

## The drama of faith west of Iceland

From Greenland's icy mountains,  
From India's coral strand,  
Where Afric's sunny fountains  
Roll down their golden sand,  
From many an ancient river,  
From many a palmy plain,  
They call us to deliver  
Their land from error's chain. (*Hymns Ancient and Modern*, No. 358).

When asked, at very short notice, to support a sermon by his father-in-law on 'The Propagation of the Gospels in Foreign Parts', Reginald Heber, subsequently Bishop of Calcutta, took some thirty minutes to pen the first three verses of this most famous of missionary hymns in 1821, what he probably had in mind was the 18th-century Moravian mission to Greenland, not the arrival of Christianity in its medieval Norse settlement. But, although the bishop was unlikely to have been acquainted with it, the first reported missionary act by a Norseman in foreign parts had a Greenland connection: the baptism, on the return trip there by Þorfinn Karlsefni in *Eiríks saga rauða*, of two natives of Markland. It's a doubtful story – but perhaps no more so than the account of Leifr Eiríksson's conversion of the Greenlanders, reported in that saga and some other Icelandic sources.

Back to these matters later; but, in the meantime, what sort of place was Greenland in medieval Norse history, saga, and geography? A place of contradictions and contrasts. The 13th-century *Konungs Skuggsjá* stresses its status as an institutionalized Christian society: 'The people in that country are few, for only a small part is . . . habitable; but the people are all Christians and have churches and priests. . . . and their own bishop.'<sup>1</sup> The *Konungs Skuggsjá* also associates Greenland's immediate surrounds with an element of the monstrous – seas beset with tidal waves and impassable ice floes and inhabited by monsters (*skrímsl*) – mermenn (*hafstrambar*) and mermaids (*margygjar*)<sup>2</sup> – which contrast curiously with its 'beautiful sunshine and . . . rather pleasant climate' (Larson, pp.27-28). The tacit message here is that there's something remarkable, even paradoxical, about the fact that this extraordinary place *is* Christian. Cosmographically, according to the early 13th-century *Historia Norvegiae*, Greenland was the furthest point west in Europe, extending almost to Africa, and separated from the mythical Bjarmaland – land of giants and virgins north of Norway – by icebergs, with a wondrous race of pygmies to its north.<sup>3</sup> A pseudo-ethnographic description of the North in the late 14th- or early 15th-century romance *Samsons saga fagra* (ch.13) puts Greenland at the centre of a region inhabited by trolls and giants, and fantastic races.<sup>4</sup> Adam of Bremen and the Vínland Map (whatever the latter's provenance and date may be), on the other hand, make Greenland insular.

Unique among the settlement stories in *Landnámabók*, in Eiríkr rauði Norse Greenland had a 'murderous founder,' on the pattern of a number of Greek colonial narratives in which a killer crosses new boundaries to make a fresh start and found a new city.<sup>5</sup> In terms

<sup>1</sup> Laurence Marcellus Larson, trans. *The King's Mirror (Speculum Regale)* (New York, 1917), pp.144-45. 'Fát er folk aðví lannde því at lítit er þitt sva at byggiannde er en þat folk er cristit oc kirkiur hafá þeir oc kenni menn. . . . en þo hafá þeir ser nu byskup' (Ludvig Holm-Olsen, ed., *Konungs Skuggsjá* [Oslo, 1983], p.30).

<sup>2</sup> Holm-Olsen, *Konungs Skuggsjá*, p.27.

<sup>3</sup> Gustav Storm, ed., *Monumenta Historica Norvegiae* (Kristiania, 1880), pp.75-76.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Riddarasögur III* (Reykjavík, 1954).

<sup>5</sup> Carol Dougherty, *The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece* (Oxford, 1993), 8, 15, 31-32.

of social organization, the Greenland settlement was both like and unlike Iceland. Although *Einars þáttur Sokkason* (or *Grænlandinga þáttur*) and two *Íslendingasögur* with substantial episodes in Greenland – *Fostbraeðra saga* and *Flóamanna saga* – refer to a Greenland þing, in the two main Greenland narratives, *Grænlandinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða* (*ES*), the settlement appears to be run as Eirík's private fiefdom.

