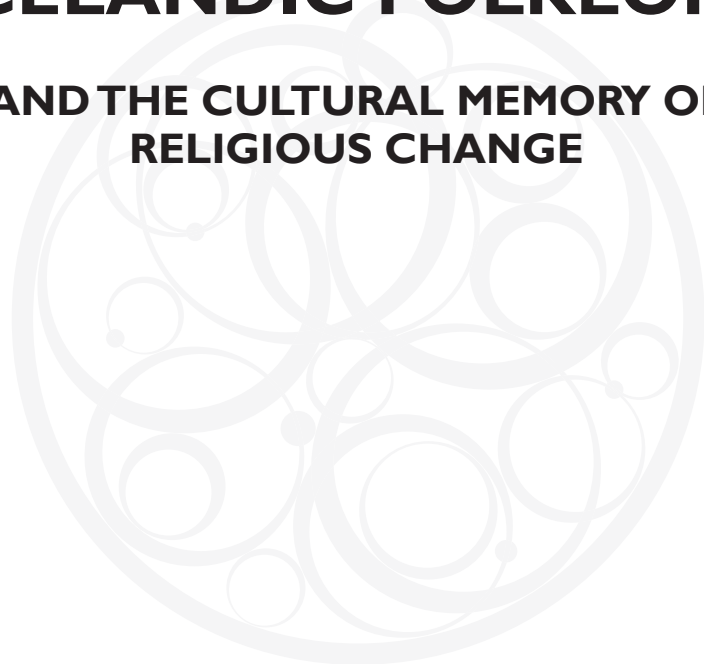


ICELANDIC FOLKLORE

**AND THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF
RELIGIOUS CHANGE**



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ICELANDIC FOLKLORE

AND THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

by
ERIC SHANE BRYAN

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We have all forgotten our names.

—G. K. Chesterton



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PREFACE

THERE IS SOMETHING inherently offensive about the study of folklore. Inevitably, the student of folklore becomes either an imposter, an opportunist, or (most often) both, because they presume to project objectivity upon something that was never meant to be objectified. The search for such objectivity, further, is an endeavour doomed from the start. Folk stories, as one part of folklore, can never be objectified in the way the student would hope; the folk story is the action being done, not an object upon which something is done. Once it becomes the object, it ceases to be folklore. Scholars normally call this kind of agency performance, yet when it is objectified, the performance must be torn from both the performers of the action—the storytellers, the singers, the dancers, the actors—and the recipients of the action—the hearers, the audience, the cultural life in which the folklore acts. Nor is it enough for the student of folklore to remain quiet and still and allow the story to speak for itself, without interruption or analytical lens, because it is not possible to hear or read any story without also becoming a participant in it. The human mind will always participate in the story being told. This much, at least, we know for sure. The best the student of folklore can hope for, perhaps, is to participate in a specific way: by telling the story ... and then by telling the story of the story. This volume represents an effort to participate thus in five of the greatest stories ever told in the northern world.

This book attempts to understand the origins and development of religious belief in Iceland and greater Scandinavia through the lenses of five carefully selected Icelandic folktales collected in Iceland during the nineteenth century. Each of these five stories has a story of its own: a historical and cultural context, a literary legacy, influences from beliefs of all kinds (orthodox and heterodox, elite or lay), and modalities (oral or written) by which the story was told. These factors leave an imprint—sometimes discernable, sometimes not—upon the story, and when that imprint is readable, the legacies and influences upon these stories come alive to illuminate a tapestry of cultural memory (that is, a society's perception of itself, its past, and its prospects for the future) and cultural development that might otherwise be hidden from the reader's eyes. So much is the aim of this book: to tell the story of five great stories.

It remains only to be added that I hope any of the offences that inevitably accompany a study of folklore will here be forgiven by virtue of the deep appreciation and wonder I hold for these (and all) Icelandic folktales, and for the people and the land from which they come.

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Eric Shane Bryan
Saint Louis, Missouri
February 14, 2020

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INTRODUCTION: STORIES, MEMORIES, AND MECHANISMS OF BELIEF

Cultural Memory and the Development of Belief

This book traces the origins and development of five post-Reformation Icelandic folktales in an attempt to understand cultural memories of Christianization and Reformation in Iceland and elsewhere in the North. While the study of cultural memory has in recent years become a keen interest for scholars of the medieval North,¹ relatively little attention has been given to the cultural memory of the post-medieval period, and even less consideration has been given to what post-medieval folk stories might contribute to memory studies.² The present book seeks to fill that gap by drawing connections between Icelandic folktales collected during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—with special attention given to Jón Árnason's vast collection of tales published in 1862 and 1864—and their earlier counterparts in Old Norse-Icelandic sagas and Eddic poetry. The five Icelandic folktales that anchor the following chapters were selected because they meet criteria that set them apart as especially useful lenses through which to view the diachronic developments of cultural memory in Iceland: (1) each tale has deep and discernible roots in literary history, folkloristic development, and theological undercurrents not only in Iceland but throughout Scandinavia; (2) each displays a distinct concern for one of five fundamental aspects of religious belief (respectively, death and mourning, gender, supernatural attendance, sacred spaces, and the renewal of self); and (3) the development of each tale shows evidence of a demonstrable transformation over time of how those fundamental aspects of belief are perceived within cultural memory. Since discernible vectors can

¹ For some important examples, see Sverrir Jakobsson, "Conversion and Cultural Memory in Medieval Iceland," *Church History* 88 (2019): 1–26; *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, 2 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018); *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell, and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014); and "Memory and Remembering: Past Awareness in the Medieval North," ed. Pernille Hermann and Stephen A. Mitchell, special issue, *Scandinavian Studies* 85, no. 3 (2013).

² Important exceptions to this rule are Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir's "Cultural Memory and Gender in Iceland from Medieval to Early Modern Times," *Scandinavian Studies* 85 (2013): 378–99; Sofie Vanherpen's "Remembering Auðr/Unnr djúp(a)uðga Ketilsdóttir: Construction of Cultural Memory and Female Religious Identity," *Mirator* 14 (2013): 61–78; and my "Prospective Memory of Death and the Afterlife," *Neophilologus* 103 (2019): 543–60.

be articulated from these tales backwards into literary history and cultural memories of the past,³ they illuminate the development of Icelandic cultural memory from the medieval to the post-medieval period, for, as will be argued in the following pages of this book, folktales do not change without purpose; they rather transform in response to the cultural, religious, and interpersonal influences around them. These narratives can therefore reveal elements of a society's cultural development that would otherwise go unnoticed if one looks only at more traditionally conceived historical evidence.

More specifically, viewing Icelandic cultural memory through the lens of folklore helps illuminate some of the most significant and long-standing questions regarding the relationship between the beliefs of the lay person and the doctrines of orthodoxy: *How close are the beliefs of the lay person to the doctrines of the Church? What is the relationship between post-conversion Christian (and, later, post-Reformation Lutheran) beliefs and the pre-Christian pagan beliefs of the medieval North?* And, finally, *How accurately do later, post-conversion (or post-Reformation) folk narratives represent the convictions and beliefs of those persons outside the realm of the elite (literate) classes?* As Stephen A. Mitchell recently stated, "Folklore and 'memory' (in all its different varieties) are largely inseparable, even, one might say, helpmates."⁴ As helpmates to memory, then, the five stories (and the corresponding aspects of belief) that anchor the following chapters allow for a comparative, diachronic assessment of the developing cultural memory of belief in Iceland. The following assessment of these five anchor narratives proceeds by considering them on three axes: (1) connections with international folktale types and motifs; (2) connections with theological and historical events that occurred in Iceland and beyond as the region experienced Christianization and Reformation; and (3) connections to the literature and poetry of the Old Norse/medieval Icelandic world. An assessment along these three axes enables a test of the hypothesis that, while it may reasonably be expected that fringe and heterodox beliefs as represented in these folktales would be an attempt to undermine or outright reject established religious institutions, these indications of heterodoxy instead reflect an inclination to create a unified belief system that incorporates both the institutional (i.e., Christian) religious doctrine and the native landscape of belief.

