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Pingeyrar Abbey in Northern Iceland: A Benedictine Powerhouse of Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: Pingeyrar Abbey was founded in 1133 and dissolved in the wake of the Lutheran Reformation (1550), to virtually disappear with time from the face of the earth. Although highly promising archeological excavations are under way, our material points of access to this important monastic foundation are still only a handful of medieval artifacts. However, throughout its medieval existence Pingeyrar Abbey was an inordinately large producer of Latin and Icelandic literature. We have the names of monastic authors, poets, translators, compilers, and scribes, who engaged creatively with such diverse subjects as Christian hagiography, contemporary history, and Norse mythology, skillfully amalgamating all of this into a coherent, imaginative whole. Thus, Pingeyrar Abbey has a prominent place in the creation and preservation of the Icelandic Eddas and Sagas that have shaped the Northern European cultural memory. Despite the dissolution of monastic libraries and wholesale destruction of Icelandic-Latin manuscripts through a mixture of Protestant zealotry and parchment reuse, philologists have been able to trace a number of surviving codices and fragments back to Pingeyrar Abbey. Ultimately, however, our primary points of access to the fascinating world of this remote Benedictine community remain immaterial, a vast corpus of medieval texts edited on the basis of manuscript copies at unknown degrees of separation from the lost originals.

Keywords: Latin literature; Icelandic and Old Norse literature; Pingeyrar Abbey; cultural heritage; monasticism



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1. Introduction

Umberto Eco's novel *Il nome delle Rosa* (*The Name of the Rose*) (Eco 1980) is deservedly famous for providing the modern reader imaginative access to the rich if occasionally poisonous mentality of a community of Benedictines in Northern Italy, anno 1327. Although variously shaped by the author's creative imagination and expertise in postmodern semiotics, Eco's idea of a Benedictine Abbey borrows heavily from existing Italian monasteries, chief among them the Sacra di San Michele, a picturesque monument poised on top of a mountain in Val di Susa, Piedmont. Even today this spectacular location can be visited and admired by Eco's fans, built as it is of stone and never discontinued or destroyed during a disruptive religious revolution. The situation with Pingeyrar Abbey in Northern Iceland, although founded already in the early 1100s and operating under the same monastic rule, is strikingly different. Today, a visitor to the site will find but a small stone church, which despite its Romanesque features was built as late as the 19th-century. The oldest artefact inside this church dates to the 15th century, an English alabaster altarpiece, known from a medieval inventory to have decorated the high altar of the monastic church, and a hexagonal pulpit with a few other artifacts from the 17th century. The natural site of Pingeyrar is impressive enough, situated as it is on a hill between two lakes, Hóp and Húnavatn, but there are virtually no material remains on site from the medieval Abbey. Icelanders built their churches and monasteries from wood, occasionally imported from Norway but more commonly, especially in the case of Pingeyrar, using the plentiful driftwood found on the neighboring beaches. According to a description from 1684, when a new caretaker took up

residence at Þingeyrar, there were 46 wooden buildings on location, large and small. Many of these were old and needed rebuilding, making it probable that they were remnants from the time of the monastery before 1551. Traditionally, buildings were renewed more or less according to their original design. Thus, we should picture the medieval Abbey as a small village of tarred timber houses and huts with an imposing stave church in the centre. Named constructions were the 'priests' hall', 'large hall', 'dining house', 'kitchen', and a 23 m long tunnel in between. In the medieval charters, apart from the church itself, mention is made of the cloister (Clastrum), chapter house (Capitulum), and the convent house (Conventum), where the monks sat when they read, wrote, and studied. The church was a timber stave church with apprentices surrounding the central space and a palisade walkway; two towers framed the façade, and probably carved pillars on each side of the main door, which was of a type rounded at the top. Similar structures are preserved in Norway to this day. Such wooden buildings, if not destroyed in fires at some point in history, have long since rotted away in the wet and windy Icelandic climate, or been torn down or reused, to leave no visible remains above ground. Naturally, something must still remain in the ground, at least post holes and stones, marking the outlines of former buildings, and these will no doubt be unearthed in the ongoing excavations, led by archeologist Kristjánssdóttir (2017a), gradually giving us a more precise picture of the layout and arrangement of individual buildings at Þingeyrar Abbey.

Even though the modern visitor to the site may feel disappointed by its desolation, the Benedictine brothers would likely have begged to differ, despising as they did this world and spending their lives in preparation for Kingdom come, of which they thought they had reliable knowledge from their sacred books. Most moderns think they know better than to waste their lives on transcendent promises, but in a sense the *monachi Thingeyrenses* were actually quite successful in overcoming the material restraints of this world. Throughout its medieval existence, the Abbey was a center of book production like probably no other institution in the whole of Scandinavia. The monks of Þingeyrar were responsible for most of the original Latin literature of Iceland, which although largely lost today in its original form survives in vernacular versions, many of which were no doubt also created at the Abbey. Judging by the number of pages that survive in translation, the monks were highly productive authors of Latin texts, measured on medieval scales, when books were handwritten on animal skin, and a library of 200 volumes was large.

Nothing indicates that these monks intended to limit themselves to the exclusive literary medium of ecclesiastical Latin. They have not only bequeathed to us vernacular translations and discussions of classical authors (Sallust, Ovid, Lucan, Pseudo-Dares Phrygius, and Hyginus, to name a few) and of medieval historians (Beda the Venerable, Adam of Bremen, William of Malmesbury, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Pseudo-Turpin), not to mention the numerous Icelandic renderings of Judeo-Christian scriptures, apocrypha, homilies, and hagiography; the Benedictines of Þingeyrar seem to have begun early on to experiment with writing original histories in the vernacular, now called 'sagas', as well as poetry, religious or otherwise, in an effort to preserve and expand local Icelandic, Scandinavian, and Germanic legends. Indeed, if it were not for these Icelandic Benedictines, we would not have some of the most important manuscripts transmitting the Eddas and studies on vernacular grammar and poetics, which today inform our Northern-European historical identity and cultural memory, since many of the manuscripts transmitting such texts were produced at Þingeyrar Abbey (Gunnaugsson 2016; Kristjánssdóttir 2016). Perhaps strangest of all, at the end of the 12th century, the men of Þingeyrar got embroiled in the historical quarrel between *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, and in that connection penned past and contemporary political history (Jensson 2016). While much of Icelandic medieval literature is anonymous, we have the names of abbots, priests, and monks of Þingeyrar Abbey, who are spoken of as authors, poets, translators, compilers, and scribes, engaging with a diversity of literary topics. Remarkably, these monastics were able to fashion all of their subjects into a coherent universal whole, using an orthodox medieval theology, which

was largely established in antiquity by the Church Fathers, though long since revised today and all but forgotten.

After the Reformation, which in Iceland is marked by the beheading of the last Catholic bishop and his two sons in 1550 (one of whom, Björn Jónsson, was the caretaker and future abbot of Þingeyrar), both mobile and landed property belonging to the Icelandic monasteries was confiscated by officials of the Danish Royal Crown. In 1551, an armed band of Danish soldiers stole from the northern episcopal cathedral and monasteries most items of value, especially artifacts of gold and silver, which they transported to Copenhagen to be melted down by royal goldsmiths. Even more sadly, we have no accounts of what happened to the monastic libraries. For all we know, books were burnt, left to rot, or thrown overboard from the Danish ships on the voyage to Copenhagen. Another perhaps more innocent but equally devastating practice in the 16th and 17th century was parchment reuse, mainly in book binding. Several surviving codices are missing pages, cut out for this purpose ‘by a barbaric hand’, as the Icelandic manuscript collector Árni Magnússon (d. 1730) wrote on a slip of paper he inserted into one of them (Reykjavík, AM 382 4to).

