann þurfti eigi at hafa til kostar sér.*”⁴³ (he used the booty he got for the release of men taken captive in battle—whatever he did not need to have for his own provisions⁴⁴).

In this passage, even before Þorvaldr is introduced as a Christian, the character's actions are associated with elements emblematic of an ideal connected to Christianity. Þorvaldr refrains from

⁴⁰ GRØNLIE, Siân, Conversion Narrative and Christian Identity: 'How Christianity Came to Iceland' *Medium Ævum* 86, no. 1 (2017): 129ff., <https://doi.org/10.2307/26396501>.

⁴¹ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:3.

⁴² *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:4.

⁴³ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:4.

⁴⁴ GRØNLIE, Siân, ed., *Íslendingabók. Kristni Saga.: The Book of the Icelanders, the Story of the Conversion*, Text series / Viking Society for Northern Research 18 (London: Viking Soc. for Northern Research, 2006), 35.

using the spoils from his plundering voyages beyond what is minimally essential for his own survival, dedicating the surplus to liberating captives. The theme of liberating slaves and captives recurs in hagiographic literature and, in the case of the *Kristni saga*, indicates the author's intent to construct an image of sanctity linked to the initial propagation of Christianity — according to their interpretative stance — in Icelandic territory. This association is further reinforced with the introduction of Þorvaldr's companion in the process of preaching Christianity in Iceland, a certain Bishop Friðrekr from *Saxland*, the region where Þorvaldr supposedly headed after his plundering campaigns. There, he is said to have been baptized and instructed in Christian doctrine by this same bishop. Following the characters' separation due to a conflict involving Þorvaldr, the saga author presents Friðrekr as *maðr sannheilagr*⁴⁵ — a holy man.

Such details are significant for understanding the narrative's essence and how it constructs a specific Icelandic identity linked to Christianity. By attributing characteristics to Þorvaldr that are easily associated by the audience with the holy men of hagiographies, the author suggests that among Icelanders there was a predisposition toward Christianity through the character and morality of figures like Þorvaldr. Simultaneously, Þorvaldr's conflict with Friðrekr, who is explicitly called a saint, hints at the reasons why Þorvaldr's preaching had limited reach concerning the Christianization of Iceland. On one hand, it suggests, in the course of the narrative, that although the Icelandic possessed elements in his nature that aligned with Christianity, he was still tied to a context of paganism, and thus of perdition, evidenced by Þorvaldr's fits of rage and violence against his detractors — a stance that, in turn, distances him from the ideal of the medieval saint. This can be traced throughout the narrative of Þorvaldr and Friðrekr, where the former consistently assumes the role of preaching, while the latter performs miracles that lead to various conversions and baptisms. In this sense, the episodes of Þorvaldr and Friðrekr actually suggest that, although Þorvaldr led the spreading of Christianity in some sense, it was Friðrekr, a foreigner, that was actually able to attain some success in the conversions, which marks a fundamental aspect of *Kristni saga*'s authorial discourse, as we shall see.

Regarding the second preacher to act in Iceland before the official Christianization of the territory, the author employs a pattern similar to that presented in the case of Þorvaldr, albeit with some crucial distinctions. Stefnir Þorgilsson appears in the narrative of the *Kristni saga* in the sixth chapter alongside the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason, and like Þorvaldr Koðránsón, Stefnir is also introduced into the narrative through his genealogy.⁴⁶ However, the resemblances between these companions — Stefnir and Þorvaldr later meet and travel together to *Jórsalaheim*, *Miklagarðr*, and

⁴⁵ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:13.

⁴⁶ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:15.