The specific outcomes of this assessment and how they relate to the above hypothesis will be borne out in the subsequent chapters of this book. The remainder

³ Gísli Sigurðsson takes up a similar perspective in consideration of the value of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, whose composition (it may be added here) has a similar makeup as might be observable in a later collection of folktales. See Gísli Sigurðsson, "Past Awareness in Christian Environments: Source-Critical Ideas about Memories of the Pagan Past," *Scandinavian Studies* 85 (2013): 400–10 (especially 408–10).

⁴ Stephen A. Mitchell, "Folklore Studies," in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, 2 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 1:101. See also Mitchell's "Orality and Oral Theory," in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, 2 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 1:120–31.

of this introductory chapter will be dedicated to establishing the scope and scholarly context for the following chapters, particularly regarding three key factors: a framework for cultural memory and its application to Old Norse-Icelandic studies, a brief outline of Reformation history and theology relevant to post-Reformation folk narratives, and consideration of the folklore sources that make up the heart of this study.

Cultural Memory in Iceland and Abroad

The question of a tension between lay and ecclesial beliefs throughout these religious developments has long been a point of contention amongst scholars. In the broader context of medieval and early modern Europe, scholars have been divided on the question of how closely the beliefs and cultural views of the elite aligned with those of the masses. Some scholars, on the one hand, argue for a stark differentiation between a clerical elite and a much larger “folk” culture,⁵ while others vigorously reject the notion of a conflictive polarity between two cultures, arguing that the sources that would support such a polarity are in fact scarce and that many more reflect a culture struggling to understand Christianity rather than oppose it.⁶ Recently, Richard Firth Green has argued for a “state of hostility, or at least deep suspicion, existing between representatives of the great tradition [of the educated few] and those espousing such aspects of the little tradition [of the uneducated masses] as a belief in fairies.”⁷ In fact, argues Green, “vernacular culture (that is to say, the culture of the little tradition) was far from having lost its power to resist in the Middle Ages despite the church’s having stepped up its campaign against it.”⁸ The present study of Icelandic folklore bears relevance on this debate, which has been ongoing for several decades,⁹ because

5 Conceptually, at least, this historical anthropological approach is not inherently partisan on the issue of elite versus folk beliefs, but suggests that historiography can benefit from applying methodologies from the fields of anthropology, art history, literature, and folkloristics.

6 This view is chiefly represented in John Van Engen’s essay “The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 519–52, which outlines the origins and development of the issue. See also Alexander Murray, “Confession as a Historical Source in the Thirteenth Century,” in *The Writing of History: Essays Presented to Richard William Southern*, ed. R. H. C. Davis and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 275–322.

7 Richard Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 50. Green aims to nuance the notion of a high and low culture, or, as Peter Burke puts it, the “great” and “little” traditions. See Green, *Elf Queens*, 42–51, for more on this discussion.

8 Green, *Elf Queens*, 49.

9 For an appraisal of the relationship between this approach and Nordic memory studies, see Bjørn Bandlien, “History,” in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, 2 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 1:303–317 (304–5), but note that Norse proponents of the Schmitt/Le Goff perspective rarely acknowledge the reservations registered by Van Engen, “The Christian Middle Ages,” and others noted in footnote 6 above.

of the persistent question of whether medieval and post-medieval Icelandic folklore may be indicative of—if not pre-Christian then at least—heterodox Icelandic beliefs. Jean-Claude Schmitt's enticing reference to "the complex makeup of medieval culture," and "the heritage that gave birth to it: the legacies of Greco-Roman paganism ... or the 'barbarian' legacies that were brought back through the migrations of Germanic peoples and that were integrated into Christendom during the first millennium"¹⁰ may be an exciting prospect, but as John Van Engen has demonstrated, it is nearly impossible to show evidence of the kind of definitive historical connections between paganism and Christianity alluded to by Schmitt.¹¹

The study of cultural memory has provided some useful new tools to the problem, largely due to its recognition of diverse modalities of transmitting cultural memories, along with the notion of an internal/external context for those memories. Early on, James Fentress and Chris Wickham emphasized the transmissible quality of "social memory,"¹² to use their terminology, saying that in order for a memory to be "social," it must have some modality by which it can be felicitously distributed throughout a society.¹³ Both narrative and visual modalities function as viable means of such transmission, but in both cases the memory conveyed (rather than the medium of transmission) must remain the central subject of study.¹⁴ To understand the modality of transmission, Fentress and Wickham envisioned an internal and external context in which cultural memory might be transmitted. The external context depends upon a specific social environment and therefore upon those cultural phenomena which are meaningful to a particular society at a particular time. The internal context, which depends more heavily upon imagery and thematic coherence, tends to remain free of a specific social context.¹⁵

For instance, one noteworthy site of the internal/external contexts of Icelandic cultural memories may be found in Ari Þorgilsson's (1068–1148) well-known deference to bishops Þorlákur and Ketill and the priest Sæmundur *fróði* (the wise) at the start of *Íslendingabók* (The Book of the Icelanders). As Sian Grønlie points out, though *Íslendingabók* may be called history by genre, "Ari creates a myth of origins for the

10 Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

11 Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages," 532.

12 For an effective discussion of the relationships between schools of social/cultural memory, see Alan Kirk, "Social and Cultural Memory," in *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, ed. Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 1–24.

13 See especially chapter 2 of James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 41–86.

14 See Carole L. Crumley, "Exploring Venues of Social Memory," in *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2002), 39–52, for more on ways of understanding the different media (venues) of cultural memory.

15 Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 72. Fentress and Wickham employ an analysis of epic narratives and what they call "fairy tales" to exemplify their distinctions. See below for my discussion of genre, however.

Icelanders involving migration over the sea and settlement in a ‘promised’ land.”¹⁶ Presuming this “myth of origins” was taken up by the Icelandic people, it would have been woven into the tapestry of the Icelandic cultural memory and carried forward through various means, and not just historical sources, like Ari’s, but through a variety of modes of communication and memory. While it may be difficult to verify definitively that Ari’s view of early Icelandic history is accurate, he is clearly concerned with (at least the appearance of) accuracy, for he refers to what would amount to the intellectual elite of Iceland at the time in the persons of Þorlákur, Ketill, and Sæmundur. All three were well known for their wisdom and learning and thus constitute an appeal to an external context for the cultural memory Ari means to communicate.¹⁷ Notably, even historians outside of Iceland during Ari’s time took notice of the care Icelanders had for history. Ármann Jakobsson notes that the great medieval historian Saxo Grammaticus (ca. 1160–1220) acknowledged Icelandic historians for their ability.¹⁸ Saxo says he has “scrutinized [Icelanders’] store of historical treasures and composed a considerable part of [his] present work by copying their narratives, not scorning, where I recognized such skill in ancient lore, to take these men as witnesses.”¹⁹ This acumen for composing and preserving “historical treasures” and “ancient lore” does not necessarily imply that Icelandic histories are more accurate than others (as Saxo seems to deduce), yet it cannot be denied that Icelanders, from the earliest recorded writings about themselves, especially valued the very types of stories and sense of self that make a study of cultural memory possible. Ari’s appeal to authority in his preface to *Íslendingabók* also represents an attempt to establish a connection with the external context in Iceland, specifically, as he aims to gain the approval of those considered wise in the country.

