

The Celtic Impact on the Church in Iceland and Greenland

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Research on Icelandic DNA has revealed that many Icelanders, and in particular women, are of Celtic descent. It is puzzling, therefore, that hardly any traces of the Celtic language or of Irish culture appear in Iceland or in the saga literature. The aim of my paper is to uncover vestiges of Celtic cultural influence related to the Celtic version of Christianity in Iceland and Greenland. First, I will present the conclusions of the genetic studies with regard to the extent of the Celtic presence in Iceland. Then I will focus on settlers described in the saga texts as coming from a hybrid Hiberno-Norse culture in Ireland (Dublin), as well as in Scotland and the Hebrides – in particular, the settlement of the family of Auðr (Unnr) inn Djúpúðga. Finally, I will present the characteristics of the Celtic church in light of the pertinent archaeological finds in Iceland and Greenland. I would like to suggest that Christianity was introduced twice to Iceland: First, Irish and Scottish immigrants (perhaps in particular women of Celtic origin) introduced Celtic Christianity, and later, after the year 1000, the missionary activities of priests and bishops led to the connection with the Roman Catholic Church.

Genetics

Studying the DNA of contemporary Icelanders, Agnar Helgason has found that 62% of Icelandic women have Celtic ancestry, whereas 80% of the male population has a Norse lineage. He has studied the mitochondrial DNA, the Y-chromosome, and blood types of modern Icelanders in order to obtain information about their genetic history.

It is possible to study the ancestry of women by examining the mitochondrial DNA, which is inherited from one's mother. Comparing Icelandic mitochondrial DNA with other European populations shows that Icelandic women are most similar to the Welsh and British in 62-63 percent of the samples. Researching the male Y-chromosomes, which are inherited only in the male line, Agnar Helgason revealed that about eighty percent of male settlers had a Nordic origin; only twenty percent have chromosomes that can be traced back to the British Isles.

There is also a scientific basis for determining the ancestral background in the distribution of blood types, particularly types A and AB. In Iceland, these two types are present in 19% of the population. In Norway the figure is 30%, while Ireland weighs in with 18%, matching modern Icelanders very closely. Modern Norse blood types match those of other northern Europeans in this respect, but not the Icelanders.

It is possible that, over time, uncontrollable factors may have skewed the Icelandic population figures, and therefore it is preferable to study samples taken from the teeth of medieval Icelanders. For example, people with blood types A and AB are much more susceptible to smallpox, a fact that may have expanded the Irish component in the genetic background of the modern population of Iceland (MacKenzie).

Another method would be to study the DNA preserved in the teeth of skeletons found in medieval graveyards, but such studies are not yet available. We will have to wait for future studies of historic DNA samples.

Celtic settlers mentioned in the Saga literature: The settlement of the family of Auðr (Unnr) inn Djúpúðga.

The Celtic presence in Iceland can also be discerned in the saga literature, which mentions Norse men marrying Irish or Celtic women (who were particularly prominent in the family of Auðr). As Gísli Sigurðsson points out, 'Gaelic people are found in Iceland as independent settlers, as wives of Norwegian settlers, and as slaves.' Most of these slaves were soon freed, and some of their descendants came to occupy an important place in Icelandic society (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988: 25).

But such marrying practices led to what Christian Keller labels hybrid cultures. The Norse people were some of the most mobile Europeans in the Viking Age and the early Middle Ages. This mobility enabled the spread of culture as well as of populations, with the result that the society became neither completely Norse nor completely Irish. Examples of the impact of this hybrid culture are the inclusion of Norse commercial and seafaring vocabulary into Irish (Keller 2005).

Keller mentions Sami/Norse, Finnish/Norse, Slavic/Norse, Baltic/Norse, Frank/Norse, Anglo-Saxon/Norse, Celt/Norse, and Pict/Norse hybrid cultures. Of these hybrid cultures, those that had a permanent existence were the mixed cultures of Irish, British, and Norse, and in particular the Hiberno-Norse culture that came into existence in Dublin and other Irish towns, as well as the settlements in the Hebrides and the north-western coastal areas of Scotland. The Orkneys and the Shetland Islands were an integral part of Scandinavia until the sixteenth century.

