

SIÂN GRØNLIE

KRISTNI SAGA AND MEDIEVAL CONVERSION HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

There is a wealth of written sources from the Middle Ages about Iceland's conversion to Christianity, and a corresponding wealth of critical literature attempting to reconstruct this key event. Yet the lack of any contemporary sources to lean on has created enduring uncertainties as to how exactly the medieval texts should be interpreted: the earliest source for the conversion, Ari Porgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, was written over one hundred years after the historical events took place (in circa 1122-33), and the others, which use Ari's narrative to varying degrees as a basis for expansion and rewriting, were written between circa 1190 and 1350. The best known are Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Kristni saga*, the *kristniþættir* in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and *Njáls saga*.¹ Attitudes towards the historical reliability of these sources have varied greatly, although the general consensus of opinion has always been that Ari alone is fully trustworthy. It has not, however, proved possible or desirable to dismiss the other sources altogether, both because Ari's account in itself is so unsatisfactory, and because the later works contain

¹ The level of dependence on Ari varies, although all later sources draw on his account of the legal conversion at the Althing. Of the two main manuscripts of Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (127-130), one refers directly to *Íslendingabók* as a source and the other includes an account so close to Ari's that it is sometimes believed to come from the older (lost) version of his *Íslendingabók* (Brenner 1878:117-19, Turville-Petre 1953:100). Although some of the variants in wording may come from this source, it is noticeable that the main additions all relate to the role of Óláfr Tryggvason and it seems most likely that they were made by a translator or compiler of Oddr's work, if not by Oddr himself (see the different opinions expressed by Groth 1895:lix, Finnur Jónsson 1932:xxxii-ii). *Kristni saga* refers directly to Ari in the second part of the saga, but it seems likely that its account of the legal conversion uses a source based on Ari rather than being directly derivative (*ÍF* XV:ccvii); the same may be true of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and *Njáls saga*.

many intriguing additional details. While Ari gives only a vague picture of Pangbrandr's mission to Iceland and leaves many questions unanswered in his fuller account of the legal conversion, later sources tell in detail of Pangbrandr's exploits, substantiated in part by skaldic verses and place-names. They also tell of two earlier missions, led by Þorvaldr Koðránsson and Stefnir Þorgilsson, of which the first in particular is problematic material, with its miracles, chronological impossibilities and edifying commentary. Any reconstruction of Icelandic conversion history has to take into account the stories contained in these later texts, if only to dismiss them as religious propaganda or downright fabrication. In this paper, I would like to look at some of the ways in which historians have handled the sources on the conversion, and then suggest that these may not be so different from how a medieval historian, the compiler of *Kristni saga*, approached his work.

EARLY HISTORIES OF THE CONVERSION

Typical of early accounts of Icelandic conversion history is a more or less uncritical use of all the available sources, with little attempt to distinguish levels of reliability. Perhaps the most rigorous is the German law professor Konrad Maurer's *Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen Stammes zum Christenthume*, published in two volumes in 1855-56. Maurer uses a complete range of sources, all translated in full, and ordered according to a strict chronology of events: in his introduction, he promises to observe „den engsten Anschluß an die chronologische Reihenfolge der Begebenheiten” (‘the narrowest adherence to the chronological order of events’) and to write „mit dem wissenschaftlichen Ernste, welchen jede geschichtliche Forschung voraussetzt” (‘with the scientific seriousness, which all historical research requires’) (Maurer 1965:vii-viii). Although aware that some of the texts he uses may contain unhistorical features, he argues that these serve „als Beleg für die Sinnesweise der Zeit” (‘as evidence for the mentality of the time’) and best provide the reader with „eine lebendige Anschauung” (‘a vivid depiction’) (Maurer 1965:viii). The general reliability of the sources is, however, taken for granted, and Maurer's commentary focuses mainly on chronological difficulties, legal issues, and the political reasons for Iceland's conversion. Maurer's work provided the foundation for Björn M. Ólsen's seminal study *Um kristnitökuna árið 1000 og tildrög hennar*, which was written in commemoration of the nine-hundredth anniversary of Christianity in Iceland, and

dedicated to Maurer. Drawing selectively on a wide range of sources, including Eddaic verse, Björn M. Ólsen weaves his material into a plausible whole and develops at length Maurer's analysis of Icelandic political history. Although an episode is occasionally dismissed as „tilbúningur síðari tíma“ ('the invention of a later time'), his general tendency is to accept the information in his sources and to smooth over the many differences between them (Björn M. Ólsen 1900:36, 89).

Interestingly, both men acknowledge in theory the greater reliability of Ari's work, but in practice rely heavily on later, more detailed accounts of the conversion. Maurer (1965:407, 416), for example, states explicitly that he follows *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* because of its „Ausführlichkeit“ ('detail') rather than its reliability, while Björn M. Ólsen (1900:70-71) looks to other sources to bulk out Ari's meagre narrative: „Filgjum vjer frásögn Ara, það sem hún nær, enn hendum það úr öðrum sögum, er oss þykir næst sanni“ ('We follow Ari's narrative, as far as it goes, and take from other accounts what seems to us nearest the truth').

If Maurer and Björn M. Ólsen write in the tradition of Ranke, aiming for objectivity and scientific rigour, the church histories by Adolf Jörgensen (published in 1874-78), Bishop Jón Helgason (1925-27) and John Hood (1946) are rather different in nature. These men conflate the sources on the conversion without making any note of their differences and incompatibilities, and no particular prominence is given to Ari. The religious motivation behind their work is evident from a number of interpretative comments: Jörgensen and Jón Helgason openly express their Christian sympathies, warmly praising the Christian pioneer Þorvaldr and the evangelical missionary Friðrekr at the same time as they condemn the violent approach of Stefnir and Pangbrandr (Jörgensen 1874-78:274-75, 284, 360-61, 363; Jón Helgason 1925:31-32, 34). For Jörgensen (1874-78:358), the superiority of Christianity is self-evident and sufficient in itself as an explanation of Iceland's rapid conversion:

Det lå i sagens natur, at det nye i den henseende havde en stor fordel for det gamle, det svarede til den længsel, som var så levende i Islændingens bryst, det lovede opfyldelse af den dybeste attrå, det stod i forbund med alt det ædlest og bedste i mennesket.