Sverrir Tómasson has pointed out that Ari’s appeal to church authority and his pursuit of accuracy reflect a common medieval topos evident in many such historical writings outside Iceland.²⁰ Even though they are derived from outside Iceland, these

16 Sian Grønlie, “Introduction,” in *Íslendingabók = Kristni Saga (The Book of the Icelanders = The Story of Conversion)*, trans. Sian Grønlie (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006), xxv. See also Stephen A. Mitchell’s “The Mythologized Past: Memory in Medieval and Early Modern Gotland,” in *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell, and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 155–74.

17 These must be Þorlákur Runólfsson, bishop of Skálholt (1118–1133) and Ketill Þorsteinsson, bishop of Hólar (1122–1145). Sæmundur *inn fróði* (the wise) was a priest at Oddi, in southern Iceland, who was well known for his learnedness and wisdom. He became an important figure in history and lore, and would feature in the story entitled “The Stupid Boy and the Devil,” discussed in chapter 5, below.

18 See Ármann Jakobsson, *A Sense of Belonging: Morkinskinna and Icelandic Identity, c. 1220*, trans. Fredrik Heinemann (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014), 287.

19 Saxo Grammaticus, *The Histories of the Danes, Books I–IX*, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, trans. Peter Fisher (Cambridge: Brewer, 1979), 5.

20 Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum, Rannsókn bókmenntahefðar*, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, Rit 33 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1988), 155–57. Sian Grønlie directs readers to this work in n. 4 of her translation of *Íslendingabók*.

topoi represent an internal context that remains free of any dependence upon the immediate external context localized in Iceland. The presence of such topoi not only indicates the author's concern with literary custom of the day (one modality of cultural memory), but it also speaks to a concern with the ethos with which his expressly Icelandic audience will receive his work. For the same reasons that modern scholars include footnotes and page references, Ari gives deference to the intellectual standards of his day. Despite Sverrir Tómasson's keen observations, if Ari were seeking to impress an international audience, he would have almost certainly written in Latin, and he would certainly have done much more to couch the Icelandic story within the context of global Christian missionary initiatives rather than the local.²¹ In other words, the appeal to an international topos represents an internal context, but the manner in which he applies that topos (via a localized appeal to Icelandic figures) represents an external context. Both in this instance and in more general terms, this type of interdependence upon internal and external context results in a close relationship between the communicator of the cultural memory (be they saga writer, oral storyteller, or historian) and the audience. No doubt, as Gísli Sigurðsson recently stated, "The tellers and writers of stories about the past shape the ideas of their audiences and readers about what happened, how it happened, and why it happened,"²² yet the authors of such stories (or histories, in the case of Ari) must also gain and sustain the respect of their audience in order to articulate such performative acts as Gísli describes.²³

Fentress and Wickham's presentation of internal and external contexts also illuminates one of the most important attributes of cultural memory: malleability. Cultural memories are often constructed or reconstructed decades or even centuries after the events they purport to recall, and their shaping is influenced by all manner of contemporary forces, whether political, religious, or other cultural currents. The reasons why a particular society might permit or even encourage the shaping or reshaping of certain aspects of its cultural memories offer a good opportunity for an analysis of cultural development. A study of cultural memory acknowledges a reciprocal relationship between memory and the external cultural and historical context from which it draws its vitality, yet it does not depend wholly upon that relationship for its textual analysis; it also asserts itself upon that context. This allows for the presence of cultural differences to be indicated by a study of cultural memory without the need for claiming something on a historical level. In short, cultural memory is not history, and a

21 See Grønlie, "Introduction," xxv–xxvi for a useful defence of this point.

22 Gísli Sigurðsson, "Constructing a Past to Suit the Present: Sturla Þórðarson on Conflicts and Alliance with King Haraldr *Hárfagri*," in *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell, and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 175–96 at 175.

23 See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 14–15, where Austin discusses the need for performatives to meet certain felicity conditions, without which a performative would not be valid.

study of cultural memory is not historiography. Cultural memory is rather an image of history preserved, accurately or not and by various modalities²⁴ of the transmission of meaning, within a culture. Sverrir Jakobsson has recently explored these characteristics of cultural memory with respect to Old Norse-Icelandic historical narratives about the conversion and Christianization of Iceland. Sverrir suggests that the Old Norse-Icelandic histories of conversion in Iceland are concerned not only with the establishment of church institutions and authority but “also with the development of Christian identity in Iceland and the question of whether this new religion should be an elitist endeavor connected with a limited group of people or it implied a genuine conversion of the masses.”²⁵ Sverrir concludes that while the earlier accounts of conversion attribute the change in religion to an individual or a few people, subsequent accounts became increasingly inclusive until conversion was represented in the latest versions as a nationwide phenomenon, including both the elite and humble.²⁶

Iceland’s conversion from paganism to Christianity²⁷ would clearly have been an especially important part of the cultural memory. This period marked a time when writing became an increasingly significant medium for narrative transmission,

24 Recently, Old Norse scholars Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell, and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir have taken up this notion (though they use their own terminology) of the various modalities of conveying meaning. These scholars seek to understand premodern Nordic memory from a variety of frameworks and genres: myth, history, poetry, and saga are all considered, such that their work perceives how memory is shaped, how it functions, and how is depicted in medieval Icelandic and Nordic culture. Their volume, *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, referenced several times in this Introduction, brings together a wide array of interdisciplinary approaches to the conception of memory, cultural and otherwise, in the medieval North. While memory studies do not oppose historical approaches, they pursue a different objective than does historiography. Whereas historiography seeks an account of events as they happened, memory studies pursue an understanding of how events are remembered. A review of this expansive two-volume reference work would be impossible here, but, as the foreword to the first volume states, the goal of the study is to “scrutinise the ways in which memory, remembrance, commemoration, and other forms of anamnesis (at individual, collective, and cultural levels) mattered to pre-modern Nordic cultures” (*Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, 1:xvii). This volume will be of great use to scholars of memory in the medieval North. Of special value may be the second volume, which includes a wealth of interesting primary texts and images relevant to memory studies: *Minni and Muninn*.

25 Sverrir Jakobsson, “Conversion and Cultural Memory,” 2.

26 Sverrir Jakobsson, “Conversion and Cultural Memory,” 26.

27 The conversion and Christianization of Iceland have been thoroughly discussed in scholarship and requires no further scrutiny here. Aspects of conversion and Christianization relevant to the content of the following chapters will be addressed where appropriate. For the most accessible discussion of conversion and Christianization, see Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For a broader Scandinavian context, see Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven: Yale, 2012); for a discussion of sources relevant to conversion, see Siân Duke, “Kristni Saga and Its Sources: Some Revaluations,” *Saga Book* 25 (2001): 346–66. Further discussion of Reformation and Lutheranization is given below.

but oral transmission remained vital to the communication of cultural memory.²⁸ Christianization was in full swing in Iceland by 1100, and it obviously had a tremendous impact on how and whether various pre-Christian folk beliefs persisted, due both to the increasing emphasis on written sources and the cultural dissemination of Christian doctrine and worldview. It is during this period (roughly 1100–1400) that many of the greatest of the early Icelandic family sagas and histories were composed. These remembrances and reinventions contain much about the pre-Christian past, but it must always be remembered that these sources contribute to the cultural memory of the time in which they were authored rather than the time of the narrative events.²⁹ To name just one example, the fourteenth-century short tale from *Flateyjarbók* entitled *Þiðranda þáttur ok Þórhalls*,³⁰ which narrates several supernatural competitions between Norse paganism and Christianity during the time of conversion, tells us more reliably about the cultural memory of the fourteenth century than about beliefs or events of the conversion period.³¹ Nevertheless, by viewing these earlier sources as precursors to the post-medieval sources discussed here, a diachronic image of the development of cultural memory in Iceland begins to come into focus.³²

To complicate matters further, history as we know it today has only been around since the invention of writing or, in societies that accepted the technology of writing much later, since the introduction of that technology to their society.³³ Oral societies sustained a sense of their collective pasts, presents, and prospects for the future long before the introduction of written histories. In fact, Jan Assmann has posited, contrary to expectations of the modern (literate) world, that oral societies do a better job of preserving cultural remembrances than literate societies. In oral cultures, says Assmann,

28 I will say little about the folkloric elements of this era here, but see Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *The Folk-Stories of Iceland*, rev. Einar G. Pétursson and trans. Benedikt Benediktz, ed. Anthony Faulkes, Viking Society for Northern Research, Text Series 16 (London: Viking Society, 2003), especially 71, as well as the work of Merrill Kaplan cited below in footnote 30. For a comprehensive overview of memory studies in Old Norse-Icelandic sources, see *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*.

