EMBODYING THE PAST

Relics and Remains in Old Norse Literature

Olivia Elliott Smith

Master’s Thesis in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies
MAS4091 (30 Credits)

Institutt for lingvistiske og nordiske studier (ILN)
Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies
UNIVERSITETET I OSLO
Faculty of Icelandic and Comparative Cultural Studies
HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Spring 2019
EMBODYING THE PAST

Relics and Remains in Old Norse Literature

Olivia Elliott Smith

Master’s Thesis in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies
Supervisor: Kristen Mills, Universitetet i Oslo

Institutt for lingvistiske og nordiske studier (ILN)
Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies
UNIVERSITETET I OSLO
Faculty of Icelandic and Comparative Cultural Studies
HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Spring 2019
This thesis explores the relationship between depictions of the dead and the representation of the past in Old Norse literature. The holy and the pre-Christian dead are read as representations of two different pasts: the collective Christian past of medieval Europe inherited by Scandinavia through conversion; and the indigenous, pagan past which informed many facets of medieval Scandinavian society. Depictions of the dead shed light on the negotiation of religious and cultural identity in medieval Norway and Iceland, as they provided one way for a medieval audience to encounter and confront aspects of these pasts.

This thesis situates depictions of saints’ relics and other remains within a theoretical framework drawn from the discipline of museology. As museums represent the past through the interpretation of objects, they provide an interesting conceptual model through which to view the medieval church and the relationship it facilitated between the living and the holy dead. The space of the church is understood through the application of structuralist and philosopher Michel Foucault’s work within the field of museum studies, and museum processes are used to further engage with the place of the dead within the church. The medieval church is here interpreted as a heterotopia, which like a museum, can juxtapose temporally and geographically varied pasts within a single location, as well as uniting terrestrial and celestial places within Foucault’s conception of medieval space.

Chapter 1 investigates textual accounts of the medieval church in Old Norse literature as a place to encounter the holy dead through the presence of holy relics. It addresses Norway’s participation in the Cult of the Saints through the discovery, translation and enshrinement of Saint Óláfr’s relics, and argues that depictions of these events permit Norway to partake in the collective inheritance of the Christian past through the creation of its first indigenous saint. Chapter 2 considers Iceland’s relationship to the past illustrated through encounters with the holy and the pre-Christian indigenous dead. Like Norway, Iceland enters the Christian past through the cult of its first indigenous saint, Saint Þorlákr, which necessitates negotiating the relationship to the relatively recent pre-Christian past. Depictions of “reverse-translations” in Laxdæla saga and Egils saga Skallagrímssonar are viewed as representations of attempts on Iceland’s part to reconcile its Christian present and its pagan past.
FOREWORD

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Kristen Mills, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Oslo, Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies. I am indebted to her not only for her guidance and feedback throughout the research and writing of this thesis, but also for her support and mentorship in furthering my academic career.

I would like to thank the professors at the University of Iceland and the University of Oslo from whom I have had the privilege of learning. This thesis would not have been possible without the knowledge I have gained through their teaching.

I am grateful to my parents, Jane Goad and David Smith, and my fiancé, Jeff Alyanak, for their unwavering love, support and encouragement throughout this process. I am especially thankful to my parents for encouraging my childhood passions for history and literature, and for their constant emotional and intellectual support in my academic pursuit of these passions as an adult.

I would also like to thank the friends that I have made in the Viking and Medieval Norse Studies programme. I am especially grateful to Luca Panaro, the brother I never had, for being a source of support and friendship throughout the course of my studies.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of two treasured grandparents, Isobel Elliott Goad and David Norman Smith, for their love and encouragement in every aspect of my life.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**.................................................................................................................................................................................. 1
- Theoretical Framework.......................................................................................................................................................................... 4
- Heterotopic Space .................................................................................................................................................................................. 7

**Chapter 1: “He Became Enshrined Alive, Having Been King”: The Relics of Saint Óláfr and the Representation of the Past** ................................................................. 12
- From King to Saint: Relics and the Accessioning of the Christian Past ............. 14
- From Periphery to Centre: The Holy Dead and Heterotopic Space ............... 20
- From Remains to Relics: Representation and the Role of the Reliquary ........ 23
- Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................................................................... 30

**Chapter 2: Incompatible Pasts? Proximity to the Dead and the Negotiation of Icelandic Cultural Identity** ............................................................ 31
- “A Glorious Gemstone of Power Before God”: Recognizing the Holy in the Relics of Saint Þorlákr .......................................................... 32
- Collecting Christianity: The Nature of the Heterotopic Church ................... 35
- “Past” Away I: Deaccessioning the Pre-Christian Past .................................. 36
- “Past” Away II: Curating the Pre-Christian Past ........................................ 42
- Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................................................................... 49

**Conclusion** ...................................................................................................................................................................................... 51

**Bibliography** .................................................................................................................................................................................... 56
INTRODUCTION

Saints, the holy dead, occupied a place of fundamental importance within the Christian culture of the European Middle Ages. The special treatment of certain human remains, revered as relics through which God’s grace could be channeled, can be regarded as a hallmark of the medieval experience.1 As Robert Bartlett observes, “Many religions have the idea of a holy man or woman – a living human being with extraordinary powers derived from special contact with the divine. Medieval Christianity developed to an extreme degree a distinctive form of this concept: the idea that dead bodies of these holy people should be cherished as enduring sources of supernatural power.”2 The desire to access this power manifested in the Cult of the Saints, wherein holy relics were revered for their ability to join Heaven and Earth through their intercessory powers.3 Upon their discovery, relics were translated, enshrined in costly reliquaries and installed within the church,4 where they could be visited by pilgrims who longed to be close to their power.5 The translation of holy relics often inspired the creation of hagiographical works, and these written records of saints’ lives, miracles, and the enduring sanctity of their remains aided in the spread of the Cult of the Saints.6

Such hagiographical material is found in the Old Norse literary tradition in a variety of genres, including prose narrative and skaldic verse. These texts often depict extraordinary encounters with the holy dead: for example, the blood of Saint Óláfr of Norway (d. 1030) heals the blind; and the Icelandic Saint Porlákr (d. 1193) performs over twenty documented miracles after his death, including healing illness and injury and improving the health of animals.7 Accounts such as these informed the living of the intercessory power possessed by the holy dead, furthering the view of the saint as “a mediator between the transcendent,

4 When referring to the church as a building or space, lower-case “church,” is used; when referring to the institution, capital “Church” is used.
omnipotent God and the weak, vulnerable, and often suffering human.”

As the first indigenous saints from Norway and Iceland respectively, the depictions of the discovery, translation and enshrinement of Saint Óláfr and Saint Þorlákr allow insight into Scandinavia’s relationship to the Cult of the Saints and its place within the culture of European Christendom.

The Cult of the Saints originated with the late antique veneration of the tombs of the Roman Martyrs, and spread rapidly throughout Europe during the 11th and 12th centuries with the expansion of Latin Christendom. While the Cult of the Saints was certainly an important feature of Christianity earlier in the Middle Ages, this period saw “the most dramatic social and artistic expansion of (the Cult of the Saints) since the (4th) century.” Though there was missionary presence within Scandinavia as early as the 8th century, it is generally held that Norway and Iceland officially accepted Christianity in the early 11th century, making their conversions roughly contemporaneous with the rapid increase in the veneration of the holy dead. It is not surprising then that the cults of Saint Óláfr and Saint Þorlákr were established in the wake of these events, as the Cult of the Saints thus presented these nations with the opportunity to participate in an important facet of European Christian culture. The period following conversion in Scandinavia was a time of transition, and necessitated the negotiation between the Christian – and European – identity offered in part through the Cult of the Saints, and the recent pre-Christian past which informed many facets of Scandinavian society. The complex nature of the relationship between pagan past and Christian present likely experienced by medieval Scandinavians is aptly expressed by Torfi H. Tulinius: “what are we to do with the pagan past, which makes us who we are through our settlement, our laws, our

---

8 Madigan, *Medieval Christianity*, 323.
9 Though the martyrdom of Saint Sunniva is dated to c. 996, placing her death before that of Saint Óláfr’s, her relics were not translated until 1170, over a century after those of Saint Óláfr were moved to Clementskirkja. Given Saint Sunniva’s Irish origins and the view that her legend is “more a mirror of twelfth-century perceptions than tenth-century realities,” she is not considered an indigenous saint for the purposes of this analysis. See Alexander O’Hara, “Constructing a Saint: The Legend of Saint Sunniva in Twelfth-Century Norway,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 5 (2009): 105–21.
language, our customs, the ancestors from whom we derive our social status, even though we are now Christians?"  

Scholars have often noted that a preoccupation with the past is a feature of Old Norse literature, and readers of the corpus will be familiar with its vivid depictions of events from the past. Among the most memorable are arguably those which concern the pre-Christian dead: Óðinn’s encounter with a dead seeress who relates the creation and destruction of the world in the Eddic poem Völuspá; Gunnar Hámundarson of Njáls saga, who is seen residing within his burial mound after death; and the draugr Glamr who is slain by Grettir Ásmundarson in the eponymous Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar are but a few examples. These encounters take place in peripheral locations, in the wilderness or on the border of civilization, which sets them apart spatially from society and culture. While some encounters occur within domestic space, such as the hauntings at Fróðár in Eyrbyggja saga, medieval society was structured around a Christian spatial hierarchy which placed the church at the central and most sacred point. Though not as marginal as the wilderness, the household was nevertheless not immune to disruptions from the dead, given its distance from the protection offered by sacred space.

On two occasions, however, the pre-Christian dead are discovered within the centre of medieval society: the bones of a pagan seeress are unearthed beneath the floor of the church at Helgafell in Laxdæla saga; and Egill Skallagrímsson’s skeleton is found under the altar of the church at Hrísbrú in Egils saga Skallagrímssonar. The presence of the pre-Christian dead within this space, which exclusively permits encounters with the holy dead through the Cult of the Saints, is thus antithetical to the role of the church as the pinnacle of holiness in medieval society. In both accounts, the pre-Christian dead are removed and relocated in a manner which evokes the inverted translation of a saint. These “reverse-translations” illustrate

---

the importance of the presence of the correct kind of dead within the church and may speak to “the complicated desire to confront and come to grips with the pagan age in the North.”

This thesis addresses the role of the dead in negotiating the relationship of Norway and Iceland to two religious pasts: the indigenous, pagan past; and the Christian past inherited through the process of conversion. In this reading, depictions of the dead are regarded as representations of the past in their capacity to carry values and connotations associated with both Christianity and paganism: the holy dead offer access to the collective Christian past of medieval Europe, into which Norway and Iceland entered via the official acceptance of Christianity; while the pre-Christian dead embody the pagan past that came before.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The following study situates depictions of the dead inside the space of the church within a theoretical framework based on concepts from the field of museology. This structure is built upon the implementation of the museum as a concept, in which museum processes and practices are used to explore the nature of the dead and parallels between the museum and the medieval Church as agents of access to the past. The space of the church is understood through the application of structuralist and philosopher Michel Foucault’s work within the field of museum studies. The museum is thus employed theoretically throughout this reading, and its role in society as a place for the preservation and interpretation of the past is used to interrogate the relationship between the Church and the dead in Old Norse literature.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines a museum as an “institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” While this definition

---


19 The agency of both the church and the museum lies within the power they exert over those who enter them. Both spaces impose certain behaviours upon their visitors which are required to access the knowledge made available within. For example, some museums require security checks, limit the use of photography in general or of particular objects, and restrict things like running, touching and eating within all or certain spaces; the medieval church required female visitors to cover their hair among other modifications in behaviour, and restricted access to certain areas of the space based on societal and ecclesiastical status. For the disciplinary effect of the museum, see Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, “The Museum in a Disciplinary Society,” *Museum Studies and Material Culture*, ed. S. Pearce (Leicester: Leicester University Press 1989), 61–72.

is modern, it can nevertheless be applied theoretically to the present analysis in several ways. Of importance is the idea that museums do not only acquire and conserve human heritage, often in the form of objects, but that they communicate and exhibit it. This creates an accessible past, and the museum becomes a space which enables its visitors to establish or remain in contact with it. Museums therefore enact the process of musealization, wherein an object is removed from its original or intended context and transformed into accessible knowledge.21 This process is not unbiased, but rather is innately subjective, as it is dependent upon those who enact it, such as registrars, interpretive planners, and of course, curators;22 thus when museum visitors encounter an object, they in turn encounter the interpretation conveyed upon it by those who facilitated its musealization.

This process is selective and conveys value upon an object, imbuing it with an almost sacred quality.23 No longer is the object treated casually, no matter how mundane it may have been within its original environment. It is instead handled with especial care as,

the ‘musealization’ process is ultimately focused on protecting and conserving the object for ‘eternity.’ Having ‘removed’ the object at whichever stop along the road to its eventual demise, however that may occur, the museum can take heart in arresting this certain inevitability through its institutionalization in an artificially created web of physical and intellectual protection.24

Put simply, this process transforms what may otherwise be a mundane object into museal knowledge by selecting, removing and elevating it by means of its protective enclosure – an indication of reverence and respect – and with the accompanying interpretation that justifies this treatment. Musealization indicates that certain objects are exceptional, making them more deserving of special treatment than others which may appear similar. This interpretation is informed by personal experience, as it is a product of those experts responsible for musealization.25 The museum therefore displays both the physical object and its interpretation of it, which together form a representation of the past from which it came. As Lynn Maranda observes, “(t)he object…has become a passive entity which is manipulated to suit any one of a myriad of contrivances in which the museum decides to place it at any particular time.”26

The potential for variation in the interpretation of objects over time can be seen in the changing attitudes towards the museological keeping and handling of the dead. Human remains have long been collected, preserved and displayed within museums, and over the past twenty years the ethics of this practice have increasingly been a topic of debate. As D. Gareth Jones and Maja I. Whitaker note, much of the controversy “frequently stem(s) from what is seen as a lack of respect for the remains of another human being. In this instance, the underlying concerns are that the corpses are displayed naked, along with lack of consent from anyone with an interest in them.” Historically, attitudes towards the display of human remains – particularly the ancient dead – in museums “have been shaped by the perception that prehistoric remains are located outside our immediate social relationships, and so, have often been considered as anatomical objects rather than the remains of people-now-dead.” This issue has given rise to several responses, including, perhaps most notably, calls from indigenous communities in North America, Australia and New Zealand for the return of their ancestral dead. Subsequently, groups in the United Kingdom such as Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD) and the Council of British Druid Orders (CoBDO) have asserted that the renowned bog bodies represent their ancestral dead, prompting a similar call for their return.