*Kænugarðr*⁴⁷ — are limited to their connection to preaching Christianity on the North Atlantic island on the eve of the Icelanders' conversion. Stefnir does not appear in the narrative as a *quasi*-saint, as is the case with Þorvaldr. Instead, he is characterized as a typical missionary following the patterns found in continental narratives concerning the Christianization of people since the early Middle Ages. Like other characters in stories of conversion and Christianization in medieval Europe, Stefnir is portrayed as a native educated abroad, urged to bring Christianity to his homeland and initiate the diffusion of Christian teachings among his peers.⁴⁸ In Stefnir's case, specifically, the saga author links the character's journey to Iceland as a preacher to the actions of the missionary king *par excellence* within the context of the Christianization of Scandinavia, namely, Óláfr Tryggvason.

Following the model of missionary narratives, the author of *Kristni saga* indicates that upon arriving in Iceland, Stefnir did not succeed in his mission. This failure was not due to his wavering commitment to Christianity but rather due to the pagans' obstinacy and their refusal to accept Stefnir's teachings. According to the narrative, “*En er hann kom til Íslands þá tóku menn illa við honum ok frændr hans verst, því at allr lýðr var þá heiðinn á landi hér. En hann fór djarfliga bæði norðr ok suðr ok kenndi mönnum rétta trú, en menn skipuðusk lítt við hans kenningar.*”⁴⁹ This motif is present in other narratives of a similar nature, such as *Vita Bonifatii*⁵⁰ and *Vita Anskarii*⁵¹, ultimately referring back to a recurring theme in biblical texts, notably in various prophetic narratives and historical texts. Just as in the texts that likely served as references for the author of *Kristni saga*, Stefnir also reacts to the indifference and reluctance of his peers to receive Christian teachings and embrace the new religion through religious violence. According to the account, “*Ok er hann sá þat, at þat hafði engan framgang, þá tók hann at meiða hof ok hörğa en brjóta skurðgoð.*”⁵² Here, one can observe a direct narrative proximity to the theme present in the *Vita* of Boniface or in the different accounts of missionary activities in Scandinavia found in *Gesta Hammaburgensis* by Adam of Bremen. However,

⁴⁷ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:37.

⁴⁸ In this case, it is necessary to consider this theme with some caution. Indeed, many narratives omit explicit references to the missionary educated in another already-Christianized territory, yet it is an inferred detail in numerous accounts of the Christianization process, with central references to figures like Ulfilas—although he was Arian. In the tradition of missionary literature, particularly from the Carolingian period, we observe such subjective indications in the activities of Winfried/Bonifatius. Cf. BINNIG, Wolfgang and HEMPEL, Heinrich, *Gotisches Elementarbuch*, 5th ed., De-Gruyter-Studienbuch (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1999), 37ff; SCHÄFERDIEK, Knut, Wulfila (Ulfila); in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie: Band 36: Wiedergeburt - Zypern*, ed. MÜLLER, Gerhard, Reprint 2020, Theologische Realenzyklopädie Band 36 (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2020); SCHIEFFER, Rudolf, Boniface: His Life and Work; in AAIJ; GODLOVE, *A Companion to Boniface*; YORKE, Barbara, Boniface's West Saxon Background; in AAIJ; GODLOVE, *A Companion to Boniface*.

⁴⁹ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:15–16.

⁵⁰ Bonifatius, *Briefe Des Bonifatius: Willibalds Leben Des Bonifatius*, 1st ed., ed. RAU, Reinhold (Darmstadt: wbg Academic, 2017).

⁵¹ Rimbertus, *Vita Anskarii*; in *Quellen Des 9. Und 11. Jahrhunderts Zur Geschichte Der Hamburgischen Kirche Und Des Reiches*, ed. BUCHNER, Rudolf, 3rd ed., *Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters 11* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges, 1973).

⁵² *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:16.

similar to Þorvaldr, Stefnir concludes his activity in Iceland without achieving significant success. In fact, even more drastically than Þorvaldr, who was accompanied by the saint Friðrekr, the author of *Kristni saga* concludes Stefnir's participation with the character being prosecuted and forced to leave Iceland again, without a single mention of a conversion resulting from his preaching activity.