Opposition and paradox define the topography of the land itself – between the cultivated space of the Eastern and Western settlements, *Eystríbyggð* and *Vestríbyggð*, and the bleak, untamed regions of the *óbyggðir*, to the north. Greenland episodes in the 'classical' *Íslendingasögur* *ES*, *Grænlandinga saga*, and *Fostbraeðra saga* are anchored in the two settlements; but in *Einars þáttur Sokkasonar* and in the post-classical *Flóamanna saga*, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, and *Króka-Refs saga*, Greenland is overtly and actively bifurcated territory: *byggðir* and *óbyggðir*. *Einars þáttur Sokkasonar* tells the story of the appointment of Greenland's first bishop. Its crucial incident is the discovery of the ship, which had sailed from Norway at the same time as the new bishop, beached in the *óbyggðir* and a hall filled with the corpses of the crew and the ship's treasure (ch.2).<sup>6</sup> In the *Íslendingasögur* there's contrast in the *óbyggðir* themselves: barren and malign in *Flóamanna saga* but a well-wooded refuge, stocked with game and fish, in *Króka-Refs saga*. *Óbyggðir* in general are obliquely aligned with anti-Christian forces in *ES*, where Eiríkr's aggressively pagan friend, Þorhallr, is said to be well acquainted with them (*honum var víða kunnigt í óbyggðum*, ch.8).<sup>7</sup>

Why do people go to Greenland? the son asks his father in the *KS*. To seek fame, out of curiosity, and the desire for gain, is the reply. But it's not to prove themselves as men, or as traders, or in the spirit of enquiry and adventure that Icelanders usually go to Greenland in the *Íslendingasögur*. A tough, bleak frontier society, extending into vast tracts of icy wasteland, more often than not it's the destination of the desperate and destitute.<sup>8</sup> Þorbjörn Vífilsson, for instance, falls upon hard times and takes up Eiríkr's invitation to settle in Greenland in *ES* (ch.3). Ref decamps to Greenland in *Króka-Refs saga* after he's slain a man, because he's told that life will be difficult for him in Norway once the killing is publicized (ch.6). Once in Greenland, he's the victim of a false rumour that he's been paid to get out of Iceland because he's homosexual (ch.7).<sup>9</sup> 'It's ill advised to go there,' says the wife of Þorgils Örrabeinsstjúpr – a capable man of restless spirit – in *Flóamanna saga*.<sup>10</sup> Beware of marrying a Greenlander,' her dead husband, Þorsteinn Eiríksson, tells Guðrör Þjórðbjarnadóttir in *ES* (ch.6).<sup>11</sup> But, as the end of a perilous and arduous journey, as a place of physical hardship, epidemics, famine, and austerity ('Thorkel had ale brewed . . . banquets were rare in Greenland,' remarks the narrator of *Fostbraeðra saga*, ch.22),<sup>12</sup> and dominated by the obdurately pagan Eiríkr rauði, Greenland is a made-to-order locus for the testing of Christian faith and fortitude.

Take the trials of the Icelander Þorgils Örrabeinsstjúpr, an early convert to Christianity, in the Greenland episode of *Flóamanna saga*. This, as Richard Perkins has demonstrated, can be read as a series of tests of faith which draw on saints' lives, vision literature, and the Bible, and in which Christian steadfastness is directly challenged by Þórr

<sup>6</sup> Ed. Matthías Þórðarson, in *Íslensk fornrit IV* (Reykjavík, 1935)

<sup>7</sup> Ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, *Íslensk fornrit, Vískaui IV* (Reykjavík, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Jenny Jochens, 'The Western Voyages: Women and Vikings,' in Andrew Wawn and Þórunn Sigurðardóttir, eds., *Approaches to Vinland* (Reykjavík, 2001), p.82.