This debate has required museums to address “concerns that archaeology fails to treat ‘pagan,’ prehistoric remains with the same dignity and respect that Christian remains receive,” and at times to reframe their treatment of the dead.

The issues raised by this debate are particularly interesting considering the function of human remains within the medieval Church. Though laws prohibiting the disturbance of graves existed at the inception of the Cult of the Saints, the desire for access to the remains of

---

29 Jones and Whitaker, “The Contested Realm of Displaying Dead Bodies,” 652.
the holy dead and the supernatural powers they possessed resulted in the disruption of their burial sites. This usually occurred through the translation of the whole body into a church, and at times through the fragmentation of the remains which enabled relics to travel abroad. Far from being disrespectful, this treatment of the holy dead is what designated them as special, evidenced by their enclosure in costly reliquaries, many of which are among the finest examples of medieval art. The holy dead were thus put on display within the church for the edification of its congregation and its pilgrims, and like collections managers, conservators and curators, members of the clergy were appointed to tend to their shrines and the relics contained within them. The medieval church highly resembles the modern museum in its capacity to collect, preserve and provide access to holy relics – the musealized remains of the holy dead, which can be viewed as venerated objects from the Christian past. As Sadreddin Taheri observes, “In the modern period, museums have inherited the position of sanctuaries and palaces as the most substantial institutions to preserve and protect the selected/sacred objects,” making the museum a useful lens through which to view the medieval Church.

HETEROTOPIC SPACE

As spaces, the museum and the medieval church share many commonalities. In particular, they both possess the ability to accumulate and preserve temporally and geographically diverse objects and present them within a single location. The ability of the medieval Church to present and make accessible all of Christian time within a single place, and to unite Heaven and Earth through the Cult of the Saints, is interpreted in this reading through Foucault’s concept of the heterotopia, and particularly through the museological application of this concept. While Foucault did not write exhaustively about museums, his theories have nevertheless been readily employed within museum studies, particularly as the

33 Bartlett, Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?, 240.
34 Bartlett, Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?, 240.
35 Bartlett, Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?, 3; Madigan, Medieval Christianity: A New History, 320.
sociological turn within the field has generated more concern for the place and function of museums in society.\textsuperscript{39} Foucault conceives of heterotopias or heterotopic sites as “Other Spaces,” which “are something like counter-sites…in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”\textsuperscript{40} In defining these sites, Foucault enumerates six fundamental principles in what he terms a “heterotopology”:

1. Heterotopias exist in every culture throughout the world, and consequently can take a variety of forms.
2. As time passes and history unfolds, a society can cause its heterotopias to function differently.
3. A heterotopia may juxtapose several sites that appear incompatible within a single space.
4. Most often, heterotopias are linked to moments in time and function at their full capacity when there has been a break in or a loss of “traditional time.”
5. Heterotopic sites are generally not freely accessible. Entry is either compulsory, as with prisons, or requires the one to undergo rites and purifications, or to obtain special permission to gain entry.
6. Heterotopias function in relation to their surroundings. They either create a space of illusion, or a space that reflects the world in which they exist.\textsuperscript{41}

Foucault asserts that heterotopic spaces are not an innovation, but rather that space “has a history, and one cannot fail to take note of this inevitable interlocking of time with space.”\textsuperscript{42} He briefly addresses museums directly under his fourth principle, stating that they are “heterotopia(s) of time that accumulate indefinitely...(they) have become heterotopias in


\textsuperscript{42} Foucault, “Different Spaces,” 176.
which time never ceases to pile up and perch on its own summit.” Foucault refers to these as *heterochronia*, and as a space of this kind, the museum desires “to contain all times, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside time and protected from its erosion.” He conceives of these heterotopias of time as modern phenomena: “organizing a kind of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in a place that will not move – well, in fact, all of this belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are characteristic of Western culture in the nineteenth century.” Given that space has a history, I argue, contra Foucault, that it is also possible to identify medieval sites which function as pre-modern heterotopias of time.

The medieval Church is part of this history of space, and depictions of it illustrate its function as a heterotopia of time. It possesses many of the qualities outlined in Foucault’s heterotopology: through the administration of sacraments, interpretation of scripture, and the collection, preservation and display of relics, the church juxtaposes several sites which may seem incompatible in a single space (i.e. the Holy Land and the local community, the rebirth offered by baptism and the finality of the grave); they are linked to moments in time (Biblical time, the lives of the saints’ to whom they are dedicated, and the present in which they physically exist) and access to them requires certain rites, purifications and at times, permissions. As an institution which collects, documents, preserves and displays venerated objects from the past, the medieval Church functions in many ways like a museum. As I will argue below, depictions of the medieval church represent it as a heterotopic space, in which the entirety of the Christian past, both local and foreign, can be accumulated and presented as an accessible whole.

In an important article, Sverrir Jakobsson applies Foucault’s theory to analyse the function of the medieval church in Iceland. He observes that:

For churches to become sacred places within society, places of intimate connection with holy events of the past and holy places in the world, places where a saint was present although he had never himself been there, places where the usual rules of society did not apply and the losers had some respite from the winners, ideas about

---

43 Foucault, “Different Spaces,” 182.
44 Foucault, “Different Spaces,” 182.
45 Foucault, “Different Spaces,” 182.
space and time had to be modified through a new conception of space, a conception which had an operational power.\(^{46}\)

The capacity of the heterotopia to juxtapose places and times which may otherwise be incompatible is precisely what enables both medieval churchgoers and modern museum visitors to have continued access to a broader past. Following Sverrir, the medieval Church is thus viewed theoretically as a heterotopia throughout this thesis to examine the relationship between the space of the church and the dead which may be encountered within it. I argue that like a museum, literary depictions of the medieval Church illustrate that it functions as a heterotopic space which makes the holy dead, and therefore the Christian past, accessible through a curated collection of representations.

Chapter 1 examines depictions of the holy dead and how their presence contributes to the heterotopic nature of sacred space. It addresses Norway’s participation in the Cult of the Saints through literary accounts of the discovery, translation and enshrinement of Saint Óláfr’s relics, and argues that these depictions serve to represent Norway as an heir to the collective Christian past. The museological practice of accessioning, through which objects are formally selected and musealized within an institution’s collection, is employed to understand this process. Through the establishment of his cult, Saint Óláfr is accessioned into the Cult of the Saints, and the translation of his remains from their peripheral burial place to their enshrinement within the cathedral at the centre of medieval society mirrors the transition of Norway from a northern frontier to a member of European Christendom. The ability of the Cult of the Saints to represent the past is further addressed through an analysis of descriptions of Saint Óláfr’s shrine, which serves to represent him, and by extension Norway, as both indigenous and European through the blending of artistic traditions.

Chapter 2 explores Iceland’s relationship to the past as it is represented through encounters with the holy and the pre-Christian dead. Building on the conception of the medieval Church as a heterotopia, it argues that Icelandic authors claimed a place for Iceland within the collective Christian past through the discovery, translation and enshrinement of the relics of Saint Þorlákr, its first indigenous saint. Iceland’s relationship to its pre-Christian past is explored through the accounts of “reverse-translations” in Laxdæla saga and Egils saga Skallagrímssonar mentioned above, which are viewed as representations of attempts to reconcile Iceland’s Christian present and its pagan past. These depictions are understood

\(^{46}\) Sverrir Jakobsson, “Heaven is a Place on Earth: Church and Sacred Space in 13th Century Iceland,” Scandinavian Studies 82, no.1 (Spring 2010): 1–20 at 18.
through the museum practice of *deaccessioning*, in which an object is formally removed from the collection, and it is argued that the relocation of the pagan dead represents the desire of medieval Icelandic authors to create distance from the pre-Christian past. Furthermore, it is suggested that the different types of reburial sites described in these incidents are indicative of nuanced attitudes towards the pre-Christian past represented through the proximity to the dead.

Óláf Haraldsson, later known as Óláf inn helgi “the Holy,” the eternal king of Norway and first indigenous Norwegian saint, was born in approximately 995. An interesting tale concerning his birth is recorded in both Latin and Old Icelandic versions, including an account in the well-known Flateyjarbók. The story relates that a man named Hrani was visited in a dream by the legendary king Óláf Geirstaðaálfr, who at this time was being falsely worshiped by his former subjects. The dream-king instructs Hrani to break into his burial mound and remove a large gold ring, a belt and a knife from the corpse inside, which he must decapitate before leaving. He is then to seek and find a woman named Ásta Guðbrandsdóttir, who is in labour, and to place the belt around her, which would allow her to give birth. Óláf Geirstaðaálfr further directs Hrani to present the child, Óláf Haraldsson, with the ring and the knife and to pledge his service to him. As Alison Margret Klevnäs observes,

This is a story about claiming legitimacy from the past... Geirstaðaálfr and Haraldsson are not blood relations, so the bequeathing of heirlooms creates a mythical kinship between them. This fictive genealogy conveys status on Haraldsson, but the story also emphasizes personal qualities associated with the dead ruler. There is a strong implication that Geirstaðaálfr’s desirable traits are transferred to the new king.

While this account of King Óláf’s birth may illustrate the need to claim legitimacy and continuity from the pre-Christian past, his transformation from king to saint speaks to a desire to establish a connection to the Christian past, which was both foreign and new in Norway at the time of King Óláf’s death. As the objects from the grave of Óláf Geirstaðaálfr may have transferred the power of rulership from pagan to Christian king, the

---

49 Anne Heinrichs et al., eds., Olafs saga hins helga. Die „Legendarische Saga” über Olaf den Heiligen (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1982), 32.
50 Heinrichs, Olafs saga hins helga, 32–34.
51 Heinrichs, Olafs saga hins helga, 32–34.
52 Heinrichs, Olafs saga hins helga, 32–34.
53 Klevnäs, “‘Imbued with the Essence of the Owner’,” 469.
54 Klevnäs, “‘Imbued with the Essence of the Owner’,” 468.
establishment of Saint Óláfr’s cult hearkens to the Christian past and the role of the saints within it. In establishing his cult, Saint Óláfr’s remains become relics, and as a result they form part of a tradition of veneration stretching back to Late Antiquity and practiced throughout European Christendom.55

This chapter investigates the role of Saint Óláfr’s holy relics in establishing the place of Norway within the shared Christian past of medieval Europe through the Cult of the Saints. By analysing the events surrounding the discovery, translation and enshrinement of his remains described in Óláfs saga helga, Óláfs sögu ins helga inni sérstóku and the skaldic poems Glaðognskviða, Eríindrápa Óláfs helga and Geisli, it is argued that the importance of the Cult of the Saints in medieval religious culture allows Norway to inherit the collective Christian past through the veneration of Saint Óláfr’s relics depicted in these narratives. This is approached through the practice of accessioning, the museum process by which an object is officially documented as part of a collection. Saint Óláfr is accessioned into the Cult of the Saints through the veneration of his relics which represents him, and by extension Norway, alongside the varying times and places which make up the collective Christian past. The medieval Church is viewed conceptually through Michel Foucault’s heterotopia, a space which, like a museum, collects and juxtaposes places and times that may otherwise be regarded as incompatible.56

As will be discussed more thoroughly below, the veneration of the holy dead caused a shift in the definition of medieval sacred space.57 The Cult of the Saints places the holy dead at the centre of the heterotopic church, paralleling the movement of the cemetery, a highly heterotopic space, from the periphery to the centre of medieval European society. An examination of texts depicting Saint Óláfr’s relics demonstrates the pivotal role played by the Cult of the Saints in asserting Norway’s place within the broader Christian past, facilitating the movement of Norway from the fringes of Christian civilization into European society. Further consideration is given to depictions of Saint Óláfr’s shrine, and to the role of the reliquary in interpreting sanctity. The depictions of these sacred objects further serve to represent Saint Óláfr with the necessary furnishings of a European saint.

56 Foucault, “Different Spaces,” 181.
FROM KING TO SAINT: RELICS AND THE ACCESSIONING OF THE CHRISTIAN PAST

As collecting institutions, the museum and the medieval church derive their prestige in part from the objects they house. Like the works of art and ancient artefacts which cause crowds to flock to modern museums, the presence of holy relics bestowed reverence upon the churches that contained them through their supernatural connection to God.\(^{58}\) Surviving church inventories record the at times extensive lists of relics held within their treasuries in a manner similar to museum catalogues; for example, the 1293 inventory of the abbey of St.-Pierre-le-Vif in Sens, France, organizes its relics hierarchically, beginning with Christ and the Virgin Mary before listing universal and finally local saints, while providing explicit details about the provenance of the relics where possible.\(^{59}\) In Norway, the 1517 inventory from the Stavanger Cathedral presents a similar record, which includes the blood of Saint Óláfr listed alongside relics of Christ, the early martyrs such as Saint Stephen and Saint Clement, and other European saints like Saint Swithun and Saint Willehad.\(^{60}\) The order in which the relics are catalogued is also intriguing: the blood of Saint Óláfr is documented amongst relics from universal saints such as Saint Paul the Apostle and Saint Mark the Evangelist, which may serve to represent him as deserving of the same kind of recognition afforded to major saints.\(^{61}\) Inventories such as these highlight the shared capability of the medieval church and the museum to house objects from temporally and geographically diverse pasts.

Bartlett notes that a relic was “a token of power, a sign of the faith and a pointer to the resurrection,” and the miracles worked through them were taken as an indication of the saint’s residence in God’s court.\(^{62}\) Though there had been missionary presence in Scandinavia as early as the 8\(^{th}\) century, Norway’s official acceptance of Christianity in the late 10\(^{th}\) century was the product of the adoption of this hierarchical and politically advantageous religion by the ruling elite, and it is perhaps then unsurprising that Saint Óláfr himself comes from this demographic.\(^{63}\) Norway was a relative newcomer to Christianity at the time of King Óláfr’s

\(^{58}\) Madigan, *Medieval Christianity: A New History*, 323.


\(^{60}\) Torstein Jørgensen and Gastone Saletnich, “Let Us Open St. Swithun’s Shrine: The Treasure of Relics in the Cathedral of Stavanger,” *Letters to the Pope: Norwegian Relations to the Holy See in the Late Middle Ages* (Stavanger: Misjonshøgskolens Forlag, 1999), 101–133.

