

Remembering Auðr/Unnr *djúp(a)uðga* Ketilsdóttir¹

Construction of Cultural Memory and Female Religious Identity

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Introduction

When individuals and families chose to emigrate from Viking Age Scandinavia to Iceland, their decisions had a major impact on their personal lives. For some this meant, amongst other things, a change of faith. While most migrants remained exclusively faithful to traditional beliefs, some converted to Christianity prior to their arrival in Iceland. Carol Clover believes that this Norse expansion is largely a male undertaking, defining it in terms of ‘frontier migration’, which to her explains the low number of Scandinavian women who are mentioned in the relevant medieval sources.² Some of the more recent genetic work on the Settlement of Iceland explains the scarcity of Scandinavian female migrants by showing that Icelanders are primarily descended from Norse men and Gaelic women.³ Among these migrants must have been women.

Stories of both pagans and Christians settling in Iceland are a recurrent theme in medieval Icelandic written works such as the *Íslendingasögur* (‘Sagas of the Icelanders’), *Landnámabók* (‘Book of the settlement’) and *Íslendingabók* (‘Book of the Icelanders’). In the latter, Ari enn fróði Þorgilsson (1067–1148)—Iceland’s most prominent medieval historian—lists the most important settlers of Iceland, one for each district. Among the four names listed is one female, ‘Auðr, daughter of Ketill flatnefr, a Norwegian lord, settled in the west in Breiðafjörður; from her the people of Breiðafjörður are descended.’⁴ *Íslendingabók* is the first known historical writing in the vernacular in medieval Iceland. It gives a very brief and concise overview of the settlement of Iceland and its early history. Apart from the facts about Auðr

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² Carol J. Clover, ‘The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia’, *Scandinavian Studies* 60 (1988), 147–188, at 173.

³ Agnar Helgason et al., ‘mtDNA and the Islands of the North Atlantic: Estimating the Proportions of Norse and Gaelic Ancestry’, *American Journal of Human Genetics* 68 (2001), 723–737, at 733. Available online at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1274484/>.

⁴ “Auðr, dóttir Ketils flatnefs, hersis nórcæns, byggði vestr í Breiðafirði; þaðan eru Breiðfirðingar komnir.” See *Íslendingabók* in *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, Jakob Benediktsson ed., 2 vols (Íslensk fornrit, 1), Hið Íslenska fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1968, 1–28, at 6; Translated by Siân Grønlie in *Íslendingabók – Kristni saga. The Book of the Icelanders – The Story of the Conversion*, Siân Grønlie trans. (Viking society for Northern research text series, 18), Short Run Press: Exeter 2006, 4.

mentioned in the quote above, we learn very little about her through this source apart from being worth mentioning as a female in a male-dominated culture. Luckily, we have various *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók* to enlighten us. It should be noted here that these are not straightforward windows into the past, but are actually very problematic sources for the ninth and tenth century. What is striking here is that the majority of these stories focus on male protagonists, whereas in Auðr's case the story centres around a female settler. Secondly, the question of Auðr's religion as depicted in these accounts is an interesting one and a puzzle at that.

In this paper, I want to focus on what, to me, are two distinguishing literary traditions which exist parallel to one another. One tradition I will refer to as Christian. This tradition is transmitted through *Landnámabók*⁵ and several *Íslendingasögur*⁶. According to these sources Auðr converts to Christianity somewhere on the British-Irish archipelago before setting sail to Iceland. She erects several crosses and demands to be buried in the Christian fashion. Through oral transmission this Christian tradition has been elaborated on and has survived in the early nineteenth-century Icelandic folk legend *Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi*.⁷ The other tradition is preserved only in *Laxdæla saga*. In this saga Auðr, who is named Unnr here, remains pagan and is buried accordingly. It should be noted here that Auðr and Unnr are not different names, but variant forms of the same name. She is called Unnr in *Laxdæla saga*, but Auðr in *Landnámabók* and most other sagas, and some later manuscripts actually wrote "Uðr" as a blend between the two. It is probably both scribal variation and variation in oral tradition.⁸

These alternative traditions form a good example of how cultural memory⁹ and representations of a ninth century female Viking and her religious identity are transmitted in literary form. *Landnámabók* and *Laxdæla saga* each draw a slightly different picture of Auðr. These different representations of both her and of ninth century Iceland must be understood in the light of thirteenth century written culture in Iceland. As Pernille Hermann notes:

Medieval writers remembered the past in more than one way, and their recording of memories also involved a dynamic and creative dimension that not only saved memories from oblivion, but also organized memories according to present needs.¹⁰

⁵ *Landnámabók* in *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, 29–397.

⁶ The *Íslendingasögur* in question are *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. For the texts themselves, see *Eyrbyggja saga*, in *Eyrbyggja saga: Brands þáttur Örva, Eiríks saga rauða, Grœnlendinga saga, Grœnlendinga þáttur*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson eds. (Íslensk fornrit, 4), Hið Íslenska fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1935, 1–191; *Eiríks saga rauða* in the same edition, 403–434.

⁷ Jón Þorleifsson, 'Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi', in Jón Árnason ed., *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri I*, J. C. Hinrichs: Leipzig 1862, 146–150. The possibility of *Landnámabók* or the *Íslendingasögur* functioning as a source for later oral tradition is not a concern in this paper, though it will be briefly touched upon later in this article. For the relevant references and the discussion on this topic see the chapter 'Retelling the story.'

⁸ For a detailed discussion on these name variants, see Kemp Malone, 'Audur and Gullbrá and Skeggi', in Henning Larson and Charles A. Williams eds., *Scandinavian Studies Presented to George T. Flom by Colleagues and Friends* (Illinois studies in language and literature, 29:1), University of Illinois Press: Urbana 1942, 57–65, at 62.

⁹ For a more thorough discussion on 'cultural memory' I refer here to Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning eds., *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung, 8), De Gruyter: Berlin 2008.

The various depictions of Auðr/Unnr *djúp(a)uðga* Ketilsdóttir presented in the different sources under consideration here should be understood and interpreted in their respective cultural and social context, the golden age of saga writing (twelfth until fourteenth century) and Post-Reformation Iceland (nineteenth century) respectively.

By discussing the portrayal of a single female character, namely Auðr, I would like to nuance the classical image of women in Old Norse literature as presented in the aforementioned work by Carol J. Clover. In the light of gender studies, female characters and their depictions in Icelandic medieval literature have received a lot of scholarly attention from the latter half of the twentieth century onwards. Among the best known studies on Old Norse women are the works of Else Mundal, Helga Kress, Jenny Jochens, Judith Jesch and Carol J. Clover.¹¹ Most of these studies give an overview of the different types of women depicted in the Old Norse literature with a stress on rather negative characteristics, such as being headstrong and revengeful, rather than discussing the depiction of one female figure with an emphasis on positive characteristics such as strength, wisdom and authority. The image of Old Norse women that emerges from these works can often be reduced to a simple dichotomy of ‘powerless’ and ‘powerful’, ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Recently, a rather persuasive critique of this is offered by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir in her book *Women in Old Norse Literature: Women, Bodies, Words and Power*.¹² In this book, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir presents a more nuanced and multidimensional picture of female characters in the variety of Old Norse texts.

