CONVERSION NARRATIVE AND CHRISTIAN IDENTIY:
‘HOW CHRISTIANITY CAME TO ICELAND’

Conversion, in the Middle Ages as today, has a range of different meanings: as Muldoon has commented, it encompasses a ‘spectrum’ of experiences, not one. In the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, the root meaning of the verbs used is ‘to turn’, ‘to return’, ‘to repent’; in his Confessions, Augustine uses a range of word-forms with the root ‘vert’ (‘to turn’) in describing his own conversion (e.g. ‘convert’, ‘avert’, ‘pervert’, ‘adverse’, ‘universe’). In a classic study of conversion in late antiquity, Nock defined it as ‘the re-orientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning that implies a consciousness that the old was wrong and the new was right’. This is frequently quoted in works on conversion in the Middle Ages, with certain qualifications. Many historians have pointed out that this individualizing definition of conversion can hardly apply to the description of the large-scale conversion of whole peoples, for whom Christianity is just as likely to have been a pragmatic choice as a theological one. Some scholars prefer to use different terms for the conversion of peoples (‘acculturation’ or ‘Christianization’), but it is not necessarily useful or accurate to reserve the term ‘conversion’ only for individuals: the biblical call to repent is, after all, addressed to the community as a whole. The other qualification is that, while Nock assumes that conversion represents a single turning point, most would now conceive of it as a process: Morrison has shown that, in twelfth-century monastic writing, conversion is predominantly understood as a way of life, a process of ‘empathetic transformation’ that begins with entry into the monastic life and ends only with death. Although one might argue that his definition applies only to an intellectual elite, the idea of conversion as a process has the support of contemporary psychologists like Rambo, who would divide it into stages such as ‘crisis’, ‘quest’, ‘encounter’, ‘interaction’, and so on. Conversion, then, can be individual or communal, personal transformation or institutional affiliation; it can be depicted as a single moment of crisis or as a lifelong process of change.

Just as difficult to pin down is the relationship between the experience of conversion and its representation in narrative, which is often dismissed as derivative and therefore suspect in historical terms. It is common for those writing on conversion to distinguish between the experience of conversion,
which is ‘beyond thought and words’, and the narrative of conversion, which is retrospective and rationalized. Morrison points out that the Latin conversio is a metaphor from manufacturing processes in the arts and crafts (the ‘transformation of one substance into another’), and thus that there is always an artistic, even perhaps a consciously fictional element to conversion narratives: it is only through the poetic imagination that the ineffable (‘the reorientation of the soul’) can be expressed. Conversion, according to Bernard of Clairvaux, takes place in a supernatural dimension freed from the constraints of language, so concealment is a condition of both the experience of conversion and the narrative that results. Some scholars distinguish between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ conversion, arguing that the religious experience is followed by a second conversion of ‘life into text’. Yet if conversion is always a ‘turning’ from and/or to, if it is always a process, then one might argue that conversion can only be expressed and apprehended through narrative, even if the religious experience at the heart of it cannot. As Fredrikson has argued:

To see a content filled moment of conversion is to have constructed a narrative whereby that moment emerges retrospectively as the origin of (and justification for) one’s present.

Narrative is the primary genre used in the Bible to speak of conversion; Szpiech points out that the conversion of St Paul in Acts undergoes ‘a process of narrativization’ by being told and then retold three times. St Augustine, in the garden in Milan, hears a voice chanting ‘tolle lege’ (‘take up and read’): this is not just ‘conversion by the book’, but conversion as a way of reading, a form of exegesis: a ‘strong form of reading’ or ‘re-reading’ of one’s life. Indeed, the way in which narrative shapes and orders the flow of experience might be thought of as parallel to the way in which God, in the Christian tradition, shapes and orders history: all narratives, in this sense, are conversion narratives – retrospective narratives, narratives ordered towards an end. As Ricoeur has commented: ‘Each literary plot is a sort of miniature version of the great plot that joins Apocalypse and Genesis.’ More recently, it has even been argued that conversion narratives are not ‘retrospective’ so much as ‘prospective’: the text precedes and makes the experience of conversion, not the experience of conversion the text. The literary form of the conversion narrative therefore deserves close attention: rather than coming second to the experience of conversion, it is through narrative that conversion takes place.

These views are supported by more recent work on conversion within the social sciences. Sociologists have argued that one thing that definitely changes when a person is converted is their ‘universe of discourse’: the way a person interprets the world and his or her relationship to it through language. A significant part of this change is the process of ‘biographical reconstruction’:
the ‘dismantling’ and ‘reconstituting’ of one’s past in such a way as to identify with the paradigms of the group. Rambo suggests that a key moment in the encounter of conversion comes when the convert perceives a point of contact (an ‘impression point’) between his or her own life story and the central narratives of the group: conversion is about entering into ‘a new story’ in which one’s personal life experience is integrated into a theological system. Rambo suggests that a key moment in the encounter of conversion comes when the convert perceives a point of contact (an ‘impression point’) between his or her own life story and the central narratives of the group: conversion is about entering into ‘a new story’ in which one’s personal life experience is integrated into a theological system. In some evangelical movements, giving one’s testimony is recognized as a crucial stage in conversion: the convert asserts his or her new identity as convert by retelling his or her story in accordance with the metaphors, images, and narratives of the group. It may be relevant that the Norse verb for ‘to convert’ is snúa, which can also mean ‘to translate’; conversion and translation are closely connected as creative and literary acts. Sociologists would argue that telling one’s story is not separate from the process of conversion, but actually constitutive of it.

As for individuals, so for communities: conversion to Christianity is experienced and understood through narratives about conversion to Christianity. We see this in the narratives in which the Germanic peoples of medieval Europe told the story of their conversion: they too needed to remember and ‘reconstitute’ their past in such a way as to assert a new Christian identity for themselves. Participation in the Christian community meant the appropriation of biblical narratives, reconstructing the history of one’s people so as to integrate it into a theological system. It meant entering into a new story: the story of salvation history. These narratives are not secondary to the conversion process; they are an intrinsic part of the process of converting.

