Njáls saga and its Christian background
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Chapter 1
Laxdæla saga: shipwreck and salvation

1.1 Text and author

More than in any other Íslendingasaga, there is a tension in Laxdæla between the exotic and the familiar. The author took what must have been well-known stories, from the history of one of Iceland’s great dynasties, and placed them in a complex imaginative world of his own creation. He invented this world by superimposing on the narrative traditions of the Íslendingasögur, elements from three very different literatures: eddaic poetry, the translated riddarasögur\(^{102}\), and ecclesiastical texts. That the narrative shows considerable influence from the first two of these is now well known, but the nature and extent of the influence of Christian, ecclesiastical literature is as yet undetermined. The concern of this chapter will be the narrative function of certain Christian elements within Laxdæla saga, together with some suggestions as to the sources from which the author took these elements.

It has for long been generally recognised that much of the written saga is the creation of an author who shaped his narrative around a kernel of historical tradition\(^{103}\), inventing many of the most striking elements\(^{104}\). In fact, Laxdæla saga would appear to have a more solid historical base than most of the Íslendingasögur. The historian Ari inn fróði Þorgilsson (‘the learned’, born 1067) is twice cited in the saga as the source for statements made there. Ari was fostered until the age of six by his grandfather, Gellir Þorkelsson, the son of Laxdæla’s great heroine, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, and her fourth husband, Þorkell Eyjólfsson. During those years of early fostering, Ari lived at Helgafell, the farm that his great-grandparents, Guðrún and Þorkell, had owned.

\(^{102}\) ‘The translated riddarasögur (‘sagas of knights’) comprise Old Norse prose versions of French epic and romance … produced in Norway … for the court of King Hákon the Old (r. 1217-63). These sagas are, for the most part, preserved in Icelandic manuscripts and generally presumed to have reached Iceland soon after their composition’ (Barnes, ‘Romance in Iceland’, p. 266).

\(^{103}\) ‘Einzelne Fakten und Personen stellte die Tradition bereit, die Konstruktion der Fabel und die künstlerische Gestaltung hingegen stammen vom Verfasser’ (Röhn, Zeitgestaltung und Komposition, p. 116).

\(^{104}\) Representative examples of studies which have collectively led to this conclusion are, on sources: Heller, Die literarische Schöpfung; on characters and episodes: Heller, Literarisches Schaffen (especially on Ólafur pál); Heller, ‘Anmerkungen zur Arbeit des Verfassers’ (especially on Melkorka); on narrative structure: Beck, ‘A Structural Approach’; Heller, ‘Studien zu Aufbau und Stil’; Madelung, Structural Patterns.
In his work of history, Íslendingabók (the Book of the Icelanders), Ari names among his sources Pórkell Gellisson and Þuríðr Snorradóttir. The former was Guðrún’s grandson and Ari’s paternal uncle, while the latter was the daughter of Snorri goði, Guðrún’s friend and adviser. It is therefore highly probable that accurate historical information concerning characters in the saga, including especially Guðrún, was passed down to Ari, and later formed a part of Laxdela, when that saga was written down. For example, the saga (p. 226) dates the death of Snorri goði to the year following the fall of St Óláfr (King Óláfr Haraldsson), and names Ari as the source of this information. It seems a plausible assumption that Ari had acquired this knowledge from Þuríðr Snorradóttir.

There is a good deal of historical material, too, in the early chapters of the saga, which give a version of the settlement in Iceland of Unnr in djúpúðga (‘the deep-minded’) with her family. This material agrees in part with the account of these events in Landnámabók, although there are discrepancies too, some of which probably result from the recording of different oral traditions. There is always the possibility, of course, that some of these differences result from the author’s own invention, and the argument of this chapter will include the suggestion that the saga’s portrayal of Unnr in djúpúðga as a pagan is one such case.

Unnr is the founding matriarch of the Laxdœlir dynasty. Vésteinn Ólason has described Laxdela saga as one of the very few ‘fully-fledged family sagas’ within the wider genre of the Íslendingasögur, although he almost immediately qualifies this statement (p. 77): ‘our sense of the work as a family saga is complicated by the fact that Guðrún, who is not a Laxdaler by birth, enjoys great prominence from the beginning of the saga’s main story through to the end’. Guðrún is not descended from Unnr in djúpúðga, and is technically, therefore, not one of the Laxdœlir, but she is a member of the wider dynasty, being descended from Unnr’s brother Björn. Different branches of this wider family are brought together through Guðrún’s love for Kjartan Óláfsson and her marriages to Bolli Þorleiksson and Þorkell Eyjólfsson, since all three of these men are descended from Unnr. The author used these historical relationships as part of a narrowing of the saga’s focus from that of the history of a regional dynasty to that of a biography of Guðrún Ósviffrsdóttir.

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105 See Turville-Petre, Origins, pp. 88-90; Andersson, Growth, pp. 21-23.
106 Björn M. Ólsen, ‘Landnáma og Laxdela Saga’.
107 ‘the only fully-fledged family sagas are Laxdela saga, Vatnsdela saga, Ljósvetninga saga and, to some extent, Egils saga’ (Dialogues, p. 76).
The narrative divides into two main parts. In the first part the author gathers his material together and weaves various strands which will contribute to the design of the second major part: this represents a neighbourhood history from the settlement down to the end of the tenth century. When Guðrún Ösvifrødóttir appears on the scene, however, everything begins to revolve around her and the different strands start to come together\textsuperscript{108}.

With this structural division comes a change of mood. The previous generations of the Laxdœlir had been preoccupied with establishing themselves as a great dynasty in Iceland. Unnr's initial settlement of land beside Hvammsfjørður is followed by the distribution of estates among her grandchildren. The Laxdœlir develop their properties simultaneously with increasing their status: Høskuldr Dala-Kollsson, of the next generation, travels to Norway for timber to improve his house, and while there quickly gains the respect of the king. His son, Óláfr pái (‘peacock’), surpasses his father’s achievements, travelling first to Ireland, where King Mýrkjartan acknowledges him as his grandson and offers him the kingship after him. Óláfr travels twice to Norway, where on each occasion he too is given timber, and where he receives the favour of Earl Hákon, as well as that of King Haraldr Greycloak. The earl gives him such a huge load of timber that pat sumar lét Óláfr gera eldhús í Hjarðarholti, meira ok betra en menn hefði fyrr sét (p. 79: ‘that summer Óláfr had a hall with a fire built at Hjarðarholt which was larger and grander than men had ever seen before’).

In each of these earlier generations conflicts arise between members of the family: Unnr feels she has been insulted by her brother, Helgi Bjólan (ch. 5), while Høskuldr Dala-Kollsson (ch. 19) and Óláfr pái (chs. 26-27) each have inheritance disputes with a half-brother. All of these conflicts are resolved relatively easily\textsuperscript{109}. This is in marked contrast with the bloody conflict in the next generation, which first involves Kjartan Óláfsson and Bolli Þorleiksson. The two are cousins and foster-brothers, and start out as inseparable friends, but Kjartan dies at Bolli’s hands. The central tragedy of Laxdœla saga comes about as a result of Bolli’s marrying Guðrún Ósvifrødóttir, the woman Kjartan loves (and who loves him), thus rupturing his friendship with Kjartan, and bringing about enmity and feuding that leads ultimately to both their deaths\textsuperscript{110}.

\textsuperscript{108} Jónas Kristjánsson, Eddas and Sagas, p. 274. See also Kress, ‘Meget samstavet’; Conroy and Langen, ‘Theme and Structure’, p. 128, present critics’ differing views of where the break occurs between the two parts of the narrative.


\textsuperscript{110} Clover notes that ‘the conventional view of Laxdœla saga as a feud saga has been challenged … To be sure, male conflict looms large, but it is finally an accretion on an underlying biographical pattern’
The mood of *Laxdœla saga* has switched. The future had seemed hopeful for Kjartan and Bolli as they travelled to the royal court in Norway and found favour from King Óláfr Tryggvason. Now, however, the narrative returns them to their homes in the same small area of Iceland, and as it concentrates on their actions and emotions, together with those of Guðrún, the third member of this erotic triangle, the atmosphere becomes claustrophobic. The sequence of pride, insult, retaliation, killing, feud and vengeance is standard stuff of the *Íslendingasögur*, but the eroticised treatment of this feud, and the extravagant emotions (extravagant at least in terms of the *Íslendingasögur*), look back to a different literary tradition, the world of eddaic poetry.

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson has pointed to clear parallels between *Laxdœla saga’s* tragic narrative of Guðrún and Kjartan, and the legend of Brynhildr and Sigurðr. Like Brynhildr, Guðrún loves a man with splendid qualities, but is subsequently married to a less outstanding one; and like Brynhildr, she urges her husband to kill the man she loves, because she cannot bear the thought of his being married to someone else. Andersson has drawn up a list of ten ‘primary parallels’ between saga and legend, of which three may be mentioned here as an indication of the scale of the borrowing: Sigurðr takes a ring from Brynhildr and gives it to Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, while Kjartan takes a headdress for Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir but gives it to Hrefna; peaceable husbands (Gunnarr and Bolli) are incited against a blood brother (or a foster-brother) by implacable wives (Brynhildr and Guðrún); the chief hero (Sigurðr, Kjartan) is killed when almost defenceless.

Using the model of the legend of Brynhildr and Sigurðr in this way enabled the author of *Laxdœla saga* to construct the character of Guðrún, at least during this part of her life, as a fiercely and determinedly passionate one.

A peculiarity of *Laxdœla saga* is the number of strong female characters, the list of which includes, apart from Guðrún herself: Unnr in djúpúðga, Melkorka, Jórunn, Auðr, and Þuríðr. The author’s interest in female power and psychology has led Kress to argue that the saga may have been written (or at least narrated) by a woman, a view that has received some support from other critics: Njörður Njarðvík allows for

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111 *ÍF 5*, p. xlvi.
112 Andersson, *Growth*, pp. 139-40.
113 ‘one impressive woman after another … uses the various means at her disposal … to wield a great amount of power … If a woman’s social role in medieval Iceland or even the world of the sagas is a constricted one, it doesn’t inhibit the women in *Laxdœla* from calling the shots’ (Cook, ‘Women and Men’, p. 41).
114 ‘Meget samstavet’, pp. 278-79.
the possibility of a female author, while Cook speaks of ‘the thirteenth-century male or female author of *Laxdæla saga*’, and ‘the possibly female author of *Laxdæla*’\footnote{‘Women and men’, p. 44.}

But the issue of authorship raises questions of where, and for whom, the saga might have been written. Jesch stresses the point that:

> Like all Sagas of Icelanders, *Laxdæla saga* is anonymous. We can never know whether it was written by a woman. Nor do we really know who it was written for … But this preponderance of strong female characters suggests that the conventional elements of the genre have been reinterpreted to appeal to an audience composed to a large extent of women\footnote{‘Female Experience’, pp. 45-46.}.