It lay in the nature of the thing, that the new in that respect had a great advantage over the old, it answered the longing which was so intense

in the Icелander's breast, it promised fulfilment of the deepest desires, it stood in connection with the noblest and best in man.

Hood, who was stationed in Iceland during the Second World War, writes as a journalist to acquaint the English with 'the spirit and achievements of the Icelandic church' (Hood 1946:vii); and the inaccuracies, personal reminiscences and occasional flights of fancy in his work all suggest that he is engaged in creating an atmosphere rather than reconstructing past events. The atmospheric setting is particularly marked in his account of Þorgeirr's speech at the Law-Rock: 'The slanting rays of the sub-arctic sun, in the heavens there all that night, would be shining over the lake, touching the stern background of volcanic mountains with gracious colours'. In line with his stated aim, he privileges stories showing the character of the Icelandic church: on how some Icelanders preferred to be baptised in warm springs, he remarks that 'some might say that a certain tepidity has marked the Christianity of the nation ever since; others that the incident illustrates its practical common sense' (Hood 1946:32-33).

THE PROBLEM OF MIRACLES

Miracles and legends are problematic even for the devout among these early historians, and meet with a variety of different fates. Maurer and Jørgensen both include the supernatural and legendary in their work, but make note of the less believable anecdotes: Maurer (1965:214, 218, 224, 385) three times points out the presence of decorative additions in Þorvaldr's mission and expresses strong doubts on the subject of Pangbrandr's youthful adventures, while Jørgensen (1874-78:276, 362) refers deprecatingly to the role of „sagn“ ('legend') at the beginning of Þorvaldr's life and the end of Stefnir's. The early twentieth-century histories tend to leave out the supernatural, but are less critical about other legendary material: Björn M. Ólsen, for example, relates a number of apocryphal events from Þorvaldr's mission (such as his rescue of Sveinn Forkbeard), but silently omits the battles with heathen spirits and berserks and the miracles by which God protects his people. He keeps a brief description of Pangbrandr's youth, which Maurer found so problematic, prefacing it with „er sagt“ ('it is said') in deference to his predecessor's scepticism, and exercises the same caution when telling of the incense miraculously smelt upwind at the Althing (Björn M. Ólsen 1900:28-29, 85). On the

other hand, he quietly passes over the magician Galdra-Heðinn who, according to the sources, caused the ground to swallow up Pangbrandr's horse. This is, interestingly enough, the only supernatural event Jón Helgason (1925:40) sees fit to include, perhaps because of its dramatic qualities. Yet, much as he may have appreciated the story's artistry, he distances himself from its historical truth by introducing it with „i Følge Sagnet“ (‘according to the legend’).

An alternative to either accepting the miracles uncritically or omitting them altogether is to strip away the supernatural while salvaging whatever can be rationalised as history. In *Kristni saga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, for example, there is an account of how the heathens were miraculously prevented from burning Bishop Friðrekr alive, when a flock of birds frightened their horses just a stone's throw from his homestead (*ÍF* XV:12-13, *ÓlTm* I:297-98). Björn M. Ólsen (1900:20) suggests that this is in fact the confused reminiscence of a „fjeránsdómr“ (‘court of confiscation’) held outside Friðrekr's home after he was outlawed: at some point the legal context was forgotten, and the fact that the heathens left without harming the bishop was reinterpreted as a miracle. Similarly, Sigurður Nordal (1928) has shown that Pangbrandr's horse really could have sunk into the ground in the area mentioned in the sources: Mýrdalssandur beneath Katla in southern Iceland (*ÍF* XV:19, *ÓlTm* II:156-57, *ÍF* XII:259). Giving examples from nineteenth century records, he points out that, after a volcanic eruption, glacial cavities are formed under the sand that can easily give way if they are ridden over. Historians, he argues, must distinguish between events themselves and the (supernatural) explanations later given to them: while doubt may seem more scientific than faith, both rest on equally weak foundations („Það er nú einu sinni svo, að efinn þykir vísindalegri en trúin, þótt hvorttveggja sé á jafn-veikum rökum reist“; Sigurður Nordal 1928:113).

A more recent attempt to extract history from miracles can be found in Gryte Piebenga's discussion of the mission of Þorvaldr and Bishop Friðrekr. With the aim of distinguishing „hva som virkelig skjedde og hva som bare beror på fantasi“ (‘what really happened and what merely rests on fantasy’; Piebenga 1984:80), she selects a number of episodes from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and *Kristni saga* for closer inspection, including Friðrekr's defeat of a heathen spirit worshipped by Þorvaldr's father Koðrán, and his victory over two berserks who walk through fire without burning themselves. The first of these episodes, she suggests, might well have some

kind of historical basis: Koðrán's admiration for Christian rituals, his belief in a spirit in a stone and the fact that he was somehow convinced of the superiority of the Christian God are all plausible in the context of religious history, and only the literary shaping of the story betrays the mind of an author. Likewise, Friðrekr's defeat of two berserks can be readily admitted to the sphere of history on the grounds of psychology: Piebenga argues that the berserks entered into a hypnotic state in order to stride painlessly through fire, which the bishop was able to cancel because of their fearful expectations of Christianity and loss of faith in their own gods (Piebenga 1984:88, 90). These tentative conclusions are, however, rather undercut by the parenthetical admission towards the beginning of the article that „det er helt umulig á bestemme noe slikt med sikkerhet“ ('it is quite impossible to decide such a thing with certainty'): as she herself admits, the fact that an event could or might have happened – is „naturlig“, „forståelig“ or „forklarlig“ ('natural', 'understandable', or 'explainable') – falls short of proving that it actually did.