Medieval libraries were quite different from their modern counterparts. As was usual elsewhere in Scandinavia in the Middle Ages, in Iceland books and documents were mostly stored in wooden chests and coffers. At Þingeyrar Abbey, these were apparently located near the high altar of the old church, according to an inventory of 1525. Liturgical books lay around in the church, and ‘numerous’ others were found elsewhere in the building (where exactly it does not say), while ‘on the high altar there [were] many books in Latin, in good and bad condition, and books in Icelandic [nine titles are mentioned, among them the lives of the three Icelandic saints, Þorlákr, Jón, and Guðmundr], and a few other used up and rotten books’. The compiler of the 1525 inventory, Sigurður, who was the son of the last Catholic bishop of Hólar, seems not to have considered it important to describe all the books in detail or list their contents. The monks who knew and perused them no doubt took a different view. The large wooden church itself survived the Reformation well into the 17th century, when it was rebuilt by the king’s bailiff, probably according to the same design, only smaller. We may have a rough design for the medieval church from one of the seals of Þingeyrar Abbey together with a miniature inside an illuminated capital letter in a manuscript written there (Reykjavík, GKS 1005 fol., 69v) (Tómasson 2009; Harðardóttir 2016). This codex, the grandest of Icelandic manuscripts, comprises a small library in one manuscript. Its copying was begun in 1387, apparently from the works available at the Abbey.

What happened to the books after the Reformation? Despite the damaging dissolution of monastic libraries and wholesale destruction of especially Latin manuscripts, fragments of 400–450 Latin books from Iceland have been identified but hardly any whole books. Codicologists have been able to trace about 40 surviving manuscripts and fragments to Þingeyrar Abbey and surroundings (Gunnlaugsson 2016; Kristjánsdóttir 2016). Some of the surviving manuscripts were probably not among the books in the church when it was inventoried in 1525. Many books were produced in the monastery to be sold elsewhere in Iceland or exported to Norway (Karlsson 2000). However, the preserved manuscripts from Þingeyrar Abbey do not tell the whole story, because a vast corpus of texts still exists, material of the kind that Mortensen has dubbed ‘intangible cultural heritage’ (Mortensen 2020), i.e., ancient and medieval texts edited on the basis of manuscript copies at unknown degrees of separation from the lost originals, and therefore usually not included in the definition of cultural heritage, which mainly focuses on preserved material artifacts. The quality of preservation of these medieval texts from Þingeyrar Abbey varies, but on the whole they give a good picture of the learned and religious mentality of this and other monastic communities in Iceland. Numerous studies of individual texts have been published in the past, but few have attempted to survey this corpus of literature for evidence of the historical consciousness of the Benedictines of Þingeyrar Abbey, nor to understand how the diverse topics they subjected to study relate to each other, indeed, how they were made to cohere in a catholic (in the original sense of that word) whole. What was

the *Thingeyrenses'* view on essential issues for medieval Icelanders, such as the connection between languages, peoples, and the outline of the terrestrial orb? What were the epochs of world history from creation to the present? How did the idolatry of their pagan ancestors relate to the true faith of Christianity? Where did they see their own place in the world as Benedictines in Iceland? The aim of the present study is to try to answer such questions.

2. The Þingeyrar Abbey Corpus: 12th Century

One of the first writers of Þingeyrar was Abbot Karl Jónsson (c. 1135–1212/13), who authored *Sverris saga* ('The Saga of Sverrir'), which follows the career of King Sverrir Sigurðarson of Norway (r. 1177–1202) from the time he left the Faroe Islands, where he grew up and where his mother revealed to him that his true father was King Sigurðr Haraldsson of Norway (d. 1155), through his uprising against King Magnús, chosen by the universal church to rule Norway as vassal of St Óláfr of Niðaróss, and concludes with Sverrir's attainment of monarchy through armed struggle, shrewdness, and good fortune. King Sverrir drove two archbishops into exile and was himself excommunicated in 1194 by Pope Celestine III together with all of Norway. Nevertheless, he managed to hold on to power for over two decades and establish the future dynasty of Norway. *Sverris saga* is medieval literature at its best, and its sober and understated narrative style no doubt set the standard for later Icelandic historiography. The saga paints a highly sympathetic picture of a struggling but resourceful leader of men, assigning him artfully composed orations that reveal his balanced character and sophisticated sense of humor. The saga is said to have been the chosen last reading of King Hákon the Old of Norway (r. 1217–1264), King Sverrir's grandson, on his deathbed in Orkney.

Sverris saga was begun by Abbot Karl during his stay in Norway from 1185 to 1188, in collaboration with the king himself, who 'decided what was written', as is stated in the prologue. Later, according to the saga's revised prologue in the aforementioned manuscript Flateyjarbók, the saga was completed or revised by the priest Styrmir Kárason (c. 1170–1245; on him below), who was probably the son of the abbot who replaced Abbot Karl while in Norway. The Norwegian scholar Munch suggested long ago that Abbot Karl may have begun writing *Sverris saga* in Latin, given that King Sverrir's Faroese fosterfather, Uni, is Latinized to *Unas* in the vernacular text, and two of Abbot Karl's contemporaries at Þingeyrar used Latin when writing Norwegian history (Munch 1857). The priest Styrmir would then have translated, revised, and continued the saga in the vernacular, and the preserved text would be largely from Styrmir's hand. To Munch's arguments could be added that the title of the latter part of the original saga was *Perfecta fortitudo*, according to the revised prologue. If we look at contemporary writing in Norway, King Sverrir's main opponent in the early 1180s, Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson (d. 1188), commissioned the Benedictine monk Theodoricus to write Norwegian royal history in Latin, *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*. Against the choice of the Roman tongue, on the other hand, speaks that King Sverrir commissioned a propaganda oration against the church in the vernacular, *Ræða gegn biskupum* ('A Speech against the Bishops'), which exploits the vernacular to better get its message across to lay Norwegians. The King may, however, have wished to employ a different strategy in his biography, if it was aimed at the officials of the Roman Church. Just like Abbot Karl, Sverrir was clerically educated. If nothing else, our inability to determine with certainty the language of the original biography of King Sverrir underscores the bilingual nature of literacy at Þingeyrar in this period.