Sources: The *Landnámabók*, the most important source for the *landnám* of Iceland, was written in prose from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. It is based on information primarily provided by Ari fróði Þórgilsson (1067-1148), Iceland's most prominent medieval chronicler. He is the author of *Íslendingabók* as well as the main source of information for the ancestry of Auðr's family provided by the *Landnámabók*, *Laxdæla Saga*, and the Greenland Sagas.

Landnámabók deals with the settlement of Iceland from 870 to 1000. It follows the coast clockwise from the west, the area for which the book offers most detailed information, because Ari grew up in the Snæfellsnes- and Dalasýsla area. In contrast, the book is a mere skeleton for the eastern parts of Iceland.

The history of Auðr's family should be considered more reliable because Ari draws on his own family traditions. Ari was a part of the Haukdælir family and studied in the school in Haukadalur with Teitr Ísleifsson (the son of Ísleifr Gizurarson, first bishop of Iceland). On the other hand, the text of *Landnámabók* is not contemporary with the events it describes, and the medieval editors inserted information that may not be reliable. The text exists in five redactions, of which Hauksbók and Sturlubók are the oldest and most important.

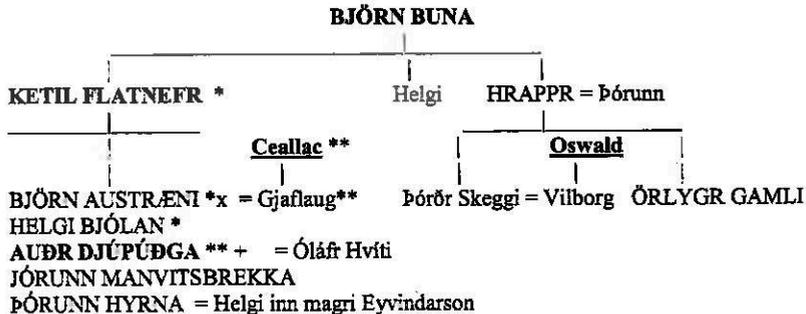
The information in *Landnámabók* should also be compared with the land registers (Björn Lárússon), which can confirm whether a place name actually exists. It

is also important to notice the size of locations, because freedmen would have smaller estates than the chief. The land is valued in the long hundred counting system. I have recently found a text book, which I will present on another occasion, explaining the arithmetic procedures in this counting system.

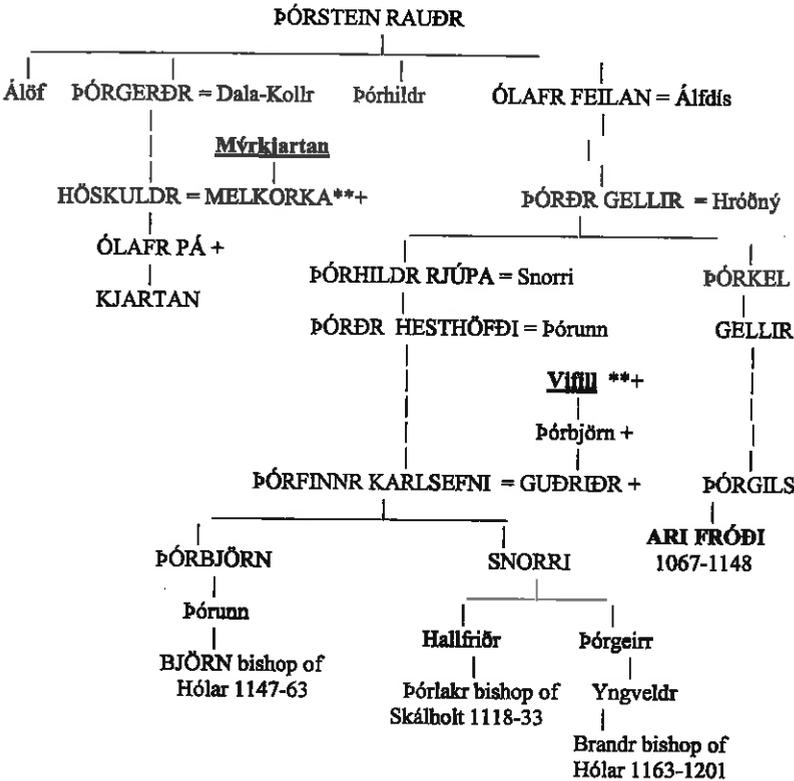
Auðr's family was descended from Björn Buna, her grandfather, whose family were *hersir* in Sogn in Norway. They were driven out by King Harold Finehair, and then they began to pillage and settle in the British Isles. Björn Buna's sons were Ketill Flatnefr, Helgi, and Hrappr. The latter was married to Þórunn, and their son Þórðr Skeggi married Vilborg, the daughter of King Oswald, and Ulfrúna, daughter of the English king Edmund.