\(^{61}\) Jørgensen and Saletnich, “Let Us Open St. Swithun’s Shrine,” 101–133.


death, and having one of its own represented among God’s saintly host may have been advantageous for establishing a Christian identity. As a ruler who died a violent death, having been king of Norway from 1015 until his death – or martyrdom – at the Battle of Stiklarstaðir in 1030, Saint Óláfr is one of a type of saint that would emerge as a defining feature of Christianity in both northern and eastern Europe.  

Among the texts that describe the events of King Óláfr’s life, death and sainthood is Óláfs saga helga, the longest saga in the Heimskringla compilation. The narrative devotes a significant amount of attention to the safekeeping and transportation of Óláfr’s corpse, culminating in his initial burial in a sand dune which would later become the location of Kristkirkja. The sanctity of Saint Óláfr’s body is made immediately apparent following his death:

Þórir hundr gekk þar til, er var lík Óláfs konungs…Ok er hann þerrði blóð af andlitinu, þá sagði hann svá síðan, at andlit konungsins var svá fagrt, at roði var í kinnum, sem þá at hann svæfi, en miklu bjartara en áðr var, meðan hann lifði. Þá kom blóð konungsins á hönd þóri ok ran upp á greipina, þar er hann hafði sár fengit, ok þurfti um þat sár eigi umband þaðan í frá, svá grøri þat skjótt.

(Þórir hundr went to where King Óláfr’s body was…And when he was wiping the blood off his face, then he said this afterwards that the king’s face was so beautiful, that there was a flush on his cheeks as if he was asleep, and much brighter than before when he was alive. Then the king’s blood got onto Þórir’s hand and ran up between his thumb and fingers, where he had previously been wounded, and he needed no bandage after that, it healed so quickly.)

Óláfr’s body bears the recognizable qualities of an incorrupt corpse – a rare gift and a clear indication of sainthood – and the healing power of his blood serves as the new saint’s first miracle. Concealing the king’s remains becomes a matter of urgency, and the farmer Þórgils and his son Grímr are described as “mjðk hugsjúkir” (“very distressed”) concerning the

---

64 Bartlett, Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?, 53.
67 Bjarni, Óláfs saga helga, 387.
68 Snorri, Heimskringla Volume II, 258.
safekeeping of the corpse. This is particularly necessary as there are those who harbour ill intentions towards the body and its miraculous powers, which may serve to rally those loyal to the king: “þeir heyrðu þær ræður bonda, at þat ráð myndi til liggja, ef lik konungs fyndisk, at brenna þat eða flytja út á sæ ok søkkva niðr” (“they heard the farmers’ talk of it being the best thing to do, if the king’s body was found, to burn it or convey it out to sea and sink it down”). Þórgils and Grímr initially hide the body in an outbuilding overnight, but this location is jeopardized when a blind man happens upon the corpse and regains his sight through contact with Óláfr’s blood, causing those nearby to speculate as to what may lay inside. To ensure that the identity of the corpse remains unknown, they transport it to a clandestine site and bury it in a sand dune.

The drama and tension surrounding the initial preservation and transportation of Óláfr’s corpse represent the pivotal first step in his journey towards sanctification: the transition from king to saint. The care taken with his remains foreshadows their importance as holy relics later in the narrative, and the initial miracles associated with the healing powers of his blood form the basis for establishing his sanctity. As the political situation in Norway worsens under the rule of the Danish King Sveinn, Óláfr emerges as a symbol of Norwegian identity, which at this time was being subjugated under a new king’s legislation. Talk of Óláfr’s sanctity begins to circulate and Bishop Sigurðr, who had opposed him, flees the country for England to seek the support of King Knútr.

Bishop Grímkell is then summoned to Niðaros by Óláfr’s supporters, and he is motivated to make the journey from Upplönd in part by the stories he has heard of Óláfr’s miracles. He and Einarr þambarskelfir then receive permission from King Sveinn and his

70 Bjarni, Ólafs saga helga, 397; my translation.
71 Bjarni, Ólafs saga helga, 397.
72 Snorri, Heimskringla Volume II, 265.
73 Bjarni, Ólafs saga helga, 397.
74 Bjarni, Ólafs saga helga, 405.
75 “Sveinn konungr hafði ný log í land um margu hlutu, ok var þat eptir því sett, sem log váru í Danmork, en sum miklu frekari…Þat fylgði ok þessu, at þá skyldu danskir menn hafa svá mikinn metnað í Nóregi, at eins þeirra vitni skyði hrinda tíu Norðmanna vitnum…Sá þá aflir, at öheppliga var um råði…En þa náðisk sannmæli af morgum mǫnumni til Óláfs konungs.” Ólafs saga helga, 399–401. “King Sveinn introduced new laws into the country in respect of many things, and these were set up after the pattern of how the laws were in Denmark, though some were much harsher… Danish men were to have this much standing in Norway, that the witness of one of them was to outweigh the witness of ten Norwegians. And when this legislation was made public, then people immediately began to develop feelings of resistance and started grumbling among themselves… And now the truth about King Óláfr was realised by many people.” Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla Volume II, 267–8.
76 Bjarni, Ólafs saga helga, 402.
77 Bjarni, Ólafs saga helga, 403.
mother, Álfífó, to have King Óláfr disinterred.78 His body is exhumed over a year after his death, and Óláfr’s coffin appears to be miraculously undamaged upon its removal from the ground.79 A sweet odour is then detected around the king’s body, and as Bishop Grímkell uncovers Óláfr’s face, he discovers that, “var engan veg brugóit ásjónu hans, svá roði i kinnunum, sem þá myndi, ef hann væri nýsofnaðr”80 (“his countenance was in no way changed, such redness on his cheeks as would have been if he had just gone to sleep”).81 Álfífó remarks that, “Furðu seint fúna menn í sandinum, ekki myndi svá vera, ef hann hefði í moldu legit”82 (“Men rot amazingly slowly in the sand. It would not have been so if he had lain in earth”),83 indicating an awareness of the effect of the environment on human decomposition as well as challenging the sanctity of Óláfr’s remains. Bishop Grímkell then cuts a lock of Óláfr’s hair, which along with his moustache and fingernails are said to have continued growing after his death, and submits it to a trial by fire at the request of Álfífó.84 The hair does not burn, and it is proclaimed a holy relic and Óláfr a saint.85 The king’s body is then translated to Clementskirkja, where the coffin is set upon the high altar and draped in precious cloth.86

The museological practice of *accessioning* can be employed to understand these events as they relate to Norway’s place within the collective Christian past. Accessioning – the process by which an object is formally acquired and officially documented as part of an institutional collection – is an important museum practice and is generally accompanied by guidelines indicating what type of objects may be accessioned by an individual museum and why.87 The medieval church operates similarly: to be “accessioned” into the Cult of the Saints, certain criteria must be met both before and after death to establish a person’s

---

78 Bjarni, *Óláfs saga helga*, 404.
79 Bjarni, *Óláfs saga helga*, 404.
80 Bjarni, *Óláfs saga helga*, 404. A celebrated account in *Morkinskinna* describes the presence of a sweet odor around the relics of Saint Óláfr in 1153, when the poet Einarr Skúlason recites the poem *Geisli*, possibly commissioned by King Eysteinn Haraldsson, in Niðaros Cathedral. This is taken as a sign of Saint Óláfr’s approval. See Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Morkinskinna* (Copenhagen: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 1932), 446.
82 Bjarni, *Óláfs saga helga*, 404
84 Bjarni, *Óláfs saga helga*, 404–5.
86 Bjarni, *Óláfs saga helga*, 405.
sanctity. The act of translation is a visual demonstration of Óláfr’s transition into sainthood: his incorrupt corpse and the miracles associated with it have identified him as one of the holy dead, and the installation of the coffin in Clementskirkja makes his sanctity known and accessible. Much like the modern museum, the medieval church was open to the public, making the collection contained therein available to an audience comprised of many societal strata. Like museums, the Church had a didactic role through its curation of sacred objects, which necessitated a degree of scrutiny in determining what becomes part of the collective Christian past and what is excluded. Óláfr’s translation indicates that he possesses the qualities required to be accessioned into the collection – or cult – of the saints, and the enshrinement of his relics serves to represent his presence in Heaven to the living on Earth.

Through this representation, Óláfr’s relics function in a similar manner to musealized objects. As Crispin Paine has observed, the processes of sacralization and musealization have several features in common: both processes remove the object from the world – its functioning environment – and set it apart from others through interpretation. The burning of Óláfr’s hair serves as a test of the authenticity of his relics and thereby his sanctity, resembling the research and testing conducted on museum objects prior to or during their accessioning. Having passed the test, Óláfr’s relics are musealized through their enshrinement and installation over the high altar, the most exalted place in the church, which communicates their status as sacred objects according to the established traditions of the Cult of the Saints.

Like the objects from the mound of Óláfr Geirstaðaálf, which transferred the power and authority of rulership from the pre-Christian past to the future King Óláfr at his birth, Óláfr’s death and the veneration of his relics is a parallel process that transforms his remains into objects charged with power and meaning. As both a king and a saint, Óláfr’s relics are imbued with the authority of the Christian past through their connection to the Cult of the Saints, and this authority is subsequently conveyed upon kingship in Norway. The transferal of this authority can be seen in Óláfs sognu ins helga inni sérstoku, in which Óláfr’s successors Magnús inn góði and Haraldr harðráði are depicted as custodians of his remains: “Magnús kongungr varðveiti helgan dóm Óláfs konungs, skar hár hans ok negl…Sióan réð Haraldr konungr landi, bróðir Óláfs ins helga, ok varðveiti Haraldr konung þá helgan dóm Óláfs

konungs, svá sem Magnús konungr hafði gotr”90 (“King Magnús looked after the relics of King Óláfr, cutting his hair and nails… Afterwards Óláfr the Saint’s brother King Haraldr ruled the country, and then King Haraldr looked after the relics of King Óláfr in the same way as King Magnús had done previously”).91 The keeping of Saint Óláfr’s “prestigious relics” was a guarded privilege of the Norwegian kings, and Magnús inn góði and Haraldr hárðráði receive both religious and royal authority through the caretaking of his remains.92 Through the Cult of the Saints and its connection to the Christian past, Óláfr’s relics thus become revered objects capable of bestowing power and authority derived therefrom upon successive rulers.

The sanctity of Óláfr’s relics was made known in part through the stories of his miracles, such as those which were told to Bishop Grímkell in Upplönd. This speaks to the importance of narrative in the establishment of a saint’s cult. In Bartlett’s definition, the term “cult” refers to the special treatment required to identify the sanctity of the deceased, which aided in setting them apart from others.93 He identifies three key elements which create a cult: the recognition of the saint’s name and day, the special handling of the saint’s bodily remains, and the celebration of the saint in writing.94 After the flight of Bishop Sigurðr and inspired by the news of Óláfr’s sanctity, Bishop Grímkell travels to Kaupangr and summons Þórgils and Grímr, who inform him of “óll þau merki, er þeir hǫfðu vísir orðit, svá þat ok, hvar þeir hǫfðu komit líki konungs”95 (“all the signs that they had discovered, and also where they had taken the king’s body”).96 This aids in establishing the first element of cult through the initial spreading of Óláfr’s name and his saintly qualities. These accounts have in turn been preserved in the text of Óláfs saga helga, an example of hagiography as the third element of cult. The instant in which Bishop Grímkell is told of the miracles and whereabouts of Óláfr’s corpse therefore represents a crucial moment in the establishment of Óláfr’s sanctity, as it initiates the development of the second essential element – the special treatment of the saint’s remains, which occurs when the body is translated and enshrined in Clementskirkja. As will be discussed below, the location of relics within the space of the church reflects both the

91 Snorri, Heimskringla Volume II, 309.
93 Bartlett, Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?, 95.
94 Bartlett, Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?, 95.
95 Bjarni, Óláfs saga helga, 404.
96 Snorri, Heimskringla Volume II, 269.
changing notions of medieval sacred space and the contribution of the Cult of the Saints to Norway’s place within European Christendom.

**From Periphery to Centre: The Holy Dead and Heterotopic Space**

The church’s position as a place of access to both religious teaching and holy relics contributed to its central position in medieval society. Foucault touches on the nature of medieval concepts of space in his article entitled “Des autres espaces” (Different Spaces):

In the Middle Ages there was a hierarchized ensemble of places; sacred places and profane places, protected places and, on the contrary, places that were open and defenseless, urban places and country places (speaking of people’s real life); for cosmological theory, there were supracelestial places as opposed to the celestial place, which contrasted in turn with the terrestrial place… It was this whole hierarchy, this opposition, this interconnection of places that constituted what might be called, very roughly, medieval space – a space of localization.\(^97\)

As Anders Andrén has observed, this medieval space was constructed around a Christian cosmological worldview: society was arranged spatially and the church, as the most sacred space within this society, was thus situated at its centre.\(^98\) The church itself was constructed according to what Andrén refers to as the “Christian utopian idea,” based on the medieval conception of Heaven as it is described in the Bible:

The nave, which was usually the largest part of the church, was intended for the common laypeople… (and) also represented the human condition after the Fall of Man… In contrast, the chancel was restricted for the use of the priests, and their daily prayers and the mass…(this) represented the human hope for salvation after the sacrifice of Christ.\(^99\)

The centre of the chancel was the high altar, which as the space for the Eucharist symbolized the Holy Sepulchre, making it “furthermore a representation of the centre of the world and its celestial counterpart, the heavenly Jerusalem.”\(^100\) As a representation of Heaven on Earth, the church, and particularly the high altar, may be regarded as the point of intersection between what Foucault defines as terrestrial and celestial places. The church embodies two different types of place through this meeting, which may appear to be hierarchically incompatible

---

97 Foucault, “Different Spaces,” 176.
100 Andrén, “Landscape and Settlement as Utopian Space,” 384.
according to Foucault’s conception of medieval space. Recalling the third heterotopological principle, the medieval church can be regarded as a heterotopic space through its “ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves.”

As the meeting point of Heaven and Earth, the church is both terrestrial and celestial, juxtaposing these otherwise conflicting medieval places.