Conversion history, then, is necessarily literary history: the history of how ‘converting’ peoples appropriated Christian narratives. Religious identity, like any other form of identity, requires the construction of continuity and sameness over time and space: Szpiech describes the convert as a ‘chronotope’, who ‘embodies and reflects the entirety of salvation time, the before-and-after of figural Christian thought’. In Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World, Lieu speaks of ‘the locality of belonging to and being able to tell a story’ and ‘the powerful and empowering function, within the continuing tradition, of remembering a common faith narrative’. This is particularly the case for Judaism and Christianity, which are very much ‘religions of remembrance’; Szpiech speaks of conversion as ‘distinctively Christian’ because it reflects so closely ‘Christian notions of revelation, salvation and time’. However, there are some challenges here. The continuity and sameness constitutive of Christian identity must be weighed against the discontinuity and difference that constitutes Christian conversion; the strengthening of local identity must be carefully balanced against the international and universalizing tendencies of Christianity. As Lieu herself points out, remembering in this context is an active process of ‘re-membering’: it involves ‘a deliberate not remembering’ or ‘remembering otherwise’, perhaps
even a ‘denial of difference’, a collective amnesia on whatever does not match the dominant narrative of the group.\textsuperscript{26} Although religious identity may appear stable, it in fact conceals variety and multiplicity: contest and struggle with alternative narratives are hidden behind an apparently united front. One might connect this with what Ricoeur says about ‘as yet untold stories’ in life: ‘a life story proceeds from untold and repressed stories in the direction of actual stories the subject can take up and hold as constitutive of his personal identity.’\textsuperscript{27} It is with the recollection of a few ‘as yet untold stories’ that this article is concerned.

Although my primary focus is Iceland, it is helpful to start by discussing a better-known story in Bede’s \textit{Historia ecclesiastica}, which furnishes a particularly good example of conversion as a ‘strong form of reading’, as allegorical exegesis. As Wormald and others have argued, Bede invests the English with shared identity on the basis of their spiritual unity, making use of the biblical theme of election to present the English as a ‘chosen people’ with a providential destiny of their own.\textsuperscript{28} Yet the conversion of the English is not just a local event, but their incorporation into the Universal Church; a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies that God’s word will reach to ‘islands’ at the end of the ‘earth’.\textsuperscript{29} Bede’s exegesis can be clearly discerned in his well-known account of the conversion of King Edwin, in which an anonymous adviser makes the famous speech about the sparrow flying through the lighted hall. As Fry recognized, this is the sparrow of Psalm lxxxiii (lxxxiv), which Augustine allegorizes in his \textit{Expositions of the Psalms} as ‘the heart’ and who is promised ‘a heavenly perch, an everlasting home’.\textsuperscript{30} Christianity, in this story, offers clear knowledge of what comes before and after life: it transforms a haunting image of transience into a master narrative within which each individual life finds its purpose. Likewise, Barrow has argued that the story about the high priest Coifi presents ‘a sustained piece of literary inversion and biblical exegesis’: the spear with which Coifi (recalling Caiaphas) desecrates the pagan shrines can be read as a type of the spear with which Christ’s side is pierced, from which the waters of baptism flow.\textsuperscript{31} The shadowy visitor that appears to Edwin, she suggests, is a \textit{figura} – the shadow of the Old Testament pointing through ‘signs’ to the New, an embodiment of ‘typological reading’. Conversion, for Bede as for Augustine, is a ‘theological interpretation of the past’.\textsuperscript{32} Alternatively, one might think of allegorical exegesis itself as reiterating the process of converting; recollecting or redeeming hidden, lost, or absent meanings and translating this ‘loss’ into eternal ‘gain’. Poland argues that it ‘repeats in miniature the crisis through which loss and death become gain and eternal life’.\textsuperscript{33}

At the same time, Rowley has argued that Bede here struggles to make the material at his disposal fit the paradigm of conversion, that other stories ‘untold’ or ‘repressed’ can be perceived between the gaps of this ‘meditation on the redemption’.\textsuperscript{34} There are alternative accounts of Edwin’s conversion in British sources and in the \textit{Earliest Life of Gregory the Great}, which Bede may have
known; and his account can be broken down into three distinct and conflicting narratives, which he struggles to coordinate. Edwin's lack of miracles and the hesitancy – the deferral – of his conversion 'resist' Bede's desire to incorporate it through exegesis into his grand theological vision of God's intervention in the history of the English people. The obscurity of Edwin's visitor, his isolation and silent musings, speak just as much of the opacity of God's will as of divine enlightenment and revelation.

Bede may well have been a source for the first written history of the Icelanders and the very earliest account of their conversion: Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, written between c.1122 and 1133. As I have argued elsewhere, Ari's depiction of the conversion is remarkably streamlined, based on the memory of a single person, Ari's foster-father Teitr, and recording the Icelanders' consensual decision to accept Christianity with a bare minimum of conflict and disagreement. Although theology seems to have been of less interest to Ari than statecraft, he nevertheless makes use of the biblical paradigm of migration and conversion so useful for the election of nations. Yet, even in his short history, we find the same 'dynamic of resistance and incorporation' that Rowley identifies in Bede.

On the surface, Ari's history is certainly marked by 'sameness and continuity over time and space' – to the extent that he might be said to neglect Nock's sense of conversion as a 'deliberate turning' and a 'consciousness that the old was wrong'. He cultivates this continuity so carefully that it is easy to miss the elegant manoeuvres that allow him to present the arrival of Christianity in this way. Ari tells us that, before the Icelanders arrived, there were Irish Christians in Iceland:

> Pá váru hérr menn kristnir, þeir es Nordmenn kalla papa, en þeir fóru síðan á braut, af því at þeir vildu eigi vesa hérr við heiðna menn, ok létu eptir þeir trékk írskar ok bjöllur ok bagla; af því mátti skilja, at þeir váru menn írskir. (p. 5)

(There were then Christians here, whom the Northmen call *papa*, but they later went away, because they did not wish to stay here with heathens; and they left behind them Irish books and bells and staffs. From this it could be seen that they were Irishmen.)