Hrappr had another son, Örlygr inn gamli. *Landnámabók* relates that he had been in fosterage with Bishop Patrick, the saint, of the Suðreyjar. The bishop gave him wood for a church to be dedicated to saint Columba (Kolumkilli). Örlygr built the church on the land of his nephew, Helgi Bjólan, who had settled at the coast to the northwest of Esjuberg. Even though the text seems to have been altered at some point, it indicates that Örlygr built a church according to the Celtic tradition.

Ketil Flatnefr had five children: Björn Austræni, Helgi Bjólan, Auðr Djúpúðga, Jórunn Manvitsbrekka, and Þórunn Hyrna.



* British Isles. ** Ireland. + Christian. x Pagan.

AUÐR DJÚPÚÐGA – ÓLAFR HVÍTI

Auðr en djúpúðga (c.820-890) was married to Óleifr hvíti (ÍF I 136), who according to *Landnámabók* was king of Dublin (c. 853-871). But according to an Irish source, which does not refer to Auðr, Olaf the White was married to a daughter of Aed Findlaith (High King of Tara, 862-879). Johannes Steenstrup tries to identify Auðr with the 'Otta' mentioned in the Irish sources, who was married to Tuirgeis/Thorgisl, king of Armagh (c. 835). Otta also visited the high altar at Clonmacnoise (*Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaih*, XLIX, 9, 224-27; Steenstrup, II, p. 109, 374).

Irish kings were, however, notorious for having several women, and therefore it is not possible to exclude the possibility that Auðr was married to Óleifr hvíti. 'Many Irishmen boast descent from kings. The claim is not always justified, but is not altogether preposterous, for Ireland had redundancy of royal blood... [with] the Irish system of succession and of marriage laws which approximated to polygamy, dynastic families proliferated at the expense of the commoner sort.' (Byrne, 1).

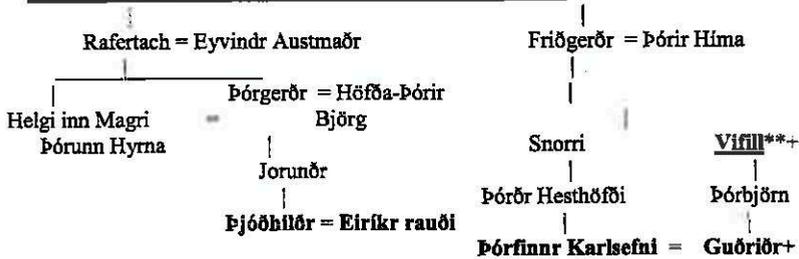
After her husband had died in battle, the settlement of Auðr and her followers coincides with the modern Dalasýsla, situated at the bottom of Hvammsfjörður, north of Snæfellsnes. She settled at Hvammur, after having stayed with her brother Björn

Austræni on Snæfellsnes, where he lived in Bjarnarhöfn – and Helgi Bjólan, who lived at Esjuberg.

Auðr's farm at Hvammur became a rich farmstead, which was valued at 60 hundred when the Bishop of Skálholt obtained it 1524 (Björn Lárusson, 181). Auðr was a Christian, as the *Landnámabók* reports, but she did not build any church, erecting only some stone crosses at which she said her prayers:

Síðan nam Auður öll Dalalönd milli Dögurðarar og Skraumhlaupsár og bjó í Hvammi. Hún hafði bænahald í Krosshólum. Þar lét hún reisa krossa því að hún var skírð og vel trúuð. Með henni komu út margir gófgir menn þeir er heteknir höfðu verið í vesturvíking og voru kallaðir ánauðgir. (*Eiríks saga rauða* ch. 4, ÍF IV, 208).