The position of the holy dead within the medieval church further contributes to its heterotopic qualities. Through the translation and enshrinement of Óláfr’s relics discussed above, his remains are moved from their peripheral gravesite to the holiest point in the church, and therefore in society as a whole, and the Cult of the Saints into which he has been accessioned permits him to exist among the living and for the living to interact with him. This facilitates the existence of the saint’s past within the present and creates an intimacy with the dead which may in other circumstances be deemed inappropriate, as the normal place of the dead was in the cemetery. Foucault, concerned with modern concepts of space, notes that the highly heterotopic cemetery was placed in the heart of the community, next to or within the church space, until the end of the 18th century, and that, “it was in the (19th) century…that people began putting cemeteries at the edge of cities…It was thought that the dead brought illness to the living, and that the presence and proximity of the dead right next to the houses, right next to the church…was responsible for the propagation of death itself.”

The 19th century relocation of the cemetery to the periphery of the community was not an innovation. The graves of the Roman Martyrs around which the Cult of the Saints first began were in fact located outside of the city walls. This location was deliberate: the dead were considered “antithetical to the public life of the living city,” and it was the beginning of the Cult of the Saints that breached these established boundaries through the “digging up, the moving, the dismemberment – quite apart from much avid touching and kissing – of the bones of the dead, and, frequently, the placing of these in areas from which the dead had once been excluded.” The medieval conception of space, then, has at its apex the heterotopic church, a “different space” wherein the holy dead exist among and interact with the living. Changes in “social necrogeography” that occurred alongside the creation of European Christendom thus further designate the church as a heterotopic space: the holy dead, no longer held as sources of pollution, were now rather the loci of sanctity necessary for maintaining a Christian

---

101 Foucault, “Different Spaces,” 181.
103 Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 4.
104 Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 4.
community “with a new communal purpose: to await the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”

The installation of Óláfr’s coffin upon the high altar of Clementskirkja exemplifies these changes. The movement of the remains from their initial burial place in a sand dune on the shore – a highly peripheral space – onto the high altar has relocated Saint Óláfr to the centre of sacred space, moving the holy dead into the centre of Norwegian Christian society and transforming Saint Óláfr’s corpse from terrestrial remains into celestial relics. Hence, the holy dead exist at the heart of this space, one in which a select group of human remains are elevated above the mundane through their enshrinement as a necessary component of cult. This further establishes the church as a heterotopia, as the Cult of the Saints allows the church to exist both in terrestrial and celestial space.

In the wake of Saint Óláfr’s enshrinement at Clementskirkja, a miraculous healing spring appears in the sand dune where the king was initially buried. The spring was enclosed, and a chapel was built at the site, its altar over what was once Óláfr’s burial place. Óláfs saga helga indicates that Kristkirkja was subsequently built on that spot, and that Archbishop Eysteinn maintained the position of the high altar in this new church. The construction of this church at the peripheral location of Saint Óláfr’s initial burial site illustrates the capacity of the holy dead to convert the terrestrial to the celestial within the Foucauldian conception of the medieval space. While the translation of Saint Óláfr’s corpse represents the movement from periphery to centre, and the transformation of terrestrial remains to celestial relics, the construction of a church at the site of Saint Óláfr’s burial indicates that the site itself functioned in many ways like a relic. Bartlett notes that materials and substances which came into contact with a saint’s corpse or tomb could absorb some of their power and become contact relics. In particular, he refers to the healing properties of the water used to wash the corpse of Saint Cuthbert, and the dust and water from the tomb of

---

106 See for example the depiction in *Landnámabók* of the burial of Auðr djúpúðga “The Deep-Minded” Ketilsdóttir on the seashore at the high-water mark. The account states that Auðr wished to be buried in this location because she was baptized and did not want to lie in unconsecrated earth, suggesting that burial in the liminal space of the shore, which is neither earth nor sea, could prevent this. See *Landnámabók*, Íslenzk Fornrit 1, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritarfélag, 1986), 146–7.
109 Bjarni, *Óláfs saga helga*, 405.
110 Bjarni, *Óláfs saga helga*, 405.
111 Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 244.
Saint Martin, which cured the diseases of those who consumed them. The spring which formed at the site of Saint Óláfr’s burial appears to have acquired healing powers through contact with his corpse, as, “fengu menn bót meina sinna aft því vatn” (“people got cures for their ailments from this water”).

The supernatural nature of the spring implies that the burial site of Saint Óláfr was conceptualized as part of the celestial space before the construction of the church. The notion that things other than human remains, including water, which have come into contact with a saint could be imbued with their healing powers is evident in the New Testament (Acts 19:11–12), allowing for devotion to a saint without the presence of their remains. This suggests that contact with a saint’s body can determine the holy nature of a place. Much like Clementskirkja as the location of Saint Óláfr’s shrine, Kristkirkja is heterotopic, as its position at the burial site of Saint Óláfr connects it both to his own time and to the origin of the Cult of the Saints. The church’s construction on the peripheral site of Óláfr’s grave hearkens to the genesis of the Cult of the Saints at the tombs of the Roman Martyrs, which were located on the borders of late antique society. Like the veneration of these tombs, the construction of Kristkirkja serves to “join Heaven and Earth at the grave of a dead human being,” creating a “credible, sacred, celestial, and temporal connection with both humanity and divinity.”

FROM REMAINS TO RELICS: REPRESENTATION AND THE ROLE OF THE RELIQUARY

For a saint to be recognized as such, the connection between their humanity – their tangible remains venerated as relics – and their divinity needed to be communicated to their audience. As Cynthia Hahn observes, “shrines used elements common to their genre, that is, visual elements that could be readily understood as significant because they were recognizable…all elements of a shrine, including location and spatial organization, were carefully orchestrated for their effect upon the viewer.” From a modern perspective, holy relics perform based on audience recognition, as they are indistinguishable from other human

---

113 Bjarni, *Óláfs saga helga*, 405.
118 Sverrir, “Heaven is a Place on Earth,” 18.
remains without an audience to identify their holiness.⁴ From a medieval perspective, however, the grace of God through which the living saint acted had remained within these relics after death, and this required both reverence and recognition in the form of what Peter Brown has termed reverentia: “an etiquette towards the supernatural.”⁵ Saints’ shrines were thus “conceived, built, and ornamented as glorious sites where it could be seen that heaven touched earth and that the saints supported and glorified the Universal Church made up of its living members.”⁶ By enclosing holy relics within precious containers, reliquaries perform the holy nature of their contents in a manner understood by their intended audience, thereby acting as mediators between the living and the holy dead.⁷

The central role of the reliquary within the heterotopic space of the church is emphasized by the description of Saint Óláfr’s shrine in the skaldic poems Glælognskviða, Erfidrápa Óláfs helga, and Geisli, and in the prose texts Óláfs saga helga, and Óláfs sögu ins helga inni sérstöoku. Turning first to the poetry, Glælognskviða by Þórarinn loftunga and Erfidrápa Óláfs helga by Sigvatr Þórðarson both describe the shrine of Saint Óláfr on the high altar in Clementskirkja. The poems are preserved in Óláfs saga helga and Óláfs sögu ins helga inni sérstöoku and dated to c.1031 and c.1040 respectively, making them roughly contemporaneous with the display of the shrine.¹²⁴ The earlier of the two poems, Glælognskviða, refers to the resting place of Saint Óláfr within the church as a “borðveggs sæing,” literally a “wooden-board bed.”¹²⁵ The later poem, Erfidrápa Óláfs helga, refers to Saint Óláfr’s coffin as a “gollit skrín,” a “golden shrine,” which according to Øystein Ekroll suggests that the original coffin had at some point been covered with gold.¹²⁶ In addition, the poem Geisli, almost certainly composed in 1153 by Einarr Skúlason, describes Óláfr’s shrine

---
⁵ Hahn, “What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?” 290–1; Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 119; Madigan, Medieval Christianity: A New History, 324.
as “skreytta…boli drekka” (“ornamented…with the dwelling of the dragon”), wherein “boli drekka” is a kenning for gold. If Ekroll’s suggestion is correct, the original coffin was judged fit to serve as a shrine, possibly indicating that it had become a contact relic.

The progression from the “borðveggs sæing” draped with luxurious textiles to the “gollit skrín” described by Sigvatr Þórðarson indicates an awareness of the conventions of display developed within the Cult of the Saints. The bones of the Roman Martyrs were believed to be “more valuable…than precious stones and finer than refined gold,” and this sentiment received physical manifestation in the Middle Ages in the shrines made from those precious materials. The costly and awe-inspiring enclosures for these relics were intended to communicate the sanctity and spiritual value of their contents. As Hahn states, the role of the reliquary was to “‘represent’ the relic as powerful, holy and sacred, part of the larger institution of the Church,” and an integral part of this representation involved “a glittering container covered with gems (meaningful even in its very materials).” The attestation in Erfidrápa Óláf helga that Saint Óláfr’s coffin was now a “gollit skrín” suggests that Saint Óláfr’s sanctity was now interpreted through the enclosure of his relics within a precious shrine.

According to Óláf sogni ins helga inni sérstóku, the relics of Saint Óláfr were at some point translated to Kristkirkja. This forward-and-back movement speaks to the power of the holy dead in determining the hierarchy of the medieval space, as the return of the remains to their initial resting place further transforms the terrestrial periphery into the celestial centre. Subsequently, a more elaborate shrine was constructed for Saint Óláfr’s relics, described in detail in Óláf sogni ins helga inni sérstóku. Authorship of the saga is generally attributed to Snorri Sturluson, who would have likely seen Saint Óláfr’s shrine when he spent time in the

---

130 See Bartlett, Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?, 244-250. There is evidence to suggest that the original coffin in which Óláfr was buried became part of the second shrine addressed below, further suggesting that it was considered a contact relic. See Ekroll, “The Octagonal Shrine Chapel of St Olav at Nidaros Cathedral,” 80.
134 The shrine is also described in detail in Magnus saga konungs. As the descriptions are nearly identical and both texts are included in Heimskringla, only the Óláf sogni ins helga inni sérstóku text is quoted here.
court of Skúli jarl and King Hákon Hákonarson at Trondheim during his visit to Norway in the winter of 1219-1220. The description found in the saga is therefore generally believed to be a reliable account of the shrine as it was in the early 13th century.

The amount of detail afforded to the depiction of the shrine is striking: once Magnús has become king of Norway, he

lét gera skrín ok búu gulli ok silfri ok steinum. Er skrín þat svá gört bæði at mikilleik ok at qððrum vexti sem líkkista, en svalir undir niðri, en yfit uppi vét vaxit sem ræfr ok þar af upp hófuð ok burst. Eru á véttuinu lamar á bak, en hespur fyrir ok þar læst með lukli. Síðan lét Magnús konungur leggja í skrín þat helgan dóm Óláfs konungs.

(had a shrine made and adorned with gold and silver and jewels. This shrine is made in both size and other aspects of shape like a coffin, but with lines of pillars underneath and up on top a lid shaped like a roof and rising up from it figureheads and a ridge. On the lid there are hinges at the back and hasps at the front, and these are locked with a key. After that King Magnús had the relics of King Óláfr placed in the shrine.)

Aside from its costly decoration, perhaps the most striking attribute of the shrine is the shape of its lid. Its depiction as “vaxit sem ræfr,” (“in the shape of a roof”), recalls the European

---

136 Ekroll, “The Octagonal Shrine Chapel of St Olav at Nidaros Cathedral,” 79.
137 The text indicates that the shrine was commissioned by Magnús Olafsson góði (reigned 1035-1045), who lived well before the Limoges reliquaries discussed below were imported into Scandinavia. Øystein Ekroll, however, notes that if this shrine was indeed commissioned by Magnús góði, some two hundred years before the composition of the text, it would be roughly contemporaneous with the initial shrine in Clementskirkja and therefore not fitting with the chronology of the narrative. He therefore suggests that the Magnús mentioned in this account may instead be Magnús Erlingsson (reigned 1161–1184), as the construction of such a large and impressive shrine would have been beneficial for establishing and enhancing both his own prestige and that of his dynasty. This is not to suggest that house-shaped reliquaries were completely unknown in Norway before they were imported from the Continent, especially as several Insular examples made their way into Scandinavia during the Viking Age. See Ekroll, “The Octagonal Shrine Chapel of St Olav at Nidaros Cathedral,” 79–82.
138 The term líkkista is first attested in the text of Ólafs saga helga and continues to be used in hagiographic sagas and royal biography for the burial vessels of the religious and royal elite. It is also attested in the text of Mírmanns saga, a chivalric saga believed to have been composed in the 14th century, where it refers to the coffin that Mírmann instructs his foster-father King Clovis I to make for him. The term’s connection in Mírmanns saga to early medieval French royal burial customs may indicate an association of líkkista with a European royal identity. See A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose, s.v. “líkkista”; Desmond Slay, ed., *Mírmanns saga*, Editiones Arnamagnæae Series A, vol. 17 (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag, 1997), 57; Ralph O’Connor, trans. “Mírmann’s Saga,” *Icelandic Histories and Romances*, 2nd revised ed. (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd., 2004), 156–8.
139 Bjarni, Óláfs sǫgu ins helga inni sérstuðku, 441.
house-shaped reliquaries which mimicked the shape of a church, emphasizing the importance of the relics within that space. Similar “scinia auro et argento composita, ossibus mortuorum plena” are known throughout medieval Europe, from the early Insular house shaped shrines to the elaborate stone tomb-shrine of St. Peter Martyr in Sant’Eustorgio, Milan. The gilt and enamel châsse reliquaries produced in Cologne, Germany and Limoges, France, the latter of which were exported throughout Europe beginning in the 12th century, are perhaps the best known examples given their proliferation throughout Christendom. As relics themselves exist as mediators between Heaven and Earth through the ability of the Saint acting through them to intercede on behalf of the living, it seems fitting that they are both preserved and displayed within a representation of the space in which this would occur.