As often noted, these 'relics' serve to consecrate the land, suggesting that Iceland was Christian territory – sacred space – long before the actual conversion. Just as important, though, is the corresponding emptiness of the landscape: the absence of pagan shrines or temples (like Edwin's *fana*) that must be cleansed or destroyed before Christianity can gain ground. This stands in sharp contrast to later accounts of Iceland's conversion: in *Þorvalds þáttr viðfórla*, Bishop Friðrekr must drive an evil spirit out of a rock in order to gain his first convert, and in *Bjørnanda þáttr ok Þórhalls*, the prophet Þórhallr sees all the nature spirits in Iceland packing their bags to depart before the missionary Þangbrandr arrives from Norway. In *Þórhalls þáttr knapps*, an angel appears to Þórhallr in a dream, telling him to
break down his temple at once, and build a church when Christianity comes to Iceland; when they land in Iceland, Gizurr and Hjalti’s first act is to destroy pagan shrines and build a church on the very same site. Ari, however, except for one tantalizing reference to hof (‘temples’), does not mention any aspect of pagan cult: his Icelanders are pre-Christian, rather than pagan, and they do not enter into conflict, nor have any contact with the Irish Christians at all. This is particularly significant given that Ari dates the settlement of Iceland to the time ‘es Ívarr Ragnarssonr loðbrókar lét drepa Eadmund enn helga Englakonung’ (‘when Ívarr, son of Ragnarr loðbrók had St Edmund, king of the Angles, killed’). In Ari’s retelling, Iceland is not caught up in this dramatic conflict between Norse paganism and Christianity; it forms a self-contained island sanctuary, insulated from the violence of the surrounding world.

Ari mentions a ‘saga’ of Edmund, perhaps a written life, allowing him to coordinate the date of Iceland’s settlement with the chronology of the Christian world. More significant, though, from a theological point of view, are the bœkr (‘books’) that he claims the Irish Christians left behind. Like bells and staffs (Old Icelandic bagall, from Irish bacall), books are frequently the subject of miracles in Irish and British saints’ lives: books written in the hand of St Columba are miraculously kept safe when dropped in water, and St Cuthbert’s precious book (probably the Lindisfarne Gospels) washes up on the beach at Whitherne, dry and undamaged, when it falls out of the boat in which his body lies. For Ari, these books constitute the ‘impression point’: Iceland has entered into written history before the Northmen even arrive. They are a sign of Iceland’s place in salvation history, in which Ari’s bœkling (‘little book’) – prefigured here – has its own modest role to play. In this sense, they function similarly to the mysterious figura in Bede, a ‘figure’ of the Old Testament, understood retrospectively to point towards the New. Conversion is an entry into Christian narrative, into the master plot between ‘Apocalypse and Genesis’.

Another potential ‘impression point’ is the day and night that Þorgeirr spends lying under his cloak, deciding whether to accept Christianity; a moment that is closely comparable with Edwin’s silence as he muses over which religion to adopt. Like Edwin, Þorgeirr stands here for the Icelandic people as a whole: the success of their conversion story will depend on what he decides. Jón Hnefill Áðalsteinsson has amassed significant evidence that links Þorgeirr’s ‘lying out’ with the practice of pagan divination, but there are biblical and hagiographic parallels too: Elijah wraps himself in his cloak to go out and hear the ‘still, small voice of God’ and Ezra sits with his cloak torn in penitence for the Israelites’ sins. In one of the best-known and most frequently illustrated incidents in his life, St Martin draws his sword and cuts his cloak in two so that he can share it with a beggar; that night, he has a vision of Christ wearing the beggar’s half. Ari here remembers Iceland’s conversion in such a way as to infuse pagan
practice with Christian meaning, drawing on the shared associations in both traditions. He uses the cloak, theologically, to acknowledge but also to conceal the ‘reorientation of the soul’ in the converting individual.

Ari’s focus on a single story about the conversion is attractively ordered and compelling, allowing him to establish a high degree of continuity between pre- and post-conversion Iceland; but his focus comes at the cost of other more heterogeneous stories about early Christianity in Iceland. This can be seen in a couple of loose ends that ‘resist’ Ari’s strongly unified reading. At the beginning of his chapter on the conversion, Ari mentions that the missionary Þangbrandr killed two or three men who had slandered him; this is given as the reason for his return to Norway. Ari’s vague approximation may suggest that his sources are unreliable, or it may express anxiety about what he here leaves untold, in what Lieu calls a ‘deliberate not remembering’. Later in the same chapter, Ari quotes two lines of verse spoken by Hjalti Skeggjason insulting the goddess Freyja – a scrap of poetry inserted out of context and chronological order to explain why Hjalti had previously been outlawed. These tiny glimpses of violent (or at least verbal) collision between the missionaries and pagan Icelanders threaten Ari’s careful construction of the Icelanders’ conversion as ‘late and peaceful’, distanced from the religious violence experienced elsewhere. Yet they are corroborated by the existence of skaldic stanzas dating to the conversion era, which testify to ‘untold’ stories of violent injury, insult, and slander. Hjalti certainly seems to have been involved in this, although his story survives only in small pieces. Some of the stories surrounding Þangbrandr’s killings are imaginatively recuperated in later narratives of conversion, such as Kristni saga and Pangbrands þáttir, and they are successfully incorporated into a traditional feud pattern in Njáls saga, with the addition of lively dialogue and heroic double killings. Ari’s narrative proceeds by the denial of stories ‘untold or repressed’, deliberately ‘not remembered’.

My main interest here, though, is not in these loose ends so much as in absences: in this case, the absence of the papar who allegedly left Iceland when the Northmen arrived: the absence of alternative Christianities. Even if the papar had no impact on the native population, it is widely recognized that several of the settlers Ari mentions would actually have come to Iceland via the British Isles, bringing Christianity with them. Ari himself claimed descent from one of the four main settlers he identifies, Auðr the Deep-Minded, and must have known that she came to Iceland via Ireland and the Hebrides, since he notes that she was married to Óleifr the White, the Norse king of Dublin, and traces his descent from her grandson, Óleifr feilan (the Irish nickname ‘little wolf’). Yet Ari keeps silent about Auðr’s potential familiarity with the Christianity of the British Isles, and records in his genealogy that the first Christian in his family was Eyjólfr, Auðr’s great-great-grandson, who was baptized in his old age ‘when Christianity came to Iceland’ (p. 28).
Ari’s silence about Irish Christianity is reproduced in *Laxdœla saga*, which gives Auðr (there called Unnr) a grand pagan burial in a ship. It is tempting to read both these silences as deliberate repression in the interests of ‘sameness and continuity’ or ‘denial of difference’, especially in the context of alternative narratives that foreground Auðr’s Christian faith. Both *Landnámabók* and *Eiríks saga rauða* record that she was a baptized Christian, and *Landnámabók* describes how she was buried, at her own request, ‘í flœðarmáli’ (‘below the mark of the high tide’), because she did not wish to lie in unconsecrated earth. Stefán Karlsson relates this to the tradition that all waters are consecrated by Christ’s baptism in the Jordan, and notes that some Norwegian laws designate this tidal space, neither land nor sea, as suitable for the burial of unbaptized children; it is similar to the English practice of burying the dead under the eaves of the church, so that sanctified water would drip down on them. To remember Auðr’s burial on the seashore is to situate her in a liminal space, a borderland, between pagan past and Christian future, between socio-political authority and divine agency, temporarily stranded or out of place. It is a space associated with sanctity: it is where St Nicholas falls asleep as a child with his lectionary on his lap, and where St Cuthbert’s book is found when it washes ashore undamaged.