ARI AND SOURCE CRITICISM

As faith in the historical reliability of the sagas diminished in the course of the twentieth century, an increasing dependence on Ari came to dominate writing about the conversion. In his *Íslendinga saga*, Jón Jóhannesson (1956:151-52) echoes Maurer and Björn M. Ólsen on the reliability of Ari's work „það sem hún nær“ ('as far as it goes'), but is equivocal about the later sources: „Rit þessi eru mjög varhugaverðar heimildir, þótt þau geymi sjálfsagt ýmis forn minni, svo sem vísur“ ('These writings are very dubious sources, although they obviously preserve various old memories, such as verses'). Emphasis on the undoubted (if not faultless) trustworthiness of Ari, coupled with scepticism as to the value of other sources, is also characteristic of Sigurður Línadal's work in the first volume of *Saga Íslands* (see, for example, Línadal 1974:231). Both men use *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and *Kristni saga* only when there is nothing else to go on, and even then exercise extreme caution, retaining only the bare outlines of the narrative. Once they reach the period covered by Ari, they stick closely to his account. Jón supplements it with skaldic verses, place-names and a few incidents from *Landnámabók*, but Línadal (1974:241) is wary even of these modest additions: „Hitt verður aftur að mestu látið liggja milli hluta, sem aðrar heimildir greina“ ('What the other sources say will again mostly be ignored'). The studies of the conversion by

Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1999:55-57) and Dag Strömbäck (1975:18-25) both stress Ari's authoritative status and the secondary nature of the other sources, and the most recent attempt at reconstruction by Jenny Jochens (1999:646) mentions later versions of Pangbrandr's mission only in order to illustrate 'the accretion of information and the increased theological sophistication of the authors'. Ari, it seems, has a monopoly when it comes to reliability, and other sources are considered trustworthy only in so far as they substantiate his account.

A minority have gone so far as to question even Ari's reputation as a historian, noting among other things his emphasis on the role played by his own family and friends in the conversion (Hallr of Síða and the Haukdælir) and his apparent disregard for Celtic Christianity. Sawyer, Sawyer and Wood (1987:72-73) accuse him of exaggeration and oversimplification in his description of how Iceland was converted, while Jónas Gíslason (1990:250) describes his work as a 'particularly one-sided source'. The shaping role of literary convention has been further identified as detrimental to the historicity of his conversion narrative: Richard Fletcher (1997:398), for example, describes it as 'too good to be true', and many scholars have emphasised Ari's possible debt to European religious literature (see, for example, Línal 1969, Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1979, Sverrir Tómasson 1984, Weber 1987, Mundal 1994, Duke 2001).

The current caution about using written sources to reconstruct conversion history is expressed most succinctly by Peter Foote (1993a:107) in his article 'Conversion' in *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*. There he states that, among the many medieval Icelandic texts, 'a few contain a limited amount of what must be judged authentic information about the progress of Christianity in Iceland from about 980 to 1120'. The problem lies in working out where exactly this 'authentic information' is to be found. Like most other scholars, Foote distinguishes between Ari and all later conversion narratives, concluding that Ari's account, 'as far as it goes', has 'unassailable authority' both because we can trace its source and transmission and because of its unconventionality. The value of the other texts, consisting at least in part of 'inferential embroidery' and 'literary construction', is more difficult to judge, but Foote does note that missionary sermons on St Michael 'might rest on genuine reminiscence' and that the most noteworthy additions are 'some skaldic stanzas in which the hostility that Christian preachers might meet from Icelanders appears to be authentically reflected'. Here the encouraging words

‘genuine’ and ‘authentically’ are set against the uncertainties of ‘might rest’, ‘might meet’, ‘appears to be’, just as Ari’s ‘unassailable authority’ is qualified by ‘as far as it goes’, by now an oft repeated expression of frustration. Ari is reliable, but does not tell us enough; the other sources tell us more than enough, but unfortunately we do not know how far to trust them.

KRISTNI SAGA: A MEDIEVAL HISTORY?

The tendency to lump together all sources other than Ari, rather than characterising them individually, has perhaps prevented scholars from moving on from this impasse. Like the later histories mentioned here, medieval accounts of the conversion were written for different purposes and with differing degrees of historical acumen; it would be strange indeed if Ari were the only medieval Icelander writing about the conversion capable of distinguishing historical fact from legendary accretion – if this is not, in fact, a modern distinction. An inability to distinguish between fact and fiction is, however, very much the accusation levelled by historians of religion at the monks Oddr Snorrason and Gunnlaugr Leifsson, who is believed to be the source of at least some of the material that *Kristni saga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* have in common.² Jón Jóhannesson (1956:152) describes Gunnlaugr as „trúgjarn“ (‘credulous’), writing solely to increase the glory of Christians, and

² Björn M. Ólsen (1893:263-349) was the first to identify the conversion accounts in *Kristni saga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* as deriving from Gunnlaugr, and Finnur Jónsson (1923:398-402) and Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (1937:85-135) built on his research when reconstructing Gunnlaugr’s work. It is now clear that many of their criteria for attribution to Gunnlaugr were not valid (see, for example Ólafur Halldórsson 1967:552-53; Jakob Benediktsson 1974:209), and Gunnlaugr’s authorship of the conversion narratives can no longer be assumed. Recent research has failed to clarify the matter, with conflicting opinions being expressed within the new *Biskupa sögur* (ÍF XV:cxxix, clxiii-iv): while Sigurgeir Steingrímsson argues that *Kristni saga* is an independent composition and the source of the conversion account in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, Ólafur Halldórsson upholds Björn M. Ólsen’s views on the existence of a common source (probably Gunnlaugr), with the reservation that ‘southern’ narratives about Þiðrandi, Þangbrandr, Hjalti and Gizurr may not have passed through Gunnlaugr’s hands. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (2001:161-64) has also held on to the idea of a common source, but he believes this to be an Icelandic *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* existing in several versions, only some of which goes back to Gunnlaugr. In my view, a common source/sources makes most sense of the material shared by *Kristni saga*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (and *Njáls saga*), but Gunnlaugr’s contribution is difficult to determine, even in the case of *Porvalds þáttur*, which clearly does derive from his work:

this verdict has coloured attitudes towards both *Kristni saga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. Sigurður Línal (1974:248), for example, remarks that the point of many of the stories found in these texts „virðist fremur verið að lýsa undri og stórmerkjum en raunverulegum atburðum“ (‘seems to have been to display wonders and miracles rather than real events’). Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1999:59-60) couples *Kristni saga* with Oddr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, describing it as ‘one more example of uncritical history writing in the service of church and religion’, and he labels *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* as ‘every inch as much a religious tract as *Kristni saga*’. Indeed, the most recent editor of *Kristni saga*, Sigurgeir Steingrímsson (*ÍF* XV:cxli), characterises it as based on „táknmáli kirkjunnar og frásögnum Biblíunnar eða annarra helgiritra sem á henni byggja“ (‘symbols of the Church and stories from the Bible or other hagiographical works based on it’) – both he and Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (1974:73) believe that it is modelled on an Augustinian dualism. Yet, even when two sagas draw on the same material, they may approach it in very different ways: while the above remarks may be true of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, there is much to suggest that *Kristni saga* is neither uncritical in its handling of its sources nor hagiographical in its aims.