The length and complexity of *Laxdæla saga* suggest that the author was able to draw upon considerable resources of education, time, and expensive parchment. If the author was indeed a woman, therefore, she must have been either a member of a religious house or a wealthy laywoman. Auerbach suggests the latter, ‘perhaps the daughter of a wealthy and influential literary man’\footnote{‘Female Experience’, pp. 45-46.}

Recent readings of the saga have seen the author questioning the picture of Saga-Age society, as this is conventionally portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur*. A frequently occurring motif, for example, involves a young man adding to his honour and social status by travelling abroad, usually to Norway, and earning the respect of a ruler\footnote{Lönnroth, *A Critical Introduction*, p. 44; Hermann Pálsson, ‘Death in Autumn’, p. 7.}. In *Laxdæla saga*, however, the motif is given almost parodic treatment\footnote{Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues*, p. 78.}: the men of the Laxdœlir dynasty do not have to work hard to win respect from royalty; they seem immediately to enjoy royal favour, and are showered with the gifts and status that accompany it\footnote{‘If we examine such passages in context, asking why it is these men are received so warmly and showered with gifts at the Norwegian court, we are likely to be puzzled. If we are struck by their lavish reception, we are also struck by how little they do to earn it’ (Cook, ‘Women and Men’, p. 46). Andersson makes a similar point concerning Hœskuldr Dala-Kollsson and Óláfr pái (Growth, p. 134-35).}. Much more than their counterparts in other sagas, these men flaunt their status in magnificent houses and showy dress.

> It is a fine irony that what we think of as the romantic elements in the saga, the *kvenlegur smekkur* and the *rómantískur blær* described by Einar Olafur Sveinsson (ÍF 5, pp. vi, xii), are connected with the men rather than with the women\footnote{Cook, ‘Women and Men’, p. 45.}. 

\footnote{116 ‘Women and men’, p. 44.\footnote{117 *Women in the Viking Age*, pp. 200, 199.\footnote{118 ‘Female Experience’, pp. 45-46.\footnote{119 Lönnroth, *A Critical Introduction*, p. 44; Hermann Pálsson, ‘Death in Autumn’, p. 7.\footnote{120 Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues*, p. 78.\footnote{121 ‘If we examine such passages in context, asking why it is these men are received so warmly and showered with gifts at the Norwegian court, we are likely to be puzzled. If we are struck by their lavish reception, we are also struck by how little they do to earn it’ (Cook, ‘Women and Men’, p. 46). Andersson makes a similar point concerning Hœskuldr Dala-Kollsson and Óláfr pái (Growth, p. 134-35).\footnote{122 Cook, ‘Women and Men’, p. 45.}}}}}}
It is not impossible that the feminisation of these heroes is the work of a female author, and the irony may well have been intended. The irony is of course increased, when the small achievements of these feminised men are set beside those of the saga’s powerful women. At times, the irony approaches the mock-heroic:

We begin to sense that there is something hollow about the descriptions of the glorious travels and trappings of these men. There seems to be a discrepancy between the language used of them … and the fictional reality of the saga.  

The fictional world of *Laxdœla saga* changes and shifts through the course of the narrative, however, and critics have looked to this ambivalence for some indication of the author’s attitude towards the ‘glorious travels and trappings’ of the men of the Laxdœlir dynasty.

The world of glitter and wealth of which these men are a part, and to which they are well suited, is inherited from the saga’s second literary influence, the translated *riddarasögur*. The values and vocabulary of the world of courtly literature are apparent in *Laxdœla saga*: Bolli Bollason’s weapon is a *glaðel* (*< Latin gladiolus*), while on his red shield a knight (*riddari*) is painted in gold (p. 225). Óláfr pái also carries a red shield, on which is painted a lion, again in gold (p. 55). These weapons were unknown in the Saga Age, and come from the world of thirteenth-century chivalry.

The frequency with which the author refers to the love felt for one character by another is probably also borrowed from the translated *riddarasögur*, as are, probably the terms used (*unna, ást*), found in the Íslendingasögur generally, but common in the *riddarasögur* and *Laxdœla saga*. Similarly, although the word that sums up the whole courtly ethos, *kurteisi*, certainly appears in other Íslendingasögur, it occurs much more frequently in *Laxdœla saga*; and according to Einar Ólafur Sveinsson at least, the code of *kurteisi* governs these characters from their outward appearance to their innermost thoughts. The saga’s interest in the psychology and emotions of the

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123 Cook, ‘Women and Men’, pp. 46-47. Cook was by no means the first to recognise this vacuity in the male characters. See Andersson, *Growth*, p. 134, n. 7 for references.
124 Cleasby-Vigfusson, *s.v. glaðel*, suggest ‘a kind of sword’. Sävborg, too, believes the weapon to be a sword (*svärd*: ‘Kärleken i *Laxdœla saga*’, p. 82). Einar Ólafur Sveinsson translates as ‘lance’ (*lenza*, *burtstöng*), and comments that the word is not found in any other Íslendingasaga (*ÍF* 5, p. 225, n. 4).
125 Sävborg, ‘Kärleken i *Laxdœla saga*’, pp. 83-84, where he gives lists of the occurrences of these words in *Laxdœla saga*.
126 *ord som kurteiss* etc. förekommer förvisso i andra islänningasagor, men är betydligt vanligare i *Laxdœla saga* (Sävborg, ‘Kärleken i *Laxdœla saga*’, p. 82).
127 ‘Höfuðdyggð þeirra er kurteisi, og nær marking þess orðs frá yfirhöfn till innstu hugrønninga’ (ÍF 5, p. xvii).
characters might be judged to reflect the concerns of a female author, complementing the creation of so many strong female characters, although it must be acknowledged that the saga is generally reticent about feelings:

Though more attention is paid to the emotional lives of characters in *Laxdœla saga* than in most other sagas, even in *Laxdœla it is a question of feelings being revealed in a few isolated sentences*.\(^{128}\)

Njörður Njarðvík’s view of the importance of *kurteisi* as a governing principle in the world of *Laxdœla saga* is much less relaxed than that of Einar Ólafur Sveinsson. He points out that, although the meaning of the term encompasses wearing beautiful clothes and making courtly conversation, it principally refers to an ethic that should govern behaviour in different spheres of life. This aspect of *kurteisi* is lacking among the characters of *Laxdœla saga*, whose actions are frequently cruel, and sometimes may be downright treacherous.\(^{129}\) Taking as his starting point the work of Heller in particular, who had drawn attention to a series of verbal and situational parallels between *Laxdœla saga* and *Sturlunga saga*,\(^{130}\) Njarðvík suggests that two memorably unpleasant episodes in *Laxdœla saga* were borrowed by the author from historical events: the first is when Kjartan takes men, surrounds the house at Laugar, and for three days denies the people of the household access to their outside privy (ÍF 5, pp. 144-45, apparently borrowed from an episode that occurred in 1198); in the second, Helgi Harðbeinsson uses the shawl that Guðrún is wearing ‘to dry the blood off the spear with which he had pierced Bolli’, her husband (ÍF 5, p. 168, apparently borrowed from an episode that occurred in 1244, i.e. around the time that *Laxdœla saga* was written)\(^{131}\). These contemporary and near-contemporary references suggest to Njarðvík that *Laxdœla is the work of a man or woman who intended the saga to include a critical commentary on the cruelties of the Sturlung Age*.\(^{132}\)

These two examples, the first of gratuitous coarseness and the second of apparently sadistic cruelty, both occur in the central part of *Laxdœla saga*, the section

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128 *Dialogues*, p. 178.
129 ‘Riddarlivet innebar inte bara vackra kläder och höviskt tal utan också en viss sorts etik, en moral som drog upp skarpa gränser för vad som var tillåtet inte bara i uppförande, utan även i handling. I Laxdœla saga saknas denna moral i hög grad. Under den praktfulla ytan kan man ursskila en värld full av grymhet, äregirighet, hänsynslöshet, falskhet och t.o.m. så förnedrande saker som stölder och direkta nidingsdåd’ (Njörður Njarðvík, ‘Laxdœla saga – en tidskritik?’ p. 73).
130 Heller, ‘*Laxdœla saga* and *Sturlunga saga*’, passim.
132 ‘De två exempel som här framförs räcker dock för att visa att Laxdœla har skrivits av en man (eller en kvinna) som varit kritiskt inställd till sin samtids grymhet och att verkliga händelser av detta slag utnyttjats för skönletterära ändamål’ (‘Laxdœla saga – en tidskritik?’ p. 77).
that deals with Kjartan and Bolli, their lives, rivalry, and deaths. This is the most tragic and violent section of the saga. The structural split between the earlier, regional-dynastic saga and the later narrative of Guðrún’s life is accompanied by a change in tone. For Andersson, the saga’s narrative of the generations between Unnr in djúpuðga and Óláfr páí is the history of a golden age, which is followed by an age of iron.

There is peace and plenty, almost spontaneously. Heroic reputations are made without a sword’s being visibly lifted, and fortunes are made effortlessly by simply appearing at foreign courts. Money grows like the self-sown fields of Norse mythology … The break comes between Óláfr’s generation and the following generation of his son Kjartan and foster son Bolli … Important here are not so much the narrative details as the reversal of earlier patterns and a supervening gloom … we find an atmosphere poisoned by suspicion and bitter resentment

The tragedy in the story of Kjartan and Guðrún is all the more ‘cataclysmic’ in that it follows on ‘the unsuspecting idyll in the early part’ of the saga (Growth, p. 140). But whereas Njarðvík reads the saga as tragedy and social comment, predicated upon the author’s ironic view of the world of kurteisi, Andersson reads it as a narrative of three parts: an idyllic world, the loss of that world, and its recovery.