In *Eiríks saga rauða*, moreover, burial on the seashore evokes the patristic figure of Christian life as voyage across the sea, which is later figured in the search for the paradisal Vínland and the final pilgrimage of Guðríðr (herself a descendant of one of Auðr’s freed slaves, and a Christian before the conversion) to Rome. Auðr’s burial on the seashore sets her apart from the social and legal structures of pagan Iceland; it constructs a new identity for her as a Christian *peregrinus* or ‘pilgrim’.

There are many other examples of stories ‘as yet untold’ in Ari, connections that he does not make or perhaps deliberately suppresses between the Christianities of the settlement period and the legal conversion of Iceland. It has been suggested that Ari, like Bede before him, was hostile towards British Christianity as a competitor of the Roman Church or, which is more likely, that he downplayed the Christianity of the British Isles because of the continental Christianity of Gizurr’s family. Later sagas certainly suggest that Hebridean Christianity could be perceived as suspect, most obviously in the case of Þórgunna in *Eyrbyggja saga*, a Hebridean who arrives from Dublin bringing a mysterious curse, which Ólafur Halldórsson has suggested may preserve a memory of Manx legends about the sea deity Manannán mac Lir. Yet it is also clear that Ari’s decision about what to forget was ideologically driven: he could hardly present the Icelanders as a people with ‘one law and one religion’ if heathenisms and different varieties of Christianity had in fact coexisted from the start. Faced with this problem, Ari chose to ignore those memories that did not match his conversion narrative, to stick with the ‘focality’ of a single story.
Nevertheless, some of these alternative stories or unofficial memories are imaginatively recuperated in later narratives about early Christianity in Iceland. I would like to look here at three stories in *Landnámabók* ("The Book of Settlements"), which was probably first compiled in the twelfth century, but survives only in later redactions.\textsuperscript{55} There are multiple versions of these stories, but I will concentrate on those in the redaction of *Landnámabók* in *Hauksbók*, an encyclopedic compilation assembled in 1302–19 by the Icelandic lawman Haukr Erlandsson. Haukr based his version of *Landnámabók* on the earlier version made by Sturla Þórðarson (d. 1284), and he placed it in an anthology of other texts on history, geography, and theology that projects a catholic worldview.\textsuperscript{56} Rowe has argued that Haukr's purpose in producing this codex was to boost his power and authority in Norway; this gave him a vested interest in Irish Christianity, since he traced his descent from the Irish king Kjarvalr (Cerball).\textsuperscript{57} It also gave a marked clerical bent to Haukr's selection of texts, as he harnessed for his own purposes the considerable authority of the medieval Church: he follows his version of *Landnámabók* with *Kristni saga* ("The Story of the Conversion"), which claims to tell the story of 'hversu kristni kom á Ísland' ('how Christianity came to Iceland') from the arrival of the first missionaries in Iceland in 986 to the episcopates of Ísleifr and Gizurr. This incorporates Ari's narrative of conversion, but extends it back in time to cover earlier missions by Þorvaldr and Friðrekr, Stefni, and finally Þangbrandr.\textsuperscript{58} Yet, in contrast to Ari's strong sense of social and legal continuity between pre- and post-conversion Iceland, Haukr's narrative – from settlement in *Landnámabók* to conversion in *Kristni saga* – abounds in discontinuity, conflict, and confrontation. What he remembers is an embattled and ascetic Christianity, a Christianity under siege on the margins of the world.

Haukr, like Ari, begins his book with an account of the *papar* in Iceland. In this, he sticks closely to the story told in Sturla’s version of *Landnámabók*:

\begin{quote}
En áðr Ísland byggðisk af Nóregi, váru þar þeir menn, er Norðmenn kalla papa; þeir váru menn kristnir, ok hyggja menn, at þeir hafi verit vestan um haf, því at fundusk eptir þeim bœkr írskar, bjöllur ok baglar ok enn fleiri hlutir, þeir er þat mátti skilja, at þeir váru Vestmenn. Enn er ok þess getit á bókum enskum, at í þann tíma var farit milli landanna. (pp. 31f.)
\end{quote}

(And before Iceland was settled from Norway, there were men here, whom the Northmen call *papar*; they were Christians, and people believe that they were from west over the sea, because Irish books, bells and staffs, and still more objects were left behind them, from which it could be seen that they were from the west. It is also mentioned in English books that there were journeys between the lands at that time.)

There are some small, but significant, differences here from Ari's originary account. The *papar* are not identified as from Ireland only, but from the British
Isles (‘West over the sea’) and there is no mention that they left when the Northmen arrived, although this may be implied by the objects ‘left behind’. Instead, the allusion to ‘journeys between the lands’ (backed by the authority of ‘English books’) allows for the possibility of overlap, of blurring the distinction between the papar and settlers who came via Ireland, Scotland, and the Hebrides. Haukr’s own addition is to specify locations for the objects found, linking them to local place names, rather than to Iceland as a whole: ‘Þat fannsk í Papey austr ok í Papýli’ (‘They were found in Papey in the East and in Papýli’). The ‘books’ and ‘bells’ in particular become a symbolic focus in Haukr’s account of the first Christian settler, Órlygr Hrappsson.