With this article, I would like to contribute to the study of nuanced images of Old Norse women. The focus in this paper will be on the portrayal of a single female character, namely Auðr *djúp(a)uðga*, as she has only been briefly touched upon in several of the works on Old Norse women.¹³ They do not go into much detail on, for example, her religious identity. Kemp Malone and Eric Shane Bryan explore the role of women—and Auðr in particular—in relation to Christianity in the aforementioned folk legend.¹⁴ Bryan discusses the social memory of gender and religion in the Icelandic folktales with a focus on Auðr’s role and function in *Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi*.¹⁵ Though he does refer to an English translation of this tale which does not include ‘significant portions of the original’¹⁶, he fails to mention Malone’s full translation of the tale and his brief study of the text. Furthermore, both Bryan and

¹⁰ Pernille Hermann, ‘Concepts of Memory. Approaches to the Past in Medieval Icelandic Literature’, *Scandinavian Studies* 81:3 (2009), 287–308, at 293.

¹¹ See especially Else Mundal, ‘The Position of Women in Old Norse Society and the Basis for Their Power’, *NORA* 1 (1994), 3–11; Else Mundal, ‘Om manndómr og meydómr. Språket som kjelde til synet på kvinne og mann i norrøn tid’, *Nordica Bergensia* 25 (2001), 103–126; Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca 1995; Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Middle Ages series), University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia 1996; Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, The Boydell press: Woodbridge 1996; Helga Kress, *Máttugar meyjar: Íslensk fornbókmenntasaga*, Háskóli Íslands: Reykjavík 1993; Carol J. Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe’, *Speculum: Journal of the Medieval Academy of America* 68:2 (1993), 363–387.

¹² Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Women, Bodies, Words and Power* (The New Middle Ages), Palgrave MacMillan: New York 2013.

¹³ See for example Jesch 1996, 80–83; Kress 1993, 143; Jochens 1995, 62.

¹⁴ Malone 1942, 57–65; Eric Shane Bryan, ‘Conversion and Convergence: the Role and Function of Women in Post-medieval Icelandic Folktales’, *Scandinavian studies* 83:2 (2011), 165–190.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 170–174.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

Malone do not mention the second version of this folk legend as recorded by Magnús Friðriksson.¹⁷ Though Auðr is not featured in this version of the legend, Magnús Friðriksson's text is certainly worth including in an analysis of the version under discussion here as it provides us with additional information about the version included in Jón Árnason's collection of Icelandic folktales.

This article will give an overview of the alternative traditions on Auðr/Unnr *djúp(a)uðga* from her earliest attestations in *Landnámabók* and the sagas, to the collection of folk tales in mid nineteenth century and early twentieth century, and compare them to each other. Relatively little work has been done on Iceland's post-medieval interest in medieval characters, especially in Iceland, where present-day identities remain so tightly bound to ideas of the Viking Age.¹⁸ I will discuss how these texts represent memories of Auðr and her religious beliefs and how they contribute to the construction of Icelandic cultural memory. I will investigate how and why these different representations of Auðr were created, focusing on religious and funerary practices. I will briefly mention what effect these changes have on the depiction of Auðr in the sources under examination here and how this shapes the way in which we remember her nowadays.

***Landnámabók* and its Story**

The Christian tradition is transmitted through *Landnámabók* and briefly touched upon in two *Íslendingasögur*, namely *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. Of these narratives, *Landnámabók* is the earliest and the most explicit about Auðr's religion. *Landnámabók* consists of a collection of records, as will be explained later on in this article. It served as source material for the *Íslendingasögur* as much as the sagas served as source material for *Landnámabók*. For instance, the saga-author derived several chapters of *Eyrbyggja saga* from an earlier lost version of *Landnámabók* written by Styrmir Kárason (died 1245).¹⁹ The author of *Eyrbyggja saga* is unknown, but some scholars attribute its authorship to Sturla Þórðarson (1214–1284).²⁰ Sturla Þórðarson also wrote *Sturlabók*, the earliest extant version of *Landnámabók*, and added material from *Eyrbyggja saga* to his version of *Landnámabók*.²¹ *Eiríks saga rauða* is preserved only in two vellum manuscripts, Hauksbók (early fourteenth

¹⁷ Magnús Friðriksson, 'Hvammur I Dalasýslu', *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1940* (1940), 88–111.

¹⁸ A similar approach was used by Kirsten Hastrup in her study of Grettir Ásmundarson. Kirsten Hastrup, 'Tracing the tradition: An Anthropological Perspective on Grettis saga Asmundarsonar', in John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth and Gerd Wolfgang Weber eds., *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism* (The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilisation, 3), Odense University Press: Odense 1986, 281–313.

¹⁹ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, 'Introduction,' in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards trans. (Penguin Classics), Penguin Books: London 1989, 1–17, at 12.

²⁰ Some examples of studies and discussions on Sturla's authorship of *Eyrbyggja saga*, see Forrest C. Scott, 'General Introduction', in Forrest S. Scott ed., *Eyrbyggja saga. The Vellum Tradition*, (Editiones Arnarnagæanæ, Series A, 18), C. A. Reitzels forlag: Copenhagen 2003, 1*–28*, at 21*–22*; Peter Hallberg, 'Eyrbyggja sagas ålder – ännu en gång', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, 32 (1979), 196–219; Peter Hallberg, 'Om språkliga författarkriterier i isländska sagatexter', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 80 (1965), 157–186; Rolf Heller, 'Das Alter der *Eyrbyggja saga* im Licht der Sprachstatistik', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 32 (1979), 53–66; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 'Eyrbyggja sagas kilder', *Scripta Islandica* 19 (1968), 3–18.

²¹ Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 1989, 12.

century) and *Skálhóltsbók* (early fifteenth century) respectively.²² The former contains next to *Eiríks saga rauða* and other texts a version of *Landnámabók* written by Haukr Erlendsson (died 1334). I will use *Landnámabók* as the main text and source for my argumentation on the image of Auðr as a Christian and will refer to the two sagas where appropriate or necessary.