Analyzing the narrative of these first two missionaries in *Kristni saga* reveals a trend in the author's intent to create a text with strong references to a continental narrative tradition linked to the spread of Christianity. Before being an original text or even a compilation of information related to the specific case of Iceland, the author clearly envisioned a narrative project to embed Iceland's Christianization process within a universal backdrop of the "Christianization of the world," as established in European literary tradition. In this sense, the actions of the third preacher in Iceland, Þangbrandr, may offer valuable insights into the saga's underlying purposes.

Þangbrandr is initially introduced in *Kristni saga* in the fifth chapter. He emerges in the narrative as a chaplain of a certain Archbishop Albert (?) of Bremen, who had settled in Áróss, Jutland, during the times of King Haraldr Gormsson (Bluetooth). Furthermore, Þangbrandr is also said to be the son of a certain Count Vilbaldus of Bremen, a figure not attested in other sources apart from those related to the preacher. Succinctly, the narrative surrounding Þangbrandr in this initial chapter seeks to present certain elements that will illustrate the character throughout the following chapters. Three elements are visible in the opening lines of the chapter: Þangbrandr's association with the diocese of Bremen, his noble lineage and chivalrous ability, and the character's dubious morality or religiosity, evident through the story of his acquiring an Irish slave for his personal use.⁵³ In fact, due to a dispute involving this slave, Þangbrandr initially causes political disturbances that force him to leave the Danish realm and seek refuge with Óláfr Tryggvason. According to *Kristni saga*, the future preacher of Christianity in Iceland killed a Germanic hostage at the Danish court, making his stay there troublesome. At the same time, the construction of this character in *Kristni saga* serves as a basis to place Þangbrandr — an unknown figure in narratives outside the Nordic literary cycle, albeit apparently of Germanic origin — at the court of Óláfr Tryggvason. According to *Kristni saga's* narrative, "*Því mátti Þangbrandr eigi vera í Danmørk ok fór hann þá til Óláfs konungs Tryggvasonar, ok tók hann vel við honum ok var hann vígðr þar til prests ok var hann hirðprestr hans um hríð.*"⁵⁴

In Óláfr Tryggvason's court, Þangbrandr continues his wandering behavior, as mentioned in *Kristni saga*, spending his wealth in such opulence that at one point he acquires a ship to conduct raids against the pagans, an image fully aligned with the narrative models of Icelandic sagas.

⁵³ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:13–15.

⁵⁴ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:15.

Particularly in the case of Þangbrandr, it is evident that the author of *Kristni saga* follows established literary patterns to create tensions that justify the narrative plot. Just as the conflict with the Germanic hostage brought Þangbrandr to Óláfr's court, now this character's criminal actions place him in direct conflict with the Norwegian king, who, as punishment, sends him to Iceland to act as a preacher in that region. For the author of *Kristni saga*, therefore, Þangbrandr's activities in Iceland stem more from the conflicts this character built throughout his journey with important political figures in the North than from a genuine interest in the Christianization of the Icelanders. Faced with these details and seeking to construct a coherent narrative about the events that led to Iceland's Christianization while simultaneously striving to maintain consistency with other narratives of Christianization, notably the *Íslendingabók* and the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* — both of which present narratives more or less consensual regarding the Christianization of Scandinavia in the context of *Kristni saga*'s composition —, the author proceeds to elaborate on complex material in which Þangbrandr appears both as a successful preacher — ultimately, he manages to promote the acceptance of Christianity by some of Iceland's main political leaders — and as a problematic figure, largely responsible for his own setbacks and difficulties encountered in the dissemination of Christianity among the Icelanders.

After two years of activity in Iceland, as narrated in *Kristni saga*, Þangbrandr found himself forced to leave the island, having been banished due to the preacher's murder of two poets who had composed defamatory verses about himself. Certainly, the assassination of two other characters did not enhance Þangbrandr's reputation, even though one of them was identified as a berserkr, whose death was regarded with relief. According to the narrative, “*Þessu fǫgnuðu margir góðir menn þó at heiðnir væri.*”⁵⁵ Once again, largely hindered by his own irresponsible actions in the process of disseminating Christianity in Iceland, Þangbrandr, like the preachers before him, had to leave the island without achieving the goal of making Icelanders Christians, heading back to Óláfr Tryggvason to report what had happened.