A contemporary of Abbot Karl at Þingeyrar was the priest Oddr Snorrason, whose precise dates seem impossible to ascertain. Brother Oddr wrote in Latin a pseudo-hagiographical vita of King Óláfr Tryggvason of Norway (r. 995–1000), *Gesta regis Olavi filii Tryggva*, a vernacular translation of which has come down to us, likely made at Þingeyrar Abbey, and certainly preserved in a manuscript written at the Abbey: Copenhagen, AM 310 4to (dated to 1250–1275). King Óláfr Tryggvason was virtually unknown or even reviled in written accounts outside of Iceland (such as the *Passion of St Olav* and Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*) but in the earliest Icelandic historical writings

by Sæmundr Sigfússon and Ari Thorgilsson, from the early 12th century, he was much loved as the king who brought Christianity to five countries in the north, Iceland among them. One of Oddr's sources on King Óláfr I was Ásgrímr Vestlidason (d. 1161), the second Abbot of Þingeyrar. Brother Oddr prefaced his work with a letter in Latin, addressed to his 'Christian brothers and fathers', his intended audience presumably being, besides other monastics in Iceland and Scandinavia, the archiepiscopal court at Niðaróss, Norway, in the last decade of Archbishop Eysteinn's period of office (1177–1188).

In his prefatory letter, Brother Oddr further announces his intention to promote King Óláfr Tryggvason, 'as you promote King Óláfr'—meaning the royal Saint Óláfr II of Niðaróss, who was the head figure of the new Olavian ideology of ecclesiastical control over the kingship of Norway. Brother Oddr writes that King Óláfr I held his namesake, St Óláfr, as a babe during baptism, and just as John the baptist was the precursor of Christ, so King Óláfr I prepared for the arrival of St Óláfr. Oddr concedes that after his death King Óláfr did not shine with miracles like St Óláfr, but he nevertheless believes him to have been 'a saintly man, virtuous, and a friend of God'. To underpin Oddr's daring claim to royal sanctity for King Óláfr I, he describes when the king and his bishop discovered the earthly remains of the Saints of Selja, the site of the first Benedictine monastery of Norway, citing in full the entire Latin legend of Sunniva, the saint of Bergen (St Óláfr's cult was centered around Niðaróss). The prominence of Selja in Oddr's work might indicate a possible institutional bonding between these two Benedictine Abbeys in times when Augustinian influence was increasingly felt in the archdiocese. A number of prelates in Norway collaborated with King Sverrir despite the papal ban and the flight of their archbishops to England and Denmark. The message Oddr wished to get across to his reader is that men should, with Peter the Apostle, 'fear God and do honor to the king' (1Peter 2:17: *Deum timete: regem honorificate*). The king gives men good things, God gives them the king; thus, human approval is due to the king and divine worship to God. Put more plainly, the Church should not meddle in politics. Oddr's work likely reached both Niðaróss and Lund, in his days, and was studied in both archsees, as is evidenced by Theodoricus' account of the *Norwegian Kings of Old* and Saxo Grammaticus' great *Deeds of the Danes*, written in Lund in the decades before and after 1200.

Another Latin work by Brother Oddr, *Gesta Inguari late peregrinantis*, is preserved only in an Icelandic translation, *Yngvars saga víðfjara* (The Saga of Yngvar the Far-traveler). This is the story of a Viking pretender to the throne of Sweden, who on a pseudo-missionary exploration into "Russia" sails upstream (on the Daugava?) through unknown territory filled with strange peoples such as the Amazones, a tribe of women warriors, Cyclopes, monsters, and dragons. Yngvar and his men come to cities with Greek sounding names—Scythopolis, Heliopolis—most of the material for which ultimately derives from Adam of Bremen and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*. Surprisingly, at least from the modern point of view, Oddr's fantastic narrative has a historical kernel, as is shown by some 26 runestones from the 11th century, found primarily in the Stockholm area, which were erected in memory of the men who "perished in the east with Yngvar". True to history, in Brother Oddr's original *Gesta Inguari late peregrinantis*, Yngvar never returns, but his Icelandic travel companion Garða-Ketill (Russia-Katle) does, and it is he who brings the story to Iceland, although ironically no one in Sweden seems to have heard it, judging by the runestones. In the latter half of *Yngvars saga*, the protagonist's son, Sveinn, who was left behind to receive schooling in the languages of the East, follows in his father's footsteps and sails into Russia, where he ends up marrying a Greek-speaking queen, non of which is found on the runestones.

The story of Yngvar has both direct and subtle associations with the *Gesta regis Olavi filii Tryggva*, which, as we saw, plays into the ecclesiastic and political context of the day through undermining the 'Olavian' ideology of Archbishop Eysteinn of Niðaróss by ascribing the Christianization of the Northern countries not to St Óláfr but to his predecessor, King Óláfr I. Indeed, both texts decisively reject the policy of *libertas ecclesie* (ecclesial independence from secular government) by depicting the ideal role of Christian bishops *vis-à-vis* their

lords and kings as that of loyal companions and subjects (Hofmann 1981). With his writings, Oddr like Abbot Karl no doubt intended to lend indirect support to King Sverrir in his struggle for power in Norway and conflict with the universal Church of Rome. Brother Oddr must therefore have written his works after 1179, when King Sverrir had risen to power after killing Earl Erlingr, the father of King Magnús. In doing so, he shows himself to have belonged to a network of prelates and magnates in Iceland and Norway, who were sympathetic to King Sverrir and opposed Danish influence in Norway. Indeed, in a prefatory letter to the original Latin text, which is cited in the epilogue of *Yngvars saga*, Oddr addressed two clerically educated magnates in the south of Iceland, Jón Loptsson of Oddi (d. 1197) and Lawspeaker Gizurr Hallsson of Skálholt (d. 1206), almost as his patrons. The latter was also mentioned at the end of *Gesta regis Olauí* as the expert reader, who reviewed and emended the text, although this could be an interpolation from the other Latin work on King Óláfr I by Brother Gunnlaugr. Two short Latin fragments are embedded in the translations of Oddr's works, a Latin stanza from *Gesta regis Olauí* and a passage of *Gesta Inguari* relating information from a work well known in Iceland, Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*. In one of the manuscripts containing Oddr's account of King Óláfr I (Stockholm, Holm perg 18, 4to; c. 1300), it is added at the end, where the author is identified, that Brother Oddr experienced visions. He had been unhappy, and was planning to leave the community, when Christ appeared to him in the church at Þingeyrar with arms spread and dropping his head, saying in a troubled voice, "Behold how I have suffered for your sake; you shall overcome your temptation in my name". After which it says that Oddr praised God and never again fell into temptation. He is also said to have had another magnificent vision of King Óláfr I (Hofmann 1988), who presumably command him to write his story.

Brother Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1218/19) was the younger contemporary of Abbot Karl and Brother Oddr at Þingeyrar. He was the most prolific Latin author of the Middle Ages in Iceland and respected in his time for his extensive learning. His *magnum opus* was another, presumably much longer and more elaborate, history of King Óláfr Tryggvason, *Historia Olauí regis filii Tryggua*, which he submitted for review to Lawspeaker Gizurr Hallsson. Gizurr is said to have kept it for two years before returning it to Gunnlaugr, who then emended the text accordingly. Gizurr died in 1206, hence the work was drafted no later than 1204, and presumably already in the 1190s, when King Sverrir still ruled Norway, since the work would not have had the same exigency after his demise. Brother Gunnlaugr also collaborated with Lawspeaker Gizurr on the composition of the life and miracles of the first canonized Icelandic saint, Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson (1133–93), *Vita et miracula S. Thorlaci Skalholtensis episcopi*, whose earthly remains were translated at Skálholt See in the summer of 1198. Latin fragments of this work are preserved, which show Gunnlaugr to be a competent writer of ecclesiastical Latin.

