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Iceland and the *Immrama*: An Enquiry into Irish Influence on Old Norse-Icelandic Voyage Literature

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Introduction

A well-known passage in Ari Þorgilsson’s Íslendingabók, and a similar one in Landnámabók, which refer to Christian men having been in Iceland when the Norsemen arrived there, is an appropriate place to begin this study. According to these two sources, the men in question, whom the Icelanders called papar, left the country because they did not wish to remain there with heathen men. They left Irish books, bells and croziers behind them, from which it might be deduced they were Irishmen.

The gist of these accounts appears to be fairly straightforward and has been rehearsed for many years in scholarly literature. In essence, the argument is that the accounts are transparent and say what they mean: Irish clerics were settled in Iceland when the Norsemen arrived there. Questions have arisen in recent years, however, regarding the status of the accounts. Ari states that he based his work on reliable oral testimony and/or on learned written works. Are these accounts then based on such evidence and can one rest assured they reflect the true historical facts? Or could they be based perhaps on a common tradition — not necessarily historically true — which was accepted in ecclesiastical learned circles of the 12th century? There is also the question if Ari has manipulated the evidence in any way to fit his own agenda.

2 Þá váru hér menn kristnir, þeir es Norðmenn kalla papa, en þeir fóru síðan á braut, af þvi at þeir vildu eigi vesa hér við heiðna menn, ok létu eptir hekr írskar ok bjöllur ok bögla, af þvi mátti skilja, at þeir váru menn írskir (Jakob Benediktsson [ed.] 1968, p. 5).
3 Jakob Benediktsson (ed.) 1968, pp. 31–32.
4 See, for example, MacDonald 2002.
The Prologue to *Landnámabók* states that the Venerable Bede in his book on the reckoning of time mentions an island called Thile (Thule), which is said in books to be six days’ sailing from the north of Britain; it equates the island with Iceland, as does Adam of Bremen in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (IV.xxxvi), ‘Deeds of the Bishops of Hamburg’, written between 1073 and 1076, which may be the source for the identification. Like Bede, the Irish monk and geographer Dicuil, writing in 825 in *De mensura orbis terrae* (Tierney [ed.] 1967, VII.11–13), also states that it is six days’ sailing beyond the north of Britain and that thirty years previously, that is, in 795, he had heard from three Irish clerics that they had stayed there from 1st February until 1st August. Notwithstanding the oral testimony of these Irish clerics and the fact that Dicuil had spent time in the Hebrides in his younger years, the six days’ sailing reference appears to be based on the literary testimony of earlier authors. In addition to the above, there is also the presence of papar place-names in Iceland (also in Norway) and in the Faroes, Orkney,

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5 *Í aldarfarsbók þeirri, er Beda prestr heilagr gerði, er getið eylands þess er Thile heitir og á bókum er sagt, at liggi sex døgra sigling í norðr frá Bretlandi* (p. 31). The Bedan *aldarfarsbók* appears to be either *De temporibus* or *De temporum ratione*: in *De temporibus* (VII), for example, Bede mentions Pytheas of Massalia, who made a circumnavigation of the Island of Britain in the 4th century BC, as the original source for his information. Since Pytheas’s work was lost, Bede relied on the writings of later Classical authors who had based their accounts on Pytheas — Polybius, Strabo, Solinus, Pliny the Elder — and, as he himself says, on stories circulating in his own times of men who had come from that region (Jones [ed.] 1943, pp. 239, 297–298; see also Ó Cróinin 1983 and Wallis 1999).

6 Dicuil’s informants told him that there was no day in the winter months and no night in the summer months on the Island of Thule (Tierney [ed.] 1967, VII:11). Isidore of Seville (*Etymologiae* XIV.vi.4) states that *Ultima Thule* lies in the northern and western waters and is the farthest island in the ocean north of Britain, beyond which there is no day. It is characterized by its remoteness: according to Pytheas, the seas to the north of it are unnavigable on account of the frozen ice there. Accounts of unchartered territories *usque ad ultimum terrae* (Acts 1.8; cf. Ps. 71.8) had a profound effect on the medieval imagination, as reflected in history, story and art, and provided an important incentive for voyages to the far north. Overall, the evidence for the identification of Thule with Iceland is very strong, but it has been variously located by different authors and sources.
Shetland, Caithness, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. While many of these place-names came about because Irish/Scottish clerics settled in these areas, some of them could have been named later following a naming tradition formed in other Norse colonies and are not necessarily contemporaneous with possible settlement by Gaelic Christian clerics or hermits.