These three sources relate that Auðr was born in Norway. While Auðr lived there, she and her family worshipped the gods and goddesses of the Northern pantheon. When her father Ketill and his family settled somewhere in the Hebridean Islands off the west coast of Scotland, they converted to the Christian faith. *Eyrbyggja saga* agrees with this version of the story by saying that by the time Auðr's brother Björn joins his family on the Hebrides his siblings have changed their faith, which Björn *austroeni* finds *lítillmannligt* ('belittling' or 'unmanly') of them.²³ So prior to her arrival in Iceland, Auðr is baptised as a Christian. At the end of *Landnámabók* a brief list is given of some of these Christian settlers including Auðr, her brother Helgi *bjóla* and her brother-in-law Helgi *enn magri*. It adds that while some of them kept their faith until their death, others lost theirs. With the passing of this first generation of Christians, the writer of *Landnámabók* claims that nearly all Icelanders were heathens for the next 120 years, until Christianity was accepted as the 'national' religion in the year 999/1000.²⁴

As to the construction of Auðr's religious identity one element stands out: the burial practice. After stressing how devout a Christian Auðr was, *Landnámabók* touches upon more worldly affairs, such as the division of her land among her companions and slaves. In her old age, she prepares the wedding of her grandson Óláfr *feilan*. After three days of celebration she announces that the feast will go on for another three days, the only difference being that it will be her funeral feast. She dies that same night. A bit more information is given on Auðr's burial and funerary wishes.

[W]hen the feast had been going on for *three nights*, she said that the feast would go on for *three more nights*; she told that it would be her wake. [...She] was buried at the flood-mark, as she had instructed before, because she did not want to lie in unconsecrated earth, as she was baptised.²⁵

The reason for Auðr's wish to be buried at the flood-mark seems straightforward. A Christian burial is the burial of a deceased person in consecrated ground. As there was no piece of land in Iceland that was hallowed or sprinkled with holy water, Auðr preferred the shore as her final resting place. In Christian religion water is a symbol of purification.²⁶ *Landnámabók* thus suggests that the land in Iceland is not consecrated and that the shore is neutral territory. Given that water has a purifying

²² Gísli Sigurðson, 'Introduction and Notes', in *The Vinland Sagas*, Keneva Kunz trans. (Penguin Classics), Penguin Books: London 2008, i–xlv, at ix.

²³ *Eyrbyggja saga*, 10.

²⁴ *Landnámabók*, 396–397.

²⁵ "[E]n er *þrjár nætr* hafði veizlan staðit, [...]; sagði hon, at þá skyldi standa veizlan enn *þrjár nætr*; hon kvað það vera skyldu erfi sitt. [...] var grafin í flæðarmáli, sem hún hafði fyrir sagt, því at hon vildi eigi liggja í óvígðri moldu, er hon var skírð." *Íslendingabók*, 146–147. My italics. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are my own.

²⁶ Keith J. Egan, 'Water', in Gordon S. Wakefield ed., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, SCM Press: London 1983, 390–391, at 390.

effect, when it floods over Auðr's grave site on the shore, the water hallows it. Added to this,

[S]ome early writers maintained that by his baptism Jesus had purified the Jordan water, an act that in turn made all water the source of purification for ordinary humanity.²⁷

This idea was still common among Christians in medieval Iceland as is testified in *Homiliu-bók* ('Old Icelandic Book of Homilies'), written circa 1200. In *Homiliu-bók* there is a sermon preaching that since Jesus was baptised by John in the river of Jordan all the water and the oceans of the world are consecrated there from.

On this day our Lord had John the Baptist baptize himself in [the river] Jordan, so that he consecrated all waters so that they would be eligible for baptism anywhere in the World where men were baptized.²⁸

This might explain why the author ascribes this particular wish to Auðr as it would signify that the shore is baptized or consecrated by the ocean washing over the land.²⁹ However, there is something odd about Auðr's last wishes. The expression *grafa í flæðarmáli* ('bury at the flood-mark') is peculiar in the sense that it only occurs in *Landnámabók*. A quick survey in the *Dictionary of Old Norse prose* (ONP) tells us that this expression does not occur in any of the sagas.³⁰ This idiom does feature in Norwegian Christian laws, though the context in which it is used here differs from that of *Landnámabók*. According to the Old Christian law of the Gulaping, the Old Christian law of the Eidsifaping and the younger mid-thirteenth century Christian laws, the most suitable place to bury outlaws banned from Christian burial was on the shore 'where the tide meets the green turf'.³¹ This will be explained in more detail below.

Landnámabók is a record of the people who 'took land' or colonised Iceland. It is not, as its name suggests, one book, but a collection of records. This work has been preserved in different manuscripts that content-wise differ significantly from each other. According to Haukr Erlendsson two learned men instigated this record of early settlers, *Ari enn fróði Þorgilsson* and *Kolskeggr hinn vitri*.

²⁷ Robin Jensen, *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*, (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae: texts and studies of early Christian life and language*, 105), Brill: Leiden 2011, 119–120.

²⁸ "Á þessum degi lét várr dróttin Jóan baptista skíra sik í Jordón, till þess at hann helgaði ǫll vǫtn svá at til skírnar væri hæf hvargi er men væri skírðir í heiminum." *Homiliu-bók*, Theodor Wisén ed., Gleerups förlag: Lund 1872, 60.

²⁹ Karlsson discusses in some more detail Auðr's burial and the link with this idea expressed in the *Homiliu-bók*. See Stefán Karlsson, 'Greftrun Auðar djúpúðgu', in Guðni Kolbeinsson ed., *Minjar og menntir: afmælisrit helgað Kristjáni Eldjárn 6. desember 1976*, Bókaúgáfa Menningarsjóðs: Reykjavík 1976, 481–488.

³⁰ The ONP has a total of 7 reference to the idiom "grafa í flæðarmáli" one of which comes from *Landnámabók*, the other six from Norwegian Christian laws. *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose/Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*, [Arnarnagnæan Commission/Arnarnagnæanske kommission], Copenhagen, 1983–. Available online at <http://dataonp.hum.ku.dk/>, s.v. flóðarmál; s.v. flóðarmál.

³¹ "[Þ]ar sem særr mǫtesc oc grǫn torva." *Norges gamle love indtil 1387*, R. Keyser and P. A. Munch eds., 5 vols, Gröndahl: Christiania 1846–1895, i 13 [Gulapingslǫg]; i 392 [Eidsifapingslǫg] (twice); i 431 [Kristinn rétrr Sverris]; ii 296 [Borgarþingslǫg]; ii 314 [Gulapingslǫg].