Bishop Þorlákr was educated in Paris after the middle of the 12th century. Paris was the intellectual center of Europe at the time, and based on the known affiliations of other Scandinavians in Paris, such as the later archbishops Eiríkr Ívarsson of Niðaróss and Absalon of Lund, the most likely institutions where Þorlákr studied are the Abbeys of St Victor and Ste Geneviève, which were celebrated for their learning and together with the cathedral school of Notre-Dame the cradles of the University of Paris. It was Þorlákr who brought the Augustinian rule to Iceland by presiding over the first Augustinian house at Þykkvibær in Síða in the south of Iceland. The Augustinians were promoted by the newly founded archbishopric of Niðaróss and acted as agents of ecclesiastical policy in Iceland. By a clever stratagem, the magnates of Iceland, primarily Lawspeaker Gizurr, in collaboration with the Benedictines of Þingeyrar, promoted the canonization of St Þorlákr, who died in 1193, and wrote his *vita*, where the conflicts between these factions of society were so downplayed that a revised vernacular version of the saga of St Þorlákr was deemed necessary in the early 14th century (Fahn and Jensson 2010). Incidentally, the abbot who likely wrote this revised saga, Brother Bergr Sökkason (d. c. 1350), was in his youth a monk at Þingeyrar Abbey. By promoting the canonization of St Þorlákr, Brother Gunnlaugr and

his magnate patrons could contribute to improving the relations with the papacy and the archbishop while at the same time controlling the legacy of St Þorlákr.

Brother Gunnlaugr's second engagement with original Icelandic hagiography was through his *Vita et miracula S. Johannis Holensis episcopi*, written around 1202 at the request of Bishop Guðmundr of Hólar. Bishop Jón of Hólar (d. 1121) was the first *presul* of this newly founded northern diocese (before there was only one see in Iceland, Skálholt). He prepared for the founding of Þingeyrar Abbey and no less importantly for the northern Benedictines, he established a school at his see, where many of the later members of Þingeyrar Abbey received their clerical education. Bishop Jón brought with him to Iceland two experts from abroad, Rikini, who is said to be a *franzeis*, although judging by his name (*Richinne, Ricvine*) he may have been a Lotharingian (Kålund and Beckman 1914), and a schoolmaster, Gísli Finnsson, from Gothland (now in Sweden) in the ecclesiastical province of Lund (until 1153 the only archsee of Scandinavia). Rikini taught singing and versification, and he impressed the diocese of Hólar with his phenomenally retentive memory, having learnt by heart the complete *Opus Dei*, both the words and music of the liturgy from morning to evening for the entire year. Brother Gunnlaugr displayed a great interest in liturgical recitation and singing, portraying St Jón as a marvelous *cantor* with a great voice and capable of reading Latin aloud most beautifully. He reports that because of the quality of liturgical performance, people flocked to Hólar to celebrate Easter and Pentecost.

St Jón is made the spiritual founder of Þingeyrar Abbey, even if it was consecrated by his successor in 1133. An infectious passion for Latin runs through Brother Gunnlaugr's *Vita S. Johannis* (Jensson 2017). The reader is entertained with stories of the carpenter Þóroddr Gamlason, who while building the Hólar cathedral learnt Latin by overhearing students being taught at the school. There was also a pious lady, Ingunn by name, so learned in Latin grammar that she could correct the texts of others by listening to them read aloud; meanwhile, she busied herself with embroidery. Then there is the story of Klængr Þorsteinsson, future bishop of Skálholt, caught reading Ovid's *Ars amatoria* (a copy of this work is attested in the 1525 inventory of Hólar cathedral; *DI*, IX, p. 298) and reminded by Bishop Jón not to stimulate his already excitable carnal appetites by perusal of such poetry. Indeed, according to the *vita*, St Jón went so far as to ban all erotic poetry in his diocese, as well as dancing. These stories of life at Hólar in the early 12th century may reflect the ideals of the community at Þingeyrar Abbey rather than actual history. A certain zealotry characterizes the figure of St Jón as a bishop, as for example when he is credited with reforming the designations of the weekdays, drawn from the pagan gods/heroes Týr (=Mars), Odin (=Mercurius), Thor (=Jupiter), and Freyja (=Venus), by insisting on referring to them by numbers or functions instead (third day, midweek day, fifth day, fast day, and washing day), appellations that have survived in Iceland to this day. In addition, the *Life of St Jón* contains many anecdotes and miracles *post mortem*, which give a bleak but interesting picture of everyday life in 12th-century Iceland: hunger, death, and poverty among the common people. These tales of suffering and disease provide authentic testimony about religious beliefs and practices, and give fascinating glimpses into the mentality of the period.

Finally, Gunnlaugr translated the *Prophetiæ Merlini* of his fellow Benedictine Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. c. 1155). The translation, entitled *Merlínusspá*, is composed in the eddic metre *fornyrdislag*, which is also used in the famous eschatological Old Norse-Icelandic poem *Völuspá* ('Prophecy of the Seeress'). The Icelandic poem includes material from Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae*, which is also found translated into the vernacular in two manuscripts, Hauksbók (Reykjavík, AM 544 4to) and Copenhagen, AM 573 4to, no doubt the work of one of the members of the Þingeyrar community. Gunnlaugr is finally said to have composed a rhymed office in honor of St Ambrose, *Historia Ambrosii*, but when he performed it in the Hólar Cathedral, probably in 1209, Bishop Guðmundr of Hólar, a militant agitator for the liberty of the Roman Church, rejected the composition, saying that he preferred the old one by Gregor the Great. By then, Gunnlaugr had virtually replaced the half-maniac bishop as the highest ecclesiastical authority in the diocese.

3. The Þingeyrar Abbey Corpus: 13th Century

The 13th century is arguably the golden age of Icelandic literature, when many of the greatest sagas of Icelanders were written. It was also during this century that Nordic mythology was put into writing in the so-called Eddas. Although 19th century scholars had a tendency to study this material in “splendid isolation”, both earlier and later studies have emphasized that Norse mythological tales were embedded in a learned European context. *Snorra Edda*, which derives its name from Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241), who is believed to be its author, makes this clear when it explains its purpose as that of educating young poets in the art of vernacular poetry. The Icelandic grammatical treatises are preserved in the same context and found in the same calf-skin codices as *Snorra Edda*. The first treatise, from the middle of the 12th century, is concerned with how best to write the vernacular, using the letters of the Latin alphabet, and the third treatise insists on the unity of Greco-Roman and Icelandic grammar, illustrating the figures of style defined in ancient Latin treatises (Priscianus, Donatus) with examples taken from vernacular poetry. This treatise was written around the middle of the 13th century by Óláfr Þórðarson (d. 1259), nephew of the famous Snorri Sturluson.

