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Abstract

The Awakening of Christianity in Iceland. Discovery of Timber Church and Graveyard at Þórarinsstaðir in Seyðisfjörður. Part I and Part II. Written in English. 216 & 54 pages. Published in GOTARC Series B, Gothenburg Archaeological Thesis, No 31, 2004.
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The central theme of this thesis is the Christianisation of Iceland during the period from the late 10th century to the turn of the 12th century. The distinct, though similar, branches of Christianity are traced through the archaeological record, where the excavation of an Early Medieval timber church and graveyard at Þórarinsstaðir in Seyðisfjörður is used as a basic source. Additional material is sought in other investigations and surveys of church remains in Iceland.

The archaeological excavation at Þórarinsstaðir revealed two phases of a stave-built wooden church with earth dug roof-posts, which architectural form is well known from Early Medieval times in Scandinavia. Such church buildings have commonly been connected to the discussion about continuity of cult as one of the central themes in the Conversion to Christianity in the former Viking World. This particular debate is reviewed here and connected to the results from the excavation at Þórarinsstaðir.

In the thesis, the deliberate performance of continuity of cult is highly questioned, as is the idea that Paganism existed as a single solidary cultus. It appears quite obvious that Pagan practises were not as homogenous as was Christianity, even though Christianity was compounded of diverse branches. Results from archaeological investigations tell us that Pagan practises differed greatly in the various societies of the Northern world; nonetheless, these two religious practises are usually depicted as opposites. Pagan temples have assumed some sort of stance opposite to that of churches. Similarly, Thor's hammer is viewed as the antithesis of the cross, and so on. The question is whether any clear social and political borders or frontiers existed between cultures and countries during prehistoric times, except for those made by modern people in an attempt to regulate their fixed surroundings. It is possible that the glorious Scandinavian Pagan mythology was first made visible as a homogeneous phenomenon by Early Medieval writers, whose purpose was to create a well-defined identity for the converted Christian.

The concluding point is that the Þórarinsstaðir church was not converted from a Pagan temple into a church but may instead have functioned as a *public church*, or *missionary church*, during the period after the Conversion. Missionary churches can therefore be regarded as a symbol of the organised *mission* performed by the ruling elite, demonstrating that the new religion was accepted by the upper levels of the society. Conversely, the most common type of church building in Medieval Iceland, the so-called turf church, represents the privately owned church. Such *private churches* were built as a result of the unorganised mission, *infiltration*, symbolising the knowledge of Christianity already acquired by those who belonged to the lower strata of Icelandic society.

Key words: Christianization, Continuity of cult, Christianity, Paganism, stave-church, timber church, private churches, missionary churches, mission, infiltration, graves, crosses, altar stone, silver ring, coin, weight, tephro-chronology, micro-archaeology, macro-archaeology, long-term processes, metaphors, Viking Age, Early Medieval Times, Þórarinsstaðir, Iceland, Northern Europe.