Órlygr, who settles in Kjalarnes in the south-east of Iceland, was fostered in the Hebrides by a Bishop Patrick, described as ‘inn helgi’ (‘the holy/the saint’), who has probably been confused, whether by accident or deliberation, with Patrick the patron saint of Ireland. Patrick gives Órlygr wood for a church, a plenarium (probably a Gospel book), an iron bell, a gold penny, and consecrated earth to take with him to the new land. He instructs Órlygr to build a church dedicated to St Columba (Kolumkille) in a place where three mountains are visible from the sea, where he is to raise three stones. The presumably Trinitarian significance of these is Haukr’s addition to the story in Sturlubók, where only two mountains are named. As Órlygr nears Iceland, a storm blows up; he calls upon Bishop Patrick for help and lands safely, after promising to name the fjord after his patron: Paterksfjóðr. Haukr adds to this that his foster-brother Kollr calls on Þórr; they are separated in the storm and Kollr’s ship is wrecked, although he and his crew survive. Later, as Órlygr sails around the coast, the bell that Patrick gave him falls overboard; it is found in a pile of seaweed near to the place where Órlygr settles and builds a church.

The ‘sameness and continuity’ that constitutes Christian identity here is not, as for Ari, coterminous with the socio-political order; it is the ‘sameness and continuity’ of the Christian supernatural, channelled through the relics of the saint. The virtus (‘power’ or ‘virtue’) of the saint is literally exported from the Hebrides in the consecrated earth and contact relics provided by Bishop Patrick; ‘remembering’ him as St Patrick thus carries theological weight, collapsing historical chronology into the timelessness of the liturgical commemoration of the saints. As Wellendorf has shown, Haukr’s story about the bell is reminiscent of a miracle from the life of the Irish saint Declan, an older contemporary of St Patrick. Like Declan’s bell, which is left on a rock and floats to the place of his resurrection, or the altar of the British saint Caaranog, which he casts into the sea to lead ‘where God wished him to go’, St Patrick’s bell guides Órlygr to the site preordained for his church. Through associating relics with local traditions and place names, Haukr maps holy sites onto the Icelandic landscape, just as Heimshýsing (‘A Description of the World’) later in the same codex measures
geographical space by the shrines of saints. The objects that connect Ørlygr with the papar do not lie passively, waiting to be found; they play an active role in defining the religion of this local community. Haukr tells us that Ørlygr’s descendants ‘trúðu á Kolumkilla, þó at þeir væri óskírðir’ (‘believed in Columba, although they were not baptized’). How long this local form of Christianity continues is not clear, but there is no sign of it in Kristni saga, when Stefnir Þorgilsson arrives in Kjalarnes in 995/6 to convert it to Christianity. We are told that he meets with a poor reception, especially from his family, ‘því at allr lýðr var þá heiðinn á landi hér’ (‘because everyone in this land was then heathen’). Stefnir, like Ørlygr, is the descendant of a Hiberno-Norse Christian, Helgi bjóla, but no link is made to any inherited or local form of Christianity.

Haukr diverges from Ari here in the attention that he pays to Hebridean Christianity and to local religion in Kjalarnes; but he also contests Ari’s emphasis on the religious neutrality or homogeneity of the pre-Christian period in Iceland. In his account, the Iceland of the settlers is religiously divided: Ørlygr is a Christian, but his foster-brother Kollr is a pagan, and the competition between the two faiths is vividly captured in the story of how Ørlygr prays successfully to Christ, while Kollr calls unsuccessfully on Þórr. This reads like a riposte to the comment in Sturlubók about the Hiberno-Norse Christian Helgi the Lean, who ‘trúði á Krist, en þó hét hann á Þorr til sæfara ok harðræða’ (‘believed in Christ, but called on Þórr for sea journeys and difficulties’), to which Haukr adds rather cynically, ‘ok alls þess, er honum þótti mestu varða’ (‘and whatever else he thought mattered most’). It points towards the later scene in Kristni saga where Þangbrandr and the pagan poet Steinunn quarrel over whether Christ or Þórr has more power over the wind and waves, a debate commemorated in two skaldic stanzas, which declare triumphantly that ‘Hlífði ei Kristr’ (‘Christ gave no protection’). Unlike Ari, Haukr insists that religious difference and competition characterize the religion of the settlement period.

This opposition between paganism and Christianity also colours Haukr’s story about Patrick’s bell. As Wellendorf has illustrated, there is a close parallel here with pagan rituals of settlement as described in Landnámabók and elsewhere: Ingólfr throws his high-seat pillars overboard and determines to settle in the place where they land, as do some other settlers, including Þórólfur Mostrarskeggi, whose pillars are engraved with the image of Þórr. Wellendorf argues that we are dealing here with the same motif: successful settlement depends on the cooperation of spiritual powers, whether these are pagan or Christian. What matters is ‘piety and religious/cultic behaviour’ regardless of what religion one has. This might be described as a typological interpretation, by which the old comes to prefigure the new. The problem is that, in Haukr’s story, it does matter who one prays to: it is Ørlygr, calling on Bishop Patrick, who reaches land safely, while Kollr receives no help from Þórr. This story corrects those in which Þórr
directs settlers where to land or crushes the ships of Christian missionaries. Haukr is quite conscious here that, in Nock’s terms, ‘the old is wrong’ and the ‘new is right’: there are clear moral choices to be made.

Haukr gives no more details about Christianity in Kjalarnes, but Kjalnesinga saga, dating also to the early fourteenth century, picks up where Landnámabók leaves off. It gives a vivid imaginative depiction of how this area of Iceland, after settlement, was riven by competing faith-systems: how churches and temples stood in adjoining districts, and how Irish Christianity coexisted with Norse paganism and benevolent sorcery. The consequence is precisely the religious conflict that Ari tries so hard to deny: Búi, son of the Irish Christian Andriðr, is outlawed ‘um rangan átrúnað’ (‘for having the wrong faith’), and he burns down a pagan temple belonging to Helgi bjóla (now a Norse pagan) while his son is praying inside.65 This story has little or nothing to do with historical fact: Helgi bjóla was, at least according to Landnámabók, a baptized Christian, and his nickname certainly suggests mixed Irish descent. Rather, the saga projects backwards in time the religious struggles in Kjalarnes during Stefnir’s mission: Stefnir too is prosecuted for being a Christian, after burning down pagan temples and shrines.66 In Kristni saga and in Stefnis þátttr, this is about extremism and persecution, which results first in Stefnir’s outlawry and eventually in his death. In Kjalnesinga saga, as Cook has shown, it has become a fiction about ‘integration’ and ‘assimilation’ between early Norse and Irish settlers.67 Búi, aspects of whose story may be based on the Irish hero Cúchulainn, returns from outlawry to marry Helga, the heathen daughter of his enemy.68 When he dies, his religion dies out too. We are told that he is buried in the church that Órlygr had built, but to which ‘engan maðr gaf gaum’ (‘nobody paid attention’). The saga ends where Ari’s history begins, with the sacred objects the papar left behind:

Sú in sama járnklukka hekk þá fyrir kirkjunni á Esjubergi, er Árni biskup réð fyrir stað, Þorlákssson, ok Nikulás Pétrsson bjó at Hofi, ok var þá slitin af ryði. Árni biskup lét ok þann sama plenarium fara suðr í Skálholt ok lét búi ok líma óll blöðin í kjölnn, ok er írskt letr á. (pp. 43f.)