The perspective of the author of *Kristni saga* becomes evident from a statement by Gizurr the White before the Norwegian king, when Óláfr became enraged on account of the Icelanders' intransigence in accepting Christianity as their religion. According to the narrative, “*Gizurr sagði at honum þótti ván at kristni mundi við gangask á Íslandi, ef ráðum væri at farit; – , en Þangbrandr fór þar sem hér heldr óspakliga; drap hann þar menn nokkura, ok þótti monnum hart at taka þat af útlendum manni.*”⁵⁶ For the author of *Kristni saga*, therefore, through Gizurr's words — who became one of the main figures involved in the subsequent Christianization — the main obstacle to

⁵⁵ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:25.

⁵⁶ *Kristni Saga*; in KRISTJÁNSSON; STEINGRÍMSSON, *Biskupa Sögur I*, vol. 2:29.

Christianization stemmed from the lack of wisdom on the part of the preachers, on one hand, and from the fact that they were in many cases (Friðrekr and Þangbrandr) foreigners, a characteristic not well accepted by the Icelanders. Gizurr concluded his thoughts by indicating that if wise men and well-established members of Icelandic society were to engage in Christianization, then the success of the endeavor would be certain. Indeed, Gizurr the White himself, along with his companion and son-in-law, Hjalti Skeggjason, pledged before the king to succeed in the Christianization of the Icelanders and were presented by the author of *Kristni saga* as the main figures responsible for the successful presentation of the case before the assembly, which led to the adoption of Christianity on the island, as the narrative tradition dictates.

FINAL THOUGHTS: NARRATIVE AS THE CONSTRUCTION OF PAST REALITY AND THE FIELD FOR ESTABLISHING POWER RELATIONS

Following the proposed analyses of the narrative construction of the activities of preachers in Iceland on the eve of the population's Christianization on the North Atlantic island, one can observe how the author of the *Kristni saga* selected their material to propose an image of Christianization guided by two central elements: the connection of Icelandic Christianization to a long tradition of religious change, inspired by biblical and hagiographic influences; and the notion of a Christianization that arises from the agency of Icelanders themselves, contrasting external influences, marking the idea of a cohesive socio-political body capable of making the right decisions without the need for foreign tutelage, whether Norwegian or continental. For the author of the *Kristni saga*, the introduction of Christianity in Iceland appears as a privileged field for discussing the historical experience of their own time, a time of crisis, as well as a space for defining the distinctly insular identity amidst Icelandic integration into the political-religious dynamics of Norway and Europe.

Simultaneously, in constructing their historiographical narrative of Icelandic Christianization, the author of the *Kristni saga* reinforces the tradition initiated by Ari Þorgilsson hinn fróði, who sees Christianization as a purely internal, peaceful, and, considering its context, democratically resolved political matter within the regular acts of the Icelandic political body. By revisiting the myth of autochthonous Christianization, the author strengthens the sense of predestination postulated by Ari in his *Íslendingabók*. Thus, alongside other authors, from whom various narratives are taken and reworked in light of their understanding of the past, the author of the *Kristni saga* not only establishes a vision of the past for their immediate audience in their own time but also constitutes the basis of

possible knowledge regarding this central event in the Icelandic historical experience for later investigation. By defining their discourse around the theme of autochthonous Christianization and, more than other texts, excluding the presence of foreign agents from the narrative, or identifying them as hindrances to Christianization, the author of the *Kristni saga* emerges as a key element in defining historical reality as presented in contemporary historiography. Beyond being merely an informative vehicle about the past, the *Kristni saga* thus positions itself as the very reality it portrays.