<sup>9</sup> ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Íslensk fornrit 14* (Reykjavík, 1959).

<sup>10</sup> 'Misráðit mun,' sagði hon, at þangat sé farit'. Ed. Þorhallur Vilmondarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, in *Harðar saga*, *Íslensk fornrit 13* (Reykjavík, 1991), p.276.

<sup>11</sup> 'En hann bað hana varask at giptask grænlenzkum manni' (*ES*, p.420).

<sup>12</sup> 'Þorkell mungát heita . . . sjaldan váru drykkjur á Grænlandi.' Ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, in *Vestfirnga sagnar*, *Íslensk fornrit 13* (Reykjavík, 1943), p.226.

himself.<sup>13</sup> Þorgils's faith is tested to the extreme when, in reponse to an invitation from Eiríkr rauði to take his pick of the best land there, he is becalmed and then shipwrecked off Greenland in a glacier-bound bay; he loses many of his company to plague and his livestock die. Þorgils urges them to keep the faith; his thralls murder his wife, Þorey, and abscond; still suckling at his dead mother's breast, their son is sustained by the miracle of male lactation. The *óbyggðir* are integrated into this exemplum of faith in *Flóamanna saga*, where they serve as both literal and metaphorical 'wilderness'. Icebound for a third winter, Þorey has a celestial vision of a beautiful country and shining people. 'I think that we may escape from these troubles,' she tells Þorgils.<sup>14</sup> When Þorgils replies that her deliverance is not likely to be in this world, she asks him, in the manuscript AM516, 4to, 'to seek a way out of the wilderness' (*burt leita ór óbyggðum*, p.287). Those abstract 'troubles' from which her vision seemed to promise escape are now the literal wilderness from which she pleads for release. When Þorgils finally gets to Brattahlíð, there's an ungracious reception from Eirík (ch. 26); doggedly he perseveres, prospers, and eventually returns to Iceland, where his descendants include the bishops (St) Þórlakr and Jörundur Þorsteinsson.

Greenland's *óbyggðir* serve another function in the religious fantasy which forms the conclusion to the late-14th-century *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*. This episode is, as Ármann Jakobsson has observed, 'a journey from civilisation to nature'<sup>15</sup> – and the Greenland *óbyggðir* are the point of transition. This time it's Óðinn himself (in the guise of a man calling himself Rauðgrani) who gets aboard Gestr Bárðarson's boat enroute to Greenland, after Gestr has been prime-signed by Ólafur Tryggvason and, accompanied by a priest, despatched on an expedition to fetch treasure from the barrow of the demon King Raknarr, who's been buried alive in the wastes of Helluland. After Rauðgrani has been clobbered with a crucifix and disappears, Gestr and his company reach the *Grænlands óbyggðir*, where strange things happen: the earth swallows two magicians and a pot of gold; and they spend a winter there harried by a monstrous bull, who also sinks into the ground at a blow from the crucifix. In the spring they travel westwards across glaciers and lava fields until they reach the coast, where there's a large island offshore. The island is joined to the mainland by a reef; at low tide they walk out to it and see a large barrow. 'Some say that the barrow stood in the north off Helluland,' says the saga.<sup>16</sup> There follows a piece of spectacular religious theatre, where the barrow fiends are kept at bay with holy water, and Gestr pledges to convert if he gets out of the place alive. Ólafur Tryggvason appears in a miraculous flash of light; Gestr decapitates Raknarr; his obstreperous company are pacified with holy water, and the sea parts to permit them to walk back to the mainland. Back in Norway, Gestr dreams that he is blinded by his troll-like father, Barðr, for forsaking the old beliefs; he dies the next day in his christening gown, an accidental martyr. The saga is, as Ármann Jakobsson has argued, ultimately a tragedy, since, despite his fathering of ten children, Barðr has no descendants: the (Christian) future of Iceland is, as Ármann remarks, 'out of his family's reach' (1998, 65).