In contrast to many historians of religion, philologists working with *Kristni saga* noted early that it is constructed according to „historiske principer“ (‘historical principles’; Björn M. Ólsen 1893:332-33) and „fortalt historisk og jævnt“ (‘narrated historically and evenly’; Finnur Jónsson 1923:570; see also Kahle 1905:v-vi). The possible connection with the well-known historian Sturla Þórðarson (d. 1284), first suggested by Oskar Brenner (1878:155) in the late nineteenth century, increases the likelihood that it is a serious work of history to be classified alongside *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*. As Peter Foote (1993b:140-41) has pointed out, what we know about Sturla from his other works suggests that he ‘thought he was retailing credible information about the past’, whether or not his sources were always reliable. It seems likely that the conflicting views of the saga expressed, with a few exceptions, by historians of religion and philologists respectively, have something to do with their difference in approach: whereas historians are trying to extract a core of *hard facts* about the conversion from their literary casing, philologists focus

Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (2001:92-100) and Ólafur Halldórsson (*ÍF* XV:clxxix), for example, disagree on what might have stood in his original. Since both *Kristni saga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* have made independent changes to this common source/sources, neither can be considered a faithful representation of it.

instead on how the narrative is constructed. Perhaps the most fruitful approach, however, is to ask not whether the compiler is likely to have got his facts straight, but what he is trying to do and how he goes about it. Typically, this aspect of representation is neglected in the study of conversion narratives (see the comments of Martínez Pizarro 1985).

The attribution to Sturla gives rise to the possibility that *Kristni saga* was part of a coordinated historical project: in his *Gerðir Landnámabókar*, Jón Jóhannesson (1941:69-72) argued that Sturla composed the saga from a variety of sources as an appendix to his version of *Landnámabók* and, following Finnur Jónsson (1923:571-2; see also Eiríkur and Finnur Jónsson 1892-96: lxx-lxxi), conjectured that it was written to provide a link between *Landnámabók* and the contemporary sagas in a compilation covering the history of Iceland from the settlement to Sturla's own times. This goes a long way towards explaining some of its peculiarities in structure and content: the saga opens unusually with an allusion to the last chapter of *Landnámabók* in *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*, which details the settlers' fall into heathenism, gives the same date for the settlement as there, includes two lists of the most important chieftains in each Quarter of the country, and finishes rather inconclusively with an account of the feud between Þorgils and Hafliði, which is the subject of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* in *Sturlunga saga* (ÍF XV:3-6, 44-47; cf. ÍF I:lxxiv-v). The list of chieftains from 980, in particular, has close connections with the similar lists in *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*: over half the chieftains included are sons or descendents either of the main settlers listed there for each Quarter or of the concluding list of greatest chieftains from 930. It has recently been argued that one of *Kristni saga*'s main concerns is to extend the missions to all parts of the country and to involve all four Quarters of Iceland in its conversion, and this corresponds nicely with the historical impetus that has been discerned behind *Landnámabók* (Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 2001:139, ÍF XV:cxxxiii). According to Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (2001:15), *Kristni saga* should be considered „órjúfandi hluti sögugerðrar Landnámu“ ('an indivisible part of the historical redaction of Landnáma'): it represents a historical or historicizing endeavour rather than a 'religious tract'.

Sturla's composition of *Kristni saga* has recently been questioned on various, and to some extent conflicting, grounds: Ólafur Halldórsson (1990: 461-64) has cast doubt on Jón Jóhannesson's evidence that it followed *Sturlubók* in *Resensbók*, while Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (1974:72-73) has suggested that it was also present in the lost *Styrmisbók* and may therefore

have predated Sturla's version of *Landnáma*.³ The most recent editor does not discuss the saga's possible relationship to the historical *Landnámabók*, which he considers it to predate, and declares its author to be „óþekktur“ ('unknown'; *ÍF* XV:cliv-v). That Sturla had a part in *Kristni saga* cannot, therefore, be regarded as certain, although it remains an attractive possibility, especially given the saga's close correspondences with *Sturlubók* and its additions on Snorri goði and the West of Iceland (*ÍF* XV:5, 8, 22-23, 36). Nevertheless, the saga's shape and main emphases lend strong support to the theory that it was first put together in conjunction with a redaction of *Landnámabók*, and this, together with the saga's presentation of conversion history, suggests that closer attention should be paid to its historical credentials.

What is it that characterises *Kristni saga* as a work of history rather than hagiography or fiction? First, while Iceland's conversion is from the time of Oddr onwards the achievement of a saintly king of Norway, in *Kristni saga* it is treated separately as a subject in its own right. The saga presents itself in its opening sentence as a history of Christianity in Iceland – „Nú hefr þat hversu kristni kom á Ísland“ ('Now this is the beginning of how Christianity came to Iceland'; *ÍF* XV:3) – and this is rare in the Middle Ages, where mission is more usually subordinated to other themes (Sawyer, Sawyer and Wood 1987: 17-18). Second, *Kristni saga* is the only source on the conversion other than Ari to unite the early missions to later church history: it opens with the stories of Porvaldr, Stefnir, and Þangbrandr, goes on to tell in detail of events in Norway and the legal conversion of Iceland, and ends with an account of the first two native bishops, Ísleifr and Gizurr. Like nineteenth- and early twentieth-century histories, it makes use of a variety of different sources in order to reconstruct these events: certainly Ari's *Íslendingabók* and Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, but probably also the lost work of Gunnlaugr, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Heimskringla* (see Björn M. Ólsen 1893:309-349, Jón Jóhannesson 1941:70-71, Duke 2001:345-366, *ÍF* XV: cxxix-cxxxi). Ari is followed closely for the lives of Ísleifr and Gizurr, and perhaps used in part for the account of the legal conversion: Þorgeirr's speech,

³ Sveinbjörn's suggestion that *Styrmisbók* contained a version of *Kristni saga* was rejected by Jakob Benediktsson (1974:208), but he has recently extended his argument by attempting to show on the basis of various inconsistencies that the *Kristni saga* in *Hauksbók* makes use of both a more original *Kristni saga* from *Styrmisbók* and the lost version from *Sturlubók* (2001:25-32). Given the hypothetical nature of both these lost texts, his argument is inevitably conjectural.