29 See, for example, Jesse L. Byock, "Social Memory and the Sagas: The Case of *Egils Saga*," *Scandinavian Studies* 76 (2004): 299–316; Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogue with the Viking Age* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998); and, from a more historiographical perspective, see Sverre Bagge, "The Making of a Missionary King: The Medieval Accounts of Olaf Tryggvason and the Conversion of Norway," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 105 (2006): 473–513.

30 For an in-depth study of folk motifs in *Flateyjarbók*, perhaps the most important of the medieval Icelandic manuscripts, see Merrill Kaplan's monograph, *Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the Past in Four Tales in Flateyjarbók*, FFC 301 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2011).

31 See Merrill Kaplan, "Prefiguration and the Writing of History in *Þáttur Þiðranda ok Þórhalls*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 99 (2000): 379–94.

32 See my discussion of how this comparison works for *Þiðranda þáttur* in chapter 4, below (109–10 and 113).

33 Walter Ong argues that literacy is "absolutely necessary" for the development of history and other modern studies: *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 14.

cultural memory circulates in forms of commemoration that were originally bound up with rituals and festivals. As long as these rites were predominant, the knowledge that was all-important for identity was handed down through repetition. It is the very essence of all rites that they follow a given, unchanging order. Thus each performance is consistent with its predecessors, so that in illiterate societies time typically follows a circular pattern.³⁴

In his late twelfth-century *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* (An Account of the Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings), Theodoricus monachus (Þórir *munkur*) calls Icelanders “the people among whom in particular the remembrance of these matters [of the ancient history of Norwegian kings] is believed to thrive ... who preserve them as much celebrated themes in their ancient poems.”³⁵ The phrase “ancient poems” no doubt refers to Old Norse skaldic verse,³⁶ a predominantly oral art form (though many skaldic poems were later venerated in writing) with which Icelanders had considerable facility. Taken together, the comments made here by Theodoricus, and those by Saxo Grammaticus mentioned above, indicate a medieval Icelandic culture that was renowned for its strong sense of its own identity and awareness of its origins, and for its prowess in both written and oral modalities of their cultural memory.

In contrast to oral society, a literate world, according to Assmann, does not produce and sustain cultural memory but rather cultural forgetting, for “as more and more texts sank into the archival background, the written word grew increasingly into a form of forgetting, a graveyard of meanings that had once emerged from live interpretation and communication.”³⁷ This is in fact one of the challenges of working with nineteenth-century archival material: archival material, in contrast to the living cultural phenomenon of oral storytelling, may represent more a graveyard of meaning than a living tradition.³⁸ However, the relationship between orality and early literacy in Iceland is perhaps a unique one. It is clear that Iceland sustained more of a continuum between orality and literacy in both the medieval and post-medieval periods. Assmann’s view may be valid for a fully integrated literacy such as that of our modern western society,³⁹ but in a world in the early stages of a transition to literacy, as was the case in Iceland’s early history, or a world that is undergoing re-oralization, as is the case in post-medieval

34 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 72.

35 Theodoricus monachus, *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium—An Account of the Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, trans. David and Ian McDougall (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), 41.

36 See Theodoricus, *Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*, xvi–xvii.

37 Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, 80.

38 For a discussion on how to find variation in archival materials, see Jyrki Pöysä, “Variation in Archived Anecdotes,” in *Thick Corpus, Organic Variation and Textuality in Oral Tradition*, ed. Lauri Honko, Studia Fennica: Folkloristica 7 (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2000, 577–93, especially 580.

39 See again Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 14.

Iceland (see below, 17 and 38 for more), the contrast between oral and literate society was much less clearly defined.⁴⁰ Jesse Byock's work on Icelandic cultural memory (though he also uses the phrase "social memory") considers this point from the perspective of the audience. Byock suggests that the Icelandic family sagas, though written and not oral, possess reliable evidence of cultural memory because of their communal nature.⁴¹ The family sagas were not simply composed by a single person who then inflicted a creative work upon an unsuspecting audience. Even for those sagas that were conceived and penned by a single author, audiences possessed an involved knowledge of both the genealogy and geography referenced in the narratives, which meant the composers of the sagas had to work within the framework of that knowledge.⁴² Aspects of the narratives remain open for revision and creative flourishes, but the parameters enforced by the audience specify which aspects of a narrative are open to modification.⁴³ This modification speaks to the malleability of cultural memory mentioned above, yet Byock's point also recognizes that such malleability is not free to be random. Like other cultural memories, Icelandic family sagas must be validated by the community at large. Thus, two components of cultural memory—whether perpetuated by official histories or the folklife of a society, whether written or oral—work together: On the one hand, cultural memory is malleable, subject to change when the culture itself deems it necessary; on the other hand, cultural memory may not be changed at the whim of a single person. The community at large must dictate how the malleability of its own cultural memory ought to proceed through the years. In this way, cultural memory works rather like language: just as the linguistic community determines language, the remembering community determines cultural memory.

This brief overview of cultural memory and its points of contact with the medieval Icelandic world yields four fundamental conclusions about the characteristics of and assumptions about cultural memory to be carried into the following chapters:

40 See for instance, Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, "Legal Culture and Historical Memory in Medieval and Early Modern Iceland," in *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell, and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 211–30 at 213–15, and Arnved Nedkvitne, *The Social Consequences of Literacy in Scandinavia* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 72 (as cited by Agnes, 217), where open letters were often read aloud, merging the oral and the literate.

41 Byock, "Social Memory," 299–316. On "social memory," see footnote 12, above.

42 For more on this view, see Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 247–50; and Gísli Sigurðsson, "Njáls saga and Its Listeners' Assumed Knowledge: Applying Notions of Mediality to a Medieval Text," in *RE:writing: Medial Perspectives on Textual Culture in the Icelandic Middle Ages*, ed. Kate Heslop and Jürg Glauser (Zürich: Chronos: 2018), 285–94.

43 Byock, "Social Memory," 301.

1. Cultural memory may be manifest in a variety of modalities, be it visual, oral, or literate, and in a variety of genres, be it artistic, literary, historical, or folkloric: Regardless of medium or genre, cultural memory appeals to contexts both internal (as evinced by symbols, images, and topoi) and external (as evinced by appeals to its immediate cultural and historical situation).
2. Cultural memory is malleable, meaning it is not necessarily or fundamentally correspondent with actual events as they happened in history. Since a given memory might or might not coincide with historical events as they occurred in the past, that memory is free to change depending upon the needs of the society.
3. Though malleable, cultural memory also relies upon both internal and external contexts to establish its validity. The interdependence between these two contexts fosters a close relationship between the communicator of the memory (regardless of modality) and the recipients of that memory (the community that sustains the memory). Thus, the malleability of cultural memory is what makes it a worthwhile subject for examination: its disconnect with historical event makes it malleable, but its dependence upon the validation of the culture that sustains it means the cultural memories change as the culture itself changes.
4. In Iceland (and perhaps elsewhere), the production of cultural memories in early literate culture functioned similarly to the way it functioned in oral culture. (And, as will be argued below, that same interplay between literacy and orality continued well into the post-medieval period in Iceland in ways that make it a uniquely valuable location for the exploration of post-medieval cultural memory.)