But Kjartan’s fall and the sanguinary aftermath are not the end of the story; they are merely preliminary to a third act in the drama, an act that is recuperative. The recuperation is realised in the persons of Guðrún’s two sons, Þorleikr and Bolli Bollason, who reenact the lives and retrieve the grandeur of their most illustrious ancestors

Andersson therefore does not read the saga as a critical social commentary on the author’s own time in the same way as Njarðvík does, but he nevertheless examines the possibility of its being a reaction of a different sort to the problems remaining from the Sturlung Age.

Since the saga seems to have been written in the closing years of the Icelandic commonwealth, with the looming prospect of subjugation to Norway (1262-64), the question of the author’s political outlook has often been raised. Is the last glimpse of a golden age in the Icelandic settlement period a nostalgic farewell to political independence? Or is it rather a vision of what is prospective and capable of resurrection?

Njarðvík and Andersson, each in their different ways, raise the possibility that the author of Laxdœla created the saga’s shifting world of kurteisi and cruelty as a mirror for his own society: for Njarðvík, the author’s view was that the violence of the past was being

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133 Growth, p. 137.
134 Growth, p. 144.
135 Growth, p. 148.
recapitulated in his own time\textsuperscript{136}. Andersson, on the other hand, believes that the saga’s final message is one of hope:

The view seems rather to be that secular bleakness is dispelled by a glorious recrudescence. The emphasis is not on a past calamity but on future resplendence. We are left with an optimistic vision\textsuperscript{137}.

Vésteinn Ólason also sees more cause for hope in the saga’s final section, but whereas Andersson sees there a return to an earlier, idyllic world, he detects a completely new tone, and relates this to Christianity, the third influence upon the saga narrative:

The force of evil looms large in \textit{Laxdœla saga}; with misfortune and hostile fate dominating the middle sections of the saga. But the dark of the old world is in retreat, and the saga speaks of Christianity, and its events extend some decades into the first Christian century in Iceland\textsuperscript{138}.

Parts of the saga in which Christianity explicitly affects the lives of Kjartan, Bolli and Guðrún include not only Guðrún’s becoming a nun and a penitent in her old age (in the saga’s final section: chs. 76 and 78), but also, from the ‘violent’ mid-section, the conversion of Kjartan, Bolli and their party in Norway (ch. 40), and Kjartan’s Lenten fasting (ch. 45). Some critics have detected a Christian tone, too, in the self-sacrificing nature of Kjartan’s death\textsuperscript{139}, although there is no explicitly Christian reference here\textsuperscript{140}, and Kjartan’s behaviour in general can hardly be described as following Christian principles\textsuperscript{141}.

The same doubts that have been expressed concerning the depth of Kjartan’s Christianity have also been voiced with respect to Guðrún, whose penitential behaviour in her final years is clearly meant by the author of \textit{Laxdæla saga} to suggest that she has lost her former pride. Her adherence to the principles of the Christian faith seems

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\textsuperscript{137} Growth, p. 148.

\textsuperscript{138} Dialogues, p. 173.

\textsuperscript{139} ‘The death of Kjartan is partly that of a hero and partly that of a martyr’ (Vésteinn Ólason, Dialogues, p. 173); ‘certainly the manner of Kjartan’s death has a flavour of Christian martyrdom about it’ (Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, \textit{Laxdœla Saga}, p. 37).

\textsuperscript{140} Bensberg, one of those who see Kjartan’s death as an act of Christian self-sacrifice, assumes that in his last fight he carries the shield on which the holy Cross is painted, though this is not stated in the saga (\textit{Die Laxdœla saga im Spiegel}, pp. 161-63). For the description of the shield, see IF 5, p. 134.

\textsuperscript{141} ‘Kjartan’s actions fell far short of any Christian ideals and sprang rather from a pagan ethic – pride and self-reliance, a fierce concern for his ‘honour’ if it meant losing face, a capacity for brutal and coarse retaliation against Bolli and Guðrún’ (Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, \textit{Laxdœla Saga}, p. 37).
to come very late, however, and ‘a sceptical voice might point out that this phase is only one chapter in the saga, and the last chapter to boot, one that could easily have been tacked onto the saga by a Christian writer who wished to make of the saga exactly [an] exemplum’\textsuperscript{142}.

Questions concerning Kjartan and Guðrún which this chapter will attempt to address include: whether or not the elderly Guðrún’s penitence functions simply as a ‘tacked on’ exemplum; whether or not the manner of Kjartan’s death can be read in Christian terms; and if so, whether or not this Christian reading supplies a narrative link between Kjartan’s death and Guðrún’s late penitence. It is not impossible that the author’s portrayal of Guðrún’s old age and the deaths of Kjartan and others is intended to give the conventional Christian message that, since death is inevitable and sometimes unexpected, the Christian must therefore be prepared. If this were to be the case, the saga’s ironic treatment of kurteisi and its associated values would be explicable as showing the folly of allowing oneself to be seduced by the surface glamour of wealth and status. The contradictory world of \textit{Laxdaela saga}, shifting between courtliness and cruelty, and finally disappearing, to be replaced by the picture of an old, penitent woman, would in this case have less to do with social than with spiritual commentary; and the idyllic world of the past would not be viewed with nostalgia, but for what it is: a romantic fiction.

\subsection*{1.2 Shipwrecks and drownings}

A recurrent theme in \textit{Laxdaela saga} is death by drowning. The saga mentions eighteen people, as well as an unspecified number of anonymous crew-members, who meet their deaths in this way. The author seems to have wished to draw attention to the narrative importance of these drownings, and closes his saga with mention of one more such tragedy. The final words of \textit{Laxdaela saga} have been entirely ignored by critics:

\begin{quote}
\indent en Þorgils ... drukknaði ungr á Breiðafirði ok allir þeir, er á skipi váru með honum. Þorkell Gellisson var it mesta nytmenni ok var sagðr manna fróðastr. Ok lýkr þar nú sogunni. (p. 229)
\end{quote}

(Þorgils was drowned in Breiðafjörð when still a young man, and all his crew with him. Þorkell Gellisson was a most worthy man, and was stated to have been a man of great learning. And there this saga ends).

\textsuperscript{142} Heinemann, review of Bensberg, p. 6.
This is a reference to the death of Þorgils Gellisson, the father of the historian Ari. No specific cause is given for the loss of Þorgils and his crew, and in this respect this tragedy stands out as an exception among several accounts of drownings in the saga, most of which have supernatural causes. The reader may wonder whether the account of Þorgils Gellisson’s drowning is connected to the main narrative, or is simply a disconnected postscript, added to fill out the history of the dynasty. Studies by Madelung, by Conroy and Langen, and by Kroesen, have all linked two other cases of drownings in *Laxdœla saga*, those of Þorsteinn surtr and Þórðr Ingunnarson, with a third, the drowning of Þorkell Eyjólfsson. For Kroesen they constitute a ‘motif’, while for Conroy and Langen they ‘operate very strongly at the level of theme’. Madelung demonstrates that ‘the motifs of the three drowning episodes can be schematised into a consistent pattern’, and suggests that the episodes play a structural role in the narrative. A further examination of the question seems appropriate.

It should be noted at the outset that not every shipwreck in the saga leads to loss of life. First to be mentioned, however, are those who did not survive.

i) In chapter 18, Þorsteinn surtr (‘the black’) dies together with nine others, mostly members of his family and household. Their deaths are caused by the returned spirit of the recently-deceased Víga-Hrappr, which haunts the area, on this occasion in the form of a large seal that swims around the doomed boat.

ii) In chapter 30, Geirmundr gnýr (‘crash’) and his baby daughter die, together with their anonymous crew. They drown on a voyage undertaken after Geirmundr curses the sword that will later be used to kill one of *Laxdœla’s* major heroes, Kjartan Óláfsson. The episode will have been inspired by similar cursed objects known in the heroic sagas – such as the sword Tyrfingr in the ‘Hervarar Saga’, or perhaps by the spear Grásíða in the ‘Gísla Saga’, as Rolf Heller will have it (Heller 1976: 75-76). It will have been especially created because of that curse, which finds its fulfilment in Kjartan’s death. We are not amazed to find out, that Landnámabók does not testify to the existence of Geirmundr.

iii) In chapter 35, Þórðr Ingunnarson, his mother, and their anonymous companions, drowned in a storm conjured up by witches.
iv) In chapter 37, the sorcerer, Hallbjörn Kotkelsson, is executed for his crimes by being drowned. He curses the land just before the sentence is carried out.

v) In chapter 51, Auðunn festargarmr drowns together with his whole crew. He is cursed just before he sets out on his last voyage.

In every case of drowning mentioned so far, then - apart from that of Ari’s father Þorgils - witchcraft (cursing and spells) is involved. The only other drowning in the saga is that of Guðrún’s fourth husband (and Ari’s great-grandfather), Þorkell Eyjólfsen, who drowns while ferrying home a load of timber which he had been given in Norway for a new church building. This drowning needs commentary, since the author of Laxdæla saga seems to have reworked the historical facts, in so far as these may be ascertained. Before examining this episode, however, it is worth taking note of the case of one great survivor of shipwreck. Chapters 3 – 7 of Laxdæla saga recount the story of Unnr in djúpúðga. Following the rise to power in Norway of King Haraldr inn hárfagri (‘fine-hair’), Unnr and her family are forced to flee from their ancestral lands in Norway and escape to the north of Scotland. At the start of the saga Unnr is already elderly, and has grown-up grandchildren. Her son, Þorsteinn, whose plundering and raiding have resulted in his winning half of Scotland for a kingdom, is killed by the Scots, and once again the family is forced to flee (chapter 4).

Unnr is a widow, and the death of her son robs the family of its sole adult male, so she must act as head of the dynasty. She has a ship built in secret, and the family sails for Iceland, stopping off en route in Orkney and the Faroes, at each of which places Unnr marries one of her granddaughters to a local man. According to the saga (chapter 5), Unnr finally ‘made land in the south of Iceland, at Vikrarskeið; the ship was wrecked there, but there was no loss of life or cargo’ (p. 8: ok kemr skipi sínu fyrir sunnan land á Vikrarskeið; þar brjóta þau skipit í spán; menn allir heldusk ok fé). In Iceland Unnr establishes a wealthy household, which she controls until she is very old. Now she arranges the marriage of her grandson Óláfr feilan, and at the wedding feast bequeaths her estate to him. She dies the same night.