Now the story of the settlement of Iceland has come to an end, just as two learned men first wrote it down, the priest Ari *enn fróði* Þorgilsson and Kolskeggr *hinn vitri*. And this book I, Haukr Erlendsson, wrote after the example of their book.³²

This ‘original’ version was composed in the first half of the twelfth century and was lost. The surviving manuscripts of *Landnámabók* date from the second half of the thirteenth century or a little later. *Landnámabók* is obviously the labour of many hands as is reflected in the patchwork that are the surviving manuscripts. Examining each individual author’s intent would require a study in itself, but for the purposes of this article it will suffice to look at the overall picture with reference or focus on some individual authors where relevant. The main purpose of *Landnámabók* is to list all the settlers regardless of their beliefs, but mostly the more aristocratic landholding settlers. Of the more than four hundred primary settlers listed, about sixty settlers’ stories are more elaborate. Just about thirteen of these primary settlers are women.³³ None of the twelve other women are as famous as Auðr and none of them are mentioned anywhere except in *Landnámabók*.³⁴

My questions are the following: Why did the author(s) of *Landnámabók* choose to portray Auðr? And why in such detail? Were the authors of *Landnámabók* acquainted with the Christian laws such as *Gulaþing*? And if so, why did they attribute this particular kind of burial to Auðr? It is important to interpret the representations of Auðr in the light of the period in which *Landnámabók* was composed. As Margeret Clunies Ross argues:

[...] in order to write themselves into European history, Icelanders had first to construct their own genealogies and then to indicate how many of their chief settlers [...] could be related to the royal dynasties and noble lineages of mainland Scandinavia and, in some cases, to other foreign families.³⁵

Hence, it was important to both authors and patrons of these texts to claim to be descendants from the elite mentioned in this work. As mentioned before, one of the authors is Ari *enn fróði*. In something of an epilogue to his *Íslendingabók* Ari included a genealogy tracing back his lineage to Óleifr *hvíti* and Þorsteinn *rauði*, Auðr’s husband and son.³⁶ It seems only natural that Ari should give more prominence to, and a more detailed account of, one of his famous Christian forebears. Ari himself was a student of Teitr, son of the first bishop of Iceland Ísleifr

³² “Nú er yfir farit um landnám þau, er verit hafa á Íslandi, eptir því sem fróðir menn hafa skrifat, fyrst Ari prestr hinn fróði Þorgilsson ok Kolskeggr hinn vitri. En þessa bók ritaða <ek>, Haukr Erlendsson, eptir þeiri bók.” *Íslendingabók*, 395.

³³ Jesch 1996, 81.

³⁴ Jesch 1996, 82. For a thorough analysis and discussion of these other female settlers see: Chris Callow, ‘Putting Women in Their Place? Gender, Landscape, and the Construction of *Landnámabók*’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 7 (2011), 7–28.

³⁵ Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘The Development of Old Norse Textual worlds: Genealogical Structure as a Principle of Literary Organisation in Early Iceland’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 92:3 (1993), 372–385, at 376.

³⁶ *Íslendingabók*, 28.

Gissurarson.³⁷ Ari's *Íslendingabók*, in which Auðr is named among the four most prominent settlers of Iceland, is in short a history of Iceland and its Church. The focus in this work is mostly on ecclesiastics: missionaries, bishops and their families. It is in accordance with this that Ari mentions his Christian foremother. The same reasoning could be applied to the prominence given to Auðr in *Landnámabók*. Unfortunately, Ari's original text of *Landnámabók* has not survived and we can only speculate as to whether or not he included details of Auðr's burial. On top of that, Ari died in 1148 and could not have been familiar with the aforementioned Old Christian legislation as they are preserved now. Contrary to Ari, Haukr Erlendsson—the author of *Hauksbók*³⁸—was well acquainted with law texts. According to a letter from 1311 he was a law speaker at the Gulaping in Norway.³⁹ Like Ari, Haukr claimed genealogical connections with Auðr. In the last chapter of *Eiríks saga rauða*, a genealogy is appended in which Haukr traces back his lineage to Þorfinnr karlsefni.⁴⁰ So, two texts included in *Hauksbók* deal with Haukr's foremother: *Landnámabók* and *Eiríks saga rauða*. Haukr was an influential man both in Iceland and at the Norwegian court. His claim to be connected to Auðr would have justified and reinforced his status and place among the Icelandic and Norwegian elite of late thirteenth and early fourteenth-century Iceland. Margaret Clunies Ross explains that Haukr's motivation to sponsor and write *Hauksbók* is derived:

not only from Icelandic family pride in being well connected, but also from the desire to assert Icelandic equality with overtly hierarchical foreign societies, and perhaps importantly [...] from intra-Icelandic rivalry between powerful families who competed to develop the most impressive lineage.⁴¹

Unfortunately, there is a lacuna in *Hauksbók* where Auðr's burial would have been related. However, thanks to the Sturlubók version of *Landnámabók* we can reconstruct the missing text. Sturlubók is named after Sturla Þórðarson (1214–1284) and, like Haukr, Sturla was a lawman.⁴² Even though Sturla had been a law speaker, he still ascribed this “*flæðarmál*”-burial to Auðr. In this case it might refer to an older Christian custom which went out of fashion once Christianity was officially instated in Iceland (ca. 999–1000). Or, it might never have been a widespread custom, rather being a legend attached specifically to Auðr. The Christian views expressed in the *Homiliu-bók* and the lack of hallowed land in Iceland at the time of Auðr's death, might explain the preferred place of burial. Unfortunately, there are no other comparable examples of Christian burials in *Landnámabók* to give us a satisfactory explanation or to further illustrate this early Christian burial practice. From other

³⁷ *The Book of Settlements; Landnámabók*, Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards trans., University of Manitoba: Winnipeg 1972, 3.

³⁸ *Hauksbók* is one of the three extant medieval manuscripts of *Landnámabók*. The other two are Sturlubók and Melabók respectively. Jakob Benediktsson, ‘Formáli’, in *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, v-cliv*, at l–li.

³⁹ *Hauksbok udgiven efter de Arnamagnæanske Handskrifter no. 371, 544 og 675, 4^o samt forskellige papirhandskrifter*, Finnur Jónsson and Eiríkur Jónsson eds., Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab: København 1892–1896.

⁴⁰ *Hauksbók*, 444.

⁴¹ Clunies Ross 1993, 380.

⁴² Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl, *The Incorporation and Integration of the King's Tributary Lands into the Norwegian Realm, c. 1195–1397*, Alan Crozier trans. (The Northern World, 53), Brill: Leiden 2011, 155.

sources we know the importance to the early Christian Icelanders of being buried in consecrated ground. It comes up in *Eiríks saga rauða*, which Haukr Erlendsson also copied in his Hauksbók compilation, in the plague-and-walking-dead episode in Greenland.

These practices will not do which have been followed here in Greenland after the coming of Christianity: burying people in unconsecrated ground with little if any service said over them. I want to have my corpse taken to a church, along with those of the other people who have died here.⁴³

This episode stresses the importance of an appropriate Christian burial practice. *Eiríks saga rauða* goes on to describe the common burial practice when people died in Greenland and various reasons prevented immediate burial in a Christian cemetery or church.

