

The never ending story of Auður/Unnur djúpúðga Ketilsdóttir

Cultural memory and religious identity

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Abstract

When individuals and families chose to emigrate from Viking Age Scandinavia, 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 faithful to the old pagan beliefs, some converted to Christianity prior to their arrival on Iceland. The early settlers of Iceland were both pagans and Christians.

Medieval Icelandic literature recounts stories of both pagans and Christians settling in Iceland, though none of these stories is as strange as that of Auður/Unnur djúpúðga Ketilsdóttir. The question of Auður's religion is an interesting one and a puzzle at that. Two traditions exist parallel to one another. The first tradition is transmitted through *Landnámabók*, *Íslendingabók* and several *Íslendingasögur*. According to these sources she 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 and has survived. It is preserved in the Icelandic folk legend *Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi* written down by Jón Þorleifssonar. The other tradition is preserved only in *Laxdæla saga*. In this saga Auður, who is named Unnur here, remains pagan and is buried accordingly. These alternative traditions form a good example of the difference between real and constructed memory of Viking and religious identity. They illustrate how cultural memory and religious identity are shaped, altered and extended over time.

This paper will not attempt to determine which of these traditions is real, but will give an overview of the alternate traditions as they are preserved, how these were modified, why and how these alternate religious identities were created. The discussion will focus on religious and funerary customs.

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Primary sources:

- A. *Landnámabók* and the family sagas are cited from the series Íslenzk Fornrit published in Reykjavík by Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag. The English translation of these texts are cited from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* published in Reykjavík by Leifur Eiriksson Publishing. I refer to the following individual sagas:

Eiríks saga rauða. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Matthías Þórðarson (eds.). In: *Eyrbyggja saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 4. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1935. Pp. 195-237.

Eirik the Red's saga. Keneva Kunz (trans.). In: *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders I*. Reykjavík: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997. Pp.1-18.

Eyrbyggja saga. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Matthías Þórðarson (eds.). Íslenzk fornrit 4. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1935. Pp. 3-184.

The saga of the people of Eyri. Judy Quinn (trans.). In: *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders V*. Reykjavík: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997. Pp.131-218.

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The saga of Grettir the Strong. Bernard Scudder (trans.). In: *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders II*. Reykjavík: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997. Pp.49-191.

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Laxdæla saga. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (ed.). Íslenzk fornrit 5. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1934.

The saga of the people of Laxardal. Keneva Kunz (trans.). In: *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders V*. Reykjavík: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997. Pp.1-120.

- B. The folklegend about Auður and Gullbrá is taken from the collection of Jón Árnason. The text has been translated into several languages. I make use of two English translations.

Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi. Jón Árnason (coll.). In: *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri I*. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1862. Pp. 146-150.

Gold-Brow. Jón Árnason (coll.), George E. J. Powell, and Eiríkur Magnússon (trans.). In: *Icelandic legends I*. London: Richard Bentley, 1864. Pp. 113-120.

Audur and Gullbrá and Skeggi. Malone, Kemp (trans.). In: *Scandinavian studies presented to George T. Flom*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1942. Pp. 57-65.