Cearball mac Dunghal King of Ossory and Dublin-- 888



Cearball mac Dunghal - Þjóðhildr and Þórfinnr Karlsefni

It is worth noting that the great-grandmothers of both Þórfinnr Karlsefni and Þjóðhildr were daughters of the Irish king Cearball mac Dunghal. Þjóðhildr was the Christian wife of the pagan chief of Greenland, Eiríkr rauði. The first church in Greenland, at Brattahlíð, is said to have been constructed by Þjóðhildr (*Eiríks saga* ch. 5, ÍF IV, 212). Þórfinnr Karlsefni went with his Christian wife Guðriðr to Vinland. It may be significant that at L'Anse aux Meadows, a pin was found that shows affinities with the Irish-Norse artifacts found in Ireland (Keller).

Rafertach Mac Cerball's (Rafarta Kjarvalsdóttir's) father was Kjarvalr, king of the Irish according to *Landnámabók* (ÍF I, 248-9). He can be identified with Cerball mac Dúnlainge, king of Ossory from 847 to his death in 888, who 'played off rival bands of Vikings against one another, and took some into his own service. His daughters married Norsemen, and when Dublin went through a period of relative weakness after 873, Cerball appears to have even acted as its patron and protector. As *Kjarvalr Íra konungr* he is remembered in the pedigrees of many of the leading Icelandic houses.' (Byrne, 162).

Muircertach - Höskuldr and Melkorka

In *Laxdæla Saga* it is stated that Höskuldr purchased a pretty girl whom he made his concubine. She said she was the daughter of the Irish king Myrkjartan, and that her name was *Melkorka*.

Myrkjartan may be identified with Muircertach of the Leather Cloaks, son of Niall (919-943). In 939 his kingdom, Ailech, was demolished and Muirchertach was carried off to the fleet; but afterwards he was redeemed. But his *Melkorka* may have been caught in the incident. Muircertach turned the tide of the Vikings. In a vigorous campaigning career he beat the invaders at sea on Strangford Lough in 926, took and burned Dublin in 939, ravaged the Norse settlements in the Scottish Isles with an Ulster fleet in 941 and died in combat in 943.

Laxdæla saga tells that the son of Höskuldr and Melkorka, Óláfr Pá, at the age of eighteen went to Ireland where he met his grandfather Myrkjartan. If Melkorka was abducted in 939, Óláfr could not have met his grandfather, who died in 943, when Óláfr was barely five years old. This part of the story, however, has a legendary character, and it might therefore have been added by a medieval editor of the text.

Settlement by Auðr's freedmen

Auðr also liberated her slaves, who appear to have been all men to whom she gave small or medium-size plots of land of lesser quality. The system of land- and tithe measurement used in Iceland is similar to systems employed in Ireland. The land was evaluated in hundreds and according to the number of cows that could be raised on it (Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson, 118). The Irish territorial unit, the Tuath, contained 120 quarters: 'evidently the Irish used the duodenary system, or long hundred' (O'Curry, I, p. xcii), which was also the counting system used by the Icelanders for land taxation, as well as for estimating the tithe, which was introduced in 1096/7 (Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson, *ibid*). In 1695 there were 177 farms in Dalasýsla (Björn Lárusson), of which only a few are accounted for in *Landnámabók*:

Erpr got 'Sauðafellslönd á millum Tunguár og Miðár.' In 1686 the tax value was 3 hundred (=360 ál. Björn Lárusson, 9:2:7); the neighbouring farm is called Erpsstaðir (land rent: 110 ál., 9:2:8).

The Scotsman Hunð got Hundadalur (*Laxdæla saga* 6). Neðri and Fremri Hundadalur: (9:2:10-11); the land rent was 2 hundred (= 240 ál.) and 1 hundred and 116 ál (= 236 ál.) respectively.

Vifill, the grandfather of Guðriðr, obtained Vífilsdalur, which is situated in a valley with steep slopes and limited sun. In 1686 the farm had been divided into Neðri and Fremri Vífilsdalur (9:1:15-16), (land rent: 100 ál., and 1 hundred 20 ál. (= 140 ál.). The total land rent was 2 hundred (= 240 ál.). Vifill had two sons, Þorgeirr and Þórsteinn, and it is possible that Þorgeirr took over the farm.