It had been common practice in Greenland, since Christianity had been adopted, to bury people in unconsecrated ground on the farms where they died. A pole was set up on the breast of each corpse until a priest came, then the pole was pulled out and consecrated water poured into the hole and a burial service performed, even though this was only done much later.⁴⁴

This burial practice draws parallels with Auðr's burial. There could be significance to not being in perpetually wet ground, but rather specifically being buried in ground that is wet at high tide. Rather than simply water, the image that emerges here is one of washing. The ocean tide washes over Auðr's burial site purifying or consecrating it. However, Auðr's burial is still different from the burial practice described in *Eiríks saga rauða*. While the latter recounts the settlement of Greenland and its conversion to Christianity in late tenth century to early eleventh century, *Landnámabók* recounts the settlement of Iceland in the late ninth to early tenth century prior to its conversion. In *Eiríks saga's* Greenland, there are Christian priests, a church at Eiríksfjorðr and most of the settlers have adopted Christianity. In *Landnámabók* a majority of the first settlers are non-Christian. Auðr remains highly regarded and respected nonetheless, yet her Christian faith separates her from the community that remained faithful to the old gods. She is a liminal character. With her unique and unusual burial she indicates that, as a Christian, she is outside normal society. Bearing in mind these different Christian burial practices described in twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts, it was important to depict the unique Christian burial of a respectable ancestor who lived in a heathen era.

The image of Auðr these men present to us here is one stressing first and foremost her worldliness, adding her spirituality as a side note: Auðr as a Christian settler.

⁴³ “Er þat engi háttir sem hér hefir verit á Groenlandi síðan kristni kom hér, at setja men niðr í óvígða mold við litla yfirsöngva. Vile k mik láta flytja til kirkju ok aðra þá men sem hér hafa andask.” *Eiríks saga rauða*, 419. Translated by Keneva Kunz in *The Vinland Sagas*, 23–50, at 38.

⁴⁴ “Sá hafði háttir verit á Groenlandi síðan kristni kom út þangat, at men váru grafnir þar á böenum er men önduðusk í óvígðri moldu. Skyldi þar setja staur upp af brjósti, en síðan er kennimenn kómu til, þá skyldi kippa upp staurnum ok hella þar í vígðu vatni ok veita þar yfirsöngva, þótt þat væri miklu síðar.” *Eiríks saga rauða*, 420. Translated by Keneva Kunz in *The Vinland Sagas*, 38.

Laxdæla saga and its Story

The image of Auðr as a Christian settler has a more secularized counterpart in the second tradition, which is only preserved in *Laxdæla saga*. The saga differs from *Landnámabók* in that it does not mention a change of faith, the erection of crosses on a hill or that Auðr says prayers there. In fact, it appears to overlook any references to religion where it concerns Auðr. The account of Auðr's last days parallel that of *Landnámabók* to a certain degree. The chapter in which Auðr's last days are related in the saga is interesting and detailed. As in *Landnámabók*, Auðr has grown old, but her influence and standing have not diminished. As mentioned above, her final matriarchal act is to arrange the marriage of her favourite grandson, the promising Óláfr *feilan* to a woman called Álfðís. Auðr prepares a lavish bridal feast and invites the leading men from other districts around Iceland. On the day of the feast, she gets up by midday and greets all her guests with great honour, thanking them for travelling such long distances. During the course of the feast, Auðr announces that it is her wish for Óláfr to inherit Hvammur and her land-holdings. After this, she retires to her bed, but the bridal feast continues and men drink through the evening. The next morning, when Óláfr goes to Auðr's bed-chamber, he finds her dead, sitting upright in her bed.

And the day after Óláfr *feilan* went into the sleeping chamber of Unnr, his grandmother; and as he entered the room, Unnr was sitting up against pillows; she had passed away.⁴⁵

Auðr's knowledge of her imminent death is not made explicit as was the case in *Landnámabók*. Furthermore, *Laxdæla saga* describes her passing away while sitting upright. Though this might have been how they slept, as not all deaths in the sagas are depicted in this fashion. Her death bears resemblance to the deaths of Skalla-Grímr in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*⁴⁶ and of Þórólfr *bægifótr* in *Eyrbyggja saga*⁴⁷. All three are represented sitting in an upright position, though the depiction of Auðr's death differs slightly from the deaths of Skalla-Grímr and Þórólfr *bægifótr*. While Auðr is highly respected and retires quietly to bed, these two male characters are known to have flammable personalities. They retire to bed feeling angry and disgruntled. These three characters all have very strong personalities. So strong it seems that they remain sitting up even after they have died. For the male characters this might imply that it is somehow a more honourable way to pass if you have to die at home and not in battle. In Auðr's case, the text implies that she has dignity both in life and death.

There are several other differences here with the information found in *Landnámabók* regarding her burial and the preceding feast. It does not mention how long the bridal feast lasts, nor how long the funeral feast lasts. Although she does not predict her own death here, she appoints Óláfr as the sole beneficiary of her estate in

⁴⁵ "En um daginn eptir gekk Óláfr feilan til svefnstofu Unnar, frændkonu sinnar; ok er hann kom í stofuna, sat Unnr upp við hœgending; hon var þá ǫnduð." See *Laxdæla saga* in *Laxdæla saga, Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar, Stúfs þáttir*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson ed. (Íslensk fornrit, 5), Hið Íslenska fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1934, 1–248, at 13.

⁴⁶ *Egils saga*, Bjarni Einarsson ed., Short Run Press Limited: Exeter 2013, 99–100. Available online at http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Egla/Egils_saga.pdf.

⁴⁷ *Eyrbyggja saga*, 91–92.

front of the guests at the end of the bridal feast. Similar to *Landnámabók*, she passes away during the night and thus Óláfr's wedding feast becomes her wake. *Laxdæla saga* relates how Auðr's corpse was conveyed to a mound which had been prepared for her and that she was laid in a ship in the mound with a great deal of treasure.

And on the final day of the feast Unnr [=Auðr] was carried to the grave mound that was made for her. She was laid in *a ship in the mound*, and much treasure was laid with her in the mound, and after that the mound was closed up.⁴⁸

The most significant difference between *Landnámabók* and *Laxdæla saga* is that in the latter she is not buried according to the Christian tradition, but in a ship in a burial mound. This form of burial is well known in Scandinavia, though the graves of this kind found on Iceland are more modest.⁴⁹ Among the literary generic features of *Íslendingasögur* is antiquarianism that encouraged pasting medieval conceptions about the values and practices of the pagan past upon the narratives. Lavish ship burials of pagan kings and queens like the famous ones at Oseberg and Gokstad were common in the Viking Age, but the saga discussed here was composed at least a century after this custom ceased. While there is clearly a strong cultural memory of ship-burial in the sagas (including in sagas composed as late as the eighteenth century), the audiences of the sagas would not be participants in the tradition of actual ship-burials. The author of *Laxdæla saga* clearly shows an interest in the antiquarian. His depiction of Auðr's ship-burial illustrates the allure which the pagan past held for thirteenth century Icelanders.