In these later *Íslendingasögur* Greenland is the medium through which the geographically real crosses into the fantastic (or phantasmagoric), to become one of those lands which, to quote Rudy Simek, are situated 'in the twilight between the real and the

<sup>13</sup> Richard Perkins, *Flóamanna saga, Gauhverjabær and Haukr Erlendsson*, *Studia Islandica* 36 (Reykjavík, 1978), 11-12.

<sup>14</sup> 'ok get ek, at vér leysimst burt ór þessum vandræðum' (p.286).

<sup>15</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'History of the Trolls? Bárðar Saga as an Historical Narrative,' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 25 (1998), 67.

<sup>16</sup> 'Segja sumir menn at sjá haugr hafi staðit norðarlíga fyrir Hellulandi'. Edited and translated into English by Jón Skaptason and Phillip Pulsiano (New York and London, 1984), pp. 102 and 103.

fantastic world.<sup>17</sup> Early on in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, for example, the Greenland settlement – historically fictional in this case since, as Ármann Jakobson has pointed out in his article on this saga (1998, 58), it's represented as having been settled in the days of Haraldr hárfagri – is a place to which you can be carried on ice floe from Iceland (ch.5); but, in the saga's final stages, Greenland merges, via its *óbyggðir*, into an utterly fantastic Helluland.

The identification in *Jökuls þáttur Búasonar*<sup>18</sup> of a place in the Greenland *óbyggðir* as *Qllumlengri fjörðr* ('longer and than anything' fjord), by a loathly lady to Jökul and his companions (ch.1), signals that we're in territory of unquantifiable measure: in other words, the realm of the imaginary. And, sure enough, *Qllumlengri fjörðr* turns out to be inhabited by giants and the domain of a cannibalistic king, who occupies a treasure-filled cave with an imprisoned Saracen prince and his sisters. It's apparently only a short trip from there to Serkland, land of the Saracens. That Greenland has become completely fictionalized in the mind of at least one 14th-century Icelandic author is implied in the romance *Nítida saga* where, viewed through a magic stone which offers a vision of the entire known world, the 'northern regions' (*norður hálfunar*) extend to Norway, Iceland, the Faroes, the Hebrides, Orkney, Sweden, Denmark, England, and Ireland; but Greenland, it seems, has simply dropped out of sight.<sup>19</sup>

Greenland is, then, a borderline world, both 'inside' and 'outside' Iceland's geographical and historical frame of reference. Its settlement is historically verified in *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* but fictionalized in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, and the land itself is written off the map in *Nítida saga*. As *Bárðar saga* and *Flóamanna saga* demonstrate, this land where cultivated space shades into wasteland with demonic resonances is fertile territory for marvellous occurrences. And, as a place which is also both like and unlike Iceland, Greenland is the ideal location for Iceland's (offshore) romance of the moment of conversion.

Was Greenland ever heathen in the first place? Not if we accept Ólafur Halldórsson's theory (or, as he prefers it, 'heresy'<sup>20</sup>) that, although *Íslendingabók* says that the Greenland settlement was established before Iceland was Christianized, there is no archaeological evidence to show that it was ever heathen. Be that as it may, the conversion of Greenland, as told in *ES*, is almost certainly an entirely fictional episode; and it's also one which supplies many of the conventions of medieval conversion narrative lacking in accounts of the Christianization of Iceland. Whereas the moment of conversion of Iceland was a contractual, political, and essentially pragmatic act, in *ES* it's a missionary romance: at the behest of Ólafr Tryggvason, the idealized figure of Leifr 'the lucky' Eiríksson gracefully and successfully accomplishes what Kjartan Ólafsson refuses to undertake in Iceland in *Laxdæla saga* (ch.41). How does Leifr do it? Not by the force which the king advocates to Kjartan, but by personal example and preaching. There's a curious absence of detail here, and no sense of engagement with people at large. Yes, Leifr preaches the 'great glory' (*mikil dýrð* [*ES*, p.415]) of the new religion throughout the land, but what we actually see of the effects of his mission take place only at the level of microcosm: conversion is removed from the 'historical' public sphere to the 'unhistorical' private world of domestic politics: the family of Eiríkr rauði himself. There's hagiographic potential here for conflict between missionary son and pagan father, and between converted wife and heathen husband – unfulfilled in the first instance; realized in the

<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Simek, 'Elysiya or Which Way to Glacisvellir?,' in *Sagnaskemmtun. Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson*, eds. Rudolf Simek, Jónas Kristjánsson, and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Vienna, Cologne, Graz, 1986), p.252.