for example, is closer to Ari in *Kristni saga* than in any other work. Where Ari is lacking, however, other sources are used, both to embellish Ari's narrative and to provide information where he gives none. For events in Norway, the compiler relies heavily on *Heimskringla* and perhaps also on *Laxdæla saga* and, while Gunnlaugr's work is used as a basis for Þorvaldr's mission and probably also Stefnr's, at least one miraculous episode, Friðrekr's victory over the two berserks, is replaced by a summary of the more believable and socially meaningful account in *Vatnsdæla saga* (*ÍF* XV:8-9; *ÍF* VIII:124-126).⁴ Other details have been added either from sources no longer known to us or from oral tradition: Eyjólfur Valgerðarson's prime-signing, the additional information about Vetrliði's death, Snorri's role in the conversion of the Westerners, a verse by Brandr víðförla on Þorvaldr's death (*ÍF* XV:7, 21, 36, 37).⁵ The impression we are left with is that of a careful historian handling a large number of sources, struggling like his successors to interpret the material at his disposition and fit it into a historical mould.

CHRONOLOGY, TOPOGRAPHY AND GENEALOGY

One of Maurer's priorities, as we have seen, was to place the events leading to the conversion in chronological order, and chronology also seems to have been a priority for the compiler of *Kristni saga* (Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson 1892-1896:lxix, Björn M. Ólsen 1893:315-16, Kahle 1905:v). At the beginning and end of the saga, there are chronological notices, dating Þorvaldr's mission and Gizurr's death from the settlement, and Ari is followed closely for the dating of the conversion and for the details of Ísleifr and Gizurr's deaths (*ÍF* XV:4, 36, 39-40, 43-44). Whereas Oddr's *Óláfs saga*

⁴ Again, the editors of *Biskupa sögur I* (*ÍF* XV:lxixvi, clxxv) disagree on this: Sigurgeir Steingrímsson argues that *Vatnsdæla saga* is based on *Kristni saga* or a text like it, while Ólafur Halldórsson thinks that *Kristni saga* used *Vatnsdæla saga* as a source. This is my own view (see Duke 2001:350-53).

⁵ Similar details about Eyjólfur, Vetrliði and Snorri are recorded in *Eyfirðinga sögur*:237, *Skarðsárþók*:164, *Eyrbyggja saga*:136. The additional information on Vetrliði may have come from a lost skaldic poem or *drápa* on Guðleifr Arason by Ljóðarkeptr (Óðar or Óttarr keptr, an eleventh-century court poet of Knútr ríki), which is referred to in a marginal annotation from *Melabók* and may also have been used by the author of *Njáls saga* (Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1977:26-29). Brandr inn víðförla is not known from elsewhere, but his nickname suggests that he had travelled widely in the East (cf. Þorvaldr, Yngvarr; *ÍF* XV:37).

Tryggvasonar and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* move back and forwards in time, shaping events into semi-independent units or *þættir* and dividing them as necessary, *Kristni saga* maintains throughout an ordered and continuous narrative. Pangbrandr's youth, narrated long before Þorvaldr and Stefnir's missions in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, comes between them in *Kristni saga*, and his appointment to the church at Mostr is mentioned upon Óláfr Tryggvason's arrival in Norway, along with his subsequent misbehaviour (*ÍF* XV:13-15; compare *ÓITm* I:149-150, 168, II:64-66). Hjalti's outlawry, described elsewhere in retrospect upon his return to Iceland or arrival in Norway, is carefully placed between Pangbrandr's departure from Iceland and Kjartan's conversion in Norway, which in turn takes place shortly before Pangbrandr's arrival there (*ÍF* XV:25-28; compare *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*:128, *ÓITm* II:161-163). And, in a slightly more complex reorganisation, Þorvaldr's travels alone and with Stefnir, part of their respective *þættir* in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, are delayed until after Iceland's conversion: together with the final account of their pilgrimages and deaths, this neatly draws the curtain on the section of the saga dealing with missions (*ÍF* XV:37-38; compare *ÓITm* I:298-301, II:305 and see Björn M. Ólsen 1893: 328-330).

Alongside this large-scale observation of chronology in *Kristni saga*, there are a number of small chronological adjustments relating to the order of events within individual missions. Although there is no real consensus of opinion as to which is the more original, the narrative in *Kristni saga* is generally agreed to be more seamless and natural than that of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, and it seems likely this is at least partly due to the historical bent of the compiler.⁶ Stefnir, for example, is in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* outlawed the same summer he arrives in Iceland, but remains over the winter and does not leave until the following summer – perhaps we are meant to understand his safety during that year of outlawry as

⁶ It is difficult to determine priority in such matters. Björn M. Ólsen (1893:330) argued that, when *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and *Kristni saga* disagreed, *Kristni saga* was 'improving' on the lost original. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (2001:102, 125) tends to judge *Kristni saga* as more original, but for exactly the same reasons that Björn M. Ólsen does not: that the narrative in *Kristni saga* is „eðlilegri“ ('more natural'). Ólafur Halldórsson (*ÍF* XV:cc) notes that the account of Pangbrandr's mission is „sennilegri“ ('more probable') in *Kristni saga*, but without drawing any conclusions as to originality — the compiler may simply have had access to additional sources. For the purposes of the following analysis, what matters is the distinctive approach shown by each text, rather than which is the more original.

miraculous. In *Kristni saga*, on the other hand, he narrowly avoids attack during the first year of his mission, take refuge with his family over the winter, and leaves immediately after his outlawry in the second year (*ÓlTm* I:310-311, *ÍF* XV:15-17). *Kristni saga*'s account is undeniably the more plausible of the two, but it is not clear whether this makes it more original or simply better edited. In both cases, Stefnr's outlawry (which is intimately connected with the first Icelandic legislation against Christianity in 996) takes place in the same year, and it is therefore possible that the changes – whoever made them – have less to do with plausibility than with the conflicting dates for Stefnr's mission, which begins a year earlier in *Kristni saga* than in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. Interestingly, *Kristni saga* is the only source to extend Pangbrandr's mission to three full years (it is one or two elsewhere), and this seems likely to be the compiler's innovation. It was apparently made to accommodate Óláfr Tryggvason's arrival in Norway early in 995 and the consequent need for the missions to begin a year earlier than they do in any other source (Björn M. Ólsen 1893:321-322).