(The same iron bell hung in the church at Esjuberg when Bishop Árni Þorlákssson was in charge of the see and Nikulás Pétrsson lived at Hof, and it was then damaged by rust. Bishop Árni had the same plenarium sent south to Skálholt and had all the pages repaired and glued to the binding, and there is Irish writing in it.)

The neglected church is a poignant reminder of the vanished Christianity of the Irish settlers: all that survives into the present of the audience is a rusty bell and an illegible book. The saga engages imaginatively with alternative (perhaps local) stories about Irish Christianity, but then cuts back to the official narrative line. In these stories, Ari’s allusion to Irish books and bells becomes an imaginative prompt for alternative narratives of how Christianity first came to Iceland;
through remembering differently, they challenge the ‘focality’ of Ari’s brief account and suggest the existence of other, local, Christianities. Yet they all end officially with Christianity dying out before the arrival of the first Christian missionary. On the same hills where Auðr the Deep-Minded raised crosses, her descendants set up pagan shrines and sacrifice: ‘Trúðu þeir því, at þeir dæi í hóla’ (‘They believed that they would enter the hills when they died’). Helgi the Lean calls his farmstead after Christ (Kristnes), but his son Ingjaldr raises a temple to Freyr at Þverá, and his great-grandson Víga-Glúmr turns from the worship of Freyr to Óðinn, before a deathbed conversion to Christianity at the hands of Bishop Kolr. There may be ‘continuity of religious observance’ here, but there is discontinuity in terms of beliefs. At the end of his Landnámabók, Haukr concludes in line with Sturlubók:

Nökkurir landnásmenn hafi skírðir verit, þeir er byggt hafa Ísland, flestir þeir, er kómu vestan um haf … En þat gekk óvíða í ættir, því at synir þeira sumra reistu hof ok blótuðu, en land var alheiðit nær hundraði vetra. (p. 396)

(Some of the men who settled Iceland were baptized, most of those who came from west over the sea … But it did not last among their descendants, because the sons of some of them raised temples and sacrificed, and the land was completely heathen for nearly a hundred years.)

It is as if the presence of Irish and Hebridean Christianity has to be discontinued or at least interrupted in order for the official story of the conversion to commence.

There are a couple of stories, however, in which Irish Christianity in Iceland is not altogether discontinued or denied. The first is the story of Ásólfr alskikk, which Haukr expands significantly from Sturlubók, as he does in the case of Órlygr. Ásólfr comes to Iceland from Ireland with twelve companions (like the Irish céli Dé); he tries to settle in three different places, but is repeatedly driven away by the heathen inhabitants because of his miraculous catches of fish. As Jesch has commented, this is a characteristically Irish miracle, a detail that Haukr, with his Irish interests, did not miss. It is perhaps why he emphasizes the Irish identity of Ásólfr and his companions, simplifying their mixed Irish–Norse descent. Haukr’s longest addition to Sturlubók is what happens after Ásólfr’s death: he tells how, over a century afterwards, a servant woman is wiping her feet on the mound of grass over his grave. Ásólfr, much put out, appears to her in a dream and commands her to inform the local magnate Halldórr of his presence. Halldórr, however, ‘gaf ekki gaum at’ (‘paid no attention’), commenting that he does not care for women’s dreams. Ásólfr then makes a second appearance, this time to a monk left behind by one of the early missionary bishops in Iceland, Hróðólfr. The monk buys the land, finds Ásólfr’s bones, and exhumes them. Ásólfr then appears in a third dream, this time directly to Halldórr, and orders
him to buy back the bones immediately or he will put out both his eyes. This
time, Halldórr reacts at once, and sends his son Illugi to Norway to get wood,
intending to build a church over Ásólfr’s grave. Caught in a storm at sea, Illugi
throws the wood overboard, telling it to come to land ‘where Ásólfr wishes’. It
drifting straight to the site of his cell, where a church is built and dedicated to
Kolumkille.

This story has a number of points in common with that of Ørlygr: early conflict
between pagans and Christians, the supernatural guidance of the church wood
(based this time on a miracle of St Giles), and the dedication to Kolumkille. But it is much more obviously indebted to hagiography in the fishing miracles
and the translatio that identify Ásólfr as an incipient or potential saint. In his
peregrinations around Iceland (so different from the stabilitas of Benedictine
monasticism), we catch a glimpse of the papar on peregrinatio pro amore Dei
(‘pilgrimage for the love of God’): Iceland functions less as Ari’s ‘promised land’
than as a wilderness or heremum in oceanum (‘desert in the ocean’). Ásólfr is
driven from place to place by the hostility of the local inhabitants, but his presence
in this wasteland renews it with paradisal abundance in the miraculous catches of
fish. Perhaps there is even an incipient idea here of Iceland, like Ireland, as the
‘isle of saints’: Ásólfr creates, wherever he goes, tiny ‘islands’ of sanctity, where
he lives in harmony with the natural world. The explanation in Sturlubók that he
‘vildi ekki eiga við heiðna menn’ (‘did not wish to have dealings with heathens’),
and that ‘hann lézk ekki vilja vera hjá óðrum mónnum’ (‘he said that he did
not wish to be with other people’), echoes Ari’s comment that the papar ‘vildu
eigi vesa hér við heiðna menn’ (‘did not wish to be here with heathens’). This
story perhaps originated, Jesch has suggested, at the end of the twelfth century,
when there was considerable interest in local sanctity: saints were an important
way, on the periphery of the world, of consolidating one’s Christian identity,
constructing a new Christian centre. With Ásólfr, Iceland enters into a new
and universal story: the master narrative of the communion of saints.