It might have been the author's way to underline her status and how remarkable she really was by ascribing her such a royal burial. Frands Herschend in his paper on the Oseberg burial suggests that the body of the pagan queen was exhumed in order to rebury her according to Christian rituals.⁵⁰ Could this, or the reverse be said of Auðr's burial here? Anne-Sofie Gräslund states that:

An important fact concerning burials is that they can reflect the religion of the deceased as well as that of the surviving family, and can also mirror the normative religion.⁵¹

We know from various sources that Auðr's descendants were pagan and that heathendom was the 'normative' religion during Auðr's lifetime. If we apply

⁴⁸ "Ok inn síðasta dag boðsins var Unnr flutt til haugs þess, er henna var búinn; hon var lögð í skip í hauginum, ok mikit fé var í haug lagt með henna; var eptir þat aprt kastaðr haugrinn." *Laxdæla saga*, 13. My italics.

⁴⁹ For a survey on boat-burials in Iceland, see: Kristján Eldjárn, 'Kumlategur á Hafurbjarnastöðum', *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafelags* 1949 (1943–1948), 108–122; Adolf Friðriksson et al., *Fornleifarannsóknir í S-Þingeyjarsýslu 2007 – Samantekt um vettvangsrannsóknir á Þegjandadal, Aðaldal og Reykjadal*, Fornleiastofnun Íslands: Reykjavík 2007.

⁵⁰ Frands Herschend, 'Ship Grave Hall Passage – the Oseberg Monument as Compound Meaning', in Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross eds., *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference*, Centre for Medieval Studies; University of Sydney: Sydney 2000, 142–151, at 145.

⁵¹ Anne-Sofie Gräslund, 'The Role of Scandinavian Women in Christianisation: the Neglected Evidence', in Martin Carver ed., *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300*, The Boydell Press: Woodbridge 2005, 483–496, at 485.

Herschend and Gräslund's theory to *Laxdæla*, Auðr's descendants might have decided to bury her according to pagan customs, or even to exhume her body and rebury her in the pagan fashion. In this way *Laxdæla* may simply reflect this custom. However, we should not jump to conclusions. It would be wrong to assume that the author of *Laxdæla* turned Auðr into a pagan by ascribing a boat burial to her. It needs to be pointed out here that the author does not explicitly state or mention the terms *pagan* or *Christian* when it comes to Auðr. He is suggestive and leaves it open for interpretation. He might have opted for a ship-burial out of pure antiquarian interest. Here our discussion might benefit from a narrative analysis of the entire saga, especially concerning Auðr's role(s) in it and the role of the conversion to Christianity. The saga opens with the settlement of Auðr in Breiðafjarðardalir in Iceland. The tale continues to focus on Auðr's descendants as it sketches the family history of the two main male characters, Kjartan and his foster-brother Bolli. After this brief history, we are introduced to the main female character of this story, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir. She is also related to Auðr as she is the great-great-granddaughter of Auðr's brother Björn. While the story centres on the love-triangle between Guðrún, Kjartan and Bolli, Christianity becomes a key element to the story. The Christianization of Iceland in 999/1000 and the conversion of the main characters is weaved throughout the whole saga. Auðr's descendant Kjartan converts to Christianity in Norway before it is made compulsory in Iceland. He is the first Icelander to observe Lent and dies a sacrificial death. The saga concludes with naming Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir as the first nun in Iceland and stating that she had a church built at Helgafell. By omitting Auðr's religion the author gives extra weight and meaning to these characters' conversions putting particular emphasis on Guðrún's becoming a nun.

Unlike *Landnámabók*, which lists a great number of elite landowners, *Laxdæla* focuses on the descendants of one of those first settlers. *Laxdæla*'s narrative centres around women and in particular on Guðrún. For this reason, Patricia Conroy quite rightly calls this saga, as well as *Eiríks saga*, a female biography.⁵² *Laxdæla* revolves around Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, *Eiríks saga rauða* around Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir. The overall structure of the sagas runs parallel to each other, as both sagas open with a recount of Auðr's life and her settlement in Iceland and focus on a female character. Yet, there are subtle differences between the two, which are of interest to the discussion here. In *Laxdæla saga* Auðr's religion remains opaque, whereas in *Eiríks saga rauða* she is clearly a Christian. In the former, Guðrún only becomes a Christian nun in her old age and at the end of the saga. In the latter, Guðríðr's life is analogue to Auðr's life as represented in that saga. Both Auðr and Guðríðr convert to Christianity early in their life, travel to foreign shores to settle there and remain faithful devout Christian until their dying day. The author of *Eiríks saga* seems to use Auðr to create analogies between her and Guðríðr as well as create certain continuity in the saga's narrative structure. He starts his tale with a Christian female settler in Iceland in the heathen era and continues his story with a Christian female settler in Greenland in the Christian era. At first glance this seems to be in sharp contrast with *Laxdæla*'s structure, if we only take the religious aspect into consideration. Yet, Guðrun is a kind of 'alter-ego' of Auðr in the Christian era.

⁵² Patricia Conroy, 'Laxdæla saga and Eiríks saga rauða: Narrative Structure', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 95 (1980), 116–125.

Both are strong and independent women who carve their own destiny. This creates a similar analogy and continuity in the plot of *Laxdæla* as in *Eiríks saga rauða*.

A remarkable resemblance between *Landnámabók* and *Laxdæla* is the significance of water in Auðr's burial practice. Though the saga does not indicate any specific location for her grave mound, it is possible that the mound was located near or on the beach. A ship is clearly linked to the natural element water and it could be interpreted as a metaphor for the voyage of the deceased to the afterlife. Though *Laxdæla* and *Landnámabók* employ water in contrasting ways, water is a recurrent motif in relation to Auðr's burial.

The author of *Laxdæla saga* is unknown, but some scholars believe that it was written by a woman.⁵³ As has been suggested by Guðrún Nordal at the *Fifteenth International Saga Conference*, it is more likely that the saga was patronised or even inspired by a woman or several women.⁵⁴ In her paper Nordal suggests that *Laxdæla saga* was written 'within a distinct cultural milieu in Iceland in the thirteenth-century where we find women who travelled to Norway and stayed at the royal court.'⁵⁵ The saga's unique focus on women underlines this train of thought. Guðrun Nordal argues that *Laxdæla's* author could have been Sturla Þórðarson who was inspired by his female relatives. His first wife Helga Þórðardóttir, her mother Jóriður Hallsdóttir and the latter's granddaughter Ingibjörg Sturludóttir are put forward by Nordal as possible patrons of the saga. These women owned property and had the opportunity to travel abroad, thus they show a lot of similarities with Auðr. These women might not only have served as inspiration to the author when he wrote about Auðr, but she in turn might have served as an example to thirteenth-century women. There is a link between the female character(s) portrayed in the saga, its audience and patron(s), and its author.

The image of Auðr in *Laxdæla saga* is one that stresses her worldliness and her accomplishments as a woman. This may explain why the stress is on the passing of her inheritance and her 'royal' burial—and less on her religious views. The author wants her to be remembered more because of what she did and accomplished as a woman rather than what she believed in.