The possibility that monks of Gaelic stock reached Iceland c. AD 800 has also been inferred on the basis of recent archaeological research on artificial cave sites in Seljaland in southern Iceland, a number of which have carvings of Christian crosses on the walls which are similar to pre-Viking cross sculptures found in the Hebrides and northern Scotland.

To get a bit closer to the point of this enquiry, despite some reservations about the status of the evidence overall, what is not in doubt is that the men referred to in various accounts are Irish or Scottish Christian *peregrini*. It has been argued that the word *papi* (pl. *papar*) is a borrowing from the Early Irish word *papa* or *pupu* (*father, priest; anchorite*), which was borrowed from Latin *papa*. The fact that Ari baldly states that *papar* lived in Iceland prior to the Norsemen means that they had probably entered the consciousness of many Icelanders before or around the time Old Norse literature was being composed and redacted. On the other hand, *Íslendingabók*, unlike *Landnámabók*, has no further mention of Irish or Gaelic settlers in the country, or


8 See Fellows-Jensen 1996, pp. 116–117. See also the discussion in MacDonald 2002 and Ahronson 2014, ch. 3, who argues that the names reflect earliest Norse settlement.

9 See Ahronsson 2003, pp. 53–70 and Ahronson 2014. Ahronson’s innovative research on these sites presents a number of challenges; there are c. 200 man-made caves in Iceland, mostly in the southern part of the country, which would suggest that a reasonably large number of people were involved in their construction. Further research on sites other than those examined by Ahronson is a desideratum.

10 See eDil (www.dil.ie) s. v. *pápa, pupu*; and entries s. v. *popa* (also written *pobba, bobba*), ‘father’, hence ‘master’ (often used in vocative as respectful form of address). There are recent discussions in Ahronsson 2014, ch. 3 and Mac Donald 2002.
of a continuity between the papar and the conversion of the country to Christianity. Ari would have been well aware, however, that the Irish _peregrini_ who went to Iceland were Gaelic voyagers in search of a solitary place, a desert in the ocean or _terra secreta_, in which to live a life of prayer and contemplation in the pursuit of redemption and salvation; he makes a clear distinction between the Christian _papar_ and the ‘heathen’ Norsemen, the ancestors whose history he seeks to document and reveal. Since his work is essentially concerned with the conversion of his people to Christianity, it could be argued that the secluded island in the ocean, which the Norsemen find and settle, is a kind of Promised Land, a pre-lapsarian Christian land which has been set apart for the chosen race of Norsemen.\(^{11}\)

By the end of the 9\(^{th}\) century and beginning of the 10\(^{th}\), Norse Vikings had married women of Gaelic descent and taken many Gaelic female slaves captive during the period of their raids and colonisation of Ireland and Scotland, so that a mixed Gaelic-Norse population had developed in parts of these countries. _Landnámabók_ documents a number of people of Gaelic origin, especially Gaelic slaves and people of Gaelic-Norse descent, who settled in Iceland during the Age of Settlement, particularly in the Breiðafjörður peninsula and north of Reykjavík, many of whom came from Ireland and the Hebrides.\(^{12}\) It seems reasonable to assume that this mixed Norse-Gaelic people would have acted as channels of communication and mediation, transmitting various linguistic and literary items into Old Norse culture. Similarly, those Norse people who had spent time

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\(^{11}\) Clunies Ross (2000, p. 116) makes a similar point. She argues that Ari may have taken “the hundred years or so of paganism to have been an aberration of faith in a land that had already been sanctified by Christian hermits and potential saints, and was, as Ari pictured it, paradisal, with its surface covered with trees between mountains and shore”. See also Lindow 1997, p. 456; Mundal 1994, p. 71; Hermann 2010. Egeler (2019) points out that many of the Icelandic settlers had spent considerable periods in Britain and Ireland and were probably keenly aware of the narrative tradition concerning paradisal islands of promise in the western ocean.

\(^{12}\) For genetic evidence of Gaelic presence in Iceland, see Agnar Helgason et al. 2000.
in Ireland and Gaelic Scotland, and subsequently settled in Iceland, would have also contributed to this process.