Cultural memory may not be history, but it is best understood when observable in its historical context. Thus, some understanding (a complete assessment cannot be achieved here) of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods in Iceland will prove valuable to the chapters that follow. The following section offers a brief introduction to these events on both a historical and theological level.

Reformation and Lutherization: Some Context

The Reformation in Iceland, like conversion and Christianization in centuries prior, had a profound impact upon the country's developing cultural memory, even though the Icelandic Reformation has received less scholarly coverage than Christianization. Perhaps the greatest difference between the two is that the Icelandic Reformation was a much bloodier affair than the conversion process of 999/1000.⁴⁴ With a few important exceptions, the missionary, conversion, and Christianization processes were peaceful in Iceland,⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Jenny Jochens's oft-cited article on the subject of Iceland's peaceful conversion: "Late and Peaceful: Iceland's Conversion through Arbitration in 1000," *Speculum* 74 (1999): 621-55.

⁴⁵ But see Kathleen M. Self, "Remembering Our Violent Conversion: Conflict in the Icelandic Conversion Narrative," *Religion* 40 (2010): 182-92.

whereas Reformation, by comparison, all but divided the country. While the concern for the preservation of cultural memory in Iceland carries well into the post-medieval period, a tension between the ecclesiastical elite and the lay person seems even more evident in the later sources than in medieval texts. Possibly, this tension was a reflection of the hostility that accompanied the Reformation.⁴⁶ The reasons behind the violence no doubt require careful consideration,⁴⁷ but it may be sufficient here to attribute a significant portion of the cause to the much stronger presence of an outside government in Iceland than was at play during the lead up to the conversion to Christianity. To be sure, Christianity was largely ushered into Iceland from abroad, but as eager as King Ólafur Tryggvasson of Norway was to see Iceland converted to Christianity,⁴⁸ he never had a ground presence of more than a few representatives (and Iceland never provoked him enough to send more). By the time of the Reformation, however, Iceland had been a dependency of Denmark for a hundred years or so, and the Danish king exerted his authority, either by force or by administration, when he felt the need.⁴⁹ Reformation was no exception.

This foreign presence in Iceland likely prompted a transformation of the fight against Reformation, at least in part, into a fight against foreign domination as well. Jack P. Cunningham suggests that Bishop Jón Arason (1484–1550) of Hólar in the north—the last Catholic bishop in Iceland and the staunchest of opponents to Reformation—fought not just against Reformation but also against the Danish hegemony that had been in

46 There is a greater need for an overview of the events leading to the establishment of Lutheranism in Iceland than for discussion of the details of Christianization, since, in contrast to Christianization, the Reformation in Iceland has been covered much less by scholars, particularly in English. The most thorough treatments of the Reformation in Iceland may be found in Vilborg Auður Ísleifsdóttir, *Síðbreytingin á Íslandi 1537–1565* (Reykjavík: Íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1997), and in Loftur Guttormsson, ed., *Frá siðaskiptum til Upplýsingar* (Reykjavík: Alþing, 2000), a comprehensive study of the history of Christianity in Iceland and volume 3 of Hjalti Hugason and Sigurjón Einarsson's four-volume *Kristni á Íslandi* project. In English, a good starting place is Gunnar Karlsson's *Iceland's 1100 Years: The History of a Marginal Society* (London: Hurst, 2000), 128–48 and 169–72. More recently, Jack P. Cunningham has done two in-depth studies of the events leading up to the Reformation in Iceland. The first, "Jón Arason, 'the last Icelander' and the Coming of the Reformation to Iceland," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 11 (2009): 245–73, offers a study of the life of Jón Arason, the last Catholic bishop of Iceland, and the events leading up to his execution in November of 1550. Cunningham's second article on the subject, "Changing Fashions: The Coming of the Reformation to Iceland," *Reformation* 16 (2011): 65–92, is a broader study of the cultural and political influences that contributed to the Reformation in Iceland. Note that in my subsequent review, much of the basic history of events that took place leading up to Reformation in Iceland is common to all of these sources. My account below of those historical events are, consequently, drawn from these sources essentially simultaneously. For that reason, I offer these sources as a general reference for my following remarks. I will take care, however, to make further reference to specific theses made by respective authors.

47 See Cunningham's articles cited below.

48 For a recent discussion of written sources, especially pertaining to King Ólafur Tryggvason, see Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia*, 121–37.

49 Cunningham, "Jón Arason," 256–59.

place since the late fourteenth century.⁵⁰ It is at least true that the violence started at the hands of the Danish. On Whit Sunday 1539, a Danish bailiff—a rather caustic man named Didrich von Minden—and thirteen of his men ransacked the monastery on Viðey, which was taken over by the Danish government thereafter.⁵¹ The violence set a dark precedent for subsequent confrontations between Lutherans and Catholics. That same year, von Minden went on a similar errand when he and his men stopped at Skálholt to make some trouble, but they seem to have badly miscalculated the strength of Catholic sympathizers. Perhaps von Minden knew that Lutherans were secretly meeting at Skálholt and thus misperceived the situation there, but the Catholic bishop, Ögmundur, was still in charge. Despite their differences, Ögmundur apparently received von Minden and the Danish men hospitably and even warned them that the Catholic contingent in the area might be looking for a fight.⁵² Notwithstanding, von Minden and his men behaved so badly that the Catholic contingent in Skálholt eventually captured and killed the lot of them, von Minden included. The following year, a Lutheran sympathizer, Gissur Einarsson, took over at Skálholt, and in May of 1541 a Danish emissary, Christoffer Huitfeldt, arrived in Iceland with two hundred men to investigate von Minden's death, with Gissur as Huitfeldt's advocate. That same year, Huitfeldt's military force oversaw the Alþing's (the Icelandic parliament) ratification of the New Church Ordinance that had been drafted by Christian III in 1536. The ratification was attached in part to the Danish *landshjálp* (national relief) aimed at relieving Denmark's financial troubles.

Through all of this strife in the south of Iceland, the north remained solidly Catholic, but while all of these developments must have seemed like a nightmare to the much more staunchly Catholic see at Hólar, which was under Jón Arason's authority, the northerners could do little to stop what was happening in the south. Jón Arason seemed to have recognized the futility of fighting off Huitfeldt and his men, either by logic or by force, and did not attend the Alþing that year. It is difficult to say what these conflicts looked like in theological terms. Without a doubt, the early Reformers in the south of Iceland shared a conviction to pursue a Lutheran theology, but in the north—and perhaps at any distance—the violence and coercion at the hands of men like von Minden and Huitfeldt must have appeared very much like the hostile actions of a domineering and greedy foreign ruler rather than the manifestation of earnest theological conviction. Regardless, after the ratification of the New Church Ordinance in 1541, Jón Arason and his northern contingent of Catholics arranged a kind of treaty with Gissur and the Reformers in the south. The country would remain thus—divided but peaceful—until the death of Gissur in March of 1548.

50 Iceland had been subject to Norwegian rule from 1262 to 1380, but family ties ensured that King Ólafur IV (1376–1387) ruled over both Denmark and Norway in 1380 at the death of his father, Hákon VI (1340–1380). At that time Denmark assumed rule over Iceland. After Christian III emerged victorious from the Danish civil war in 1536, he quickly established Lutheranism in his realm. See Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, 83–105, for more on these developments.

51 Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, 129.

52 Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, 130.