Particularly interesting is the way this story is presented as one that has been
forgotten or repressed; the culpable neglect of Irish Christianity neatly captured
in the image of the servant using the mound above Ásólfr’s grave as a doormat
to wipe her muddy shoes. It takes three, increasingly vociferous, appearances
on the part of Ásólfr to reawaken the memory of his saintly presence in the
land; he succeeds only in the face of difficulty and disruption in getting his
story told. The comment that Halldórr ‘gaf ekki gaum’ (‘paid no attention’)
echoes closely what was said of Ørlygr’s church in Kjarlarnes, to which ‘engi
maðr [gaf] gaum’ (‘nobody paid attention’). The narrative that emerges from
Ásólfr’s story is one of multiple Christianities: the asceticism of the Irish papar,
the Anglo-Norman missions to Norway and Iceland (Hróðólfr was a kinsman
of Edward the Confessor and died in 1052 as abbot of Abingdon monastery),
the economics of importing church wood from Norway, the universalism of the Christian saint.\textsuperscript{77} It is worth recalling at this point Szpiech’s concept of the convert as ‘chronotope’, embodying a distinctively Christian configuration of time and space: Ásólfr embodies the intersection between the early eremitism of the \textit{papar} and the later history of Christianity, between the local church in Innri-Hólmr and the universal Church, of which the saint is a limb.

At the same time, Clunies Ross has argued that Haukr shifts the emphasis in this story from the ascetic Christianity associated with the Irish settlers to a more recognizably Icelandic version of sanctity, in which religious authority is inherited from one’s ancestors.\textsuperscript{78} She points out that Haukr omits the comments that Ásólfr ‘did not wish’ to live with heathens, and has him marry and produce descendants who are allied to important families, such as the Kjalleklingar. Like his kinsman and fellow settler Jörundr inn kristni (‘the Christian’), Ásólfr does not become a hermit until ‘old age’. Indeed, his appearance to Halldórr, son of the chieftain Illugi inn rauði (‘the Red’), reincorporates the desert saint into the social and political structures of Iceland: Illugi is listed in \textit{Kristni saga} among ‘stœrstir hǫfðingjar á landinu’ (‘the greatest chieftains in the land’) when the first missionary arrives in Iceland.\textsuperscript{79}

Haukr’s final story is less obviously hagiographic, but it makes the most explicit link so far between Ari’s \textit{papar} and the later history of the Christian missions. Ketill inn fífski (‘the Foolish’) travels to Iceland from the Hebrides and is described as ‘vel kristinn’ (‘a good Christian’). Haukr tells us that: ‘Ketill bjó í Kirkjubœ; þar hóðu áðr setit papar, ok eigi máttu þar heiðnir menn búa (‘Ketill lived in Kirkjubœr; the \textit{papar} had previously dwelt there, and heathens could not live there’). Again, there is an echo here of Ari’s explanation that the \textit{papar} ‘did not wish to be here with heathens’. Clunies Ross suggests that Ketill’s nickname shows ‘an attitude of tolerant contempt’ on the part of his heathen neighbours, but it may also preserve a memory of extreme Irish eremitism, following in the tradition of the ‘holy fool’.\textsuperscript{80} This is all we hear about Ketill himself, but the place where he settles, Kirkjubœr (where a convent was founded in 1186), comes up just three chapters later.\textsuperscript{81} We are told that Ketill’s heathen neighbour Hildir tries to take over the farmstead after Ketill’s death:

\begin{quote}
Hildir vildi fera bú sitt í Kirkjubœr eftir Ketil ok hugði, at þar mundi heiðinn maðr mega búa. En er hann kom nær at túngarði, vart hann bráðdaúðr. (p. 326)
\end{quote}

(Hildir wished to move his household to Kirkjubœr after Ketill’s death, and thought that a heathen would be able to live there. But when he came up to the fence around the home meadow, he suddenly dropped dead.)

The fence here forms a boundary between heathen and Christian territory; it encloses and protects a tiny ‘island’ of sanctity in the middle of a pagan wilderness.
It is a story that resists those in which Christian territory is reused by heathens; such as Auðr’s descendants sacrificing on the hills where she had raised crosses (itself a neat reversal of Pope Gregory’s instructions to build churches on the site of pagan temples). Hildir is violently punished for his presumption in thinking that he can cross into the sacred space of this early Hiberno-Norse Christian settlement.

No more is said about Kirkjubœr in Landnámabók, but another story is recorded in Kristni saga that reaffirms the sanctity of this place:

Pá kaupa heiðnir menn at þeim manni er Galdra-Héðinn hét at hann felldi jörð undir Þangbrandi. Þann dag er þeir riði ór Kirkjubœ frá Surts Ásbjarnarsonar, Ketilssonar ins síflska – þeir váru allir skirðir langfeðgar – þá fell hestr Þangbrands í jörð niðr, en hann hljóp af baki ok stóð á bakkanum heill. (p. 19)

(The heathens paid a man called Galdra-Héðinn to make the ground fall away beneath Þangbrandr. On the day they rode away from Kirkjubœr from the home of Surtr, son of Ásbjörn, son of Ketill the Foolish – all his forebears on the father’s side were baptized – then Þangbrandr’s horse fell down into the ground, but he jumped off its back and stood on the brink unharmed.)

Hermann Pálsson has connected this with a frequent motif in Irish saints’ lives, in which the earth swallows up evildoers at the command of the saint. Yet it is also precisely the inverse of the story told about Hildir: in one, a pagan drops dead as he attempts to enter Christian territory, in the other, a Christian comes close to death as he crosses from Christian to pagan space. To cross the boundary of the farmstead is to move from sacred to profane; beyond the sanctuary at Kirkjubœr, the landscape is a wilderness that cannot be trusted, but opens unpredictably onto the abyss. In Njáls saga we are told that the earth ‘swallowed’ the horse, like the medieval hell-mouth itself. The topography of this scene, it has been argued, is distinctively Icelandic, suggesting a volcanic cavity under the sand. But it is also the topography of Christian eschatology, ‘the great plot that joins Apocalypse and Genesis’.

