



# The Cult of Kollumkilli in Medieval Scandinavia

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References to the veneration of Colum Cille in medieval Iceland and Norway use both versions of his name adapted to Old Norse conventions: Kolumba and Kollumkilli. Medieval primstaven refer to the saint distinctly as *Kolbjörn með laksen* 'Kolbjörn with the salmon'. In the medieval Icelandic texts *Landnámabók* and *Kjalnesinga saga*, a presumed version of St Patrick presents Orlyg, a Norse settler wishing to migrate to Iceland, with several gifts intended to allow the successful foundation of a church dedicated to Colum Cille upon arrival. A church dedicated to the saint was also present in Bergen between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, indicating the presence of a cult in the area. Considering this evidence, this article discusses the way in which a cult dedicated to Colum Cille in medieval Scandinavia might be understood through medieval Norse sources, and especially the way in which they emphasise his eminence as an Irish saint.

**Keywords:** Colum Cille, hagiography, *Landnámabók*, *Morkinskinna*, *Vita Sancti Columbae*

The key role of Colum Cille, also known as Columba, in the development and spread of Christianity across Scotland and Ireland is undeniable. As Thomas Owen Clancy has shown, by the time that Adomnán composed *Vita Sancti Columbae* and *Cáin Adomnáin*, the cult and veneration of Colum Cille in Scotland was significantly established and included several traditions associated with the saint. As he indicates, Adomnán was able to promulgate his law in 697 not only due to his own influence as the abbot of Iona, but because the law was given a particular agency and more easily promulgated with Colum Cille as its spiritual patron (Clancy 1999: 9). The solid status of Colum Cille's cult in the Hebrides in the early medieval period merely a century after his death certainly led to the spread of his cult and its importance across Ireland and the islands and mainland of Scotland. The influence of Colum Cille in both countries has long been discussed, but to what extent was the saint venerated outside of Ireland and Scotland? While Adomnán claims in *Vita Sancti Columbae* that Colum Cille was widely venerated on the continent, Jean-Michel Picard has shown this was not the case and that his claim was exaggerated. Further, in comparison to the cults of other Irish saints, that of Colum Cille, under either form of his name, was considerably lacking (Picard 1998: 2). Any spread of his cult in France and Germany, for example, seems to have been due particularly to the copying of Adomnán's Life, or the

presence of Irish monks who brought their traditions about the saint along with their monastic practice (Picard 2002: 87).

When Iona is associated with Vikings, it usually is within the context of the series of raids upon the monastery which eventually led to its decentralisation as the mother house of the Columban *familia* in the ninth century. This is memorably preserved in an entry in the Annals of Ulster for 825 in which a monk is killed at the hands of the Vikings on Iona—‘The violent death of Blamac son of Flann at the hands of the heathens in Í Coluim Chille’ (*Annals of Ulster*, 825.17: 282–283).<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the early foundation of monasteries in Ireland and Britain, Scandinavia was fully Christianised far later. Given this relative late conversion in comparison to the rest of western Europe, much of Norse Christianity was itself evolved from the influence of the cultures which converted earlier. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, this is especially evident through the Anglo-Saxon and German missionary activities in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (Abrams 1995). Furthermore, it has been argued that Christianity was adapted more ‘easily’ by settlers in Iceland due to their own close contact with Gaelic-Norse culture (Ulff-Møller 2016: 8). In the shift from raiding to the eventual settlement of the Hebrides, and while Norse settlers lived alongside Gaels and Picts, they may have adopted some aspects of the cult of Colum Cille which was best seen in the islands.<sup>2</sup> Given the Norse settlement of Ireland and the equal cultural interchange which occurred as a result, it is possible that influence from Ireland may also have facilitated the spread of the cult of the saint to medieval Iceland and Norway.

The presence of cults dedicated to Irish saints in medieval Norway and Iceland has been well established. While there is a significant lack of knowledge about the true origin of St Sunniva, she is perhaps one of the earliest saints venerated in the context of medieval Norwegian Christianity and is said to be from Ireland. Supposedly an Irish princess, according to her tradition, Sunniva fled from Ireland to Norway after nearly being forced to marry a pagan. After her arrival on the island of Selja, she and her followers again faced local pagans who wished to kill them, and only were saved through the prayers of the saint (Rekdal 2003–2004: 261; O’Hara 2009; Ommundsen & O’Hara 2021). While Sunniva is ultimately given an Irish origin, any presence of her cult in Ireland and Scotland is uncertain. Nils Holger Petersen argues that the legend of Sunniva in particular ‘[p]reserved fundamental – not local – cultural memories of sainthood, together with a local knowledge that such saintliness came from far away and had to be imported into Norway. The imagined pious reign of Sunniva in Ireland, and her

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1 See also the metrical account of Blathmac’s martyrdom written by Walahfrid Strabo, *De beati Blathmaic vita et fine* (Anderson 1922: 263–265).