The three years following Gissur's death would determine the outcome of the conflict between Reformers and Catholics. Jón Arason wasted no time in moving to retake control of the south. He and other priests elected a Catholic bishop, Sigvarður Halldórsson (d. 1550), to reside at the southern see, while the Lutherans elected Marteinn Einarsson (d. 1576), who had strong southern connections. Bishop Jón, two of his sons, and another hundred men then went south to stir up trouble for the southern Lutherans and Jón managed to capture the newly elected Marteinn as well as his chaplain. In the summer of 1550, Bishop Jón challenged Skálholt and, threatening to execute Marteinn, regained control of the southern see at Skálholt; he then restored the monasteries at Viðey and Helgafell.⁵³ By all appearances, Bishop Jón had achieved near-total control over the country, and all seemed lost for the Reformers.

The last remaining obstacle for Jón was Marteinn Einarsson's brother-in-law, Daði Guðmundsson, about whom—it must be added incidentally—not enough is written or known by modern scholars. Daði seems almost singlehandedly to have overcome significant military, political, social, and legal challenges to bring about one of the most important events in Icelandic history: the capture and execution of Jón Arason. We may now remember Daði as something of a villain because of his actions and disregard for legal procedure, but the fact remains that he accomplished what seemed an insurmountable task under the circumstances. He had earlier been tasked by the Danish government with arresting Bishop Jón. Until Jón came against him directly, however, Daði had either ignored the Crown's entreaties or had not felt the timing was right. Jón must have felt confident when he went south again in the autumn of 1550 to deal with Daði directly. Despite the odds overwhelmingly in Jón's favour, Daði nevertheless outmatched him in a series of deft moves, which proceeded as follows: (1) Daði managed to get out of a summons to the Alþing, where he was meant to answer to charges against him. (2) When Jón came against Daði in the fall of that year, Jón had with him several dozen of Daði's own neighbours who were ready to act on Jón's, not Daði's, behalf, but Daði managed to convince many of Jón's southern supporters to withdraw their support before the confrontation took place.⁵⁴ Having disbanded much of Jón's force without spilling a drop of blood, it must then have been easy for Daði to overcome his inferior force. (3) When Jón and his sons finally took refuge in a nearby church, Daði disregarded the sanctuary afforded by the sacred place, entered, and captured Jón and his sons. The captives were then held by Marteinn, Daði, and the Danish bailiff, Christian Skriver. Legally, Jón and his sons ought to have been kept alive through the long winter so that they could stand trial at the next Alþing, but Daði, Marteinn, and Skriver decided that it would be impossible to do so. (4) Therefore, the three captors—disregarding their legal responsibility, ignoring a decree given by a preliminary jury, and without holding a legal trial—executed Jón and his two sons by beheading. Jón had to watch as his sons were executed: Ari went first, then Björn, and finally Jón. It is said that Jón's beheading took seven strokes.

⁵³ Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, 131.

⁵⁴ Cunningham, "Jón Arason," 266.

In the following months a contingent from the north came south and hunted down and killed every Danish representative they could find.⁵⁵ This must have felt like a great victory, but the next spring (1551), King Christian III was sufficiently provoked to send two warships and about three hundred men to quell what he viewed as a rebellion.⁵⁶ Afterwards, Daði was absolved of any wrongdoing by the lawman Ormur Sturluson, who judged that Jón and his sons had been handled appropriately. Daði also received a letter from Marteinn Einarsson exonerating him and the others in his party. It may be, as Jack P. Cunningham suggests, that “Daði found the stain of guilt a difficult one to remove as he sought religious, as well as, legal absolution.”⁵⁷ Regardless of how his feelings of guilt factored into things, Daði’s pursuit of both religious and legal exoneration must have served him well in the eyes of his neighbours, but the cultural memory of a holy Catholic church persisted in Iceland for some considerable time. In the following spring, Jón’s surviving son Sigurður and daughter Þórunn received permission from Bishop Marteinn to come south to take Jón’s remains to the north. It is said that all manner of miracles followed Jón’s final journey back to Hólar.

Lutheranization and Icelandic Folk Stories

After the struggle over Reformation was won by Reformers in Iceland, the real work of religious change began. Just as we must not focus too much on a specific date of conversion to Christianity, the Reformation of the church in Iceland must be viewed as a longer process than just the proclamation of Lutheranism throughout the country. Re-education was required, and despite the fact that the theological changes implemented after the Reformation had less potency than some of the stauncher reformers would have liked,⁵⁸ early Lutheran leaders in Iceland had their work cut out for them. The bulk of the re-education effort fell to Guðbrandur Þorláksson, the bishop of Hólar from 1571 till his death in 1627. Guðbrandur, however, faced an entirely different sort of problem from the early Icelandic converts to Christianity. Two aspects of culture threatened the Lutheran church: the remains of Catholic teaching, on the one hand, and a persistent heterodoxy associated with Iceland’s ancient past on the other. The primary medium of the latter consisted of stories, songs, and poems passed from person to person and from farmstead to farmstead. Guðbrandur in fact composed his *Sálmabók* (Book of Hymns) for the express purpose of competing with the vast numbers of these tales, ballads, and songs that he perceived as heterodox. In his introduction to *Sálmabók*, he states his desire that

men might be able to put away unprofitable songs of trolls and of the [pagan] peoples of old [*Tröllla og Fornmanna*] ... such as are loved and practiced by the common folk [*Alþydu Folke*], to the displeasure of God and his angels, and to the delight and service of the Devil

55 Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland’s 1100 Years*, 133.

56 Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland’s 1100 Years*, 133.

57 Cunningham, “Changing Fashions,” 67.

58 Cunningham, “Changing Fashions,” 67.

and his messengers, such as is not seen in any other Christian land and more like the manner of Heathen men than Christian.⁵⁹

But who were these “alpýða fólk,” and how far back does their cultural memory go? Far enough, it seems, to concern the most influential church leader of the day.

At this time, Lutheranism had only just been established in Iceland, and Guðbrandur was busy educating Icelanders on the new way of doing things. He might have even felt that this contrary folk culture in Iceland was partly due to a lax treatment of heterodoxy by his Catholic predecessors. In areas of morality, certainly, the new Lutheran leadership stiffened against what was seen as immoral activities in Iceland. The *Stóridómur*, or Great Verdict, was a series of laws enacted in Iceland in 1564 meant to stamp out unacceptable behaviour that had been more or less tolerated under Catholicism. But that was a question of morality. Against competing narratives, Guðbrandur, at least, seems to have fought fire with fire, or rather verse with verse. In addition to his *Sálmabók*, he wrote a collection of religious verses, published in 1612, called *Vísnaþók Guðbrands*,⁶⁰ or *Guðbrandur's Book of Verses*, in which he attempted to redirect popular interest away from offensive secular literature and toward verses more acceptable to God.

It seems not to have worked. For the next two hundred years, subsequent religious leaders echoed Guðbrandur's grievances against secular literature.⁶¹ Priests resorted to calling upon the heads of households to prevent members of the house from indulging in suspect storytelling, but to no apparent avail. At that time, after the Reformation and long after conversion, there persisted a cultural space in which narratives of heterodox beliefs found a comfortable home. Though not alternatives to Christian religion, these narratives were seen by some as a real and perceptible threat to the laity. Church leaders fought against them, sometimes with alternative literary creation, sometimes with rhetoric, and on very rare occasions with violence. Efforts to overcome the appeal of

59 This quotation from *En nij Psalmabok* is most accessible in Driscoll 14. See, however, *En nij Psalmabok* at http://baekur.is/is/bok/000603210/0/23/Ein_ny_Psalma_Bok_Bls_23. My translation, like Driscoll's (in *The Unwashed Children of Eve*), is based on Guðbrandur Vigfússon and F. York Powell, *Corpus Poeticum Boreale: The Poetry of the Old Northern Tongue, from the Earliest Times to the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1883), 2:388, although note several small changes I have made to bring the translation closer to the original, if less agreeable aesthetically. See also Shaun F. D. Hughes's translation in "The Last Frontier: The Renaissance in Iceland, 1550–1750," *Parergon: Bulletin of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 12 (1975): 20–31.