Retelling the Story

In the nineteenth century new life was injected into Auðr's story through the folk legend of *Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi*. We know from a letter by Árni Magnússon dated 1690 that this legend existed and was well-known as early as the end of the seventeenth century.⁵⁶ Árni decided not to copy or write down this legend:

[...] [it] seems to me to be of little importance; there are plenty of such traditions in Iceland, about Gullbrá, who was supposed to live in Dalasýsla

⁵³ Helga Kress, 'Meget samstrevet må det tykkes deg: om kvinneopprør og genretvang i Sagaen om Laksdölene', *Historisk tidskrift* 3 (1980), 266–280; Robert Cook, 'Women and Men in *Laxdæla saga*', *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992), 34–59; Alison Finlay, 'Betrothal and Women's Autonomy in *Laxdæla saga* and the Poets' Sagas', *Skáldskaparmál* 4 (1997), 107–127.

⁵⁴ Guðrun Nordal, 'Text in Time: the Making of *Laxdæla*', in A. Mathias Valentin Nordvig, Lisbeth H. Torfing et al. eds., *The 15th International Saga Conference: Sagas and the Use of the Past*, SUN-tryk: Århus 2012, 133.

⁵⁵ Nordal 2012, 133.

⁵⁶ *Arne Magnússon – Brevveksling med Torfæus*, K. Kålund ed., Gyldendal: Copenhagen 1916, 33.

when Unnr came there, [...] that everyone believes in Iceland while it is proven by others that they are untrue; and even if they did exist, I regard the genealogies as wrong and the events as invented.⁵⁷

Two versions of the legend are extant dating from the middle of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth century. The better known one, that matters more to the discussion here, is written down by Jón Þorleifsson (1825–1860) and published in Jón Árnason's collection of folktales in 1862.⁵⁸ Jón Þorleifsson grew up at Hvammur –Auðr's farmstead—where his father Þorleifur Jónsson (1794–1883) and grandfather Jón Gíslason (1767–1854) were pastors from 1802 until 1870 continuously. The legend is longer and more detailed than most Icelandic legends. The other version is written down by Magnús Friðriksson (1862–1947) in 1940.⁵⁹ His version of the legend is preceded by an article in which he explains that his parents were neighbours of Þorleifur Jónsson, Jón's father, and Magnús used to listen to Þorleifur telling stories.⁶⁰ Jón's version opens with Gullbrá buying a piece of Auðr's land from Auðr's overseer paying with a bag of gold. This is however a trick and soon afterwards the overseer dies and Auðr abandons that plot of land. The two women never meet and the story informs us that a light from Hvammur and Auðr's crosses make Gullbrá forget her lore. After Auðr's death Gullbrá is hemmed in by Auðr's grave on one side and the crosses at Krosshólaborg on the other side. Because of this, she moves away from Akur to a remote part of the dale. Whenever she has to go up the dale, she does so blindfolded. One day the blindfold falls off and she is blinded by the light from the crosses. Soon afterwards she dies and becomes a ghost. The legend continues to focus on Skeggi, a pagan, who fights of the ghost of Gullbrá and orders a church to be built when he finally overcomes Gullbrá's ghost. In Jón's version Gullbrá is alive during the same time as Auðr and is a ghost in Skeggi's lifetime. In Magnús' version there is no mention of Auðr as the story is situated around 1000 with Gullbrá being alive at the same time as Skeggi.

Only Jón's version is of interest to us now. The legend seems to take *Landnámabók's* account as its basis and builds further on that by adding more details and providing us with some motivations for Auðr's actions and wishes. Here the tale clearly takes a stand against paganism and witchcraft. The site of the three crosses where Auðr goes to worship in this legend protect the surrounding area from Gullbrá's evil influence.

[T]here she had put *three crosses* on the edge of the mountain and since then it is called *Crossgully* and she said Gullbrá's witchcraft would not gain possession of these crosses when she [=Auðr] was alive.⁶¹

Auðr is very aware of the growing influence of paganism on her family and neighbours. By raising three crosses and saying prayers, she tries to ward it off.

⁵⁷ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey* (Yale Germanic Studies, 1), Yale University Press: New Haven 1964, 8–9.

⁵⁸ Jón Þorleifsson 1862, 146–150.

⁵⁹ Friðriksson 1940, 88–111.

⁶⁰ Friðriksson 1940, 88–89.

⁶¹ “[Þ]ar lét hún setja *krossa þrjá* á fjallsbrúnina og heitir það síðan *Krossgil* og kvað hún fjölkynngi Gullbrár eigi mundi yfir komast krossa þessa að sér lifandi.” Jón Árnason 1862, 147. My italics.

Although the legend goes into a lot of detail about the on-going struggle between the Christian Auður and the witch Gullbrá, it fails to mention anything about the wedding or burial feast as features in *Landnámabók* and *Laxdæla saga*. As Kemp Malone says:

It is interesting to note that the striking account of Auður's last entertainment, given briefly in *Landnámabók* and more fully in *Laxdæla*, does not appear in our story (aka the folk legend). Its absence indicates that our story represents a tradition in which Auður's Christianity was emphasized at the expense of her worldliness.⁶²

Indeed, there is no mention of the events preceding her death. However, the legend almost repeats word for word her last wishes as described in *Landnámabók*.

Before Auður died she told that she didn't want to be buried in unconsecrated ground, but said she was afraid of pagan behaviour and she requested *to bury her near the water's edge*. There where she lies is now called Auður's Stone.⁶³

She requests to be buried at the flood mark. As the quote above illustrates, Jón Þorleifsson is interested in the actual physical landmarks of the past. Of 'Auðarstein' he says that it is still the general tidemark at Hvammsfjörður so that at springtide the sea first breaks on the stone.⁶⁴ According to the legend her final resting place proves to be very strategically positioned. Her piece of land is confined between the three crosses and her grave, thus creating a protective barrier around all who live on that piece of land. As Kemp Malone points out, there are about fourteen place-names mentioned throughout the course of the tale.⁶⁵ Most of these place-names are related to Gullbrá and are explained in some detail. The story also opens with a description of Hvammur and continues to state:

Various places there in the dale are named after Gullbrá, who was thought to have been the first to live at Akur, and this story of the west country is current about her⁶⁶.

The story clearly focuses on Gullbrá and not specifically on Auður, and that is most apparent in the extensive use of place-names related or connected to Gullbrá. However, Malone does not go into any detail on his observation. In his article, Magnús Friðriksson informs us that the main purpose for Jón Þorleifsson to write down the story was a toponymic one as Jón thought that a lot of the history around place-names got lost to future generations.⁶⁷

Jón Þorleifsson also introduces a new element to Auður's story: her influence, or intervention, after her death. The legend continues to explain that even after her

⁶² Malone 1942, 63.