Var nú drukkit allt saman, brullaup Óláfrs ok erfi Unnar. Ok inn sídastra dag boðsins var Unnr flutt til haugs þess, er henni var búinn; hon var logð í skip í hauginum, ok mikit fé var í haug lagt með henni; var eptir þat aptr kastaðr haugrinn. (p. 13)
for her. She was laid in a ship inside the mound, and a great deal of treasure was laid in the mound with her. After that the burial mound was closed.)

Laxdæla saga’s account of Unnr’s burial differs markedly from the other extant account, that given in Landnámabók. The latter describes her as skírð ok vel trúuð (‘baptised and firm in her faith’); adding that hon ok var grafin í flæðarmáli, sem hon hafði fyrir sagt, því at hon vildi eigi liggia í óvígðri mǫldu, er hon var skírð (‘and she was buried on the shore between the low and high water-marks, as she had previously stipulated, because she did not wish to lie in unconsecrated earth, since she was baptised’). In Laxdæla saga, she is a pagan, and receives a pagan burial.

Björn M. Ólsen’s suggestion that this, and other discrepancies, between Laxdæla saga and Landnámabók, were the result of the author of Laxdæla saga having had access to independent oral traditions, has been accepted by Andersson, who concludes:

At what point oral tradition encroached is impossible to tell, but the simplest assumption is to assign the author of Laxdæla saga himself the role of mediator.

In the note referred to here, Andersson does raise the theoretical possibility that the author of Laxdæla saga invented (among other matters) the account of Unnr’s burial, deliberately rewriting her as a pagan. This possibility will be explored below. At this point one may simply note that Unnr, who had survived an earlier shipwreck, is buried in a ship.

1.3 Þorkell Eyjólfssson and Kjartan Óláfsson

The male character whose destiny it seems natural to link with that of Kjartan Óláfsson is Bolli Þorleiksson, his dearest friend, cousin, foster-brother and, ultimately, killer. Another character, however, whose story may profitably be compared with Kjartan’s, is Þorkell Eyjólfssson. Each of them travels to Norway, and there clashes with the king. In Kjartan’s case, the king is Óláfr Tryggvason, with whom Kjartan first engages in a physical contest (pp. 116-18: a ducking game in the river Níð), and later in a spiritual one (pp. 118-23: in which the king seeks to convert the reluctant Kjartan to Christianity). In a saga that has drownings as a recurrent motif, it may well be significant that Óláfr Tryggvason, the king whose preaching converts Kjartan, and who is present at Kjartan’s baptism, very nearly also drowns him.

147 Björn M. Ólsen, ‘Landnámabók og Laxdæla Saga’; for the quotation given here, with further discussion, see Andersson, Problem, pp. 86-87, n. 8.
Þorkell Eyjólfsson ‘contends against’ King Óláfr Haraldsson (keppask við - the king’s words, p. 217) by planning to build a church equal in size to the one the king is building. Each king remarks on the pride of the man who confronts him. Óláfr Tryggvason passes the following comment on Kjartan after their ducking contest (p. 118): “Bæði er, at þú ert gørviligr maðr, enda lætr þú allstórliga” (‘Both are true, that you are an accomplished man, and yet you behave very proudly’). These words are closely similar to those uttered to Þorkell Eyjólfsson by Óláfr Haraldsson (pp. 216-17): “Bæði er, Þorkell, at þú ert mikils verðr, enda gerisk þú nú allstórr” (‘Both are true, Þorkell, that you are of great worth, and yet you are now becoming very proud’).¹⁴⁸

At their parting, King Óláfr Tryggvason gives Kjartan the gift of a splendid sword and scabbard, warning him to have the sword always with him, as it will protect him from harm. Kjartan had earlier received another gift from the king, namely his conversion, and when they part, the king reminds him to hold to his faith. The sword and the baptism may be seen as complementary gifts: keeping the sword will safeguard Kjartan’s life on this earth; keeping the faith will safeguard his entry into eternal life.

These two gifts may be compared with the gift of timber which Þorkell Eyjólfsson receives from King Óláfr Haraldsson in order to build a new, larger church building. Kjartan’s spiritual gift, his conversion in Norway, is part of Óláfr Tryggvason’s campaign to bring Christianity to Iceland; Þorkell Eyjólfsson’s gift of church timber is intended by Óláfr Haraldsson to support the new faith there. Kjartan’s material gift, the sword and its scabbard, is lost, submerged in water, as is the church timber, when Þorkell’s boat is wrecked, and he is drowned. Too little (p. 223: fátt eina) of Þorkell’s timber is recovered to be of any use for church-building; and although Kjartan’s sword is recovered from the bog in which it had been sunk, the scabbard is never found, and the sword is thereafter left unused.

From these points of comparison it might appear that the tragedies of Kjartan and Þorkell are largely parallel, but the dealings between Kjartan and Óláfr Tryggvason hint at a much more optimistic outcome for Kjartan than for Þorkell. The king had made an earlier gift to Kjartan of some clothes, ‘newly made of scarlet. They suited him well, as people said that Kjartan and King Óláfr were men of the same size, when they were measured’ (Konungr gaf Kjartani Ǫll klæði nýskorin af skarlati; somðu honum Ǫau, því at þat sogðu menn, at þeir haﬁ jafnmiklir menn verit, þá er þeir gengu undir mál, Óláfr

¹⁴⁸ Madelung, Structural Patterns, p. 72, notes this similarity of phrasing.
The author’s mentioning that Kjartan and the king were the same size has a narrative function beyond that of simply making the gift of clothes seem conveniently simple and appropriate. Óláfr Tryggvason makes the gift as a reward for Kjartan’s choosing ‘wisely and magnificently [lit. great-man-like]’ (hyggiliga ok mikilmannliga) to remain with him in Norway, the word mikilmannliga here being echoed twenty words later in the phrase jafnmiklir menn (‘men of the same size [lit. equal-great men]’).

Þorkell’s decision to continue with his plan to build a church equal in size to the king’s is by contrast foolish and obstinate, and is made despite the king’s advice to build smaller. This first foolish decision precedes a second, which Þorkell once more takes against good advice, when he sets sail with his load of timber, despite being warned that a storm is brewing. Þorkell’s second foolish decision has been shown by Madelung to be one of a patterned series of three similar ‘unfortunate choices’, each of which provokes a similarly worded comment. The first and third of these foolish choices lead directly to the deaths of those who make them (Eldgrimr: killed by the elderly Hrútr; and Þorkell: drowned); the second is the Icelanders’ refusal to accept baptism, a decision which they later voluntarily overturn, with Kjartan taking the lead in the new decision (p. 122).

Þorkell receives a gift of timber, but through two foolish decisions squanders both the gift and his life. Kjartan makes a wise decision and receives as reward the gift of scarlet clothing; he also reverses the Icelanders’ earlier, unwise decision to reject Christianity, and receives the gift of baptism from the king. Þorkell’s second foolish decision is made on the day he is to die. The patterning of wise and foolish decisions in Laxdæla saga leads the reader to expect that on the day that Kjartan is destined to die, he too will make a crucial decision, but unlike Þorkell, he will again choose ‘wisely and magnificently’. Þorkell’s second decision proves to be self-destructive; it may be that Kjartan’s final decision will prove to be the opposite.

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149 Structural Patterns, p. 118. The echoed phrasing comes in comments made by Hrútr Herjólfssson to Eldgrimr (p. 105: “Pat hygg ek, at þú kjósir þann hlut til handa báðum okkr, er verr muní gegna” – ‘I think you are making a choice which will prove the worse for both of us’); King Óláfr Tryggvason to the Icelanders (p. 120: Konungr segir, at þeir myndi þann kost velja sér til handa, er þeim gegndi verr – the king said they would make that choice which would be the worse for them); Þorsteinn Þorkelsson to Þorkell (p. 222: “Sá okkar mun nú ráða, er verr mun gegna” – ‘that one of us who rules now will be the worse off for it’).
1.4 The death of Þorkell Eyjólfsson

The episode of the death by drowning of Þorkell Eyjólfsson, Guðrún’s fourth husband, may now be examined. Þorkell’s drowning occurs while he is apparently engaged in performing an act of charity, the building of a church. The narrative context of his death is therefore very different from the other drownings mentioned in the saga (apart from that of Ari’s father, Þorgils Gellisson), all of which are brought about by witchcraft. It is of course possible that the author felt unable to do other than objectively report historical tradition concerning the deaths of Þorkell and Þorgils, Ari’s great-grandfather and father.

This is unlikely, however, at least as regards the case of Þorkell, who drowns in Breiðafjörður while bringing home timber he had been given in Norway to rebuild the church at Helgafell. It is doubtful whether the historical Þorkell made that journey to Norway. Instead, the timber was probably either brought back from Norway to Iceland in the Autumn of 1025 by Gellir, the son of Þorkell and Guðrún, or sent back by Gellir if he remained in Norway. According to this view, Þorkell drowned while bringing Gellir’s timber round the coast to Helgafell.¹⁵⁰

The saga states that this timber had been given to Þorkell by King Óláfr Haraldsson (Saint Óláfr). The king is later shocked to discover that Þorkell plans to build a church equal in size to that which he himself is building in Níðarós. His suggestion that it would be appropriate if Þorkell were slightly to reduce the size of his church meets with an arrogant response. The king is provoked into prophesying:

“En nær er þat mínu hugboði, at menn hafi litla nytsemð viðar þessa, ok fari því firr, at þú getir górt neitt mannvirki ór viðinum.” (p. 217).

(‘But I have the feeling that people will have little benefit from this timber, and that you will be most unlikely to build anything with it at all.’)

The king’s fears are confirmed, and Þorkell dies on Maundy Thursday. The first half of the king’s prophecy is shown to have been fulfilled (ch. 76) when, after Þorkell’s drowning, ‘very little of the church-timber was ever recovered’ (fátt eina náðisk af kirkjuviðinum).

That it should be on Maundy Thursday that Þorkell’s church-timber was lost would be ironic to a medieval audience, for it was on this day, the feast of Cena

¹⁵⁰ ÍF 5, p. lii.
Domini\textsuperscript{151}, that the faithful remembered the Last Supper, the moment when Christ symbolised for the disciples his building of the universal Church. This symbolism was made completely familiar through the words of St Paul, always spoken during the Mass, at the consecration of the Sacraments\textsuperscript{152}.