It may surprise the lovers of Norse mythology to know that essential eddic manuscripts were written at the Benedictine Abbey of Þingeyrar. This may even apply to Codex Regius of the Elder Edda (Reykjavík, GKS 2365 4to), the mother of all the so-called *Sæmundar Eddas* (an appellation based on the 17th-century hypothesis that the first historian, Sæmundr Sigfússon, collected and transcribed these poems from runic inscriptions), which preserves poetry on such Norse gods as Odin, Thor, Frigg, Freyja, Freyr, Baldur, and Loki, as well as narrative poetry about Germanic heroes and heroines. This manuscript occasionally has short prose bridges between the poems, some of which are based on *Snorra Edda* (Lindblad 1978; Lassen Forthcoming). There is only one other comparable source of eddic poetry, Codex Regius, Copenhagen, AM 748 a I 4to, which is highly fragmentary. Codex Regius was originally compiled around 1270, and emended in the middle of the 14th century, apparently by Abbot Arngrímur Brandsson of Þingeyrar (Axelsdóttir 2003). When it was rediscovered in 1643 by Bishop Brynjólfur of Skálholt, it had presumably been handed down for generations from mother to daughter in the family of the royal caretaker of Þingeyrar after the Reformation, Henrik Gerken (Guðmundsson 1997; Karlsson 2000). Gerken was originally from Hamburg, Germany, and became quite wealthy on an Icelandic scale. He had a native wife, who may have picked up Codex Regius from the abandoned books at the monastery. At the time it was hardly considered to be worth much. Even though it cannot be proven beyond doubt that this essential codex for the survival of eddic poetry was written at Þingeyrar Abbey, we know for certain that the Benedictines of Þingeyrar took an interest in this genre, because the half-pagan, half-Christian eschatological poem of *Völuspá*, as found in the manuscript *Hauksbók* (Copenhagen, AM 544 4to; c. 1310), can be traced to Þingeyrar Abbey. The scribe who wrote this part of the manuscript was also responsible for most of the manuscript Codex Wormianus (Copenhagen, AM 242 fol., c. 1350) containing *Snorra Edda* (Johannsson 1997). *Snorra Edda* quotes numerous eddic poems in its presentation of pagan mythology, which it historicizes to a degree not seen elsewhere in manuscripts containing the *Eddas*. Besides the *Snorra Edda*, Codex Wormianus preserves all the vernacular grammatical treatises, so the context Old Norse pagan poetry enters into at the hands of the Benedictines is primarily poetical.

The learned priest Styrmir Kárason fróði (c. 1175–1245), Styrmir the Wise, was reputedly the son of Abbot Kári Runólfsson (d. 1187/8) of Þingeyrar (Porsteinsson 1912), Abbot Karl’s stand-in, while he was away in Norway, and grew up in and around the abbey, where he also received his education. He left Þingeyrar presumably around 1220, when he became the household priest of Lawspeaker Snorri Sturluson of Reykholt, alleged author of two of the most well-known works of medieval Icelandic literature, the *Heimskringla* (the history of Norway from the 8th to the late 12th century) and *Snorra Edda* (a handbook for young poets and one of our most important sources of Norse mythology). Styrmir is known to have worked on and contributed to Snorri Sturluson’s historiographical and mythopoetic

projects, which again might seem to provide an indirect link between Þingeyrar Abbey and eddic poetry. The writing of medieval literature in monasteries and at royal courts or the estates of powerful magnates was not necessarily done by individuals, more likely such projects were collaborative to an extent not seen in modern literary practice. During 1210–1214, and again 1232–1235, Styrmir somewhat incongruously held the civil office of lawspeaker but ended his days as prior of the newly founded Augustinian House on Viðey Island, just off the coast of Reykjavík, the modern capital. Among Styrmir's works is a new redaction of *Landnámabók* ('The Book of Settlements'), now lost as such, although it was incorporated into the Hauksbók-version of this work by the knight and lawman Haukr Erlendsson (d. 1334, in Bergen). *The Book of Settlements* is a unique historical construct, providing information on where each newcomer to Iceland settled in the period of colonization, AD 870–930, and giving a brief genealogy of these people from their ancestors in Norway into 12th-century Iceland, frequently including anecdotes and relating events associated with the settlement of Iceland. Over 3000 people and 1400 settlements are named.

Styrmir the Wise also wrote the biography of St Óláfr Haraldsson, king of Norway, a version of the saga thought to be partly preserved in the manuscript Flateyjarbók. As mentioned above, Styrmir translated, completed or revised Abbot Karl Jónsson's *Sverris saga*, at least the final part of that saga. He also had a hand in the composition of the prototype of the Icelandic outlaw saga *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* ('The Saga of Hǫrðr and the Islet-Dwellers'), where presumably in acknowledgment of his work his estimation of the protagonist is quoted at the end of the saga. This saga, which is a sort of Robin Hood narrative, tells the story of the Viking-adventurer Hǫrðr, who leaves Iceland for Sweden where he has various adventures, for instance he breaks into a burial mound with the help of Odin, and stealing a cursed ring, which leads to his death at the end of the saga. In Sweden, Hǫrðr marries Helga, the daughter of a Swedish earl, and back in Iceland he takes up habitation with his band of robbers on an island in Whale Fjord, from where he raids the farmers of the neighboring estates, until they trap him on land and kill him. To save their two sons, the noble Helga swims a great distance from the island in ice-cold water.

Other 13th-century works, believed to have been written at Þingeyrar Abbey and associated church farms, are *Vatnsdæla saga* ('The saga of the People of Vatnsdale'; c. 1270–1280) about the family of 9th-century Norwegians who settled in this valley in the vicinity of Þingeyrar. The saga follows the first generations of their descendants until the crucial moment when Christianity arrives in Iceland around AD 1000. Even older is *Heiðarvíg saga* ('The Saga of the Heath Slayings') about the prolonged armed hostilities between the Men of Húnaþing, the region around Þingeyrar, and the Men of Borgarfjörður, leading up to the Heath Slayings, a battle on the mountain road midway between them. The hero of the latter part, Bárðr, afterwards travels to Norway where he is turned away by St Óláfr, whence he travels to Constantinople, where he ends his days in the emperor's Norse troupes, the *Væringjar* (Varangians/Confederates). Doubtlessly, a number of other Icelandic sagas were written by members of the community at Þingeyrar or associated priests (e.g., *Bandamanna saga*, *Kormáks saga*, and *Hallfreðar saga*), but since they are anonymous we cannot know for certain who wrote them or whether they derive from Þingeyrar Abbey, however probable this may be.

4. The Þingeyrar Abbey Corpus: 14th–16th Centuries

In the 14th century, the northern Benedictines became known for their translations and rewritings of hagiographic literature in the vernacular. Most of this material originated in Latin hagiographical works, compiled anew and contaminated by multiple texts, to make new vernacular reading material for church congregations on the Feast Day of the Saints whose lives and miracles were related in these works. The Benedictines of northern Iceland cultivated a particular style of writing in these retellings, which has been termed 'florid', a style characterized by an alliterative and occasionally rhymed prosody, peppered with synonym pairs and present participles, and ultimately inspired, it seems, by examples of Latin poetry in common textbooks like the *Liber Catonianus* (so named from the poet

poem *Disticha Catonis*, which it contained). In vernacular poetry, on the other hand, the clerical poets of the 13th century strove in the opposite direction, towards a clearer and more immediately intelligible diction than the one practiced in traditional skaldic poetry, and systematized in the *Snorra Edda*. In rebelling against the “eddulist” (the art of the Edda), these poets cite as precedence the rules of the ‘new poetry’, advocated by Geoffrey of Vinsauf in his *Poetria nova* a century earlier (Males 2020). Although the “Lilja” (Lilly), a prime example of this new and attractive vernacular style in poetry, is most often attributed to Eysteinn Ásgrímsson (d. 1361), an Augustinian canon of Þykkvibær in Ver, in the south of Iceland, the abbot of Þingeyrar Arngrímur Brandsson’s “Guðmundarkvæði”, a praise poem composed in 1345 in honor of the aforementioned Bishop Guðmundr the Good, is very much nourished from the same poetic vein as the “Lilja”. Abbot Arngrímur (d. 1361) is otherwise credited with writing a Latin vita of Bishop Guðmundr, *Vita et miracula Godemundi boni*, also dated to 1345, which was no doubt used in several unsuccessful embassies to Avignon and Rome to attempt to have the good bishop canonized. Abbot Arngrímur may also be the poet of *Sancti Thorlaci episcopi officia rhythmica*, uniquely preserved among the Latin works written by the brothers of Þingeyrar Abbey (Ottósson 1959).