Over the years, scholars have found both linguistic items and literary motifs in the Old Norse-Icelandic traditions which, they argue, have been, or may have been borrowed from Medieval and Early Modern Gaelic and Insular Celtic. As regards the influence of Medieval Irish voyage literature on Old Norse-Icelandic, the present study will re-examine some of these suggested borrowings. I will present a brief summary of the Irish material, followed by an analysis and discussion of some of the relevant Icelandic fornaldarsögur or Legendary Sagas which feature Þórr or his namesake, and related material from Snorri Sturluson’s Edda, compared and contrasted with the Irish texts. A number of motifs in the Thorkillus voyages

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13 See, for example, Craigie 1897; von Sydow 1910; von Sydow 1920; Finnur Jónsson 1921; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1932; Chadwick 1953/57; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1957; Simpson 1966; Chesnutt 1968; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1975b; Almqvist 1978/81; Mac Mathúna (ed.) 1985; Power 1985a; Power 1985c; Power 1987; Gisli Sigurðsson 1988; Almqvist 1996; Hermann Pálsson 1996; Almqvist 1997; Helgi Guðmundsson 1997; Mac Mathúna 1997; Ó Corráin 1998; Rekdal 1998; Mac Mathúna 1999; O’Connor 2000; Power 2005; McKinnell 2005; Power 2006; Egeler 2013a; Egeler 2014; Egeler 2015; Egeler 2019. As early as 1889, Sophus Bugge compared Old Norse and Irish Otherworld conceptions, concluding that the similarities were the result of Classical influence; amongst other things, Sayers (1994a) has written about managing the Celtic fact in Landnámabók.

14 Rafn (ed.) 1829/30.


16 Stories of the ‘lustful stepmother’ are not studied in any detail in the present work. Some of these have voyage elements contained in bridal-quest or exile-and-return romances and are quite widespread in both the Icelandic and Irish traditions. The Icelandic Hjálmpérs saga ok Qlvis, which probably dates to the 15th century, and Hjálmpérsrímur, early 15th century, have close correspondences with the Irish tales Fingal Rónáin (‘The kin-slaying by Rónán’, probably 10th century), the Early Modern Irish romances Echtra Airt meic Cuinn (‘The Adventure of Art, son of Conn’, probably dating to between the 12th to 14th centuries) and Stair Nuadat Find Femin (‘The Story of Nuadu Find Femin’), which is contained in a 15th century manuscript (see Poppe 1997 on this tale). Although Fingal Rónáin and Hjálmpérs saga are far removed in time from one another and have different cultural-historical contexts, O’Connor (2000) finds that they have more similarities with one another than with any other of the many extant lustful stepmother tales. He proceeds cautiously, however, with regard to possible influence of the Irish tale on Hjálmpérs saga, arguing that even though
of Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* are then discussed, along with analogues from the Irish and classical traditions, many of which, to my knowledge, have not previously figured in the scholarly literature. Finally, following a short discussion of material relating to Hvitramannaland and, an assessment of the possible influence of Irish/Hiberno-Latin visionary literature on the Old Norse tales, some general conclusions on the subject as a whole are presented.

the literary evidence suggests a close relationship between the two, and that the parallels “place the burden of proof upon the ‘Celtskeptick’ rather than the ‘Celtophile’” (p. 36), a comparative analysis of the texts need not depend on influence at all, but may only involve literary analysis. The Icelandic story wavers between the *fornaldarsögur* and the *riddarasögur* and, together with other *fornaldarsögur*, shares with *Echtra Airt* many of the same details of the Otherworld journey – perilous seas, a dark sinister wood, an icy river with a narrow bridge, combats with a giant and giantess, and the acquisition of a fair lady. The question of the possible influence of *Echtra Airt* on the Icelandic tale and other Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*, whether this influence be of a direct or indirect nature, requires further study. O’Connor (2000, pp. 31–32) concludes that *Echtra Airt* cannot have been the source of the lustful stepmother story in *Hjálmpérs saga*, but that it is not improbable that it “and/or related texts prompted the Icelandic development of the bridal quest álög motif”. See also Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1957, pp. 19–20; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1975a; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1975b; McKinnell 2005, pp. 203–206; Power 2006.
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