Maundy Thursday (\textit{Cena Domini}) commemorates the feast at which Christ founded the Church, and \textit{Laxdæla saga} shows Óláfr Haraldsson constructing a building that, to a thirteenth-century Icelandic audience, was itself symbolic, the building that was most representative of the church in the parts of the world they knew best. The archiepiscopal cathedral at Níðarós, originally dedicated to St Clement\textsuperscript{153}, controlled ten bishoprics at the time that the saga was written: Bergen, Stavanger, Hamar and Oslo in Norway, Skálholt and Hólar in Iceland, Kirkjubær in the Faeroes, Kirkwall in Orkney, Peel in Man and Garðar in Greenland\textsuperscript{154}. In this way \textit{Laxdæla saga} uses ironic juxtaposition and parallel, in order to contrast Þorkell’s failure to build a church on his farm both with St Óláfr’s establishment of the church in Norway and her dependent territories, and with Christ’s creation of the universal Church.

The Gospel pericope for Maundy Thursday is Joh. xiii, 1-17\textsuperscript{155}, the passage where Christ leaves his seat at the Last Supper, removes his outer garments, wraps a linen towel around his body and washes the feet of the disciples. The reading contains an injunction that we should follow Christ’s example of humility:

\begin{quote}
After washing their feet and taking his garments again, he sat down. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked. “You call me “Master”, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Then if I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example: you are to do as I have done for you. In very truth I tell you, a servant is not greater than his master ...”
\end{quote}

King Óláfr Haraldsson tells Þorkell:

\begin{quote}
“Bæði er, Þorkell, at þú ert mikil verðr, enda gerisk þú nú allstórr, því at víst er þat ofsi einum bóndasyni, at keppask við oss;” (pp. 216-17).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{151} Also in the calendars as \textit{Feria quinta paschae}; the English name, Maundy Thursday, is derived from the Latin \textit{Dies Mandati}, referring to Christ’s ‘new commandment’ (Joh. xiii. 34). For a discussion of the importance of this day within the Church calendar, see the article ‘Maundy Thursday’, in Smith and Cheetham, \textit{Christian Antiquities}, vol. 2.

\textsuperscript{152} I Cor. xi, 23-25.

\textsuperscript{153} The church was built in 1016 to replace Óláfr Tryggvason’s church, destroyed by fire the previous year. See Wisloff, \textit{Norsk Kirkehistorie}, 1, p. 82.

\textsuperscript{154} Iceland was made a part of the new province of Níðarós, which was founded by Cardinal Nicholas Brekespeare in 1152 (Jón Jóhannesson, \textit{Íslendinga saga}, p. 179; Turville-Petre, \textit{Origins}, p. 140. Orri Vésteinsson, \textit{Christianization}, p. 118, gives 1153 as the year of foundation).

\textsuperscript{155} So for example Bede, Homily II.5, for Holy Thursday; the Sarum Missal ends the pericope at v. 15, while other texts, for example the Westminster Missal, extend it through to v. 32.
Both are true, Þorkell, that you are of great worth, and yet you are now becoming very proud; because it is certainly arrogance for a farmer’s son to contend with us.

These words should not be interpreted as the speech of a viking ruler who is suffering from injured pride: when read against the Gospel text for Maundy Thursday, they become a Christian warning.

Immediately before King Óláfr prophesies that Þorkell’s timber is unlikely to benefit anyone, and having made the accusation that Þorkell is guilty of pride, he claims that Þorkell’s pride will not find room in the church, even if it is built:

> en eigi er þat satt, at ek fyrirmuna þér viðarins, ef þér verðr auðít at gera kirkju af, því at hon verðr eigi svá mikil, at þar muni of þitt allt inni liggja.” (p. 217)

(‘It’s not true that I begrudge you the timber - if you are destined to build a church with it; for it will never be large enough to contain all your arrogance.’)

Þorkell is never seen to enter a church, and the saga makes no mention of any church burial for him. Instead, he is last seen with his men, after their deaths, ‘standing in front of the church’ (ok stöðu úti fyrir kirkju: p. 223), on the evening of the day they drowned. The thirteenth-century audience would have been well aware that Óláfr, by contrast, was buried in the church he had built: in 1031, Bishop Grímkelg had the saint’s mortal remains interred close to the high altar.

1.5 The penitence of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir

Guðrún receives her first warning of disaster from a ghost that she encounters at that point on her way to church where the outside world meets the churchyard (p. 222):

> ok er hon gekk í kirkjugardshliót, þá sá hon drauga standa fyrrir sér.

(And as she passed through the lych-gate she saw a ghost standing in front of her).

It is therefore when she is within the churchyard that she thinks she sees her husband and his men standing in front of the church. The word kirkjugardr translates the Latin atrium ecclesiae, and mention of a group of men standing here, in front of the church, on Maundy Thursday, would have been seen by the original audience as a further reference to the liturgy for that day.

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156 Wisloff, Norsk Kirkehistorie I, p. 86: the date of the saint’s translation is 3rd August.
157 Cleasby-Vigfusson, s.v. kirkjugardr.
Maundy Thursday was the only day in the Church’s calendar when penitents (apart from the seriously ill) might receive absolution of either venial or mortal sins. The liturgy for the Reconciliation of Penitents begins with the following rubric:

the bishop or his deputy is to go in procession to the doors of the church to reconcile the penitents. And those who are to be reconciled are to be present in the atrium of the church ... let the bishop or his deputy begin, “Come! Come!”

The arrogant Þorkell and his men would have been instantly recognisable as occupying the position of penitent sinners, waiting outside the church before being admitted for confession and absolution. In the Middle Ages, each church was understood as bearing a mystical relationship to the universal Church, so the building at Helgafell would be seen as symbolic of the wider Church; Þorkell and his men have died unreconciled with God through confession and absolution, and are therefore doomed to wait eternally outside the doors. The full horror of King Óláfr Haraldsson’s prophetic words now becomes clear (p. 217):

“því at hon verðr eigi svá mikil, at þar muni of þitt allt inni liggja”

(‘for it [the church] will never be large enough to contain all your arrogance.’)

There is a moral lesson for Guðrún in her encounter with the ghosts in the churchyard. A church’s buildings and site had symbolic values, the significance of which was expounded in homilies for the dedication of a new church. The symbolic role of the churchyard was explained as follows:

Garðr um kirkiu merkir varðvæizlu þessa allra goðra luta er nu ero her talder. En þa megum vėr vėl varðvæita þessa alla goða luti. ef vėr hyggium at vercum þæirra er fyrir ós ero farnir ór hæimi. sva at goð dôme styrki os til eptir-likingar. en ill dôme vare ós við syndir.

(The churchyard represents the guardianship of all these good things which have now been recounted. And we may certainly guard all these good things if we reflect on the deeds of those who have passed away from this earth before us, so that a good example may strengthen us to follow suit, while a bad example may warn us from sinning).

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159 pergat episcopus uel eius uicarius ad ianuas ecclesie cum processione ad reconciliandum penitentes. Sinque presentes in atrio ecclesie qui reconciliandi sunt ... incipiat episcopus uel eius uicarius. Uenite. Uenite. The quotation here is from Wickham Legg, Sarum Missal, p. 102. The Sarum Missal provides an early example of a widely used model, and the rubric appears to be standard.
160 See, for example, Wulfstan, De Dedicatione Ecclesiae: ‘And ealle Godes cyrican syn getealde æfter gastlicum andgyte to anre cyrican, and seo is ecclesia genamad’ (Bethurum, ed., The Homilies of Wulfstan, p. 248).
161 In dedicatione tempeli. Sermo, GNH, pp. 95-99, at p. 98.
The deaths of Þorkell and his men, and Guðrún’s vision of them standing in the churchyard, offer her the chance to learn from their ‘bad example’ that she urgently needs to repent of her own sins; this is a lesson that she takes to heart. We are told that in the period after Þorkell’s death,

Guðrún gerðisk trúkona mikil. Hon nam fyrst kvenna saltara á Íslandi.
Hon var longum um nætr at kirkju á bœnum sínum. (p. 223)

(Guðrún became a deeply religious woman, and was the first woman in Iceland to learn the Psalter. She would spend long hours in the church at night saying prayers).

These words introduce into the narrative the spirit of humility and penitence that was lacking in Þorkell Eyjólfsson, and which is to be the controlling factor in Guðrún’s behaviour during her final years.

Given that Þorkell drowned on Maundy Thursday, Guðrún, who knew the Psalter by heart, could not have failed to see a symbolic significance in the manner of his death. Psalm lxviii, appointed to be sung at Mattins (first Nocturn) on that day, begins as follows:

Save me, O God, for the waters have risen up to my neck. I sink in muddy depths and have no foothold; I am swept into deep water, and the flood carries me away. I am wearied with crying out, my throat is sore, my eyes grow dim while I hope in my God.

We are told of Guðrún that as an old woman she continues her life of penitential grief, and that towards the end of her life, so it is said, she went blind:

Nú tekr Guðrún mjók at eldask ok lifði við slíka harma, sem nú var frá sagt um hríð. ...Guðrún varð gmul kona, ok er þat sogn manna, at hon yrði sjónlaus. Guðrún andaðisk at Helgafelli, ok þar hvílir hon (pp. 228-29).

(Guðrún now began to get very old, and lived in such sorrow as has now been described. ... Guðrún grew to be very old, and people say she became blind. She died at Helgafell, and lies buried there).

During the Middle Ages, it was considered possible to be saved only in the Church. The belief was summed up in the aphorism, ‘outside the Church there is no salvation’, an aphorism which Daniélou traces back to St Cyprian: ‘It is as possible for a man to be saved outside the Church as it was possible to be saved outside the ark of Noah’.

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162 Salvum me fac Deus; quoniam intraverunt aquae usque ad animam meam. Infixus sum in limo profundi: et non est substantia. Veni in altitudinem maris: et tempestas demersit me. Laboravi clamans, raueae factae sunt fauces meae: defecerunt oculi mei, dum spero in Deum meum (Vulgæ).
163 Daniélou, op. cit., p. 98. Elsewhere, he quotes Gregory of Elvira: ‘For as no one escaped from the flood
Cyprian here employs the typological connection between the ark of Noah and the Church. That this connection is not merely commonplace, but standard, may be inferred from Daniélou’s comment\(^{164}\) that ‘St Jerome will merely echo this unanimous tradition when he writes: “The ark of Noah was the type of the Church”\(^{165}\).