<sup>18</sup> Ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Íslensk forrit* 14 (Reykjavík, 1959).

<sup>19</sup> Ed. Agnete Loth, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances V*, Editions Arnamagnæanæ, Series B, vol.24 (Copenhagen, 1965), p.30

<sup>20</sup> Ólafur Halldórsson, 'The Vinland Sagas,' in *Approaches to Vinland*, p.44.

second. Eiríkr's wife, Þjóðhildr, becomes a patron of the new religion, building a church for herself and for 'those people who had accepted Christianity' (*heim menn sem við kristni tókuð*, p.418) – so it's apparently not a case of unanimous acceptance, although this implied continued opposition is demonstrated only in the person of Eiríkr. And it's with an aura of female sanctity that, to Eiríkr's considerable distaste, Þjóðhildr renounces the marriage debt after she has embraced the faith (ch.5).

The moment of conversion is, significantly, the point at which Leifr disappears from an active role in *ES*. He has, it seems, served his narrative purpose, discovering a paradisaical land to the west in the process: 'a plausibly concomitant feature of the traditional genre of saintly conversion narratives,' as one critic has recently commented.<sup>21</sup> But Greenland's is not the only conversion in that saga. The *Vínland* expedition of Þorfinn Karlsefni continues the contest between Christian and pagan ritual which substantially drives this narrative, and which becomes focussed from this point on the figure of Þorhallr veiðimaðr ('the hunter'). Once again Þórr and Christ are pitted against each other – this time, when food runs short, in a demonstration of the ineffectiveness of Þorhallr's invocation to the pagan god and the efficacy of Karlsefni's Christian prayer (*ES*, ch.8). This new territory west of Greenland presents another challenge to Christianity: not mere paganism but something approaching the demonic. For the malignant-looking *skrælingar* in *ES* are practitioners of sorcery. After three years of exploration, Karlsefni and his company score a small Christian victory: the baptism of two *skræling* children in Markland, after the adults in their small company magically disappear into the ground (ch.12). We have to read this as an(other) imaginative conversion; it takes place in that section of the saga where the landscape – having extended northward into a region of desolation (shades of Greenland) – has taken on an undeniably bookish hue. The names of kings of the land of the *Skrælings*, Avaldamon and Valdidida – as reported by the Markland children – bear a tenuous but interesting parallel to those of the king and queen of *Garðaríki*, Valdarr and Allogia, in Oddr Snorrason's *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*.<sup>22</sup> In the same chapter, straight from encyclopedic writings there emerges a uniped (*einfœtingr*). *Einfœtingaland* itself looks to be in sight; and the land 'on the other side across from theirs,' whose inhabitants, according to the children, dress in white clothes, is thought, says the saga-writer, to be *Hvítamannaland*.

In his recent study of Eurocentrism in the *Vínland* sagas, Jerold Frakes suggests, cautiously, that we might read a 'quasi-Prester John' motif into this reference to *Hvítamannaland*, inasmuch as the description by the baptized boys of the white-robed inhabitants of what may be that mysterious land is, perhaps, 'open to the interpretation that they are Christians of some religious order' and that 'the Americans [i.e. the *skrælingar*] were open to conversion.'<sup>23</sup> To entertain that suggestion in the context of my argument here, the juxtaposition of this reference to a possible semi-neighbouring Christian land to the baptism of the Markland boys provides narrative potential for another offshore Icelandic myth of conversion – unrealized, of course, although the episode does mark the start of a counterfeit missionary trail westward from Greenland, continuing with the journey by Bishop Eiríkr Gnúppsson from Greenland in search of *Vínland*, as reported in the *Icelandic Annals* for 1121, and culminating in another myth, which reached its apogée in the 19th century: the lost (Christian) colony of *Vínland*.