⁶³ "Áður Auður andaðist mælti hún svo fyrir að hún eigi vildi liggja í óvígðri moldu, en kvaðst óttast yfirgang heiðninnar og bað því að *grafa sig í flæðarmáli*. Heitir þar nú Auðarsteinn er hún liggur." Jón Árnason 1862, 147. My italics.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 147.

⁶⁵ Malone 1942, 65.

⁶⁶ Malone 1942, 58.

⁶⁷ Friðriksson 1940, 88.

death the three crosses and her grave protect the area that they encircle. The three crosses shine brightly according to Gullbrá the witch. The light that they emit should be interpreted symbolically, as is the case with water in *Landnámabók* and *Laxdæla*. The ongoing conflict between the Christian Auðr and the witch Gullbrá is retained in the dichotomy between light and darkness. The conflict between light and darkness is a recurrent motif in the Bible.⁶⁸ As a priest Jón must have been familiar with this Biblical imagery. The light emitted by the crosses becomes so unbearable to Gullbrá that she is forced to move to a nearby gully which is the narrowest and darkest spot in that part of Iceland. Gullbrá is so frightened of the light that she does not dare cross the land without wearing a blindfold.

[S]he took the veil from her eyes [...], but at the same time the crosses on the edge of the slope came into her sight. She cried aloud saying that *an unbearable light* struck her eyes, [...]. She dwelt there for a while, *blind and in great discomfort*, until she fell seriously ill.⁶⁹

As is typical of a hagiographic account, Jón gives a description of the deeds and miracles performed by Auðr before and after death. The legend informs us that a blinding light shines from her grave mound and the crosses that she raised. This light not only protects the surrounding area, it banishes Gullbrá to a dark grove. Eventually, the light blinds her. It makes her ill and she passes away soon afterwards. This scene bears resemblance to a particular scene in *Laxdæla saga*. Towards the end of the saga, Guðrún becomes very religious and says prayers at the church. Her granddaughter Herdís dreams about a witch who tells Herdís that Guðrún's tears burn her all over. The following morning Herdís tells her grandmother about her dream and under the floorboards of the church they dig up blackened bones of the dead witch.⁷⁰ Both Auðr and Guðrún's Christian faith have a 'burning' effect on the witches. Auðr's burns out the sight from Gullbrá's eyes and kills her, Guðrún's burns the bones of the dead witch.

This legend does not only focus on the battle between Christianity and witchcraft, good and evil, light and darkness, but also on miracles. And one might be as bold as to claim that this legend comes close to a 'legenda' in the true Christian sense of the word. Did Jón write this legend down to develop pilgrimages to Hvammur? We know that Auðr's burial site is named and the location is clearly situated in the legend. If so, the legend might serve as a valuable record of local history and as evidence of a popular cult or tradition. Throughout Icelandic history, Auðr's homestead at Hvammur was an important place. It was the birthplace of Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), the famous politician, historian and poet of the Sturlung family. Another well-known resident was Árni Magnússon (1663–1730) who was brought up by his grandparents at Hvammur. His grandfather Ketill Jörundsson and his uncle Páll Ketilsson were priests at Hvammur. From mid-sixteenth century up until the present it has served as a priest's residence. Two of these priests are related to Jón Þorleifsson, the author of the folk legend. It might

⁶⁸ Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, et al. eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press 1998, 509.

⁶⁹ “[H]ún þreif skýluna frá augum sér [...], en í sömu svipan blöstu við henni *krossarnir á hlíðarbrúninni*. Æpti hún þá hástöfum, sagði að óþolandi birtu legði í augu sér, [...]. Dvaldi hún þar um hríð *blind við óhægð mikla* þar til hún tók sótt þunga.” Jón Árnason 1862, 148. My italics.

⁷⁰ *Laxdæla saga*, 223–224.

have been one of his father's stories that Jón has written down here. Apart from telling stories and having a keen interest in (local) history, we know that his father made some great reforms in the Church.⁷¹ Though few of these reforms seem to have taken place before the folk legend was published by Jón Árnason in 1862, as can be deduced from the account by Sabine Baring-Gould of his stay at Hvammur on 23rd of July 1862.

We stopped the night at Hvammr, a little parsonage planted under a precipice of dark rock. The old priest was an enthusiast on the subject of Icelandic history, and was able to give me some curious information corroborating the statements in some of the Sagas. [...] The old man showed me a parchment MS. history of the parish, written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, [...]. The church contains little of real interest except a font basin of brass stamped with the Annunciation, and a fine brass chandelier.⁷²

By writing this legend Jón Þorleifsson seems to validate the existence and importance of Hvammur as a landmark in the Icelandic Church history. The legend's significance and impact can only be fully established with a thorough investigation of Hvammur's church history after 1862, its place and its importance in the overall Church history of Iceland.

The nature of this legend shapes the image of Auðr. The accident with Gullbrá losing her blindfold mentioned before is personified in a battle between the Christian Auðr and the witch Gullbrá. Auðr is portrayed as an individual imbued with the sacred. Kemp Malone says that we may go as far as to call Auðr an incipient saint.⁷³ Auðr's depiction in the folk legend is indeed one close to sainthood.

Once again, a parallel can be drawn here with Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga*. It is almost as if the figure of Auðr here has emerged with the figure of Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga*. The latter is depicted as a kind of "incipient saint" when it is stated that she was the first nun and anchoress on Iceland. From my discussion above, similar merging of different motifs from the medieval tradition (both from *Landnámabók* and *Laxdæla saga*) occur in this folk legend. Both Árni Magnússon and Magnús Friðriksson attest that oral tradition has moulded Auðr's story into this legend that has been written down.

Conclusion

I have shown here that stories about Auðr have been told since the very beginning of writing in Iceland, and that they have evolved over the centuries. Some details have been added during the tradition and various aspects have been emphasised according to the norms and expectations of the time when the sources were produced. In this brief overview I have discussed three different traditions on Auðr's religion as they survived, were recorded and preserved to us. Two strong traditions still stand today. One, in *Landnámabók*, stresses Auðr as a Christian settler. The other, in *Laxdæla saga*, presents us with a more secularized image of her: Auðr as a strong and independent female settler among the almost exclusively male primary settlers.

⁷¹ Friðriksson 1940, 89.

⁷² Sabine Baring-Gould, *Iceland: Its Scenes and Sagas*, Signal books: Oxford 2007, 330.

⁷³ Malone 1942, 63.

In the nineteenth century, one of these stories has grown fat on the retelling through the legend or 'legenda' *Gullbrá og Skeggi* leaving out all her worldly accomplishments as well as emphasizing and shedding new light on her Christian faith. Her story is still very much alive today through these. To this day, Auðr's tale continues to be told and retold, shaped and reshaped. The persistence with which these sources continue to survive and the mere existence of these alternative traditions testify what an exceptional woman Auðr must have been, and still is believed to have been. These various images of her show us two alternative and conflicting religious identities, that identities change over time and context, and that these identities when exceptional enough continue to be remembered and retold. Hers truly is a never-ending story.

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