Patristic tradition not only identified the Church typologically with the ark, into which the Christian is received at baptism, but saw in the flood a type of the waters of baptism, with their symbolic purging and drowning. The Middle Ages had the authority of Scripture for this belief:

In the ark a few persons, eight in all, were brought to safety through the water. This water prefigured the water of baptism through which you are now brought to safety.

(1 Pet. iii, 20-21)\(^{166}\)

Medieval orthodox tradition saw the Church / Ark as sailing on a voyage of pilgrimage\(^{167}\), and recognised faith as the force that preserved each pilgrim from shipwreck:

Since Christ is in each man’s heart by faith, it is signified to us, that the heart of him who forgets his faith is tossed as a ship in this world’s tempest (\textit{in hujus saeculi tempestate})\(^{168}\).

The hearts of the baptised faithful are therefore safe from being overwhelmed in the storm of this world’s passions. But what of those Christians who, like Þorkell and Guðrún, yield to their passions of pride and jealousy to such an extent that their sins are serious enough to cause them spiritual shipwreck? The Church’s teaching is that penance is the means by which the souls of these people might be rescued from drowning, a point made explicit in the liturgy for Maundy Thursday. The intercessionary prayer at the service of Reconciliation of Penitents states:

look down upon this thy servant who has been overwhelmed by the hostile tempest of this world (\textit{ab infesta seculi tempestate})\(^{169}\).
From the time of St Jerome, penance was referred to as ‘a second plank after the shipwreck’. This image became so standard that the Council of Trent was able to declare: ‘If anyone...shall say that...penance is not rightly called a second plank after the shipwreck, let him be anathema’\textsuperscript{170}. Guðrún, old and blind, in danger of spiritual drowning, but grieving and penitent, reaffirms her faith by her fasting and praying, and by learning the Psalter. She is later confirmed in her hope of salvation, when she is granted what she believes is a ‘good sign’ (góðr fyirimburðrinn). Her beloved granddaughter, Herdís Bolladóttir, has a dream in which she is visited by an unpleasant-looking old woman. The crone begs Herdís to persuade Guðrún to cease her nocturnal vigils:

“Seg þú þat ömmu þinni, at mér hugnar illa við hana, því at hon bröltir allar nætr á mér ok fellir á mik dropa svá heita, at ek brenn af òll”. (p. 224)

(‘Tell your grandmother I’m very displeased with her, for she tosses about on top of me every night, and lets fall on me such searing drops that I’m burning all over’).

The church floor is dug up at the spot where Guðrún habitually kneels to pray:

Þar fundusk undir bein; þau váru blá ok illilig; þar fannsk ok kinga ok seiðstafir mikill. Þöttusk menn þá vita, at þar mundi verit hafta völuliði nokkut. Váru þau bein færð langt í brott, þar sem sízt var manna vegr. (p. 224)

(and there they found some bones which were blue and evil-looking, and a brooch, and a large witch’s wand. People then realized that this must have been a sorceress’s grave. The bones were taken far away to a place where people were least likely to pass by.)

Dronke has commented that the removal, ‘far from human paths’, of this skeleton: ‘is a symbol of the removal of her [Guðrún’s] own bad deeds, a token of forgiveness’\textsuperscript{171}. The episode is in fact based on accounts of exorcism, possibly from hagiographic literature, and should be seen as confirmation of Guðrún’s re-admittance to full communion with Christ. Guðrún’s tears are made the instrument through which divine mercy operates to receive her back fully into the Church. The witch protests that the tears scald her: “ek brenn af òll”. The scalding out of the devilish from a possessed victim is a recurring motif in narratives of exorcism, and the motif was certainly known in Iceland, as Hill has

\textsuperscript{170} Barton, Penance and Absolution, pp. 46 - 47.
\textsuperscript{171} ‘Narrative Insight’, p. 224.
pointed out, noting its occurrence in *Porvalds þátr víðforla* and Snorri’s *Heimskringla*, as well as here in *Laxdœla saga*.  

Exorcism may be effected by the dry heat of burning (as well as by scalding), as found in *Nikolaus saga Erkibyskups* I, chapter 6, where a possessed man is told by the saint to cross himself:

> En er hann signdi sik, þa var senn fara fra honum ohreinn andi sva sem brendr ok sviðinn

(And when he crossed himself, an unclean spirit was seen departing from him, as though burnt and scorched).

God’s ‘beloved friend’ (*ástvinr*) Óláfr Tryggvason has the same power to burn the demonic. In chapter 321 of the ‘greatest’ saga, two of the king’s retainers one night come across a group of trolls rehearsing the woes they have suffered since Óláfr and Christianity arrived together in Norway. One tells how he attempted to wrestle with the king in order to injure him:

> en sa tok j moti ok setti suo fast hendr at sidum mer at mer mætti æigi uerra vid verda þøat þer hendr hefde uerit gerur or gloanda iarnne ... en þo kuomunzst ek or hondum honum med mikille naud ok miog brunninn.

(But he resisted, and gripped my sides so firmly with his hands that it could not have been worse for me though those hands had been made of red-hot iron ... but I escaped out of his hands, though in great distress and badly burnt).

The scalding of the evil crone by Guðrún’s tears is therefore a technical exorcistic motif – exorcism by heat - and is the first of two. The second is as follows: when the demonic has been cast out from the penitent sinner, it is exiled far from human habitation. The following example of the second motif is from *Andreas saga Postola* II:

> Þa bauð heilagr Andreas dioflunum sva segandi: “Fari þer i þurra iorð ok þa staði, sem eingi groðr ma upp vaxa, ok gerit eingum manni mein”.

(Then the holy Andreas commanded the devils, saying: ‘Go into a dry land, to a spot where nothing may grow, and do harm to no one’.)

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172 ‘Tormenting the Devil’.
173 *HMS* II, p. 28.
174 *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, quoted from *Flat*. I, p. 399. The speaker is ‘one of those unclean spirits’ (*æinn af þeim vhræinum ondum*).
The trolls in the episode referred to above complain that since Óláfr Tryggvason arrived in Norway, they have been forced to leave their homes. They are now found living in a cave:

hefir hann drepit suma vine uora edr annan ueg uerr undan oss spanit med sinum illzskufullum ordkrokum en ellt oss burt af uorum æginbygdum ok enn uvist at ver megim her j nadum uera firir honum j þessi vtlegd.

(he has killed some of our friends, or another, worse way, has attracted them away from us with words filled with evil sophistry. He has driven us away from our own neighbourhood, and it is still uncertain whether we will be able to remain in peace here in this exile, because of him.)

The ambition of these trolls is to do people harm (at gera nokkurum mein: Flat. I, p. 399 - compare the phrase gerit eingum manni mein from Andreas saga above), and they have some success in this until they are formally exorcised by the king. Using the Cross, sacred relics and holy water, he finally purges the land of them for good.

In the case of Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar, exorcism removes the demonic from the places where he and his men travel:

Eftir þat for Olafr konungr a land med allt hit bezsta lid sitt ... ok hreinsade med helgum bænum ok guds fulltinge allt þar er þeir foru af ollum uettum ok uhræinum ondum (Flat. I, p. 400).

(After that King Óláfr went ashore with all his best troops ... and with holy prayers and the help of God he cleansed wherever they travelled of all ghosts and unclean spirits).

Similarly, in Laxdœ la saga, the exhumation of the witch’s skeleton is followed by the removal of her bones, ‘far away to a place where people were least likely to pass by’ (váru þau bein fœ rð langt í brott, þar sem sízt var manna veigr)176.

Through his narrative of Þorkell and Guðrún, the author of Laxdœ la saga shows his readers three possible human fates: the witch’s bones, eternally exiled far from the church, represent the fate of the anti-Christian and demonic; the fate of the sinful Christian who dies without confession and absolution is represented by Þorkell Eyjólfsson, who waits silently and eternally in the churchyard for the invitation to enter the church and be reconciled; and Guðrún, praying in hope within the church at Helgafell, represents the reconciled Christian, who is safe within the bosom of the

176 The spiritual reading of the episode presented here disagrees with Cook’s psychological reading: ‘A fine, though indirect, view of the depth of Guðrún’s feelings, this time with regard to the death of Þorkell, comes from the witch’s ghost who addresses Herðís Bolladóttir in a dream’ (‘Women and Men’, p. 36).
Universal Church, fully restored to the altar, and therefore symbolically (since ‘the altar represents Christ’\textsuperscript{177}) to Christ himself. It had been the exiling of the witch’s bones that had cleared her path to the altar, representing the moment when her penance is rewarded by the throwing to her of ‘the second plank’.

\textbf{1.6 The death of Kjartan Óláfsson}

Kjartan dies on the Thursday after Easter, and the saga narrates that it was his practice to observe Lent as a season of penance:

\begin{quote}
Kjartan fastaði þurrt langaföstu ok gerði þat at engis manns dœ mum hér á landi, því at þat er sgn manna, at hann hafi fyrstr manna fastat þurrt hér innanlands. (p. 138)
\end{quote}

(Kjartan observed a strict fast throughout Lent, which was without precedent in this country, for it is said that he was the first man to have dry-fasted in Iceland.)

\textit{Laxdæla saga} seems to claim a spiritual equality between Kjartan and Guðrún, reflected in the fact that, just as Kjartan is the first man in Iceland (\textit{fyrstr manna}) to fast during Lent, so Guðrún is the first Icelandic woman (\textit{fyrst kvenna}) to learn the Psalter. At the time of his death, Kjartan has undergone the Lenten penance, has been reconciled to the Church on Maundy Thursday, and has witnessed the joy of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Like the elderly and widowed Guðrún, he is a penitent and reconciled sinner. The spiritual state of Kjartan and Guðrún at the time of their deaths contrasts with that of Þorkell Eyjólfsson, who dies impenitent and unreconciled. This spiritual link between Guðrún and Kjartan at the end of their lives is a poignant affirmation of the saga’s claim that, in their youth, they were the best-matched among their contemporaries (p. 112: \textit{með þeim Kjartani ok Guðrúnu þætti vera mest jafnraði þeira manna, er þá óxu upp}).

On that fateful Thursday after Easter, Kjartan is not carrying the sword that Óláfr Tryggvason had given him, and he pays for that with his life. But he does have his other gift, his baptism, and the liturgy for that Thursday suggests the reader may be hopeful that his faith will safeguard his soul. For baptism and penance are complementary: whereas the latter is ‘a second plank after the shipwreck’, baptism, through which one is received into the ark, ‘is the first plank to be thrown to the sinner’\textsuperscript{178}.