60 In 1612, this work had the title *Ein ný vísnaþók með mörgum andlegum vísnum og kvæðum, sálmum, lofsöngvum og rímum úr heilgagri ritningu almúga fólki til gagns og góða prentuð og þeim öðrum sem slíkar vísur elska vilja og iðka Guði almáttugum til lofs og dýrðar en sér og öðrum til gagns og skemmtunar* (A new book of verses with many sacred verses and poems, psalms, hymns, and rímur from holy scriptures for the use of common folk and printed so that they can use it as they wish and pursue almighty God to his praise and glory and other uses and enjoyment).

61 For an overview of these efforts see Matthew James Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children of Eve: The Production, Dissemination and Reception of Popular Literature in Post-Reformation Iceland* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik, 1996), 13–16.

those narratives of heterodox belief seem to have produced more of an *admixture* than a total rejection of them, as post-medieval⁶² Icelanders continued to show an awareness of literary and historical cultural identity that intertwined their diverse beliefs. The seventeenth century saw the production of a stock of reproductions of Old Norse sagas, many of which had not survived from the medieval period.⁶³ Added to this literary production (or re-production), ample evidence suggests that post-medieval Iceland also experienced a lively oral transmission of remembrances of the past in the form of *rímur*.⁶⁴ These *rímur* and the Old Norse-Icelandic sagas were mainstays at the *kvöldvaka*, literally “night-wake,” a nightly (especially during the cold winter months) gathering in households in which songs, sagas, *rímur*, and religious writings were read or sung to pass the time. All of this amounted to a kind of “re-oralization” process by which stories from the medieval period re-entered the Icelandic cultural memory (if they had ever left) in the post-medieval period.⁶⁵ Thus, the vibrant cultural memory that originated in the early medieval period carried over into the post-medieval period, despite the major changes in religion and government.

During the nineteenth century, Icelandic intellectuals grew intrigued by the work being done by the Grimm brothers and others and began collecting and cataloguing folk narratives from around Iceland. There was no shortage of contributions from all over the country. Due in large part to its lively storytelling traditions, Iceland was well placed to compile one of the great collections of folklore in the nineteenth century. Icelanders Jón Árnason and Magnús Grímsson, admiring the work of Jacob Grimm, set out to produce their own collection of Icelandic folktales. The first work to come from their efforts was *Íslensk æfintýri* (Icelandic Adventure Tales), published in 1852. After its publication, financial concerns hampered their collection of tales until the German scholar Konrad Maurer visited Iceland and revitalized the project. When Magnús Grímsson’s health began to fail, Jón Árnason continued collecting sources, sending requests throughout the country.⁶⁶ The voluminous collection of folk narratives that

62 The label “early modern” does not quite apply in the case of Iceland. I take the term “post-medieval Iceland” to refer to the period from about 1500 to about 1900, that is, leading up to and following the Reformation (ca. 1548–1575).

63 See Margrét Eggertsdóttir, “From Reformation to Enlightenment,” in *A History of Icelandic Literature*, ed. Daisy Neijmann, *Histories of Scandinavian Literature* 5 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 174–250; Driscoll, *Unwashed Children*, 1–33.

64 See Shaun F. D. Hughes, “Report on *Rímur*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 79 (1980): 477–98, for a cornerstone study of *rímur*, along with Shaun F. D. Hughes, “*Rímur*,” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer, 13 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1987), 10:401–7.

65 Lena Rohrbach refers readers to Jürg Glauser, “Tendenzen der Vermündlichung isländischer Sagastoffe,” in *(Re)Oralisierung*, ed. Hildegard L. C. Tristram (Tübingen: Narr, 1996), 111–25, as the first iteration of this notion. See Rohrbach, “Drama and Performativity,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 144).

66 Jón Árnason, *Hugvekja til alþýðlegra fornfræða* [Reykjavík: n.p., 1987]. First published in *Íslendingur*, vol. 2.12 (October 19, 1861), 91–93.

grew out of these efforts cultivated all manner of images and genres—mythological, legendary, and historical—including stories of contemporary events, of stories purportedly from the ancient past, and from every era between. The final product was called *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* (Icelandic Folk/National Stories and Adventure Tales).⁶⁷ In the words of Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, “the vast majority of the best and most important stories in every field of Icelandic folklore were included in it.”⁶⁸ Whether memories (however inaccurate) of ancestral paganism or stories of mythical events (however fanciful), many of these collected tales reflect something of those heterodox belief narratives that so displeased Guðbrandur Þorláksson in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Odd though it may seem given Guðbrandur’s harsh words against “unprofitable songs,” Icelandic churchmen made significant contributions to the collection. By this time the Enlightenment had reached Iceland, and church leaders turned their concern more toward philosophical worldviews than folklore narratives, which seem to have been relegated to a kind of anthropological curiosity. In a thorough study of the role of Icelandic clerics as collectors and reporters of nineteenth-century Icelandic folklore,⁶⁹ Terry Gunnell observes that clerics, perhaps contrary to their calling to uphold orthodoxy and shun superstition, made a significant contribution to the collection and codification of folklore in Iceland as early as the sixteenth century, and that during the mid-nineteenth-century initiatives of Jón Árnason, certain clerics were on the front lines of the collection and reporting of tales. Gunnell points out that amongst Icelandic clerics, opinions toward the folk traditions varied. Some seemed to have no interest at all;⁷⁰ others were, as one might expect, dubious of the spiritual quality of the tales;⁷¹ still others came to recognize the nationalistic value of these tales.⁷² These various opinions notwithstanding, argues Gunnell,

there was clearly very little real antagonism to the beliefs involved ... The main question seems to have been one of literary value, and this material was far from as threatening to the establishment as other works that were beginning to appear around this time: Folk tales were not Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Grey* [*sic*], or Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*.⁷³

67 In the present book, I will refer to the six-volume, 1954–61 edition of this collection, which includes many of the tales Jón Árnason elected to leave out of his first publication: Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri*, ed. Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 6 vols. (Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga, 1954–61).

68 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 139.

69 Terry Gunnell, “Clerics as Collectors of Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Iceland,” *ARV: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 68 (2012): 45–66.

70 Gunnell, “Clerics as Collectors,” 50–51.

71 Gunnell, “Clerics as Collectors,” 56.

72 Gunnell, “Clerics as Collectors,” 59.

73 Gunnell, “Clerics as Collectors,” 56–57.

If this is the case, then it reduces the likelihood that those clerics who collected tales for Jón Árnason would have intentionally altered them to exclude or minimize heterodox beliefs.

This deduction, if valid, must not imply that the assessment of post-medieval Icelandic folk narrative is unproblematic. Gunnell has highlighted the importance of the morpheme *þjóð-* (“nation” or “the people”) in the editing and collection of Jón Árnason.⁷⁴ By contrast, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, in his 1939 publication on Icelandic folklore, *Um Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur*, often used the morpheme *alþýða-*, more expressly connoting the “common people,” rather than *þjóð-*, meaning “national,” to refer to “folk” belief. Perhaps the most significant of the difficulties inherent in examining the late Icelandic material for cultural memory is that of sorting out whether there is a difference between a distinctly nationalistic folklore and folk belief on a local level. Understanding the cultural memory of a given society at a given time requires an awareness of both internal and external contexts. For literary sources, that means having knowledge of manuscript origins and source transmission. For folkloristic sources, this awareness means having reliable information about editorial and collection practices.⁷⁵ We must acknowledge any evident agendas that saga writers, collectors, and editors might have had pertaining to the source at hand. It should be clear that the most essential elements of a successful study of folklore as a site for cultural memory are the external and internal contexts for respective sources.⁷⁶

Each of the five anchor stories for the following chapters—“Djárninn á Myrká” (The Deacon of Myrká),⁷⁷ “Álfkonan hjá Ullarvötnum” (The Elf Woman at Ullarvötn),⁷⁸

74 Terry Gunnell, “Daisies Rise to Become Oaks: The Politics of Early Folktale Collection in Northern Europe,” *Folklore* 121 (2010): 23–24.