Genealogical and topographical information is included throughout the saga, rooting events more firmly in historical time and space. To the account of Koðrán's conversion, for example, the compiler appends a notice about his son Ormr's marriages and children, and further family details are added to the account of the legal conversion, concerning Þorleifr of Krossavík. In the section based on Ari, a brief genealogy of Jón Ögmundarson follows notice of his consecration as bishop, detailing his descent from Hallr of Síða, and the saga ends with a somewhat longer genealogy of Hafliði Másson (*ÍF* XV:8, 34, 42, 46-47). The compiler also cites a large number of place-names not mentioned in other accounts of the conversion: Ormr, he tells us, buys land at Hvanneyrr in Borgarfjörðr, Pangbrandr's ship is wrecked south of Kálfalæk, the Westerners are baptised after the legal conversion at Reykjalaug in southern Reykjadalr, Illugi intends to build a stone church at Breiðabólstaðr in Vestrhóp (*ÍF* XV:8, 24, 36, 47). We are told exactly what route Pangbrandr took in his travels around Iceland, and an effort is made to specify the precise geographical location of places: Selvágur, where Pangbrandr lands, is „fyrir norðan Melrakkanes“ ('north of Melrakkanes'), Jármeishofði is situated „millim Hafnar ok Belgsholts“ ('between Höfn and Belgsholt'), Krossavík is „fyrir norðan Reyðarfjörð“ ('to the north of Reyðarfjörð'; *ÍF* XV:17, 20, 25, 34). In its account of Þorvaldr's death in Russia, *Kristni saga* (*ÍF* XV:37) mentions Kænugarðr (Kiev), Nepr (the Dnieper) and Pallteskja (Polotsk) – the

much longer version in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* gives only the unknown place-name Dröfn.

The compiler appears to have had particularly close connections with the area around Borgarfjörður and Mýrar in the West of Iceland, and this is clear from an episode found only in *Kristni saga* that was almost certainly put together by the compiler (Björn M. Ólsen 1893:322-324; Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1977:24, 26; *ÍF* XV:22-23). When Pangbrandr attempts to leave Iceland for the first time, his ship is driven to land at Hítará in Mýrar: „Þar heitir nú Pangbrandshróf niðr frá Skipahyl, ok þar stendr enn festarsteinn hans á bergi einu“ (‘That place is now called ‘Pangbrandr’s Boat-shed’ down from Skipahyl, and the boulder to which he fastened his ship’s cable still stands there on a rock’). He then proceeds to Krossaholt (‘Hill of Crosses’), where he sings mass and raises crosses and, somewhat later, he engages in battle against Kolr and Skeggbjörn on the meadowland down from Steinsholt, where the graves of the victims are still clearly visible: „Þar er haugr Skeggbjarnar á fitinni, en aðrir váru jarðaðir í Landraugsholti þar hjá fitinni, ok sér þá enn gørla kumlin“ (‘Skeggbjörn’s burial mound is there on the meadow, but the others were buried in Landraugsholt beside the meadow there, and the cairns can still be clearly seen’). Here not only the place-names, but also the physical shape of the landscape bears witness to the events of Pangbrandr’s mission, increasing the saga’s impression of historicity.

MIRACLES AND LEGENDS

Perhaps most interesting is the way in which the compiler handles legendary and miraculous events, which, as we have seen, posed major problems for later historians. Many of the implausible anecdotes found in other sources on the conversion have disappeared, although, it seems, more on the basis of relevance to the subject than on strictly historical grounds: Þorvaldr’s exemplary rescue of Sveinn Forkbeard, for example, is omitted, while Pangbrandr’s apocryphal visit to a Bishop Hugbertus (Hubert) of Canterbury, who was in fact archbishop in 1193-1205, is still in place (*ÍF* XV:113). One serves only to glorify Þorvaldr; the other is relevant both to Pangbrandr’s character as missionary and to his later encounter with Óláfr Tryggvason. The most wide-ranging changes and omissions belong to Þorvaldr’s mission, which almost certainly goes back to the work of Gunnlaugr. Whereas *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* tells of Þorvaldr’s unpromising youth, the prophecy of

his future greatness, and his virtuous life as a Viking under the leadership of Sveinn Forkbeard, *Kristni saga* mentions only briefly his travels abroad and engagement in Viking raids (*ÓITm* I:280-284, *ÍF* XV:3-4). Likewise, while *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* describes the great esteem and riches Þorvaldr acquired after his departure from Iceland, receiving honours from the Emperor of Constantinople and founding a monastery named after himself, *Kristni saga* cursorily sends him on merchant journeys for fourteen years (*ÓITm* I:298-300, *ÍF* XV:13). Later, it is true, we are told that he was buried at the church of John the Baptist and that „kalla þeir hann helgan“ (‘they call him a saint’; *ÍF* XV:37), but who exactly ‘they’ are is not specified, nor is the veracity of the claim confirmed other than by the citation of Brandr’s verse. The lukewarm nature of the praise becomes clear by comparison with the saga’s parting comment on Friðrekr: „Ok er hann maðr sannheilagr“ (‘And he is truly a saint’; *ÍF* XV:13). It is worth noting that the eulogistic account of Þorvaldr’s final days was early dismissed as apocryphal by Maurer (1965: 224) and Jón Helgason (1920:32): it seems likely that the compiler of *Kristni saga* would have shared their views.

When miracles are included in the saga (and, at a time when they were believed to be possible, this can hardly be considered as a breach of historicity), they are described with a minimum of sensationalism, and no moralistic conclusions are explicitly drawn. This is not to claim, as some have, that the compiler of *Kristni saga* was a rationalist at heart (Björn M. Ólsen 1893: 347); but signs and wonders, with their religious and exemplary value, were not generically appropriate to his historical project in the way they clearly are to hagiography: the total lack of miracles in Ari’s work provides a precedent. Particularly interesting is the case of Koðrán’s conversion, which in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* is something of a *tour de force*, including speeches contrasting paganism and Christianity, three appearances from a disguised devil, and a final triumphant rejection of heathenism (*ÓITm* I:284-88). The moral of the whole is clear from Koðrán’s parting words to the devil, in which he reveals its true nature and lauds the superior strength of the Christian God (*ÓITm* I:288):

En nu með því at ek hefir reynt þik flærdar fullan ok miok v megin.
þa er mer nu rett ok vtan allan glæp at fyrir lata þik en flyia vndir skiol
þess guð dóms er miklu er betri ok styrkari en þu.