The proliferation of châsses manufactured in Limoges extended to Scandinavia, as they began to be imported at the end of the 12th century, suggesting that this Continental form would have been known during the time this depiction was written. Saint Óláfr’s shrine has not survived, rendering it impossible to compare the genuine artefact with Snorri’s description; however, Thor Kielland has posited that surviving shrines from Norway, Iceland and Sweden are in fact based closely on the shrine of Saint Óláfr, and may represent copies or miniaturizations of the shrine. Among these surviving shrines is the reliquary from the

---


147 Thor Kielland, Norsk guldsmedkunst i middelalderen (Oslo: Steenske Forlag, 1927), 49ff.
Church of Saint Thomas at Filefjell, Norway (Figure 1). It bears a striking resemblance to the shrine described in the saga: its lid is shaped like a roof, with a ridge and figureheads rising up from either end, and the chamber of the reliquary rests atop an arcade of pillars. This shrine suggests a blending of European and Scandinavian artistic styles: the ubiquitous house-shaped casket is adorned with gilt plates depicting biblical scenes and events from the life of Saint Thomas Beckett in a style resembling the repoussé metalwork produced in 13th century Cologne, while the ridge and animal-style figureheads are distinctly Scandinavian.

The description of Saint Óláfr’s second shrine appears to depict the integration of recognizable European and Scandinavian forms. As noted above, the Cult of the Saints experienced a rapid and dramatic expansion in Europe beginning in the 11th century, when, “(f)or the first time, large numbers of lives of saints were illustrated in painted manuscripts, on shrines and altars, and on church doors.” The shrine’s depiction as house-shaped suggests that the role of this shape in signifying sanctity was understood in Scandinavia at the time, while the addition of figureheads introduces a recognizably Scandinavian element to this otherwise European style. These figureheads further serve to connect the form of the shrine to the uniquely Scandinavian stave church, thereby referencing a type of church architecture familiar to the local community. The house-shaped shrine for Saint Óláfr serves to represent the saint in a manner which can be understood by all strata of its local Norwegian

---

148 Ekroll, “The Octagonal Shrine Chapel of St Olav at Nidaros Cathedral,” 82.
149 Abou-El-Haj, The Medieval Cult of Saints, 1.
audience, as the synthesis of European and Scandinavian forms characterizes Saint Óláfr as Norway’s European saint.

This blending of forms recalls other representations employed by the medieval church in Scandinavia. For example, the painted choir ceiling of the Ål Stave Church, now preserved in the Kulturhistorisk Museum in Oslo, dates from the mid-13th century. It was modeled after European stone churches and is decorated with biblical scenes in accordance with conventions established by foreign theologians. As was common throughout Europe in the Middle Ages, biblical figures are represented as local, with light skin and characteristically Scandinavian hairstyles and beards. Like Saint Óláfr’s shrine, which may have integrated the form of the European châsse reliquary with recognizably Scandinavian artistic motifs, the Ål murals further demonstrate the heterotopic nature of the medieval church. Both shrine and ceiling represent Scandinavia as part of a greater Christian whole within a space which “has the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves.”

That the shrine is at once Norwegian, European and Christian echoes the ability of the heterotopic church space to juxtapose times and places which may otherwise be in conflict. Alison Luchs and Philippe Verdier propose that the gabled shape of châsse reliquaries resembles “both a sarcophagus and a house or a church, (and) together with the rich decoration has suggested a dual identity as tomb and paradisiacal dwelling in Heavenly Jerusalem.” Fittingly, this “dual identity,” in which both tomb and heavenly paradise coexist within the same space, mirrors the heterotopic nature of the church itself, where the local community, the saint, and the Christian past exist simultaneously. In this way, Saint Óláfr’s shrine connects Norwegian identity and European Christendom through the Cult of the Saints and its origins at the tombs of the Roman Martyrs. It therefore exists at the nucleus of the heterotopic Kristkirkja and can be viewed as a kind of meta-heterotopia, encapsulating and condensing the interpretation of the Christian past conveyed by the larger church space around the very things – human remains – which operate at its centre.

150 “Ål Stave Church Ceiling,” exhibition label, Forvandling, Kulturhistorisk museum, Oslo, Norway.
151 “Ål Stave Church Ceiling,” exhibition label, Forvandling, Kulturhistorisk museum, Oslo, Norway.
152 Foucault, “Different Spaces,” 181.
CONCLUSION

Through the establishment of the sanctity of his remains, their enshrinement as holy relics within the heterotopic medieval church, and the combination of Scandinavian and European artistic conventions used to construct his reliquary, Saint Óláfr is represented as both a Norwegian and European saint within the shared past of Christianity. The translation of Saint Óláfr’s body from its peripheral burial site to a central place of honour within the church facilitates a transformation from terrestrial remains to celestial relics, as the movement from periphery to centre in turn reflects the movement of Norway into European society made possible by Christianity. As the link between Heaven and Earth, Saint Óláfr represents the connection between the earthly location of the church and its place within a more celestial geography. By extension, Saint Óláfr embodies the relationship between the Christian past of the scriptures taught within the space, the development of the Cult of the Saints, and through hagiographies such as those discussed here, the medieval time of writing.

The church as a heterotopia constructed around the holy dead can be referred to in Foucauldian terms as a space of representation: the space inherent between an object and the ways of interpreting them.¹⁵⁴ Like museums, heterotopic medieval churches “do not only display objects, but display the ways in which objects are related to words, names, and concepts: they display systems of representation.”¹⁵⁵ The church constructs a system of representation similar to that of a museum, in which the past and the present are connected and represented through objects, in this case the relics of holy dead. Reliquaries, as display cases for these relics, have a crucial function within this system, employing specific forms, materials and iconographies to represent their contents as the centre of the hierarchical medieval space. For Saint Óláfr as an indigenous Norwegian saint, the prose texts of Óláfs saga helga, Óláfs sǫgu ins helga inni sérstøku and the skaldic poems Glælognskviða, Erfídrápa Óláfs helga and Geisli considered above represent him both as an integral figure within Scandinavian history and an heir to the European Christian past through the veneration of his relics.

Chapter 2: Incompatible Pasts? Proximity to the Dead and the Negotiation of Icelandic Cultural Identity

Four years after the death of Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson of Skálaholt (d. 1193), a priest named Þorvaldr had a dream. Bishop Þorlákr appeared to him and informed him of when the harsh winter would cease, and further advised, "‘at menn leiti graptar mýns at sumri ok sé líkami minn ór jörðu tekinn, ok ef nökkur þykkja heilagleiks merki at verða þá geri menn um áheit ok dags<hal> við mik sem líkar’"\(^{156}\) (‘that men seek my grave in the summer and see that my body is taken out of the earth, and if there seems to anyone to be signs of holiness there then men shall do as pleases them concerning my invocation and the keeping of my day’\(^{157}\)). This occurs in the wake of series of miracles in connection with the deceased bishop, causing the leading men in Iceland to agree that Bishop Þorlákr’s remains should be exhumed. On July 20\(^{th}\), 1198, his relics were translated to the cathedral at Skálaholt and enshrined above its high altar.\(^{158}\)

In addition to the enshrinement of relics within costly reliquaries addressed above, the placement of such shrines near the altar, or the burial of saint’s bones beneath it, was an important element of the special treatment of the dead required by the Cult of the Saints. Though the burial of any person less holy than a saint would be irreconcilable with these conventions, this nevertheless occurs twice within the Old Norse literary corpus, where the bones of the pagan dead are discovered in this most exalted location. This chapter will examine the incidents surrounding the discovery and removal of the pre-Christian dead depicted in Laxdæla saga and Egils saga in relation to the role of translation in negotiating cultural identity and dealing with the pre-Christian past in medieval Iceland. Taking the depiction of Saint Þorlákr’s translation and enshrinement as a reference point, this chapter will further consider the role of the dead in the designation of the church as a heterotopia, particularly through further engagement with Foucault’s conception of the museum as a heterotopic space. These depictions of the removal of the pre-Christian dead are viewed through the museological practice of deaccessioning: the formal process undertaken to remove an object from a museum’s collection. A close examination of both accounts will...

\(^{156}\) Ásdís Egilsdóttir, ed., Þorláks saga byskups í elztu, Biskupa sögur II, Íslensk Fornrit 16, (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritarfélág, 2002), 85.

\(^{157}\) Ármann Jakobsson and David Clark, trans., The Saga of Bishop Thorlak – Þorláks saga biskups (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 2013), 23.

\(^{158}\) Ármann and Clark, The Saga of Bishop Thorlak – Þorláks saga biskups, vii; Þorláks saga byskups í elztu, 99.
elucidate the relationship to the past represented through interactions with and proximity to the unholy dead.

“A GLORIOUS GEMSTONE OF POWER BEFORE GOD”: RECOGNIZING THE HOLY IN THE RELICS OF SAINT ÞORLÁKR

As has been observed, the translation of Saint Þorlákr’s relics marked not only an important moment in the establishment of his cult, but also the beginning of indigenous Icelandic hagiographic literature.\(^\text{159}\) Though the oldest manuscripts of \textit{Þorláks saga biskups} date to the mid-14\textsuperscript{th} century, making them significantly younger than the event of his translation, the text of the A-version is generally accepted to have been originally composed in the early 13\textsuperscript{th} century.\(^\text{160}\) The swift and steady flow of hagiographic writings dedicated to Saint Þorlákr which followed the event of his translation exemplifies the intimate relationship between the holy dead and the production of religious literature, which, as discussed above, play a symbiotic role in the promotion of a saint’s name and day in Bartlett’s tripartite definition of ‘cult’.\(^\text{161}\)

The narrative presented in \textit{Þorláks saga biskups} resembles that of \textit{Óláfs saga helga} in several ways: Þorlákr is part of the upper registers of Icelandic society, his corpse remains incorrupt after his death, and his relics are enshrined above the high altar in a costly reliquary. The description of the shrine found in \textit{Páls saga biskups} relates that it “varð svá mjökk vandat at þat bar eigi minna af þörum skrinum, þeim er á Íslandi várú, um fegrð en um vóxt, ok var þat betr en þriggja álna, en ekki var annat betr en álmar langt, þeira er þá váru á Íslandi.”\(^\text{162}\) (“was so well made that it was not outmatched in beauty or in size by any other shrines then in Iceland; it was longer than three ells and there was not another shrine in Iceland at that time that was larger.”)\(^\text{163}\) The translation and display of Saint Þorlákr’s relics in Skálaholt cathedral contributes to the function of the church as a heterotopic space, as their presence allowed both Heaven and Earth to exist within the church. This is further reinforced by the position of the

---


\(^{160}\) Ármann and Clark, \textit{The Saga of Bishop Thorlak – Þorláks saga biskups}, vii. The A-version of \textit{Þorláks saga biskups} is used here in both Old Icelandic and English translation.


\(^{163}\) Author’s translation, lit.: “was so well prepared that it bore no less than other shrines, of those which were in Iceland, both in beauty and size, and was it better than three ells, but not was another better than [that] length of ells, of those which were then in Iceland.”
reliquary over the high altar in the customary location of a church’s primary shrine.\textsuperscript{164} As Bartlett observes, the placement of holy relics either in a crypt beneath the main altar, or in a shrine directly to the east of it, served to mark them out: “(t)he orientation of Christian churches meant that the west end was less holy and freer of access, so movement towards the east end was movement towards the more holy and less accessible. Transit past the main altar, or under it, intensified this sense of approach to a numinous and extraordinary site.”\textsuperscript{165} The deliberate placement of relics in an especially sacred location further highlights their importance in the cultural construction of a heterotopic space which facilitates the intersection of terrestrial and celestial places.

Though these translations result in the inclusion of Iceland in the collective Christian past, the circumstances leading up to these events in the texts analysed here display important differences. In \textit{Óláfs saga helga}, Saint Óláfr himself plays an arguably passive role in his translation: while his remains often have a miraculous effect on those who come into contact with or proximity to them, Óláfr does not have any direct posthumous communication with the living in the narratives examined in Chapter 1. The discovery of his sanctity occurs largely through the spread of stories about his miracles among his followers. Þorlákr, however, makes several post-mortem appearances in the dreams of the surviving community, perhaps most notably in the dream of the priest Þorvaldr mentioned above.\textsuperscript{166} What is striking about this account is that Þorlákr is asking posthumously for the recognition of his own sanctity, as he suggests directly that his remains be exhumed and observed for traces of holiness. Þorlákr can thus be viewed here as advocating for the place of Iceland within European Christendom through the establishment of his sainthood and Iceland’s participation in the Cult of the Saints.

Kirsten Wolf notes that by end of the 12\textsuperscript{th} century, several of the other provinces within the Niðaros diocese had established their local saints, and Iceland’s lack of such a patron appears to have been a source of anxiety.\textsuperscript{167} She views the establishment of Þorlákr’s sanctity as a consequence of the unsuccessful promotion of King Óláfr Tryggvasson as Iceland’s national saint: he was likely seen as an inappropriate choice by the local population due to the lack of miracles and relics attributed to him, in addition to him not being Icelandic.

\textsuperscript{165} Bartlett, \textit{Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?}, 253.
\textsuperscript{166} Ármann and Clark, \textit{Þorláks saga byskups in elza}, 84–5.
Furthermore, national pride as well as financial considerations may have led to the establishment of Saint Þorlákr’s cult, as a portion of the funds that left the country in the form of vows to other saints, particularly Saint Óláfr, could instead be allocated to a local and native saint. Establishing the sainthood of Saint Þorlákr therefore allowed Icelanders, like Norwegians, to take part in and benefit from the Cult of the Saints.

Through the discovery, translation and enshrinement of Saint Þorlákr, the medieval Icelandic church made its first acquisition of indigenous relics, if not relics in general. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson observes that the earliest churches in Iceland, those that predate the translation of Þorlákr, may not have had relics at all: they are not mentioned in the church laws from 1118–1133, nor in the 12th century Icelandic Book of Homilies, which includes the Stave Church Homily and its description of the church and its inventory. Furthermore, Jón Viðar notes that it would be unlikely for such an inventory to exclude relics from mention, as they would have been the church’s most important possessions. This apparent lack of relics would have been particularly unusual during the Middle Ages, as the church laws established at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 required new churches or altars to be consecrated with relics. The presence of relics in Iceland became more apparent in the wake of Saint Þorlákr’s sanctification: for example, Reykholt, one of the three wealthiest churches in the country, obtained its relics eight years after the saint’s translation in 1206. While it is possible that foreign saints may have been venerated in Iceland without the presence of relics, Bartlett suggests that the creation of local saints is indicative of a deeper phase in the process of Christianization, and the possibility that Saint Þorlákr’s relics were in fact the first in Iceland would mark Iceland’s inaugural foray into the Cult of the Saints. Saint Þorlákr’s relics consequently allowed Iceland to be viewed as a full member of European Christendom, i.e., to be accessioned into the heterotopic collection of Christianity.