2 This idea of cultural assimilation is perhaps seen through the eventual retirement and burial of Amlaíb (Olafr) Cuarán at Iona (see Downham 2007: 51–53); see also Etchingham, Sigurðsson, and Ní Mhaonaigh 2019: 1–42.

faithful followers, provided Norway with a cultural memory of fundamental Christian piety and saintliness which probably no Norwegian saint could have done in a similar way' (Peterson 2017: 63).

The late beginnings of Christianity in Scandinavia therefore offered a perfect environment for the conscious importation of Irish saints. Venerating an Irish saint consequently solidified an individual's status as a Christian, and active displays of their devotion granted them agency as a follower of the church. With the case of Sunniva in mind, examining the way Colum Cille was venerated in medieval Scandinavia offers some further insight as to the spread of his cult outside of Ireland and Scotland, as well as the manner in which the medieval Norse readapted his memory in order to fit their own purposes.

## I. Kollumkilli in Literary Sources

While Ireland and Scotland produced a plethora of saints from the early medieval period onwards, only a particular few of them seem to have enjoyed a cult following in Norway and Iceland. Some of these include female saints venerated both in Scandinavia and by the Norse diaspora in Britain and Ireland, who were given Irish or Celtic origins. Much like Sunniva, their traditions included stories in which they were said to have been at the risk of forced marriage to pagan suitors and needed to flee elsewhere (Rekdal 2003–2004: 270–271). Aside from those examples, some of the Irish saints most frequently documented as being recognised in Norway and Iceland are Patrick, Brigid, and Colum Cille (Marner 2013). Given the strength of the cults to these saints in Ireland and Scotland in the early Middle Ages, this is not particularly surprising. Their elevated status as saints seems to have been continued in the spread of their influence to Scandinavia.

This may be particularly seen in the use of St Patrick to explain the etymology of Patreksfjörður in the *Landnámabók*, the thirteenth-century account of the earliest settlements of Iceland (Rafnsson 2017). In the *Sturlubók* recension of the text Patrick is mentioned only as an unidentified bishop with that name as previous considerations of this passage have concluded (Marner 2013: 18–19; Abrams 2007; Cormack 1994: 91). Notably, there is also no particular reference to this bishop as a saint in the parallel version of the tale in *Kjalnesinga saga* (*Kjalnesinga saga*, 3f). The later *Hauksbók* recension of the text refers to Patrick specifically as being holy (i.e. a saint), and the interpretation of this *Patrek biskup* as St Patrick may be discerned with more certainty.

*Maðr hét Örylgr; hann var írskr at allri ætt. Í þann tíma var Írland kristit; þar réð fyrir Konofogor Írakonungur. Þessi fyrrnefndr maðr varð fyrir konungs reiði. Hann fór að finna Patrek biskup, frænda sinn, en hann bað hann sigla til Íslands – 'því at þangat er nú,' sagði hann, 'mikil sigling ríkra manna; [...] þar skaltu láta kirkju gera og gefa hinum heilaga Kolumba. Far nú vel,' sagði*

*biskup, 'og geym trú þinnar sem best, þóttú verðir með heiðnum.'* (Kjalnesinga saga, 3f)

A man was called Örlygr. He was of Irish descent on both sides. In those days Ireland was Christian. There the Irish king Konofogor was ruling. The before-mentioned man fell into the wrath of the king. He went to meet bishop Patrick, a relative of his, and he asked him to sail to Iceland, 'Because nowadays', he said, 'there is a lot of sailing of rich men there [...] There you should have a church built and give it to saint Columba.' 'Farewell now', the bishop said, 'and hide your belief as good as it seems to be worth to you among the heathens.' (Marner 2013: 19)

Orlyg is given a clear Irish parentage and is specifically mentioned to be a relative of the Patrick from whom he asks permission to travel to Iceland. As particular emphasis is placed on the Christianity of Ireland, it might be assumed that we are to understand that this Patrick is Irish himself. The author of the *Hauksbók* recension of *Landnámabók* also seems to have assumed that Patrick was the Irish saint, again referring specifically to Patrick as being the 'holy bishop,' implying sainthood (*Landnámabók*, 53).