But now that I have proved you deceitful and very weak, it is right for me and without any deceit to abandon you and flee under the protection of that divinity which is far better and stronger than you.

The scene is hardly recognisable in *Kristni saga* (ÍF XV:7-8), coming to less than a quarter of its length in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. In place of the long didactic exchange between Koðrán and Þorvaldr is the terse comment that: „Þorvaldr bað föður sinn skírask en hann tók því seinliga“ (‘Þorvaldr asked his father to be baptised, but he was slow to respond’). This is a request for the external sign of Christian allegiance rather than for inner change, and the reluctance Koðrán expresses is more like indifference than any active attachment to paganism. There is no weighted comparison between the two faiths and, indeed, the very existence of the spirit Koðrán worships is put in doubt by the use of second-hand report in references to it: „At Giljá stóð steinn sá er þeir frændr höfðu blótat ok kǫlluðu þar búa í ármann sinn“ (‘At Giljá there stood a stone to which he and his kinsmen used to sacrifice, and they claimed that their tutelary spirit lived in there’). After Friðrekr has chanted over it, the rock admittedly bursts apart, but Koðrán’s subsequent decision to convert is described in indirect speech in a distinctly non-committal manner: „Þá þóttisk Koðrán skilja at ármaðr var sigraðr“ (‘Then Koðrán thought he understood that the tutelary spirit had been overcome’). The tutelary spirit himself fails to put in an appearance, and the verbs *kǫlluðu* and *þóttisk*, with their implications of subjective interpretation, incline towards scepticism about its existence rather than wonder and awe at its defeat.

The compiler uses a similar method when telling of the heathens’ attacks on the first church in the North of Iceland, led by Klaufi and Arngeirr. In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (I:292), Klaufi’s first offensive is aborted because the church is felt and seen to be on fire:

En er þeir nalgaðuz ok gengu i kirkiu garðinn. kendo þeir ákafligan híta ok sa mikla gneista flaug vt í glugga kirkiunar. foro þeir brottu við þat at þeim þotti kirkian full af elldi.

And when they drew near and went into the churchyard, felt the intense heat and saw huge sparks flying out of the church windows, they went away because they thought that the church was full of fire.

In *Kristni saga* (ÍF XV:11), on the other hand, we are told neither that heat is felt nor that any real flames are seen: „En er þeir kómu í kirkjugarðinn sýndisk þeim sem eldr fyki út um alla gluggana á kirkjunni, ok fóru því brot at þeim sýndisk öll kirkjan eldsfull“ (‘And when they came into the churchyard, it seemed to them as if fire were flying out of all the church windows, and they went away because the whole church seemed to them to be on fire’). The marked repetition of the verb *sýndisk* suggests that the flames belong only in the minds of the aggressors: they have no external reality. Likewise, the second attempt to burn the church down is thwarted in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (I:292) by the miraculous failure of the wood to catch fire even when encouraged: „[P]á lagðiz hann inn yfir þreskiðldinn ok ætlaði at blasa at er gloðin var nóg, en eigi uilldi festa íviðinum“ (‘Then he lay down across the threshold and intended to blow on it where the red-hot embers were sufficient, but it would not catch the wood’). In *Kristni saga* (ÍF XV:11), we are told only that the fire took time to blaze up and needed encouragement: „Eldr kviknaði seint. Þá lagðisk hann niðr ok blés at inn yfir þreskeldinn“ (‘The fire was slow to kindle; then he lay down and blew at it across the threshold’). While *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* concludes didactically with „hlifði guð sva husi sino“ (‘God thus protected his house’), *Kristni saga* contents itself with the brief comment that: „Fór Arngeirr þá heim“ (‘Arngeirr then went home’). The differences in wording may be small, but they create a more sober atmosphere and reduce the sense of the marvellous. What interested the compiler, it seems, was less the value of miracles as *signa* – visible signs of God’s presence and purposes – than their material contribution, in the form of the first convert and the first church, to the growth of Christianity in Iceland.

LAW AND POLITICS

Finally, there is the strongly legal and political tone of *Kristni saga*’s narrative, reminiscent of the line taken by Maurer, Björn M. Ólsen, and later scholars. Not only is there no religious rhetoric about the heathen persecution of Christians, but the compiler of *Kristni saga* twice underlines the presence of good men in the heathen party, once after Þangbrandr’s defeat of an anti-social berserk, and again to explain why no battle broke out before the legal conversion (ÍF XV:25, 31): „En þó váru þeir sumir er skirra vildu vandræðum þó at eigi væri kristnir“ (‘And yet there were some who wished to prevent

trouble, although they were not Christian').⁷ This forms a strong contrast with *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, where berserks, far from being a social menace, are representatives of the heathen party, and only God's grace prevents the heathens from driving the Christians from the Althing by force (*ÓlTm* I:289, II:189). Ambushes against Christians are cited here as examples of the „mörgum meíngerðum ok ofsoknum er heiðnir menn ueittu Friðreki biskupi ok Þorvalldi“ (‘many harms and persecutions which heathens inflicted on Bishop Friðrekr and Þorvaldr’): the missionaries' outlawry is never explicitly mentioned and the connection between Þorvaldr's vengeance killings and the heathens' attacks is obscured by the intervening exempla of Ingimundr and Máni (*ÓlTm* I:294-97). Likewise, Þangbrandr's first attempt to leave Iceland is described as the result of heathen malice and intolerance: „hann sa sik lítit vinna íkristni boðinu“ (‘he saw that he was making little progress in preaching Christianity’) and his outlawry is mentioned only in passing upon his return to Norway (*ÓlTm* II:158-59, 163). In *Kristni saga*, on the other hand, such violent encounters are clearly motivated by legal issues: the heathens bar Þorvaldr and Friðrekr from the assembly at Hegranes immediately after Þorvaldr has killed two poets, and gather to burn Friðrekr in his home after the missionaries' outlawry deprives them of the law's protection (*ÍF* XV:12-13). Þangbrandr tries to leave Iceland after he is outlawed for the killings of Vetrliði and Þorvaldr, and his next clash with heathens, unique to *Kristni saga*, is occasioned by a further breach of law: his theft of food from Skeggbjörn and refusal to restore it upon demand (*ÍF* XV:22-23).

In Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, the struggle between good and evil gives the stories dramatic shape, but the tensions of *Kristni saga* are political rather than ideological. The strained relationship between Norway and Iceland is particularly evident in the scenes involving Óláfr Tryggvason (*ÍF* XV:27-29): the king threatens to repay the Icelanders for their reception of his messenger Þangbrandr, and his decision to grant the Icelanders peace only „þar til er reynt er hversu þetta mál

⁷ This explanation was popular among later historians, most of whom do not mention explicitly that it comes from *Kristni saga*; see, for example, Maurer 1965:439-40 („Zwischen den beiden sich schroß gegenüberstehenden Partheien der glaubenseifrigen Anhänger der alten und der neuen Religion stand eine dritte Parthei in der Mitte, welche äußerlich zwar dem alten Glauben zugethan war, der aber Staat und Rechtsordnung über die Religionen ging“); Jón Jóhannesson 1956:161 („Í öðru lagi hafa í flokki beggja verið menn, sem vildu umfram allt stilla til friðar [...] þeir hafa gengið á milli, svo að enginn bardagi varð“).

ferr“ (‘until it is found out which way this matter will go’) is ominous. While Gizurr and Hjalti’s defence of their countrymen in Oddr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* attributes Þangbrandr’s failure as a missionary to his moral unsuitability (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*:127, *ÓlTm* II:164), in *Kristni saga* the two Icelanders focus instead on his nationality: „En Þangbrandr fór þar sem hér heldr óspakliga; drap hann þar menn nokkura, ok þótti monnum hart at taka þat af útlendum manni“ (‘But Þangbrandr behaved there as here, in a very unruly manner, he killed several men there, and people thought it hard to take that from a foreigner’). Indeed, the very decision to detach Icelandic conversion history from the life of the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason emphasises in a politically significant way the independent role of the Icelandic chieftains in the conversion of their country. This explains why *Kristni saga* opens with the Icelander Þorvaldr’s self-motivated mission, frames its narrative with lists of Icelandic chieftains, and mentions with approval the many worthy men ordained as priests in the days of Gizurr „þó at höfðingjar væri“ (‘although they were chieftains’; *ÍF* XV:42-43). It may also explain why the saga fails to list, like *Íslendingabók* and *Hungrvaka*, the foreign clerics who visited Iceland, jumping instead fifty years from Gizurr the White’s success at the Althing to his son Ísleifr’s consecration as the first bishop in Skálholt (*ÍF* I:18, *ÍF* XVI:11-12).⁸ Significantly, the one brief mention foreign bishops are granted is in the context of an unfavourable comparison with Ísleifr (*ÍF* XV:39): „Hér váru fyrst útlendir byskupar ok kendu kenningar. En er landsmenn vissu hversu ágætr klerkr Ísleifr var báðu landsmenn hann at hann færi utan ok léti vígjask til byskups“ (‘First there were foreign bishops here teaching Christian doctrine. But when the people of the country realised what an excellent cleric Ísleifr was, the people of the country asked him to go abroad and have himself consecrated bishop’). The opposition of *útlendir menn* and *landsmenn* recalls both Gizurr and Hjalti’s criticism of Þangbrandr and Þorgeirr’s famous contrast between kings and *landsmenn* in his speech at the Law-Rock: in this saga, it is *landsmenn* who are responsible both for the peaceful conversion of the country, and for the successful establishment of the Church under Ísleifr and Gizurr.

⁸ This omission puzzled Brenner (1878:6-8, 14), who took it as evidence that *Kristni saga* was not originally intended as a church history, but merely as an appendix of miscellaneous information relating to *Landnámabók*.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although *Kristni saga* contains much of the same material as *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, its approach is entirely different, and this should be taken into account when evaluating its historical potential. Chronological order is observed, historical context is provided, the fullest and most reliable sources are selected, miracles are pared down to the strictly relevant, and a legal and political outlook replaces the exemplary and religious emphasis of Oddr and Gunnlaugr. In all, the compiler's methods are not so different from those of some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians, and the saga has the additional merit of being many hundreds of years nearer to the events, at a time when oral tradition was still available as a source. Although the compiler could not make reliable history out of unreliable, he could and did rework his sources according to the principles associated with Ari, the writing of apparently objective history with an eye for chronological and genealogical detail. What he adds, omits and changes from the sources in front of him is therefore worthy of our attention: at the very least it shows how a serious historian in the thirteenth century approached the source material available to him and adapted it into a detailed and plausible history of Iceland's conversion to Christianity.

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EFNISÁGRIP

Það hefur verið vandi þeirra fræðimanna sem hafa viljað gera sem gleggsta grein fyrir kristnitökunni hve ritaðar heimildir um hana eru seint skráðar. Íslendingabók hefur yfirleitt verið talin áreiðanleg heimild svo langt sem hún nær en heimildir sem seinna eru ritaðar hafa ekki að geyma eins áreiðanlegt efni, þar sem um er að ræða jarteinir, helgi- og dæmisögur. Í rannsóknnum sagnfræðinga fyrr gætti þess að þeir fjölluðu um þessar síðari tíma frásagnir vegna þess að þær voru fyllri, en sagnfræðingar nú dögum hafa yfirleitt notað þær með varúð og þá annaðhvort skilið jarteinir jarðneskum skilningi eða sleppt þeim algjörlega. En af þessum síðari tíma heimildum er Kristni saga þó allrar athygli verð. Hún hefur þó oft verið flokkuð með Ólafs sögu Tryggvasonar hinni mestu og talin til ógagnrýnnar helgisagnaritunar, en tengsl hennar við Landnámabók benda þó til að hún hafi verið ætluð sem einn hluti af sögulegri frásögn. Þetta styrkist af því hvernig sagan styðst við ákveðið tímatal og sýnir nákvæmar ættfærslur og staðfræði; Kristni saga notar ennfremur jarteinir með varúð og er laus við siðfræðilegar eða dæmisagnakenndar útleggingar og þar með pólitíska og lagalega túlkun slíkra heimilda. Hér eru færð rök fyrir því að Kristni saga hafi verið tilraun til að túlka kristnitökuna út frá þeirri sagnahefð sem tíðkaðist um miðja 13. öld.

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