168 Wolf, “Pride and Politics in Late-Twelfth-Century Iceland,” 289.
170 Jón Viðar, “Distribution of relics and reliquaries in the bishopric of Hólar c. 1320,” 70.
172 Jón Viðar, “Distribution of relics and reliquaries in the bishopric of Hólar c. 1320,” 70.
Though the church functions like a museum in its collection and display of the past, the exclusivity of its collection may at first appear in opposition to Foucault’s conception of the museum as a heterotopia of time. He addresses this in his fourth heterotopic principle, in which he states that museums, “desire to contain all times, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place.” Here, Foucault refers to the concept of the universal museum: institutions that present art, artefacts and natural history from varying civilizations, times and places in close proximity to each other. The universal nature of their collections is a product of the earliest public museums, which were often born through the union of private collections and the state. As Foucault notes, museums and libraries were the products of individual taste until the end of the 17th century, and as a result the founding collections of these early institutions were highly eclectic and geographically varied expressions of the collector’s particular interests and preferences. The Enlightenment saw these collections classified, organized and displayed in an encyclopedic manner, resulting in the establishment of institutions like the British Museum and the Louvre, which persist as hallmarks of this universalist concept. While Foucault observes that the 19th century witnessed the development of the museum as place for the organization of universal collections, it is during this same period that more focused iterations of public museums began to emerge. The early 19th century saw the advent of the first museums devoted to the history of individual nations, which encouraged further specialization and resulted in the establishment of regional, local, and subject-specific museums. Though these museums have a narrower scope, they are arguably no less heterotopic: they exist both within and without time and still have the capacity to present and juxtapose objects which may seem geographically and temporally incongruous, but with a more restricted focus than Foucault imagines. The medieval Church as a heterotopia is much more in line with the targeted approach of region and subject-specific museums: it does not desire to “contain all times, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place,” but rather desires to contain these things only in relation to Christianity. While this may not

174 Foucault, “Different Spaces,” 182.
seem universal to a modern audience, it would have in the context of the medieval Christian worldview, in which all of time fell within a Christian temporal framework. The heterotopic nature of the medieval Church is therefore rooted in its ability to juxtapose the terrestrial and celestial, and to collect both foreign and local aspects of Christianity within the sacred space it created.

“Past” Away: Deaccessioning the Pre-Christian Past

Just as the museum and the church may acquire and accession objects and pasts, they may also need to remove them. The museum practices of deaccessioning and disposal, the processes by which an object for various reasons is formally removed from the institution’s keeping, are necessary for the responsible curation of the collection.181 Rarely do deaccessioning and disposal include the destruction of objects, and disposal rather refers to the transfer of ownership and removal of an object from the collection, frequently to another museum.182 This process is often conducted “to relieve the museum of objects which are not (or no longer) compatible with the rest of the collection,” particularly as museums often find themselves in possession of undocumented and irrelevant objects which have accumulated in basements and storage vaults throughout the institution’s development.183 In the capacity of the medieval church to perform as a heterotopic, museum-like space dedicated solely to the collection and representation of the Christian past, any such undocumented objects contained in the church with connections to a past that is not Christian would consequently be considered irreconcilable with the rest of the collection.

The Íslendingasögur corpus presents two incidents in which the pre-Christian dead are removed, or deaccessioned, from sacred space. In both incidents, the bones of these dead are found beneath a church, and this discovery results in their removal and relocation elsewhere. In Laxdaela saga, the appearance of a pagan seeress in the dreams of the granddaughter of Guðrún Ósvifrbsdóttir, the saga’s protagonist, gives rise to the discovery of disfigured bones beneath the floor of the church where Guðrún prays nightly, serving as the catalyst for their relocation to a remote place.184 In Egils saga, an abnormally large skeleton presumed to belong to Egill himself is found beneath what was once the altar of a church and is reburied

next to the wall of the churchyard. Like the translations of Saint Óláfr and Saint Þorlákr, these events occur in the denouement of the sagas’ action, leaving the audience with an image of the church being rid of these un-Christian bones.

The depictions of the shrines of Óláfr and Þorlákr create a literary place of access to the Cult of the Saints, and thereby to the collective culture of the Christian past, which mirrors reality. Individuals could visit these sites should they have the necessary resources, and the placement of detailed descriptions of these shrines and their locations towards the end of the narrative leaves the audience for these texts with a clear, map-like image. Through their emphasis on the translation and enshrinement of relics within the church, these depictions communicate that it is both appropriate and desirable to access the holy dead within this space. The pagan dead, representative of the pre-Christian past, are thus not compatible with this space, and their removal is compulsory. This further speaks to the Church’s function as a heterotopia of time, which “begin(s) to function fully when men are in a kind of absolute break with their traditional time.” The Church in Scandinavia begins to function at its full capacity with the loss of “traditional time,” in this case pre-Christian belief and practice, which occurred as a result of Christianization. With the indigenous Saint Þorlákr, Iceland has now claimed its place within the Christian past, rendering the pre-Christian past obsolete. The removal of the pagan dead in Laxdæla saga and Egils saga therefore expresses the importance of translation in the negotiation of religious identity, ensuring that the dead from the “traditional time” remain in the past.

Both Laxdæla saga and Egils saga are among the most well-known texts in the Íslendingasögur corpus. Their narratives are vast in scope: as family sagas, they depict events beginning in the late 9th century and conclude in the early 11th century. As mentioned above, the events with which this discussion is concerned occur near the end of each narrative, after Iceland’s official acceptance of Christianity in c.1000. Much of each narrative,
however, is set before this time, and it is important to note that both sagas were written during the 13th century within the thoroughly Christian culture of medieval Iceland. The placement of these events which depict the removal and relocation of the pre-Christian dead reinforce Iceland’s Christian identity: though the action of each narrative began in the “traditional time,” the culmination of that action is Christian.

Turning first to *Laxdæla saga*, the reverse-translation depicted therein concerns Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, the saga’s heroine and arguably one of the most memorable characters in the Íslendingasögur corpus. She figures centrally in the conflict between two of the saga’s heroes, Kjartan Óláfsson and Bolli Þorleiksson, and through her scheming eventually brings about their deaths. Following the death of her fourth husband, Þorkel Eyjólfssson, the saga reports that Guðrún became a “trúkona mikil” (“very religious woman”). In addition, she was the first woman in Iceland to learn the Psalter and stayed late praying in the church each night, often accompanied by her granddaughter, Herdís Bolladóttir.

One night, Herdís dreams that:

*a woman approached her. She wore a woven cape and a folded head-dress, and her expression was far from kindly. She said to Herdis, ‘Tell your grandmother that I care little for her company; she tosses and turns on top of me each night and pours over me tears so hot that I burn all over. I am telling you this because I prefer your company, although you have a strange air about you. All the same I could get along with you, if the distress caused me by Gudrun were not so great.’*

Herdís relates this dream to Guðrún the next day, who believes it is a “góðr fyrirburðrinn,” a “good vision.” The next morning, Guðrún has the floorboards over the place where she prays removed and the ground dug up, revealing “bein; þau váru blá ok illilig; þar fannsk ok

---

192 Kunz, “The Saga of the People of Laxardal.” 418.
kinga ok seiðstafr mikill. þóttusk menn þá vita, at þar mundi verit hafa völuleiði nǫkkut”.194 (“bones, which were blackened and horrible, along with a chest pendant and a large magician’s staff. People then decided that a prophetess must have been buried there”).195 The bones are then removed from the church and relocated to an unnamed place, “þar sem sízt var mann ve gr”196 (“there where was least in the way of people”).197

A parallel with Þorláks saga biskups is immediately apparent in the ability of the dead seeress to communicate in dreams. Recalling Þorlákr’s post-mortem entreaty for his exhumation and, ultimately, his sanctification, the appearance of the pagan seeress in Herdís’ dream results in the discovery and removal of her bones from within the space of the church. While dreams of Saint Þorlákr are interpreted as miracles, the dream vision of the seeress and her frank address to Herdís can be regarded as what Merill Kaplan terms an irruption: an occurrence in which the past bursts forth into the present, where it makes itself known and unavoidable.198 The ability of the pagan seeress to appear in Herdís’ dreams suggests that the past still has agency: as Kaplan observes, the irruption of the past disrupts temporal order, and this disruption is disturbing.199 That the appearance of the seeress was disruptive is evident in Herdís reaction, as she informs her grandmother of this strange occurrence immediately. Guðrún, as a “trúkona mikil,” understands the dream and the necessary action to take in response to it through the lens of her Christianity: in order to neutralize the agency of the past, it must be removed, and this removal can only occur through a counter-disruption.

This disruption occurs via the exhumation and relocation of the seeress’ remains, which dampens the agency of the past. This can be read as an issue of access: the interment of these remains beneath the floor of the church, a location reserved for the privilege of burial ad sanctos, is incompatible with the heterotopic church as a place which facilitates access to an exclusively Christian culture and past.200 By reburying the remains in a remote location, and importantly, in a place where people seldom went, the pagan past is no longer easily accessible, rendering it devoid of agency. After this relocation, the seeress and the pagan past that she embodies present no further irruptions – or disruptions – in the saga, reinforcing the

194 Einar Ól, Laxdæla saga, 224.
195 Kunz, “The Saga of the People of Laxardal,” 419.
196 Einar Ól, Laxdæla saga, 224.
197 My translation.
198 Merrill Kaplan, Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the Past in Four Tales in Flateyjarbók, (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2011), 16.
199 Kaplan, Thou Fearful Guest, 16–7.
200 Bartlett, Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?, 15
ability of this reverse-translation to neutralize the power of the past. As will be discussed below, this incident demonstrates the importance of Guðrún’s piety and the absolution she has received in her new Christian way of life.

Following this event, the saga relates that Guðrún “var first nunna á Íslandi ok einsetukona” ("was the first woman in Iceland to become a nun and an anchoress"). As Thomas D. Hill notes, Iceland was newly Christian at this time, and Guðrún’s devoutness would have likely attracted attention from both early 11th century Icelandic society and the saga’s 13th century audience. Guðrún’s piety towards the end of her life appears in contrast to several events in her youth, most notably her role in the downfall of the foster brothers Kjartan Óláfsson, her intended husband, and Bolli Þorleiksson, whom she marries in Kjartan’s absence. Bolli implies that Kjartan will return home from Norway with a royal bride, and Guðrún may have agreed to the marriage in part to avoid the humiliation she would face if she waited for Kjartan’s homecoming. It is heavily implied that she steals a wedding headdress given to Kjartan by Ingibjörg, the Norwegian princess he was rumoured to have been involved with, which was originally intended for her but is instead given to Hrefna, Kjartan’s new bride. This is supported by Guðrún’s comments on the propriety of the alleged theft, as she says that whoever had stolen the headdress had only taken what was rightfully theirs. This incites a feud between Kjartan and Bolli, which results first in the murder of Kjartan by Bolli at Guðrún’s behest, and later the revenge killing of Bolli by Kjartan’s relatives. After Bolli’s death, Guðrún encounters the revenge party and one of its members, Helgi Harðbeinsson, wipes Bolli’s blood from his spear onto Guðrún’s blue or black striped shawl. Guðrún responds with an enigmatic smile; later, she incites her sons to avenge their father’s murder, resulting in the death of Helgi Harðbeinsson as well.

It may therefore be no coincidence that the descriptions of both the dream vision and the seeress’ remains appear to reflect characteristics attributed to Guðrún in the events described above. In the dream, the seeress is described as “i vefjarskikkju ok faldin

---

201 Einar Ól, Laxdæla saga, 228.
202 “The Saga of the People of Laxardal,” 420.
204 Einar Ól, Laxdæla saga, 127.
205 Einar Ól, Laxdæla saga, 133–44.
206 Einar Ól, Laxdæla saga, 144.
207 Einar Ól, Laxdæla saga, 149–56.
208 Einar Ól, Laxdæla saga, 168.
headdresses from the saga: the first appears in one of Guðrún’s dreams, the casting off of which is interpreted to foretell her unhappy first marriage; the second, brought back by Kjartan, represents the unrealized love between him and Guðrún and, ultimately, the demise of both him and Bolli. As a royal gift, the latter headdress can be viewed as a symbol of authority, which is “translated” to Iceland and displaced by Guðrún’s theft. Guðrún’s involvement in the displacement of the seeress’ bones acts like a foil for her theft of the headdress, through which she may be able to atone for the terrible consequences that came from it. Furthermore, the seeress’ bones are said to be, “blá ok illilig,” (“blackened and horrible”), evoking the colour of Guðrún’s shawl which is further darkened by Bolli’s blood. This is particularly notable as the colour “blá,” meaning either blue or black, may have carried negative connotations, as it is often employed in descriptions of those with unpleasant or malignant personalities. The seeress may thus represent not only the pagan past, but also the sinful nature of Guðrún’s life before her acceptance of Christianity.

It is important to note that it is Guðrún’s pious tears that initially disturb the seeress, which in turn causes her reverse-translation. Hill has observed that the ability of Guðrún’s tears to inflict pain on the seeress resembles the notion that praying the Pater Noster can cause the devil to be afflicted by boiling drops of blood found in the Old English poem Solomon and Saturn I. In addition, he notes that a similar incident occurs in Óláfs saga helga, in which the prayers of Saint Óláfr inflict burning pain upon the diabolical inhabitant of a shieling and force it to flee. Guðrún’s saint-like piety manifested through her fervent tears has an apotropaic effect, and Hill suggests that Guðrún may represent “a kind of anti-type to the pagan völva whose bones she disinters.” Interestingly, the seeress does not address Guðrún herself, but instead appears to Herdís, suggesting that the intensity of Guðrún’s piety renders the seeress powerless against her. Indeed, this is not the only instance in which Guðrún’s Christianity appears to offer her protection from the dead: as Kirsi

---

209 Einar Ól, Laxdæla saga, 223.
210 Kunz, “The Saga of the People of Laxardal,” 418.
211 Einar Ól, Laxdæla saga, 87–90, 149.
215 Hill, “Tormenting the Devil with Boiling Drops,” 165.
Kanerva notes, she encounters a group of ghosts on her way to the church but ignores them (and in fact is hostile when one of them attempts to address her) in favour of praying in the church.\textsuperscript{216} This speaks not only to Guðrún’s devoutness, but also to her strength of character, as Kanerva further remarks that the restless dead often only affect those who wield less societal power.\textsuperscript{217}

As the “anti-type” to the pagan seeress, Guðrún and her faith become the model for religious life in medieval Iceland, rendering the pagan seeress obsolete. The removal of her bones from the space of the church thus inverts the translation process, moving this representation of a time before Christianity from the centre to the edge of society, and transforming what was once perhaps sacred in the pre-Christian perspective into something terrestrial. This action deaccessions the pre-Christian past from the heterotopic, museum-like space of the church: as representative of the pagan past, the seeress’ bones are removed due to their incompatibility with the type of past made accessible within it. As a foil to the now-devout and likely penitent Guðrún, the seeress may further represent her sins, and by extension sin in general. Guðrún’s tears, which disturb the seeress and result in her expulsion from the church, suggest the purification of baptism, as they cleanse the space of the church – representative of Christian Iceland – of the presence of the pagan past.\textsuperscript{218} Importantly, the seeress’ bones are not destroyed, but rather reburied in a peripheral location. This mirrors the reality of pre-Christianity: while destruction of the past is impossible, it may be pushed from the centre of society to its boundaries, where it may be forgotten.