75 See Júlíana Þóra Magnúsdóttir, “Gender, Legend, and the Icelandic Countryside in the Long Nineteenth Century: Re-Engaging the Archives as a Means of Giving Voice to the Women of the Past,” *Folklore* 129 (2018): 129–47, for a thorough discussion of the value of nineteenth-century Icelandic sources.

76 For key examples of this discussion see Richard Bauman, “Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore,” in *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, ed. Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman, Publications of the American Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series 23 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), 31–41; Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Anna-Leena Siikala, *Interpreting Oral Narrative*, FF Communications 245 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1990); John D. Niles, *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Richard Bauman and Donald Braid, “The Ethnography of Performance in the Study of Oral Traditions,” in *Teaching Oral Traditions*, ed. John Miles Foley (New York: Modern Language Association, 1998), 106–22; Lauri Honko, “Thick Corpus and Organic Variation: An Introduction,” in *Thick Corpus, Organic Variation and Textuality in Oral Tradition*, ed. Lauri Honko, Studia Fennica Folkloristica 7 (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2000), 3–28; John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

77 Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, 1:270–72. Hereafter, this will be referred to as JÁ followed by volume and page number.

78 JÁ 1:97–99, from the manuscripts of Ólafur Sveinsson of Purkey (1762–1845).

“Sels-Móri eða Þorgarður” (Þorgarður, the *Móri* of Sel),⁷⁹ “Tungustapi” (The Elf Church at Tungustapi),⁸⁰ and “Tornæmi drengurinn og kölski” (The Stupid Boy and the Devil)⁸¹—allow for an understanding of their respective internal and external contexts. When such contexts are discernable, it becomes possible to view such narratives as “doorways” to cultural meaning. As Gunnell says, “these narrative ‘doorways’, however they were collected, have the potential to say something about background context and the wider living space that gave birth to them, spaces that should never be forgotten as scholars examine the structural symmetry of the door frames and the quaintness of the door handles.”⁸² Due to the importance of connecting source material to a specific cultural context, an approach focused on a distinct community works better than a broad, international, comparative assessment. Iceland provides fertile ground for literary and folkloristic studies alike. On this point, Bo Almqvist argued that Icelandic folk materials are especially valuable to folklorists, citing, among other reasons, the “scope and quality of the source material, old and new, and the extent to which legends survived until recently.”⁸³ Almqvist also argued that the geographic and cultural conditions in Iceland readily lend themselves to a clearer picture of the nature, history, and function of the country’s folklore materials.

Final Thoughts

Each of the following chapters begins with a retelling (or translation, if the story has never before appeared in English) of one important, sometimes under-appreciated folk story from Jón Árnason’s nineteenth-century collection of Icelandic folktales: “The Deacon of Myrká” relates the story of a young man who tragically dies only to return after death to haunt his beloved. The story has deep roots in international folklore and indicates much about the development of conceptions of death throughout the history of Iceland and greater Scandinavia. “The Elf Woman at Ullarvötn” describes the odd events that lead to a human man becoming the lover of an elf woman, who—most uncharacteristically—is liberated of her elf-hood to become Christian. “Þorgarður, the *Móri* of Sel” offers the account of a *fylgja* (a kind of attendant spirit) who threatens to terrorize a family for nine generations. The story finds its origins in Norse paganism,

79 JÁ 1:373–76, collected from Jón Þorleifsson (1825–1860).

80 JÁ 1:32–35, compiled by Jón Árnason from stories circulated in Álftanes, Seltjarnarnes, and elsewhere in the region of Árnessýsla (in the southwest of Iceland). Valgerður Jónsdóttir (1771–1856) and Hólmfríður Þorvaldsdóttir (1812–1876) are also listed as sources.

81 JÁ 1:483–84, collected from Markús Gíslason (1837–1890).

82 Terry Gunnell, “Narratives, Space, and Drama: Essential Spatial Aspects Involved in the Performance and Reception of Oral Narrative,” *Folklore (Tartu)* 33 (2006): 12.

83 Bo Almqvist, “Midwife to the Fairies (ML 5070) in Icelandic Tradition,” in *Legends and Landscape: Articles Based on Plenary Papers from the 5th Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Folklore Symposium, Reykjavík, 2005*, ed. Terry Gunnell (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2008), 274.

though the twists and turns that bring it to its post-medieval form indicate quite a lot about the development of supernatural attendants and companionship. “The Elf Church at Tungustapi” relates the story of a contest between a Christian church and an elf church hidden away in the rocky crag known as Tungustapi. This story says much about the importance of sacred and forbidden spaces in the history of religion in Iceland and beyond. Finally, “The Stupid Boy and the Devil” offers a classic account of a young boy who unwittingly makes a deal with the Devil, and how he escapes damnation in the end. This story has ties to possibly the oldest folklore tale type in the Indo-European world, and it helps illuminate the great and often mysterious Icelandic magicians’ tales.

Many other folk narratives, Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, and histories will be woven into the accounts of these five stories along the way. Ultimately, these tales function especially well as “doorways” to a greater legacy of storytelling and cultural memory in Iceland and beyond. Building upon Terry Gunnell’s notion, the present study argues that these narratives work not only as doorways through which we, in the present, might look to perceive cultural memories of the past. They also serve as mechanisms by which living cultural memories of belief were established and fostered during the periods when these stories were told. A basic need for a rational system of beliefs⁸⁴ drives the cultivation of such a mechanism, and tracing the origins and developments of these stories gives us the opportunity to understand something about the transformation of cultural memories of religious belief in the North. As Richard Firth Green observes, vernacular culture “might make remarkable efforts to adjust its beliefs to the orthodoxies of the church.”⁸⁵ These efforts may be evident in Icelandic cultural memory as well, but the manner in which such efforts occur and the mechanisms by which those adjustments are made point us to a telling conclusion: while the Church might not endorse folk stories about elves, trolls, and witches, the folk stories themselves suggest a basic desire to be reconciled—if not always with the leadership of the Church, then with the fundamental beliefs represented by the Church.

84 My understanding of a “system of beliefs” follows conceptually from those of Mihály Hoppál’s “Linguistic and Mental Models for Hungarian Folk Beliefs,” in *Myth and Mentality: Studies in Folklore and Popular Thought* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2002), 50–66, and Robert A. Hahn, “Understanding Beliefs: An Essay on the Methodology of the Description and Analysis of Belief Systems,” *Current Anthropology* 14 (1973), 207–24. I stop short of arguing for an individual’s or group’s beliefs in a certain system, since these are psychological in nature and cannot be discerned from the present type of study. I do, however, share Hoppál’s essential view that systems of belief, whether superstitious, orthodox, or juvenile, follow a discernable (though perhaps not always rational) logic. Logic of this kind can be identified within narratives, if not within individual beliefs. See especially Hoppál’s overview of systems of belief in “Linguistic and Mental Models,” 52–57. As Richard Firth Green has recently argued, “when belief in fairies could offer a reasonable explanation for many things that would otherwise have seemed inexplicable, rationality, in this sense, must be viewed as every bit as historically contingent as belief” (*Elf Queens*, 70).

85 Green, *Elf Queens*, 2. Green here evokes the idea first posited by Carlo Ginzburg of “cultural compromise formation.” See Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 11.