Þórsteinn settled at the farm Laugabrekka in Snæfellsnessýsla (8:2:24), where Guðriðr grew up. The land rent of the farm in 1686 was 200 (in 1695, only 100 ál.). The small size of the farm may explain why Þórsteinn and Guðriðr decided to go with Eiríkr rauði to Greenland. According to *Landnámabók* (ÍF I 141), Guðriðr was married first to Þórsteinn, the son of Eiríkr rauði, and then to Þórfinnr karlsefni. According to

Eiríks saga rauða (ÍF IV, 208) she was a Christian, and *Grænlandinga saga* ch. 8 adds that after he died she ended her days as an anchoress, very much in the style of the Celtic monastic tradition (ÍF IV, 269).

The Irish Church

In the ninth and tenth centuries, the Norse had been exposed to the Celtic variant of Christianity, and many Icelandic settlers had converted to Celtic Christianity, which already at the time of Bede had clashed with the Roman Catholic Church.

Irish chronicles seem to indicate a gradual conversion of the Norse in Ireland: Before 860, the *Annals of Ulster* refer to the Norse as *geine* ('pagans'), but later they are called *Gaill* (foreigners) or *Nordmanni*, which may indicate that they converted to Christianity. In the early tenth century, the annals again refer to them as 'pagans'. From the middle of the ninth century the Norse married Irish women, whom the annals of Gall-Ghaedhil call 'foreign Irish' (Gisli Sigurðsson, 1988: 17).

The Celtic Church had a strong connection to Coptic Christianity. Egyptian Coptic monks were living in a community at the French island of Lérins, where St. Patrick became acquainted with the Coptic Church, which was independent of Rome. The Celtic Church inevitably entered into conflict with the Roman Catholic Church, which accused Celtic Christianity of being an extension of Celtic Druidism. This accusation was aimed at the British-born Pelagius, who argued with Augustine over predestination. At the heart of Celtic Christianity was Pelagius' recognition of the struggle between the grace of God and the will of his people: individuals had a moral responsibility for their actions, because God had given them free will. However, little evidence survives for the early Irish Divine Office; Irish liturgical books are fragmentary, with the exception of the Stowe Missal and the Bangor Antiphony. No later sources are available that could help us interpret these fragments, because the Irish liturgy was a lesser tradition that was swept away by the liturgical reforms of the Carolingian period (Jeffery).

The Celtic Church shared many elements with the Coptic Church, such as the married priesthood, and the requirement that monks stay in separate cells rather than in a common dormitory. Rome considered Irish customs unacceptable and vigorously attacked the Celtic Church. The Pope sent Augustine and eighty Benedictine monks to southern England to counter the Celtic movement. By mid 598AD, Augustine established a base in Canterbury and thousands from the Celtic Church were rebaptized, this time in the Church of Rome. The 'Columbanas' refused to 'accept nothing outside the apostolic doctrine' and denied the jurisdiction of Rome.

Icelandic monastic settlements resemble Celtic ones. They were usually established without the intention of founding a large community. A hermit built his cell in a place of solitude, a 'desert,' and cleared an area of land on which to grow food. Gradually others could join him, clearing more land and establishing their own cells nearby. Each monastery had huts set aside for travellers and the sick, for the principle of hospitality was important in the Celtic tradition. Finally, there was a wooden chapel in which the community could meet for prayer. Monks and nuns enjoyed a life of freedom compared with their Continental brethren, usually meeting

together only once a day for worship and Eucharist, and establishing their own patterns of prayer, work and study in their cells.

A characteristic of early Irish monastic sites was that they were usually enclosed within oval or circular embankments. Larger sites often contained two concentric embankments, with the area of greatest sanctity at the center. The outer space was where everyday work took place.

Archaeology

The oldest church designs in Iceland and Greenland show signs of Irish influence, not in the churches themselves, which are built as a shortened version of the Norse long house, but in their graveyards. Unlike early Norwegian graveyards, which have a square cemetery, the earliest churches in Iceland and Greenland have circular cemeteries, which are also common for early churches in northern England, Ireland and Scotland (I owe the information in this subsection to Christian Keller, the University of Oslo).

The Irish round enclosures may go back to prehistoric times. They can be found at the old royal seat of Tara, where kings were elected within the round enclosure (photo). There was also a rounded enclosure at Clonmacnoise.

There were round enclosed Christian cemeteries at Ardwall Isle, Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland (AD 700). The original circular enclosure was maintained into modern times at St. Blane's, Isle of Bute (photo).