In the beginning of the 14th century, there was a concentration of new literary talent at Þingeyrar Abbey. Great histories were recompiled out of the literature of the previous centuries with increased emphasis not only on style and prosody but also on narrative structure and continuity, in imitation of continental models. In the spirit of the 14th century, ancient heroes of remote times were in vogue, and a new taste for the chivalric and religiously outrageous was introduced into the storyworlds of the Benedictines of Þingeyrar. During Abbot Guðmundr’s period of office (1310–1338), Laurentius (or Lárentius) Kálfsson, later bishop of Hólar (r. 1324–1331), joined the Abbey to lead its school. One of his named students was the talented if bibulous Árni, Laurentius’ own son by a Norwegian concubine, who is believed to have written *Dunstanus saga*, a vernacular reworking of Adelard’s *Vita S. Dunstani* and several other sources, a highly entertaining narrative about this popular English saint and archbishop, who was known as a musician, illuminator, metalworker, and trickster for cunningly defeating the devil. Another of Laurentius’ students at Þingeyrar in the second decade of the 14th century was Bergr Sökkason, who has already been mentioned. Brother Bergr later became prior and abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Pverá and a prolific writer of vernacular hagiography. He reputedly wrote sagas about Bishop Guðmundr the Good, St Nicholas, the archangel Michael, and in all probability the B-redaction of *The Saga of Saint Thorlak*, as well as translating the history of King Óláfr I of Norway by Brother Gunnlaugr, and many others. Indeed, it is rarely possible to ascribe the anonymous Icelandic vernacular prose works on saints, angels, and sacred objects—there are sagas preserved on about 130 such subjects (Wolf 2013)—to individual writers, although the names of the religious poets are more often known (Wolf and Van Deusen 2017).

Laurentius’ best known disciple from Þingeyrar Abbey is no doubt his chaplain Einarr Hafliðason (d. 1393), who joined him as a ten-year old in 1317 and served him loyally for 14 years, until Laurentius’ death at Hólar See in 1331. Einarr became a fine cleric and wrote his master’s biography sometime after 1346, which is our best source on life at Þingeyrar and in general on Icelandic intellectual life in the early 14th century. Especially informative are the descriptions of Laurentius’ travels in Iceland and Norway, the accounts of heated quarrels within the ecclesiastical community, especially at Niðaróss, and last but not least the descriptions of Laurentius’ teaching, and his ambition to sustain an international standard at the monastic houses where he sojourned, but primarily Þingeyrar, where he insists on the use of Latin not only in prayer and church service but in the daily interactions between the members of the community. It is from *Lárentius saga* that we have information that the monks conversed, read, wrote, and studied their books in the building at Þingeyrar Abbey called the Conventus, which probably opened out to the cloister garden adjacent to the south flank of the church, with the Chapter House (Capitulum) at the east end by the church’s high altar. Einarr Hafliðason also contributed entries to the *Lögmannsannáll* (‘Annal of the Lawman’), a reliable chronicle running from the early 9th century, and

continued by Einarr Hafliðason up to 1361, where another took over and carried on to 1430. In 1381, Einarr also translated from Latin a curious miracle story, *Atburðr á Finnmark* ('An Incident in Finmark').

Einarr's connection to Þingeyrar Abbey was close, since he was raised at Breiðabólstaður in Vesturhóp, about 20 km southwest of the monastery. Breiðabólstaður was one of two major church estates in the area, and had been the site of the first writing of the laws of Iceland in the winter of 1117–1118. Before this the laws were transmitted orally by the lawspeaker, each summer one third of the whole being recited at the annual General Assembly, the Althing. After they were committed to writing, however, and revised in the process, the laws would from that time on be read aloud from a codex, a practice which caused a major shift in how the laws were conceptualized (Sandvik and Sigurðsson 2005). Einarr's father, Hafliði Steinsson (d. 1319), was an important figure in Icelandic society. He received his clerical training at Þingeyrar Abbey in the time of Abbot Vermundur (r. 1254–1279), and functioned as the caretaker of Þingeyrar Abbey and the See of Hólar. Earlier in his career, he served as palace priest for King Eiríkr Magnússon of Norway (r. 1280–1299), who married princess Margaret of Scotland, daughter of King Alexander III, in Bergen 1281. She died giving birth to Margaret, Maid of Norway, who only lived to 1290, and whose death led to the Wars of Scottish Independence, when her father laid claim to the Scottish crown as his inheritance; he later married the sister of King Robert I of Scotland. King Eiríkr also made a claim to the throne of Denmark as his inheritance from his mother, Princess Ingebjörg, and spent many years warring the Danes on that account. He was nicknamed "Priest Hater" because of his strained relationship with the church.

As King Eiríkr's palace priest, Hafliði Steinsson is not an unlikely candidate for the authorship of *Bósa saga and Herraud's* ('The Saga of Bósi and Herraud'), a comic legendary saga from the end of the 1200s, relating the fantastic escapades of Prince Herraud of East Gotland and his best friend Bósi, the son of a viking and a shieldmaiden. The two companions have many strange adventures, most unusual among them Bósi's erotic encounters with three farmers' daughters, which are told in a comically explicit dialogue of metaphors. Such erotic language is extremely rare in Icelandic sagas, and for it to have been acceptable to the audience of this saga, we must assume an unusual audience, beyond the reach of chastising clerics, i.e. a community like the powerful and rebellious court of King Eiríkr Magnússon of Norway. It is hard to imagine that the course, yet sophisticated chivalric humor of this saga would have been at home anywhere else in this period. There is only one other Icelandic saga, which stages an encounter with a farmer's daughter and uses explicit language reminiscent of *Bósa saga*, although toned down in comparison. This is *Grettis saga sterka* ('The Saga of Grettir the Strong'), one of the best loved of the anonymous Icelandic family sagas, and it has for other reasons been ascribed to Hafliði Steinsson. The saga is believed to be written shortly after 1300, and the author is evidently a clerically educated man from the district of Þingeyrar Abbey, who is likewise familiar with Norway.