Kirkjubœr stands here as a small stronghold of Christianity, its power residing in the unbroken line of baptized Christians that have lived there from the papar on. This unbroken continuity of Christian observance not only stretches back to the settlement and beyond, but also forwards into the later Christian times. By the mid-twelfth century, Kirkjubœr was a major ecclesiastical centre, where St Þorlákr spent six years as district priest. It later became a convent, in which both daughters of the chieftain Gizurr Hallsson were nuns. In Þorláks saga helga, the saint affirms his high opinion as to the gefa or gipta (‘luck’ or ‘charisma’) of the place: ‘Hann hefði aldregi sínu ráði jafn vel unat sem þá sex vetr er hann var í Kirkjubœr’ (‘He had never been happier with his lot than during the six years he spent at Kirkjubœr’). The fragments of this story, once pieced together,
oppose the official assessment in *Landnámabók* that ‘the land was completely heathen for nearly one hundred years’.

What we see, in these various accounts of early Christianity in Iceland, is an imaginative recuperation of ‘as yet untold stories’, stories based on a variety of local Christianities that resist the suppression – or at least the absence – in Ari of any material link between Irish eremitism and the later conversion to Christianity. It is difficult, of course, to say how many of these stories Ari may have known, since most are recorded in much later sources. Some may well go back to the settlement period, growing up perhaps around unusual place names (like Patreksfjörður) or material relics (like bells) – objects which are neglected and lost, but then found and reclaimed in much the same way as these stories themselves. The incorporation of motifs from Irish mythology and British saints’ lives certainly suggests contact with the British Isles, although it is difficult to say exactly when this may have taken place. Other stories, like that of Ásólfr, may have arisen in connection with the native hagiography being produced at the turn of the twelfth century, as Iceland ‘entered into’ the communion of saints through the appropriation of the discourse of sanctity. They figure Iceland as a wilderness in which desert saints like Ásólfr create tiny ‘islands’ of sanctity, or in which a place like Kirkjuböð, once a locus of *peregrinatio* on the periphery of the world, can become a major centre of ecclesiastical activity. Still other stories may reflect the idiosyncratic interests of individuals like Haukr, who traced his descent from an Irish king and in whose interests it was to stress the internationalism of Icelandic Christianity. However they may have arisen, these narratives, in contrast to Ari’s emphasis on ‘continuity and sameness’, are characterized by conflict and confrontation, discontinuity or difference; they engage creatively with alternative accounts of ‘how Christianity came to Iceland’. Ásólfr’s struggle to get a hearing for himself mirrors the imaginative effort required to unearth these local stories about early Christians from beneath the official narrative line. The ‘focality’ of telling a single story served Ari well, but he knew – one suspects – that there was more than one way to tell this story. Beyond Ari’s ‘little book’ lies a multiplicity of ‘untold and repressed stories’ to be recuperated by the literary imagination.

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NOTES


Hebrew root is šûb ('to turn back, to return'); the Greek New Testament uses the terms epistrephō (‘to turn, turn around, turn back’), metamelomai (‘to change one’s mind, regret, repent’), and metanoeō (‘to change one’s mind, repent, be converted’). On Augustine’s use of words with the root ‘vert’, see Kenneth Burke, The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology (Berkeley, Calif., 1970), pp. 82f.


9 Morrison, Understanding Conversion, pp. 2–4; Conversion and Text, pp. vii, xii.

10 Morrison, Understanding Conversion, p. 6; Conversion and Text, pp. xiiif. See also Bernard of Clairvaux, ‘On conversion’, in Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works, trans. Gillian R. Evans (New York, 1987), pp. 66–8 (‘So the conversion of souls is clearly the work of the divine voice, not of any human voice’).


15 Peter G. Stromberg, ‘The role of language in religious conversion’, in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, p. 120.


18 Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 120–37; ‘The psychology of conversion’, pp. 170–3; Stromberg, ‘Role of language’, pp. 122–4; see also Stroup, *Narrative Theology*, who describes this point of contact in terms of ‘collision’ rather than ‘impression’ (p. 95).

19 For the suggestion that ‘converting’ is a better term than ‘static’ conversion, see Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 7.


24 Lieu, *Christian Identity*, p. 64; Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative*, p. 17. On ‘contest’, ‘struggle’, and ‘annihilation’, see Gillis, ‘Memory and identity’, p. 4 and Nicholas Brookes,
Bede and the English (Jarrow, 1999), p. 5. For a discussion of memory, ‘the interplay between remembering and forgetting’, and ‘competing memories’ in the sagas, see Pernille Hermann, ‘Founding narratives and the representation of memory in saga narrative’, Arv, 66 (2010), 69–87.

27 Ricœur, Time and Narrative, I, 74.


29 Jennifer O’Reilly, ‘Islands and idols at the ends of the earth: exegesis and conversion in Bede’s Historia ecclesiastica’, in Bede le Vénérable entre tradition et postérité, ed. Stéphane Lebecq, Michel Perrin, and Olivier Szerwiniack (Villeneuve d’Ascq, 2005), pp. 119–45.


37 Íslendingabók, Kristni saga, pp. xiv–xxviii; Sián Grønlie, ‘From Bede to Ari: extending the boundaries of Christendom’, Questio, 2 (2001), 27–42.


41 Biskupa sögur I, 105, 157, 162.


50 On the significance of the shore, see Barry Cunliffe, *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic


61 On ‘sites of memory’, see Smith, Myths and Memories, p. 151; Hermann, ‘Founding memories’, p. 78.

62 Biskupa sögur, I, 15f. Stefnr is a descendant of Helgi bjóla, who was the brother of Ørlygr’s father Hrappr. However, in Stefns þáttir, we are informed that he ‘tók trú’ (‘received the faith’) in Denmark (Biskupa sögur, I, 103).


66 Biskupa sögur, I, 15f., 105f.


69 Landnámabók, p. 139.


75 Adomnan’s Life of Columba, i. 6, pp. 28–30.


79 Biskupa sögur, I, 3f.

80 Clunies Ross, ‘“Saint” Ásólfr’, p. 36; I Corinthians i.18–21, iii.19, iv.10. On the Christian
tradition of ‘holy fools’, which was particularly strong in Ireland, see John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ’s Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 31–47.


83 Hermann Pállson, *Keltar á Íslandi*, p. 139.


85 *Biskupa sögur*, II, 58, 151.