Back in *ES*, the children are not only baptized but also taught the '[Norse] language'. What is, by implication, an extended narrative sequence is collapsed into a single sentence:

<sup>21</sup> Jerold C. Frakes, 'Vikings, Vinland and the Discourse of Eurocentrism,' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 100 (2001), 185.

<sup>22</sup> Finnur Jónsson, ed. *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar* (Copenhagen, 1932), ch.8, 23:14-15.

<sup>23</sup> Frakes, *Vikings, Vinland and the Discourse of Eurocentrism*, p.178.

'[t]hey had the boys with them and taught them the language and they were baptized' (*En sveinana hófðu þeir með sér ok kenndu þeim mál ok váru skirðir* [p.432]). We're told nothing of the boys' subsequent history – we have moved into the realm of overt fiction. Like the later life of Leifr and Freydís, it's a narratorial loose end. But Greenland and the lands west of there are places where ends don't have to be tied up: the centripetal narrative momentum is towards Iceland and mainland Scandinavia. For those who operate against that trajectory, like the Eiríkssons and their sister Freydís, Greenland is, literally, the end of the line – a place of truncated genealogy. In *GS*, Freydís's descendants are cursed by Leifr, and he and his brothers apparently without issue. In *ES*, there's no further mention of the child Freydís is carrying when she confronts the *skraelingar* (ch.11), and there's said to be something odd about Leifr's son by the Hebridean noblewoman, Þorgunna (ch.5). Yes, there's a Þorkell Leifsson in *Fostbraðra saga* (ch.20), but we hear nothing elsewhere in saga literature of subsequent generations. On the other hand, Guðríðr, Karlsefni, and Þorgils Örrabeinssjúpr, all of whom return to Iceland – and Króka-Ref, who heads for Denmark – are the ancestors of bishops of Iceland and Denmark, and, in the case of the first three, of saints. According to the final statement of *Króka-Refs saga*, the Danish archbishop Absalon was the direct descendant of Ref's son, Steinn; his other son, Þormóðr, returned to Iceland, and was the ancestor of a line of distinguished men.

Situated on the periphery of Norse geographical and historical fact, Greenland and points west are places which lend themselves to colonization by the narrative imagination. Factor in the establishment of the Greenland settlement at around the time of the conversion of Norway and Iceland, the hazards and harshness of its settled territory, the latent malevolence of its wilderness, and the potential for surreal experience to which its position on the boundary of the geographical real and imaginary makes it susceptible, and the result is a location which beckons to the playing out of religious romance. It's those icy mountains, after all, which inspired one of the best known first lines in the modern hymnal – and a less well known early 17th-century English narrative, *God's Power and Providence: Shewed, in the Miraculous Preservation and Deliverance of eight Englishmen, left by mischance in Greenland Anno 1630, nine moneths and twelve dayes* (London, 1631). Material recompense from the Muscovy Company was the lot of these Greenland eight, and the religious framework of their tale serves as divine endorsement for commercial and national interest.<sup>24</sup> But, for the majority of those men and women in saga narrative who hazard the perils of Greenland, and lands further west and make it back to Iceland (or Norway, or Denmark), the reward is enhanced reputation deriving from the tests of courage, ingenuity, and faith, which they have undergone in this 'special world'. It's a reputation which may be acknowledged by temporal honour and prosperity, but which, for Guðríðr, Karlsefni, Þorgils, and Króka-Ref is reinforced by posterity in a form denied recalcitrant heathens like Eiríkr and Barðr: a flourishing line of descent – a new (Christian) genealogy which serves to reinforce the institutions of the faith.

<sup>24</sup> Lloyd Davis, 'Cultural Encounters and Self Encounters in Early Modern English Travel Autobiographies,' *Parergon* n.s.19 (2002), 160.