Close by Breiðabólstaður is Víðidalstunga, where the magnate Jón Hákonarson commissioned the manuscript *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol.), which was mentioned above, the greatest of all Icelandic manuscripts. Breiðabólstaður was a prebend of the archbishop of Niðaróss, granted only to the most senior of prelates. When Einarr Hafliðason was awarded Breiðabólstaður in 1343, which he held for half a century, he doubtlessly received it in recognition of his services as *officialis* for several Norwegian bishops at Hólar, while they were away in Norway, but possibly also in recognition of his father's achievement.

At the turn of the 15th century, Iceland was struck by the Black Death for the first time, which devastated the community at Þingeyrar Abbey, reputedly leaving only one monk and three deans alive, although donations from God-fearing families poured in. Clerics were worse affected by the plague than the general population, because of their role in tending to the sick and dying. The Norwegian clergy and privileged class fared badly, and ships stopped sailing to Iceland with imported goods. With the establishment of the Kalmar Union in 1397, which was ruled from Denmark, English prelates and merchants became influential in Iceland for the first time in history. Literary life was seemingly

paralyzed after the Black Death, although books were still read and copied and occasional texts even translated from Middle English into Icelandic. It was in this period that the monastic church of Þingeyrar Abbey acquired its English alabaster altarpiece, now in the modern church. By the early 16th century, the Reformation in Scandinavia began to exert its influence in Iceland, though this happened later in the recalcitrant Hólar diocese than in Skálholt. The last Catholic bishop, Jón Arason, brought a printing press to Iceland in 1530, which ushered in a new usage of books and literature and initiated the transition of Icelandic books from handwritten to mass produced. As mentioned above, Björn son of Bishop Jón was expected to take over as abbot of Þingeyrar when he was brutally executed with his father and brother in 1550. Incidentally, the Swedish printer who worked the first printing press of Iceland was a priest at Breiðabólstaður in Vesturhóp by Þingeyrar Abbey, the very same estate where just over four centuries earlier the revolutionary technology of writing Latin letters with ink on animal skin was introduced to Iceland.

5. Time and History at Þingeyrar Abbey

Measuring and structuring time was essential for the monastic community at Þingeyrar Abbey. Each day was divided into seven regular intervals for the canonical hours, the fixed times of prayer. The day began around two in the morning in the church, the chapter house (Capitulum) or meeting house (Conventum), where the community gathered. About four and a half hours were spent in prayer every day. About the same time was reserved for reading and meditation. Equally essential was to know the ecclesiastical calendar for the year and to have an overview of world history from creation to the present. The Benedictines of Þingeyrar did not see themselves as living in the Middle Ages, according to them they were living in the Sixth Age of the world. Nonetheless, they counted the years from the birth of Christ, as we do, albeit with a seven-year difference. In the *vita* of St Þorlákr, this holy man is said to die in 1186, not in 1193 as would be correct according to the *æra vulgaris*. From around the middle of the 12th century and well into the 13th, the Þingeyrar Abbey writers followed Gerland the Computist (d. after 1093), a Lotharingian who dated the incarnation to seven years later than the common era. Likely it was the *franzeis* Rikini, a liturgical expert at the cathedral school of Hólar, who introduced Gerland's calendar to Iceland (Jóhannesson 1952). Most of the early Þingeyrar texts, and certainly those that were originally written in Latin in the late 12th century, were dated according to Gerland. The *Þingeyrensers* probably first realized that they were alone in following Gerland when an Icelandic representative returned from the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215 (Jóhannesson 1952).

However, there is a relatively minor difference between the Þingeyrar time reckoning of the early period and our own; a major difference was their belief that the world was only a few thousand years old. According to an Icelandic treatise, *Fimm stórþing* (Five Universal Councils), 5199 years had passed from the world's creation to the incarnation of Christ. Hence, the world was believed to be 6332 years old, when Þingeyrar Abbey was founded in 1133. Together with the Earth, the monks believed that man was created in God's image to rule over it. This was not a reactionary article of faith: there was no competing hypothesis. Before the arrival of Christian time reckoning, there was a different method in use among the Icelanders for dividing up the year with only two seasons, summer and winter. Instead of abandoning this tradition altogether, by the middle of the 12th century the Icelanders had integrated their own system into the Christian computistical system. In accordance with Mediterranean practice, the period from the creation of the world to the incarnation of Christ was divided into five Ages of the World (Icelandic: *heimsaldrar*; Latin: *aetates mundi*), based on a historical periodization first presented by the Church Father Augustine of Hippo. According to an Icelandic computational treatise from the 12th century—*Rímbeqla*—apparently from the same northern Icelandic intellectual milieu as Þingeyrar Abbey, precisely 2557 years had passed from the creation of the first man, Adam, to the birth of Noah, who constructed the ark at the time of the flood. This was the so-called antediluvian period, the age of original sin, which ended in almost total

destruction because of God's displeasure with mankind. The original mankind was a race of giants, who lived for centuries.

The Second Age, the postdiluvian age, was that of Noah and his sons, who became the ancestors of all peoples living. At the beginning of this age, all of humanity spoke one language (usually believed to be Hebrew, although the Bible does not specify this) and believed in one God, but this mankind was also prone to sin like the antedeluvians. These great humans gathered to build the tower of Babel (Gen. 11). If we follow the prologue of *Snorra Edda*, as preserved in the *Codex Wormianus*, written at Pingeyrar Abbey around 1350, we find that there "were seventy-two leading craftsmen" who worked on this ambitious building project. To stop them from reaching heaven undeservedly, God divided their common tongue into as many languages, which "have since dispersed throughout the world, in accordance with how the giants were then distributed to the countries and the peoples multiplied". "[A]fter the division of tongues had come about, the names of men were also multiplied and those of other things". This is why the Greco-Roman gods have many names in many languages, e.g., the Greek Zeus is Jupiter in Latin and Thor in Icelandic (Lassen 2018). With the confusion of languages a confusion of the original true religion began, and idolatry arose: "when the appellations multiplied, thereby truth perished, and from the first error, every successor worshipped his previous master, or animals or birds, or the air, the planets and various inanimate things, until this fallacy became current throughout the world, and so completely did they forgo the truth that no one knew his creator except those men alone, who spoke the Hebrew tongue, which was current before the tower construction [...], and thus they understood everything with an earthly understanding, because they had not been granted spiritual wisdom" (cited after Lassen 2018).

The Third Age began with Abraham, and extended to David the king, the fourth to the Babylonian captivity, the fifth to the incarnation of Christ, which marked the beginning of the Sixth Age, the Age of Redemption, when mankind was saved through the sacrificial death of Christ, leading to the beginning of the New Testament and Christian history. The reunification of mankind through prozelitizing the Christian faith was an ambition that sought in some sense to overcome the linguistic and religious obstacles that were the consequences of the disaster at Babel, which had given rise to idolatry and false faith. In the New Testament, the story of the Pentecost miracle forms a sort of redemption from the sin committed by mankind at Babel, or at least a momentary lifting of the divine curse of miscommunication between the nations of the world (Lassen 2018). According to the acts of the apostles, on the day of Pentecost, suddenly they heard a noise and a wind from heaven blew into the house, tongues of fire were seen that separated and rested on each of them, and the Holy spirit came over them, and they began miraculously to speak in other languages. The people of Jerusalem understood them as if they were speaking their own language (Acts 2. 1–13).