\textsuperscript{177} \textit{Altare merkir Crist}, from the homily quoted above: \textit{In dedicatione tempeli. Sermo} (GNH, p. 96).

\textsuperscript{178} Barton, \textit{Penance and Absolution}, p. 47.
The opening Prayer of the liturgy for the Thursday after Easter picks out the themes of this day: the conversion of the nations, and rebirth out of the waters of baptism:

Deus qui diuersitatem gencium in confessione tui nominis adunasti. da ut renatis fonte baptismatis una sit fides mencium. et pietas accionum.

(O God, by whom a multitude of peoples have been made one in confessing Thy Name: grant likewise to those that have been born again in the waters of baptism, unity of faith in their souls, and of piety in their actions.)

The Gospel pericope for this day is Joh. xx, 11-18, the passage which tells how Mary Magdalene discovers Christ’s empty tomb, and thinks his body has been removed. She looks into the tomb and sees two angels, who ask her why she is weeping:

‘Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have put him.’ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, and she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?’ She thought that it was the gardener, and said to him, ‘Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where they have put him and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned and said to him, ‘Rabboni’, which is to say, Master. Jesus said to her, ‘Do not touch me, for I am not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, I ascend to my Father and your Father and to my God and your God.’

This reading, then, is about recognition of the true nature of Christ. During the Middle Ages, two commentaries on this reading were particularly important. Augustine’s series of Tractates on the Gospel of John formed probably the most influential body of commentaries on that Gospel: Tractate cxxi is on the relevant passage. And among Gregory’s familiar Homilies on the Gospels, Homily 25 comments on the above pericope. In fact, Augustine and Gregory are agreed concerning a point of major importance in the liturgy for the Thursday in Holy Week. In Gregory’s words:

The reason he [Christ] wasn’t to be touched was added in the following words: ‘For I have not yet ascended to my Father.’ In our hearts, Jesus ascends to the Father when he is to be the Father’s equal. In the heart of one who does not believe that he is equal to the Father, the Lord has still not ascended to his Father. That one truly touches Jesus who believes that he is coeternal with the Father.

To recognise Christ’s true nature is to understand that he is both human and divine, mortal and eternal.
The *Lectio* for the day is Acta Apost. viii, 26-40, which tells how the Apostle Philip converted an Ethiopian eunuch. He finds the Gentile reading Isaias liii, 7 ff., but unable to understand it:

> And the angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, ‘Arise, and go toward the south to the way that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, which is desert’ ... Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same Scripture, and preached Jesus to him. And as they went on their way, they came to a certain water; and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water; what hinders me from being baptized?’ And Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may be’. And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God’ (*Ecce aqua; quid prohibet me baptizari? Dixit autem Philippus: Si credis ex toto corde, licet. Et respondens, ait: Credo Filium Dei esse Jesum Christum*) (vv. 26 and 35-7).

Commenting on verse 26, Bede stresses the themes of baptism and the conversion of the nations:

> ...it was in the South that this man was sought, found, and washed clean ... Allegorically [the desert of Gaza] designates the people of the gentiles, who were once separated from the worship of God, uncultivated by the preaching of the prophets ... with the water of baptism he made white the blackness of our guilty condition.  

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As soon as he recognises the true nature of Christ, the gentile Ethiopian is impatient to be baptised, and points out the water for his own baptism to Philip, the man whose teaching had converted him. The pagan Kjartan tells Óláfr Tryggvason, whose preaching had converted him, ‘that they should not waste time but fetch the holy water, and warned they would need plenty of it’ (p. 123: *Kjartan bað þá ekki dvala við at leita at vatninu, ok kvad þó mikils mundu við þurfa*).

This Scriptural text shows the converting power of divinely inspired preaching. In *Laxdœla saga*, the decisive factor that causes the Icelanders to desire to be baptised is the king’s ‘long and eloquent Christmas sermon’ (p. 122: *baði langt ørendi ok snjallt*). This may be compared with the version of the same events given in *Flateyjarbók*180, where no mention is made of the king’s articulacy. According to *Flateyjarbók*, the Icelanders are wooed through the senses, as they hear the bells and psalms, and smell the incense - items not mentioned in *Laxdœla saga*.

Smaragdus’s compilation of patristic homilies on the Epistles covered the whole Church year, and was one of a number of widely known homiliaries during the Middle

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180 *Flat*. I, p. 316.
Ages. Writing about the above Epistle for the Thursday after Easter, he echoes the point made in the Gospel, that the recognition of Christ’s dual nature, human and divine, is a necessary precursor to salvation:

Philippus ... summam Evangelicæ doctrinæ Ethiopi exponit, nimirum Christum esse Filium Dei, per quem Deus ... promiserat, se salutem daturum omnibus illi credentibus, hunc esse verum Deum et hominem. 181

(Philip expounded to the Ethiopian the chief point of the Gospel’s teaching, of course that Christ is the son of God, through whom God had promised to give salvation to all who believe in him, [that] this [one] is true God and man.)

It was noted above that the Gospel for the day (Joh. xx, 11-18, at v. 12) mentions angels seated at the head and feet ‘where the body of Jesus had lain’. In his homily on that Gospel, Gregory’s interpretation of the positioning of the angels presents the same message: that Christ is both human and divine.

Why were two angels seen in the place of the Lord’s body, one sitting at the head and the other at the feet? In Latin, the word ‘angel’ means ‘messenger’. From his passion the message was to go out that he who was God before all ages is a human person at their end. An angel is sitting at his head, so to speak, when the Apostle preaches, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (Joh. i, 1); and an angel is sitting at his feet when he says that the word became flesh and dwelt among us (Joh. i, 14).

The two Scriptural verses quoted here, Joh. i, 1 and 14, which mark the beginning and end of the Gospel pericope for Christmas Day, spell out Christ’s dual nature. Through these references, Gregory connects Christ’s incarnation and his resurrection - or, seen in terms of the appointed Gospel readings, Christmas Day and the Thursday after Easter.

Kjartan dies on the Thursday after Easter. And in Laxdœla saga, Christmas Day marks the time when the Icelanders in Norway are converted. They discuss the sermon preached that day by Óláfr Tryggvason about a human lord or king (p. 122: the term used is hœfðingi) who was born on that day. It is Kjartan, however, who recognises Christ’s true nature - that he is not merely a hœfðingi. In words and syntax closely reminiscent of those used by Smaragdus 182 he says: ‘now I am sure that all our welfare depends on our believing that he whom the king proclaims is the true God’ (literally:

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181 Summarium in epistolas, PL 102, col. 569.
182 As mentioned in the Introduction to this study (0.6 above), it is not claimed here that Smaragdus’s work was used by the author of Laxdœla saga; it should rather be seen as a convenient collection of exegesis by standard authorities.
‘that we believe that [one] to be true god’, p. 122: *at vér trúum þann vera sannan guð - credentibus, hunc esse verum Deum*).

Again, the account of the events given in *Flateyjarbók* provides a different reason for Kjartan’s conversion. According to this version, the king sends for Kjartan and asks him to accept Christianity, which he now does, and with it the king’s friendship. At the two places where the accounts in *Laxdela saga* and *Flateyjarbók* have been shown to differ, it has been argued that the former is closer to the *lectio* for the Thursday after Easter and its exegesis. If this interpretation is correct, it suggests that the author of *Laxdela saga* had considerable expertise in religious literature, so that he was able fluently to transfer ideas from it into his own ‘history’.

### 1.7 Unnr and Guðrún

But what of Guðrún, left behind after the deaths of Kjartan and Þorkell? *Laxdela saga* closes with the image of an old woman nearing the end of her spiritual voyage through life. On her journey she has experienced four marriages, each of them in different ways, and to differing degrees, spiritually unsatisfactory. She has also known pride and anger, great dangers to her soul’s well-being; and finally, she has suffered spiritual shipwreck and the loss of her earlier, unregenerate self. Now re-established in the ship of the Church, and steered by faith, she continues to live in penitence, grieving for her past sins. Her mingled tears and hope are orthodox, the tears caused by ‘the remembrance of past sins’ (*minning liðinna misværka*), and by her ‘contemplation of her exile in the wretchedness of this life’ (*at-hugi ut-lægðar sinnar í vesold þessa lifs*); on the other hand, she hopes with ‘eagerness for her heavenly fosterland, to come there as quickly as possible’ (*girnd yfirlegrar fostr-iarðar at ... komesc þangat sem sciotast*).\(^{183}\)

In this way, *Laxdela saga* ends as it had begun, with an old woman on a voyage to a better life. In order to escape from mortal dangers, Unnr in djúpúðga builds a ship for herself and sets sail for a new homeland, Iceland, where she and her dependants may enjoy safety for ever. During her voyage, Unnr sets up marriage contracts; her voyage ends in shipwreck, although everything within the ship, lives and cargo, is saved. In *Laxdela saga*, Unnr’s and other early voyages to Iceland are motivated partly by a reluctance to spend any more time in the familiar, but dangerous, world of Norway.

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\(^{183}\) Reasons for weeping are quoted from *Vnm tar-mælti* (‘Concerning melting into tears’), *GNH*, p. 9. This is a section of *Cvedru-sending Alquini diaconi* (‘The Deacon Alcuin’s Message of Greeting’), the Norse translation of Alcuin’s *De Virtutibus et Vitiis liber*, PL 101, col. 613, ff. The relevant section in the original is entitled *De compunctione cordis*. 

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Scotland, and the Orkneys, and partly by faith in the good reports that have been received of the new land (p. 5).

Björn and Helgi wanted to go to Iceland, for they claimed to have heard many favourable reports of it; they said that there was good land available there, and no need to pay for it. They asserted that there was an abundance of stranded whales and plenty of salmon, and good fishing-grounds all the year round.

It was noted at 1.2 above that, whereas *Laxdæla saga* portrays Unnr as a pagan, according to *Landnámabók* she was a Christian who refused to be buried in a pagan land. Unnr’s paganism may now be regarded as an invention of the author of *Laxdæla saga*, and not the result of a separate oral tradition. Unnr is the pagan precursor of the Christian Guðrún; the former’s concerns are material, the latter’s spiritual. Thus the obvious difference between the journeys made by Unnr and Guðrún is that Unnr’s is a material voyage, while Guðrún’s is a spiritual pilgrimage. In Unnr’s case, the shipwreck is physical, but everyone survives, so that the dynasty might enjoy the relative safety of Iceland in perpetuity. Guðrún’s shipwreck and threatened drowning are spiritual, from which she escapes through penitence and grace, leaving her real treasure, her soul, intact, and hopeful of eternal safety.