**“Past” Away II: Curating the Pre-Christian Past**

Though the displacement of the seeress’ bones in *Laxdæla saga* implies a desire to forget what came before Christianity, medieval Icelandic literature displays a spectrum of responses to Iceland’s pagan past. The reverse-translation incident which occurs at the end of


\textsuperscript{218} The baptism of tears is an idea which occurs in early Old English literature. It arose from the literal interpretation of an event in the Latin Life of Saint Gregory, in which the saint appears to baptize the Roman Emperor Trajan with his tears. As Hill has demonstrated that the Old English idea that the Pater Noster could afflict the devil with boiling drops of blood was current in Old Norse literature, the baptism of tears may have also been known in medieval Iceland. See T. O’Loughlin and H. Conrad-O’Briain, “The ‘baptism of tears’ in early Anglo-Saxon sources,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993): 65–83.
*Egils saga* presents a very different view of the relationship to this past, one that implies a desire to remain in proximity to it, albeit at arm’s length. Egill Skallagrimsson, the famously large and turbulent farmer, warrior, and poet, led a life of Viking voyages, revenge and tragedy, the events of which are chronicled within his eponymous saga. He was also demonstrably not a Christian: the saga depicts several instances in which he engages in pagan ritual practices, including the carving of magical runes and erecting a *núðstöng* to cause harm to his enemies.\(^{219}\) Egill dies before Christianity is made law in Iceland, and his body is dressed “i klæði góð; síðan lét hann flytja hann ofan í Tjaldanes ok gera þar haug, ok var Egill þar í lagör ok vápn hans ok klæðin”\(^{220}\) (“in fine clothes and taken over to Tjaldanes, where a mound was made that Egil was buried in, along with his weapons and clothes”).\(^{221}\) His internment in a mound and the inclusion of objects indicates that he is afforded a respectful pagan burial.\(^{222}\)

The saga then relates that Grímr Svertingsson, the husband of Egill’s niece and foster-daughter, Þórdís Þórólfsdóttir, is baptized when Christianity comes to Iceland.\(^{223}\) Egill was living with Grímr and Þórdís when he died, and it was Grímr who had given Egill the pagan burial described above. After his baptism, Grímr has a church built at Hrísbrú, and it is stated that Þórdís has Egill’s remains moved to the church.\(^{224}\) The saga relates that:

> er þat til jartegna, at síðan er kirkja var góð at Mosfelli, en ofan tekí at Hrisbrú sú kirkja, er Grímr háfði gera látit, þá var þar grafinn kirkjugarðr. En undir altarsstaðnum, þá fundusk mannabein; þau váru miklu meiri en annarra manna bein. Þykjask menn þat vita af sögn gamalla manna, at mundi verit hafa bein Egils.\(^{225}\)

(This is supported by the fact that when a cemetery was dug, after the church that Grim had built at Hrisbru was taken down and set up at Mosfell, human bones were found under the site of the altar. They were much larger than normal human bones, which is reflected in *Egils saga*. 163–73; 227–30; 102–7; 140–41.\(^{226}\)

\(^{219}\) Egill erects a *núðstöng*, constructed from a hazel pole and a horse’s head, to scorn King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhild of Norway, his primary antagonists through the narrative. Later, he carves runes on a piece of whalebone and leaves it underneath the pillow of a sick woman, who was suffering from an illness caused by an incorrectly carved spell. See *Egils saga*, 163–73; 227–30; 102–7; 140–41.

\(^{220}\) Sigurður, *Egils saga*, 298.


\(^{222}\) Kirsi Kanerva, “Rituals for the Restless Dead,” 225.

\(^{223}\) Sigurður, *Egils saga*, 98.

\(^{224}\) Sigurður, *Egils saga*, 298.

and on the basis of old accounts people are certain they must have belonged to Egil). The combination of the location of the bones beneath the place of the altar and the use of the word, “jartegna,” which in addition to meaning “fact” can also be translated as “miracle,” imbue this event with saintly undertones. The parallels between the discovery of Egill’s bones and those of relics in hagiographic texts continues when Skapti Þórarinson, a priest and a wise man, takes the abnormally large and heavy skull and places it on the wall of the churchyard, where he proceeds to strike it with a hand-axe to test its thickness. The skull does not break or crack and only a white mark is left behind where it was struck; this is taken as further proof that the bones belong to Egill, who was renowned during his life for his size and strength. This highly resembles the aforementioned trial of Saint Óláfr’s relics, where the hair cut from his incorrupt corpse is burnt in a test to establish their sanctity. Egill’s bones thus take on a kind of incorruptible quality: though bones are less susceptible to rot, the robustness of the skull is a strong parallel to the undecayed flesh of the holy dead. Following this trial, Egill’s bones are reburied, “niðr í útanverðum kirkjugarði at Mosfelli” (“by the edge of the churchyard at Mosfell”). As will be discussed below, his skeleton and the location of its reburial appear to act as representations of the enduring and desired presence of certain aspects of the pagan past.

The event of Egill’s reverse-translation differs in two significant ways from that of the seeress in Laxdæla saga. Unlike the seeress, Egill does not make any posthumous contact with the living, and his bones are not described as evil or in any way unpleasant despite their abnormal size and appearance. That Egill does not become restless after death is perhaps surprising, as Kanerva has noted that those who were of “strong mind” during life, such as Egill, are often those who return after death. Egill, however, receives both a proper pagan and a Christian burial, which may serve to pacify his strong mind post-mortem. The idea that Christian burial can subdue the restless dead occurs elsewhere in the Íslendingasögur corpus: for example, in Eiríks saga rauða, Sigriðr, Þorsteinn Eiríksson and Garðarr verkstjórí

226 Scudder, “Egil’s Saga,” 183.
227 A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic, s.v., “jar-tegn.”
228 Sigurður, Egils saga, 299.
229 Sigurður, Egils saga, 299.
230 Bjarni, Óláfs saga helga, 404–5.
231 Sigurður, Egils saga, 298–9.
232 Kanerva, “Rituals for the Restless Dead,” 204.
succumb to disease and become restless after death until they are given proper Christian burials. Furthermore, Klevnäs notes that the reburial of Egill’s bones is an example of “an apparently widespread conversion-period practice of exhuming burials and transferring remains to new, sanctified graves…recorded in both written accounts and in the archaeological evidence.” The different attributes of the pre-Christian dead in these accounts could therefore be tied to their burial contexts: while the Laxdæla seeress was found in her pagan grave beneath the floor of the church, Egill had been afforded a Christian burial in that location, perhaps preventing the restless return of his spirit.

The second and most important point of departure between the treatment of Egill and the seeress concerns the locations of their reburials. When Egill’s remains are moved from their place under the altar at Hríðbrú and reinterred at Mosfell, they are buried on the edge of the churchyard. The seeress, on the other hand, is moved far away from the church and relegated to an obscure and likely uninhabited location. The different reburial sites which figure in these reverse-translations speak to what Kaplan characterizes as desire and anxiety about the past. That medieval Icelanders wanted to have access to the past is evident in their remarkably past-focussed literature, and also in the desire to maintain traditional modes of its production, especially skaldic poetry. As Kaplan further observes, the desire for access to the past is at odds with anxiety, as “anxiety is associated with that same heathen past for spiritual reasons, and anxiety is rooted in the disorder that the goods of the past create in the present by merely existing there.”

The discovery of King Arthur’s tomb at Glastonbury Abbey in 1191 can provide an intriguing point of comparison for Egill’s reverse-translation. According to the Liber de Principis Instructione (On the Instruction of Princes) by Gerald of Wales (1146–1223), King Arthur had prized the church at Glastonbury more than all others in Britain, and had himself been devoted to the veneration of the Virgin Mary: “Unde cum vir bellator exstiterit, in anteriori parte clipei sui Beatae Virginis imaginem interius, ut eam in conflictu praebitis oculis...”

235 Klevnäs, “‘Imbued with the Essence of the Owner’,” 465.
236 Kaplan, Thou Fearful Guest, 17.
238 Kaplan, Thou Fearful Guest, 17.
semper haberet, depingi fecerat; cujus et pedes, quoties positus in congressionis articulo fuerat, deosculari cum plurima devotione consueverat”\textsuperscript{239} (“When he went out to fight, he had a full-length portrait of the Blessed Virgin painted on the front of his shield, so that in the heat of battle he could always gaze upon Her; and whenever he was about to make contact with the enemy he would kiss Her feet with great devoutness”).\textsuperscript{240} Gerald states that despite the legends of the king’s survival and eventual return, his body had in fact been discovered at Glastonbury in an oak coffin, buried between two stone pillars sixteen feet underground.\textsuperscript{241} The remains are authenticated by the inscription on a lead cross found with the coffin, which reads, “Hic jacet sepultus inclitus rex Arthurus cum Wenneuereia xvore sua secunda in insula Auallonia”\textsuperscript{242} (“Here in the Isle of Avalon lies buried the renowned King Arthur, with Guinevere, his second wife”).\textsuperscript{243} The remains of King Arthur and Guinevere are placed in a marble coffin and reburied in a place of honour within the church.\textsuperscript{244}

While the bones of King Arthur and Guinevere could not have been venerated as holy relics, their reinternment within Glastonbury church nevertheless exemplifies “mankind's inherent liking for mementoes of great men and women,” and they would have likely provided an interesting supplementary attraction for pilgrims.\textsuperscript{245} In addition, Gerald of Wales notes that:

ossa reperta corporis Arthuri tam grandia fuerunt, ut et illud poete complectum in his videri posset: “Grandiaque effossis mirabitur ossa sepulchris” …Os etiam capitis tanquam ad prodigium vel ostentum capax erat et grossum, adeo ut intercilium et inter oculos spatium palmalem amplitudinem large contineret.\textsuperscript{246}

(The bones of Arthur’s body which were discovered there were so big that in them the poet’s words seem to be fulfilled: All men will exclaim at the size of the bones they’ve exhumed…The skull was so large and capacious that it seemed a veritable prodigy of

\textsuperscript{241} Gerald of Wales, \textit{Cambrensis Opera, Vol. VIII, De Principis Instructione Liber}, 127.
\textsuperscript{242} Gerald of Wales, \textit{Cambrensis Opera, Vol. VIII, De Principis Instructione Liber}, 127.
\textsuperscript{243} Gerald of Wales, \textit{The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales}, 282.
\textsuperscript{244} Gerald of Wales, \textit{Cambrensis Opera, Vol. VIII, De Principis Instructione Liber}, 127.
nature, for the space between the eyebrows and the eye-sockets was as broad as the palm of a man’s hand). 247

This is reminiscent of the description of Egill’s abnormally large skeleton, which “is well suited to the author’s magnification of the hero to giant proportions.” 248 While it is unclear whether this account was known in Iceland at the time Egils saga was composed, the great size of the remains of both King Arthur and Egill is reflective of widespread medieval notions about the past, and Arthur’s bones are hence a useful example to think with about the Icelandic context for these ideas.

Unlike Egill, literary tradition portrays Arthur as a pious Christian, and burial within the church would have been appropriate for his status. As mentioned above, burial ad sanctos was a privilege reserved for the clergy and the elite, and one which Arthur would have been deserving of as Britain’s “once and future king.” 249 While Egill’s first Christian grave at Hríðbrú is placed in a similar location, which may have “linked the newly converted community to their past by the reburial of an honoured ancestor in a founder's grave,” 250 his reburial on the border of sacred space suggests that this initial placement is later considered inappropriate. King Arthur, as both a king and a pious Christian, is compatible with the Church’s heterotopic collection of Christian time and presents no religious anxiety about the past; on the contrary, Arthur allows the Anglo-Normans to claim an ancient Christian past for Britain, and to conveniently ignore the Anglo-Saxons and their pagan origins. Conversely, Egill lacks a Christian identity, which makes him unsuitable as a revered ancestor of the church’s founder, and his burial within the church may have been cause for alarm. The movement of King Arthur’s bones can therefore be viewed as the inverse of Egill’s displacement, as both accounts are suggestive of the need to maintain proximity to the correct type of dead.

Despite his apparent incompatibility, Egill’s remains are reburied on the margin of sacred space. When viewed in comparison to the seeress’ reburial, the placement of Egill’s remains on the edge of the churchyard keeps him near the central institution of medieval

247 Gerald of Wales, The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales, 285.
society. While both burials can be regarded as peripheral, they represent varying degrees: the seeress is reburied in the wilderness, on the periphery of civilization, whereas Egill is buried by the wall of the churchyard, on the boundary of Christian space. Egill’s bones function here very much like relics: after passing a test to confirm their identity, they are moved and reburied in an appropriate location. As Egill himself was demonstrably pagan, these are evidently not holy relics, but rather secular relics that speak to Iceland’s cultural heritage, particularly as Egill was a famed poet during and after his life. Egill’s poetic skill could represent a desirable intellectual good from the past, and one that medieval Icelanders still wished to access despite its connection within the saga to the pre-Christian period.