Just as the Church Fathers integrated classical Greco-Roman history with biblical history, the Benedictines of Pingeyrar had no qualms in integrating the mythic history of the Germanic peoples with that of the Bible and Classical Literature. In this, they very much followed in the steps of continental authors, who imitated the Romans and derived their own origins from Troy, too. Old Norse translations of hagiography, such as *Clemens saga* ('The Saga of St Clement'), or of historiography, such as *Trójumanna saga* ('The Saga of the Men of Troy'), a translation of Dares Phrygius' *De excidio Troiae*, which was made at Pingeyrar Abbey, or at the very least copied by the monks there, rendered the names of Greco-Roman gods and Trojan heroes as Nordic Odin, Thor, Freyja, Sif, and others we associate only with Norse Mythology. This view of the past was not invented at Pingeyrar Abbey, as is shown by the Germanic translations of the planetary days of the week: 'Mars' is 'Tyr', 'Mercury' is 'Odin', 'Jove' is 'Thor', and 'Venus' is 'Freyja'. Clearly this way of matching the Germanic pantheon with the Greco-Roman is older, although no richer sources exist for the Germanic world-view than those written at Pingeyrar Abbey.

The emergence of paganism or idolatry was associated by the Benedictines of Þingeyrar with the building of the Tower of Babel and the confusion of languages, when “the names of men were also multiplied and those of other things”, and with the increase in names, truth perished and people forgot their knowledge of god (Lassen 2018). Only the Hebrews of old, who still spoke the original tongue, retained a grasp of the spiritual truth until the incarnation of Christ. This is the historical background for the rise of the Nordic peoples, as explained by the Benedictine compiler of *Codex Wormianus*: “When Pompey, one of the Roman generals, harried in the eastern part of the world, Odin fled from Asia to here, the northern part, and at that point he gave himself and his men their names, and claimed that Priam was called Odin and his queen Frigg [...] and whether or not Odin said this out of pride, or because it had come about with the division of tongues, many scholars have held it to be a true story [...]” (cited after Lassen 2018), with modifications). According to *Codex Wormianus*, when the eschatological poem of *Völuspá* speaks of the end of the world, *ragnarök*, this is really a memory of the Trojan War because Odin and his Æsir (understood as meaning ‘Asians’), who brought the language and culture of the North to Saxony, Scandinavia, and even England, were refugees from Troy. The Swedes who first believed in the stories of Odin and his men and spread those myths throughout Scandinavia were naïve pagans, and no Christian should believe their stories because they are not true, except in the sense that these were the false beliefs that mankind held to be true when it lost its way after the disaster at Babel. Odin’s men, who were Turks or Asians, fabricated stories like the pagans they were so that the simple rustics of Scandinavia would think they were gods (Lassen Forthcoming). Thus, in the *Third Grammatical Treatise* from the middle of the 13th century, the author Óláfr Þórðarson argues for an identity between Old Norse-Icelandic vernacular grammar and the Greco-Roman tradition: “It is all the same art of language” (*málslist*), he claims.

What emerges from this very brief look at the theory of world history, according to Þingeyrar Abbey, is a willingness on the part of this Benedictine community in the remote northern Atlantic to find a place for itself on the periphery of the Roman Ecclesiastical world, a creativity in solving apparent incongruities and differences between the pagan past and the Christian present, and finally an unworried and confident belief in the vernacular and its ability to match and represent ecclesiastical Latin in translation, and in conveying the essential messages of biblical discourse. From the vantage point of Þingeyrar Abbey, a small village of wooden buildings in northern Iceland, the Benedictines could fix their mind’s eye on the centre of the Christian world, which was not so much Rome as Constantinople and Jerusalem, a wonderfully vague Asian paradise, where the greatest riches of the world were gathered, which they believed to be just as much their own place of origin as anyone else’s in Europe. Through a supernatural and yet rational link—given the historical premise of the events at Babel—between all the world’s languages, mythologies, and religions, they could comprehend and know the whole of the brief history of the world from creation to their own times, just as they were able to totally map out, geographically and genealogically, the origins of their own remote island community in the North Atlantic from its settlement to the present, to a degree that must have made them feel that whatever they did not yet know, they would soon be able to figure out—indeed a wonderful premise for enabling the rich contribution to world literature that was made by the Benedictines of Þingeyrar Abbey.

6. Conclusions

The modern reception of medieval Icelandic literature, including that of Þingeyrar Abbey, begins with the humanist Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned (1568–1648), who was born in Víðidalur in the vicinity of Þingeyrar and lived in the area for his entire life. His descendants were the first in Iceland to take up a Latinized family name, Vidalinus (in Icelandic *Vidalín*), beside their traditional patronymic, a custom that never caught on among the Icelanders. Arngrímur Jónsson’s Latin scholarship was published in Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Leiden, and London, and reached a learned readership throughout Europe. His achievement was to mediate the vernacular literature of previous centuries in

a form that suited the *Res publica litterarum* of the Renaissance. Arngrímur Jónsson argued that the literature of Iceland was the product of a politically independent Common Wealth or Free State in Iceland that rose with the establishment of the Althing in 930 and fell when Iceland became a tax-paying province of the King of Norway in the late 13th century. He also argued that Icelandic was the ancient language of Northern Europe, a form of Gothic, and that Icelanders had preserved its pristine state, while the other peoples of Northern Europe had corrupted it (he mentions the Norwegians and the Danes in particular), and therefore Icelanders have a historic responsibility in maintaining the pristine condition of their ancient tongue (Jensson 2004).

Arngrímur Jónsson came in possession of the Þingeyrar manuscript *Codex Wormianus* with *Snorra Edda* and the Icelandic *Grammatical treatises*. He had the text of the former revised to be more presentable to modern tastes, and in that form it was eventually published as *Edda Islandorum* in 1665, an edition that became the reference point for Icelandic mythology and literature for over a century. Thus, a continuity was established between the literature of handwritten books from Thingeyrar Abbey and the new printed Latin-based scholarship of the humanists, which laid the foundations for the modern reception. However, Arngrímur Jónsson was a Lutheran priest, and he and others of that denomination deliberately played down the importance of the Roman-Catholic monastic communities of Iceland, and of Medieval Latin literacy in general, in the creation of Icelandic literature (Jensson 2017), so while the survival of the Icelandic literary tradition was secured by the humanist reception, the role of the Benedictine community at Þingeyrar Abbey was reduced to almost nothing, and whenever the monks of Þingeyrar and their contribution was mentioned in the scholarship, it was with the inclusion of harsh and judgemental comments about how they had strayed from the path of true religion.

Thus, not only was Þingeyrar Abbey closed and its library dissolved in a religious revolution orchestrated by the secular authorities of Denmark, the literary achievement of the Benedictines of Þingeyrar Abbey has to this day been deliberately and systematically underappreciated in surveys of Icelandic medieval literature (Kristjánsdóttir 2017b). Yet, the richness of their contribution is still recoverable, albeit with some effort, through studying the cultural heritage of Þingeyrar Abbey, artefacts, originals, and copies alike, a treasure that first began to appear in print in the late 18th century, and has since been coming out in a continuous stream throughout the 19th and 20th century, and is still being published in first editions in the 21st century. As a phenomenon of the world Þingeyrar Abbey may not offer much to view for today's visitor, but as a powerhouse of cultural heritage it has certainly earned itself a place in history.

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