In northern England, St. Peter's Church in Parwich, Derbyshire had two concentric banks partially ringing the church inside the enclosure named Yate Croft. The Trent and Peak Archaeological Trust, which carried out a survey of the area in 1988, noted a circular earth enclosure round the north side of the church, with the stream acting as a natural boundary to the south. Such enclosures were a feature of the early church, and holy sites associated with water are particularly linked with the Celtic Church. St. Peter's possibly overlies the site of an eighth- or ninth-century church associated with the ring banks. Off the Cornish coast, there is a round enclosed Christian cemetery at St. Helen's, Isles of Scilly (sixth-seventh centuries).

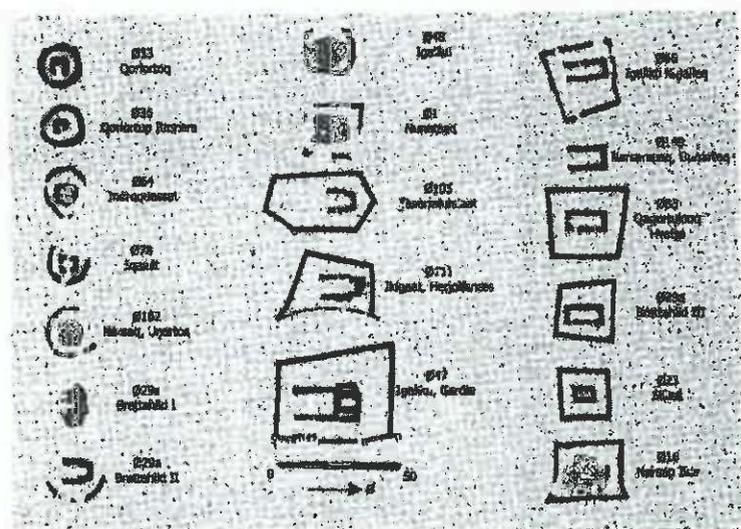
In the Faroe Islands, the graveyard enclosure was round, and at Garði in Húsavík shows a connection between the farms and the Church, which were from the time of the landnám. In Iceland there are examples of round graveyard enclosures at Gásir, Flugumyr, Hofstaðir and Brettingstaðir (photos).

The first church in Greenland, at Brattahlíð, is said to have been constructed by Þjóðhildr, the Christian wife of the pagan chief Eiríkr rauði (*Eiríks saga* ch. 5, ÍF IV, 212). No signs of a graveyard enclosure have been found, but all the graves are situated within a circular confinement. At the second church at Brattahlíð, traces of a circular enclosure have been found.



Greenland: Qassiarsuk: Reconstruction of Þjóðhildr's Church (Brattalid).

With the medieval church, Brattahlíð III and Garðar, the graveyard enclosures became squares, reflecting the introduction of the Romanesque style, which became popular with the introduction of the Catholic Church after the year 1000.



Greenlandic Churches

Conclusion

It has often been alleged that Christianity was not introduced in Iceland until the year 1000, despite the testimony that many settlers were Christians long before Christianity was officially introduced. The sagas mention several wealthy landowners during the ninth and tenth centuries who had adopted the Christianity of the Celtic Church.

The sagas credit King Óláfr Tryggvason for having converted Norway, Iceland, and Orkney by force. In contrast, Saxo and Adam of Bremen do not portray Óláfr as

an evangelist, suggesting perhaps that his fame as a missionary was an invention of Icelandic saga authors wishing to credit a native Scandinavian with the conversion rather than being subject to control by the Archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen or other foreign churches.

In the year 1000 the Christian religion was introduced into Iceland by law at the Alþingi by her apostles Gizur the White and Hjalti. Their job was not simply to convert pagans but also to convert Celtic Christians to Roman Catholicism. Þorgeirr, the law speaker, proclaimed the laws that he had received from Gizurr, which provided that all the inhabitants of Iceland should become Christians and receive baptism – according to the Roman Catholic rite.

After the conversion, many Benedictine monks and Augustinian canons settled in Iceland, and Icelanders began to pay tribute to the Roman See. Iceland first received its own bishops in the year 1056 at Skálholt, and at Hólar in 1106, but at that time the Celtic Christian past was a distant memory.

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