At the end of her life, Unnr, in accordance with pagan ritual, is given a second vessel, in which to make the voyage into eternity:

Var nú drukkit... erfi Unnar. Ok inn síðasta dag boðsins var Unnr flutt til haugs þess, er henni var búinn; hon var logð í skip í hauginum, ok mikit fé var í haug lagt með henni; var eptir þat aptr kastaðr haugrinn (p. 13).

(Now the feast commemorated … Unnr’s funeral. On the last day of the feast, Unnr’s body was carried to the burial mound that had been prepared for her. She was laid in a ship inside the mound, and a great deal of treasure was laid in the mound with her. After that the burial mound was closed.)

Guðrún, on the other hand, has no need of such material treasures with her on her final voyage, in the ark of the Church. As a penitent Christian - ever since she was thrown ‘the second plank’ - she has had no concern with worldly pleasures, nor indeed with worldly cares.

Unnr’s final acts discharge her last material responsibilities. She arranges the marriage of her grandson, and settles as far as possible the future welfare of her estate, by handing it over to him at his wedding feast. She dies during this feast. Guðrún’s final
concerns, on the other hand, are penitential, and for the ordering of her spiritual affairs. Her need is to ensure as far as possible the future welfare of her soul, in the hope that, having sailed to her last destination in the ship of the Church, she too might celebrate, at the hour of her death, one final marriage feast.

For the nun, the consecrated virgin, as much as for the celibate widow, carnal pleasures yield place to the betrothal of a spiritual marriage with Christ which will be celebrated through eternity. Guðrún is both widow and nun, and would have been consecrated as the latter in a ceremony that was:

in several respects like a wedding. A ring was put on the candidate’s finger and a wedding crown on her head. One of the responses which she had to make ran: “I love Christ into whose bed I have entered”.

Augustine points out that Christ has always been the spiritual husband of these widows, members as they are of his bride, the Church:

In reality, he was their spouse, not carnally but spiritually, when they were still subject to their husbands in obedience and fidelity. The Church itself, of which they are members, is likewise his bride.

And he urges the widow Juliana, and her daughter Demetrias, a nun, to:

Strive faithfully, therefore, to please and to unite yourselves to that king who has desired the beauty of his unique spouse [viz. the Church] of which you are the members.

When the young Guðrún had dreamed of two coverings for her head (a headdress and a gold helmet) and two rings / bracelets, Gestr Oddleifsson had explained these images to her as symbols of her four future husbands (chapter 33). His prophetic interpretations of her dreams had prompted her bleak comment (p. 91): ‘Yet it is a grave thought, if all this is to come to pass’ (En mikit er til at hyggja, ef þetta allt skal eptir ganga). The author of Laxdæla saga implicitly returns to these former symbols of Guðrún’s future husbands, when he tells of her becoming a nun and anchoress. The humble veil covering

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184 See, for example, Rush, ‘Death as spiritual marriage’.
185 Taylor, Sex in History, p. 42, where the reference is to the medieval ceremony.
186 De bono viduitatis; quotations here are from the English translation: ‘The Excellence of Widowhood’, at p. 294.
187 ‘The Excellence of Widowhood’, p. 310. Elsewhere, Augustine states that in her acceptance of the veil when preparations were being made for her marriage, Demetrias had shown that she preferred a spiritual embrace to that of a man (nuptis iam paratis sancta Demetrias spiritualem sponsi illius praeferret amplexum); see ‘The Excellence of Widowhood’, p. 270, n. 17.
188 Sayers suggests: ‘one may judge that the symbolism of rings, headdress and helmet as interpreted by Gestr Oddleifsson is overly neat and a trifle forced’ (‘Sexual Identity’, p. 132).
her head, and Christ’s ring on her finger, are prophetic symbols of another future marriage, this one flawless and eternal, to Christ as a member of his Church in Heaven.

The closing words of the saga bring the narrative out of the world of Guðrún and towards the time of ‘history’, with mention of the death of Þorgils Gellisson, the father of Ari inn fróði. Like his grandfather Þorkell Eyjólfsisson, Þorgils drowns in Breiðafjörður with all his crew, but at that point any resemblance between the two shipwrecks ends. The author devotes the twenty or so lines between the notices of the deaths of Guðrún and Þorgils (p. 229) to a sketched outline of the life of Gellir Þorkelsson, son of the former and father of the latter: ‘many remarkable things are told of him. He plays a part in many other sagas, although very little is said of him here’ (er mart merkiligt frá honum sagt; hann kemr ok við margar sögur, þótt hans sé hér lítt getit). But the author does tell us two things: that Gellir died while on his way home from a pilgrimage to Rome, having received the last rites, and that ‘he had a very distinguished church built at Helgafell’ (Hann lét gera kirkju at Helgafelli virðuliga mjöð). The reader therefore has cause to be hopeful that Þorgils, unlike Þorkell, was granted an eternal home.

1.8 Conclusions

This chapter has suggested that the author of Laxdœla saga used knowledge derived from ecclesiastical literature in order to supply a further, Christian level of meaning to his narrative. This ecclesiastical knowledge encompassed the church year and associated liturgy (for Maundy Thursday and the Thursday after Easter), together with some exegesis of the Scripture appointed for those days. These Scriptural readings, with their exegesis, provide the key to understanding why two central characters, Guðrún and Kjartan, should so profoundly change the direction of their lives: following the death of Þorkell Eyjólfsisson, the hitherto proud and magnificent Guðrún becomes a penitent nun; after hearing a Christmas sermon, the hitherto defiantly pagan Kjartan becomes a convert to Christianity.

When the saga is read against this liturgical background, what had previously been recognised as a leitmotiv - shipwreck, with survival or drowning – acquires a much more central significance: in addition to all the material voyages, storms, and shipwrecks, the saga narrates the metaphorical, spiritual voyage of Guðrún’s life, storm-tossed and shipwrecked, but finally safe. Hallberg has pointed out that sea metaphors
occur relatively frequently in Old Norse religious prose, where ‘human life is seen as a dangerous sea voyage’\textsuperscript{189}. He also notes, however:

In the domestic tradition metaphorical language was specific for the poetry. Secular saga literature restricted itself to an extremely moderate use of metaphors, mostly in quite conventional phrases. The high frequency of imagery in the religious prose is as such a principal innovation.\textsuperscript{190}

It would seem likely, therefore, that the author’s employment of these Christian metaphors of shipwreck with survival or drowning, like his knowledge of liturgy, Scripture, and Scriptural exegesis, is owing to his reading of ecclesiastical literature. His familiarity with both the theological content and the narrative conventions of ecclesiastical literature strongly suggests, too, that the author was a cleric, rather than an educated layman or woman. And since the only nunnery to have been established in Iceland before the saga was written (Kirkjubær, 1186) seems to have been in decay from 1210, and to have ceased to function by 1250\textsuperscript{191}, the recent suggestion, that the author of \textit{Laxdæla saga} may have been a woman, is unlikely to be correct\textsuperscript{192}.

This study of \textit{Laxdæla saga} agrees with Njarðvík and Andersson, in so far as they each hold that the author questions the purpose and attractiveness of the anachronistic world of wealth and show that he portrays:

The contrast between the unsuspecting idyll in the early part of \textit{Laxdæla saga} and the cataclysm in the story of Guðrún and Kjartan is so stark that it prompts questions. Is the author deliberately constructing a mirage of peace and prosperity only to confound it with the harsh reality of passion and betrayal? Is this a story of lost illusions? Or is it rather the story of a lost paradise, a story in which a falsification is injected into an otherwise stable community, with the inevitable consequence of disintegration? Are Kjartan’s dilatoriness, Bolli’s less than perfect loyalty, and Guðrún’s less than perfect constancy subtle signs of moral decay? … The saga does not provide the tools with which to resolve these questions, but it does pose them, and that is in itself a revolutionary advance over earlier sagas. \textit{Laxdæla saga} is more historically probing, more abstract, more suggestive of large issues …\textsuperscript{193}

\textsuperscript{190} ‘Imagery’, p. 402.
\textsuperscript{191} Orri Vésteinsson, \textit{Christianization}, pp. 137-38. The house at Kirkjubær was in any case ‘a modest foundation … intended for an abbess and thirteen sisters’ (Hood, \textit{Icelandic Church Saga}, pp. 77-78), and probably, therefore, could never have supported the writing of a major work like \textit{Laxdæla saga}. There were in fact never many nuns in Iceland (Jochens, ‘The Medieval Icelandic Heroine’, p. 112).
\textsuperscript{192} See 1.1 above.
\textsuperscript{193} \textit{Growth}, p. 140; Njörður Njarðvík, ‘Laxdæla saga – en tidskritik?’
Laxdæla saga is neither an allegory nor a sermon, and the author certainly does not offer any easy answers to the questions he raises. However, the actions of Guðrún and Kjartan, as each of them approaches death, do give the reader grounds for hope that their histories, at least, do not make up ‘the story of a lost paradise’. To this extent, Laxdæla saga contains more than social comment, whether articulated through satire or nostalgia. Guðrún learns from the churchyard example of Þorkell, and rejects the world of power and wealth. Temporal success in this material, apparent paradise may be easily won, as the author of Laxdæla saga shows, but eternal security in the spiritual, real one is only achievable through penitential suffering: sleeplessness, tears, and confession before God and man. At the very last, Guðrún makes her final confession, to which Bolli Bollason responds in words that bring to a close a narrative that has included such abuses of language as plots, lies, spells and curses, as well as justifiable (apparent) wordlessness: “Þat hyggju vér,” svarar Bolli, “at nú sé sagt alleinarðliga” (Bolli answers: ‘I believe that that is now spoken entirely sincerely’).

394 See Andersson, Growth, pp. 134-35: ‘[King] Hákon heaps more gifts on him [HÓskuldr Dala-Kollisson]… though exactly what service HÓskuldr has rendered to deserve such princely treatment is not revealed’; ‘We know that HÓskuldr is affluent, but there is no indication of how his wealth accrues’.