Egill’s bones may thus be imbued with the power and authority of esteemed aspects of the traditional past, much like the grave goods of Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr discussed in Chapter 1. While Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr’s possessions may convey attributes of good rulership upon the young King Óláfr, Egill’s bones represent the cultural goods from the pagan past, and perhaps poetic skill in particular, which were desired in medieval Iceland. The attention given to Egill’s skull recalls the connection made in the narrative between Egill’s head and poetry when he earns his freedom from Eírikr blóðøx by composing the poem Hǫfuðlausn (Head-Ransom). While the appropriate place for holy relics was within the church as the centre of medieval society, Egill’s bones are reburied under the churchyard wall, on the edge of sacred space. The idea that proximity affected the efficacy of saintly power points to the desire to be close these sources: “(t)he closer to the shrine a pilgrim could get, the better the chances for a cure. It was assumed by many medieval pilgrims that most saints had a certain radius of supernatural power; it weakened the further one traveled from center to periphery.” The reburial of Egill’s bones on the border of sanctified space ensures that his remains, and the cultural goods they represent, are kept in close enough proximity to be remembered, while simultaneously recognizing the church as a holy location for the exclusively Christian past at the centre of medieval society.

251 Anders Andrén has argued that the Christian cosmology of medieval Europe, which placed the church at the centre as the most sacred space with the surrounding space divided into zones which decreased in holiness as distance from the church increased, could not have applied directly within medieval Scandinavia. This is because economic gains from these peripheral areas, such as furs and fish, were essential for successful settlement, and suggests that traces of pre-Christian cosmology may have lived on in Christian Scandinavia. In relation to the Laxdæla seeress, it appears that the European Christian cosmology is in effect, as the seeress is subdued through her relocation. See Andrén, “Landscape and Settlement as Utopian Space,” 383–93.
252 Sigurður, Egi ls saga, 183–95.
253 Madigan, Medieval Christianity: A New History, 331.
The need to grapple with the desire to access this pre-Christian intellectual heritage can be seen in the depictions of Egill’s Christian reburials. His first burial beneath the altar at Hríðbrú was likely too close for comfort, as this location was reserved for the relics of saints, the “highlights” of the Church’s heterotopic collection of Christian history. The wall of the churchyard, on the margins of Christian space, is more appropriate: Egill’s remains now straddle the pagan past and the Christian present, resembling the production of Christian kennings based on those which reference pagan subjects. If *Egils saga* was indeed written by Snorri Sturluson, as some scholars have posited,254 the desire to access the intellectual goods from the past represented by Egill would be fitting with Snorri’s poetic agenda.255 The removal of Egill’s bones from the centre of the church to a marginal but accessible location not only deaccessions them from the collection of the church, but also transfers their ownership to secular society. The Christian nature of this burial serves to cleanse Egill’s remains, and the intellectual goods they represent, of overt paganism, easing the anxiety inherent in accessing them.

**CONCLUSION**

The break in “traditional time” ushered in by the acceptance of Christianity required Iceland to negotiate its relationship to its pre-Christian past. The accessioning of Saint Þorlákr into the Cult of the Saints secured a place for Iceland within the collective Christian past, which enabled Icelanders to appeal to the intercessory powers of one of their own countrymen. The movement inherent in translation facilitated Iceland’s introduction into the Cult of the Saints, indicative of a deeper stage of Christianization, and in turn inspired some of the first works of indigenous hagiographic literature. It is fitting then that the literary depiction of a similar kind of movement would be employed to navigate Iceland’s relationship to its pre-Christian, “traditional” past.

Through the reverse-translations of the *Laxdæla saga* seeress and the bones of Egill Skallagrímsson, the pagan past has been deaccessioned from the centre of medieval Icelandic society. The pre-Christian past is incompatible with the Church’s collection and must be

---


255 The *Prose Edda*, which is generally attributed to Snorri Sturluson, preserves the knowledge of pre-Christian mythology necessary for a medieval audience to understand and compose skaldic poetry, and may have been composed as a handbook for skalds. See, for example Anthony Faulkes, “Introduction,” Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), xi–xxxii.
removed, but this removal may vary according to the perceived severity of this incompatibility. The bones of Egill, who was renowned as a poet and warrior during his life, may represent the desirable aspects of the past, as neither poetry nor prowess was entirely antithetical to Christian society. The seeress, however, was a practitioner of magic, and her potential role within a pagan belief system renders her toxic to the worldview of the Christian Middle Ages. While she may have occupied a central role in pre-Christian society, she is relegated to obscurity through the removal and relocation of her remains, illustrating the need to abandon and forget the ways of the pre-Christian past. While the anonymity of the unnamed seeress allows her to represent the pagan past in a more abstract manner, Egill is enmeshed within the social fabric of medieval Iceland through the description of his personality and talents in his saga’s narrative, as well as through his descendants. Unlike the seeress, he is permitted to remain nearby: though not part of the heterotopic collection of Christianity, his reburial under the churchyard wall exemplifies the desire to remember certain aspects of pre-Christian heritage which do not undermine or oppose Christianity. The different treatments accorded to the remains of the Laxdæla saga seeress and Egill Skallagrímsson may represent the negotiation of a Christian identity which allows for the retention of a curated selection of goods from the pre-Christian past.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the role of the dead and their association with the past in Old Norse literature, and has argued that the holy and the pre-Christian dead serve as representations of their respective pasts. As a site of access to the holy dead, the Church has been analysed as a heterotopia, which operates like a museum, and allows for the representation and juxtaposition of a curated selection of interpretations. What is made accessible within the heterotopic church space is the exclusively Christian past: though its individual aspects may be geographically and temporally different, it is their shared Christianity which allows for their inclusion within this sacred location. Holy relics comprise an integral part of the past made accessible within the heterotopic church and are fundamental for the Cult of the Saints which operates at its centre. As a concept, the Cult of the Saints displays several heterotopic qualities: the holy dead venerated through it come from a wide array of places, times, and demographics, but are represented alongside each other through their treatment according to the established conventions of ‘cult.’ The recognition of King Óláfr and Bishop Þorlákr as indigenous saints through the enshrinement of their relics allowed for the representation of Norway and Iceland within the shared past of European Christendom, which in turn required the displacement of the pre-Christian past.

As heterotopic spaces, the museum and the medieval church share several common features, and museology has provided a framework through which to view the depictions of the dead treated here. This thesis has used the processes of musealization, accessioning and deaccessioning to shed light on the relationship between the dead and the representation of the past. Saint Óláfr and Saint Þorlákr are thus accessioned into the Christian past through the musealization of their relics, which are imbued with the power and authority of the Christian past acquired through the acceptance of Christianity. The sanctity of their relics is in turn interpreted through their reliquaries, the precious materials of which serve to indicate the sacredness of their contents. In this way, reliquaries resemble the glass display cases in museums, which enclose objects for their preservation while simultaneously highlighting their special qualities.

While the forging of Christian identities was aided by the cults of Saint Óláfr and Saint Þorlákr, the pre-Christian heritage of Norway and Iceland lingered in the relatively recent past. Many important aspects of medieval Scandinavian society and culture were derived from this past, and this necessitated the reconciliation of “traditional” heritage with a
Christian identity. This can be seen in the treatment of the pre-Christian dead in *Laxdæla saga* and *Egils saga*: as a practitioner of pagan magic, the *Laxdæla* seeress is deemed incompatible with this Christian identity and is removed from the central space of the church, whereas Egill’s embodiment of the desirable aspects of the pre-Christian past appears to outweigh his associations with paganism. These episodes suggest the curatorial quality of Iceland’s relationship to its “traditional” heritage, as it is the interpretation of these pagan dead which informs the perceived appropriateness of their proximity to the Christian past.

Proximity has thus emerged as an important facet of the medieval relationship to the dead. The Cult of the Saints manifests clearly as the ideal and appropriate interaction with the dead, and one that Norway and Iceland desired to participate in through the veneration of their indigenous saints. This can been seen in the growth of the cult of Saint Óláfr throughout the Middle Ages and its expansion outside of Scandinavia: as Anna Minara Ciardi notes, Saint Óláfr “was a ‘local’ saint, but his cult must be recognized as a ‘universal’ one.”

Though the popularity of Saint Óláfr’s cult appears to have declined beginning in the mid-14th century, it experienced a resurgence during the mid-15th century, when the kings of the Kalmar Union would come to Niðaros to be consecrated and crowned at his shrine. The late medieval rejuvenation of Saint Óláfr’s cult is further evident in the large number of pilgrim badges associated with it, and the discovery of a small stoneware jar at the bottom of Saint Óláfr’s well – the site of the miraculous spring depicted in *Óláfs saga helga* – suggests that the water was sold as relics. These tokens of pilgrimage to Saint Óláfr’s shrine speak to a longing to be close to the saint, and given the number and variety of these objects that have been found, it would appear that this desire was shared by many.

Through their role in the coronation of kings, Saint Óláfr’s relics can be regarded as, “an expression of (his) growing symbolic importance” and his ability to “bestow his authority on the new monarch.” Unlike many other medieval saints, whose relics were split up and sent abroad with the spread of their cult, there is no indication that Saint Óláfr’s corpse was ever divided. It would appear that the Norwegian kings did not distribute Saint Óláfr’s


257 Ekroll, “The Octagonal Shrine Chapel of St Olav at Nidaros Cathedral,” 76.

258 Ekroll, “The Octagonal Shrine Chapel of St Olav at Nidaros Cathedral,” 77.

259 Ekroll, “The Octagonal Shrine Chapel of St Olav at Nidaros Cathedral,” 76.

260 Ekroll, “The Octagonal Shrine Chapel of St Olav at Nidaros Cathedral,” 72.
relics to friends, allies and ecclesiastical institutions, a tradition practiced by royalty elsewhere in Europe, which may be surprising in light of the spread of Saint Óláfr’s cult outside of Scandinavia.²⁶¹ Perhaps it was important for these relics to remain whole and in one place, as their sanctity bestowed the authority of the Christian past upon rulership in Norway. The lives of a medieval kings necessitated partaking in unsaintly activities such as war, violence and sex, which as Bartlett notes might be thought to render them incompatible with sanctity.²⁶² Like the heterotopic Church and its capacity to juxtapose incompatible or conflicting things, Saint Óláfr’s identity as a royal saint allows his relics to join terrestrial kingship and celestial authority.

Though the relics of both Saint Óláfr and Saint Þorlákr were displaced in the wake of the Reformation, the desire to be close to the special dead has nevertheless endured.²⁶³ Alongside the fascination with saints and relics, there has long been an interest in establishing a connection to the pagan dead in Scandinavia, particularly concerning legendary heroes from the past. In Iceland, this has found expression in the recent interest in the bones of Egill Skallagrímsson. The enduring fascination with Egill’s absent bones is evident in Jesse Byock’s 1993 article, “Skulls and Bones in Egils saga: A Viking, A Grave, and Paget’s Disease,” in which he posits that Egill suffered from Paget’s Disease based on the saga’s description of his skeleton.²⁶⁴ More recently, in 2005 Byock, Jon M. Erlandsson and David Zori led an archaeological excavation at the site of Hrísbrú, the location of Egill’s first Christian burial, which unearthed a grave shaft under the altar of what was once an early Christian church.²⁶⁵ According to Byock, Erlandsson and Zori, there are “a series of extraordinary correlations between the archaeological evidence and the saga account”: Egill’s reburial under the altar at Hrísbrú is specifically noted in the saga; the grave was empty, suggesting reburial elsewhere; and the removal of the bones from this grave had occurred either during or after the abandonment of the church.²⁶⁶ The decision to use a combination of archaeology and literature to argue that this may have been the grave of Egill Skallagrímsson

—“Viking Age Iceland’s iconic warrior-poet” — perhaps speaks to the desire to access the pagan past embodied in Egill’s literary portrayal. Though his bones no longer rest there, proximity to Egill’s grave may facilitate that access: echoing the holy spring at the grave of Saint Óláfr, it appears that contact with Egill’s remains alone is enough to imbue this site with some of his essence.

While the modern desire for the proximity to the pagan dead is not incongruous with a more secular society, the fascination with the pre-Christian past found in Old Norse literature is perhaps unexpected. As has been observed, “(a)though Icelanders do not seem to have been less Christian than other peoples, they pursued the lore of their pre-Christian culture when other Christianized peoples were doing everything they could to forget or disguise theirs.”

This study has demonstrated that the navigation, and perhaps the creation, of a Christian identity in medieval Scandinavia can be traced in the desire and anxiety surrounding the access to the past embodied in the holy and the pre-Christian dead. Depictions of these dead therefore represent moments wherein the medieval Scandinavian audience for these texts would have encountered impressions of the pagan past of their ancestors.

Although most of the literary depictions of these dead were recorded in the Christian culture of 13th century Iceland, scholarly engagement with them has at times been primarily concerned with reconstructing pre-Christian ritual and belief, though more recent work has been done to problematize their Christian transmission context. This thesis has emphasized the importance of the holy dead and the Cult of the Saints within Christian medieval culture, and it is important to note that the Cult of the Saints was well established in both Norway and Iceland before the 13th century. This relationship to the holy dead would consequently form a part of what Torfi refers to as the “frame of reference”: “the field of significations within which the author’s own construction of meaning throughout his text will be displayed through all sorts of references and allusions, or simply through presumptions about the prior knowledge shared by his readers.”

This can be seen in the events described in Laxdæla saga and Egils saga analysed here, as they suggest an understanding of the Cult of the Saints

---

269 For the former approach, see H.R. Ellis Davidson, The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature (New York: Greenwood Press, 1943; for the latter, which revises many of Ellis’ interpretations, see Christopher Abram, “The Representation of the Pagan Afterlife in Medieval Scandinavian Literature,” PhD Diss., University of Cambridge, 2006.
270 Torfi, The Matter of the North, 220.
and the access it provided to the appropriate kind of dead. It seems clear that the translation of saintly relics informed the frame of reference for these episodes, suggesting that the Cult of the Saints could have influenced other representations of the dead in Old Norse literature.

The Cult of the Saints would have been well known to both the composers and the audiences of Old Norse literature, particularly considering the establishment of indigenous cults. The importance of the holy dead would have informed the worldview of medieval Scandinavia and in turn provided a point of comparison for depictions of the pre-Christian dead. Accounts of the holy and the pre-Christian dead contribute to the broader desire to remember the past expressed in the Old Norse literary corpus, though literary measures must be taken to ensure that the pagan past remains at a safe distance. While ascertaining the medieval motivations behind this desire may be an impossible task, the relationship between the dead and the representation of the past in Old Norse literature is deserving of more attention, as it may further contribute to an understanding of the medieval Scandinavian worldview.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