While it would be chronologically impossible for Patrick to have granted any permission for Norse settlers to travel to Iceland, the conflation of the apparent bishop of the Hebrides with the saint does indicate some knowledge of Patrick's status within Ireland. Muirchú describes Patrick as the 'bishop of all Ireland' in *Vita Sancti Patricii*—referring to Patrick specifically with *doctor*, implying the apostolic teacher of Ireland, indicating [his] 'pre-eminent authority as a champion of religious orthodoxy and converter of the Irish' (Bieler 1979: 98–99; Johnson 2013: 113). This reference to the saint clearly indicates that the title of bishop was in use to describe Patrick beginning from his earliest hagiography, and especially one with the jurisdiction of the entirety of Ireland. Icelandic knowledge of Patrick is visible through the descriptions of the beginning of the saint's life present in 'all Icelandic annals' (Marner 2013: 20). It seems probable from this that there was awareness of this title being associated with Patrick amongst the Norse; and the authors of the *Hauksbók* text and *Kjalnesinga saga*, believing the bishop named Patrick was the saint, described him accordingly. Given the ambiguity as to whether Patrick was venerated as a saint in medieval Scandinavia, if at all, his grant of the foundation of a church to Colum Cille is of significance (Marner 2013: 2, 20).

Patreksfjörður is said to have been named by Orlyg in accordance with his vow to Patrick that he would name his settlement after the bishop once his ship reached land. In the *Landnámabók* version of this episode, Patrick grants Orlyg the materials that he would need in order to build his church—timber, an iron bell, a plenarium, and consecrated earth (Pálsson and Edwards 2006: 24). As both saints in question are of Irish origin, the inclusion of the iron bell is of particular note. The holy bell was one of the most common and vital relics of the Irish

saints and, as an object, was given agency both in and outside of hagiography (Bray 1992: 126; Overbey 2011: 126, 128). It is tempting to assume that the bell given to Orlyg for the foundation of his church to Colum Cille was intended to be a bell shrine of a similar nature. With the fundamental role of Irish bell shrines in mind, was this bell intended ultimately to become associated with Colum Cille, and ultimately grant Orlyg's church the same type of authority that it would have in Ireland or Scotland?<sup>3</sup>

Some evidence would suggest that the Vikings held their plundered Insular relics in high esteem (Heen-Pettersen and Murray 2018). It has recently also been suggested that the Kilmichael Glassary bell shrine, found in Scotland, may have been associated with Colum Cille (Caldwell, Kirk, and Márkus 2012). The saint's association with church bells is additionally well represented in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*. In the Life, the bell's primary role appears to be a particular tool of the monastery used to call the monks to prayer or to other ecclesiastical activities. Colum Cille is described as utilising a bell to call his monks to pray for the safe journey of Cormac Ua Liatháin, who had set out in search of a place of retreat.

*Eadem hora et sanctus noster Columba quamlibet longe absens corpore spiritu tamen praesens in navi cum Cormaco erat. Unde eodem momento personante signo fratres ad oratorium convocans et ecclesiam intrans adstantibus sic more sibi consueto profetizans profatur; dicens: 'Fratres, tota intentione pro Cormaco orate, qui nunc humanae discursionis limitem immoderate navigando excessit.'*

At that same hour, our Saint Columba also, though far distant in body, was nevertheless in spirit present with Cormac in the ship. So in that moment, calling the brothers together to the oratory with the sound of the bell, and entering the church, he spoke thus prophetically according to his custom to those that were standing by and said: 'Brothers, pray with your whole might for Cormac, who now in his voyage has far exceeded the bounds of human travel.' (Adomnán, *Vitae Columbae*, §ii. 42: 444–445)

This is a consistent usage throughout the text, as can be seen in the final chapter, which details the circumstances of Colum Cille's death, and in which the bell again is used to call the saint himself to his final midnight office. Colum Cille is consistently presented not only as using the bell for his own purposes, but responding to its call himself, thus allowing Adomnán to indicate his saint's individual relationship with the bell's liturgical functions.

While it seems that bells being sent with the intention to include them in the foundation of a new church was not unique to Patrick's gift to Orlyg, the certain association of bells with Irish saints and Christianity should not be

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3 Some evidence for the connection between Irish monasticism and bells from the Norse perspective can also be seen in the famous account of the Irish *papar*, who are said to have left behind Irish books, bells, and staves; Pálsson and Edwards 2006: 38; Grønlie 2006: 4.

ignored.<sup>4</sup> The bestowal of these items by Patrick specifically for the foundation of a church dedicated to Colum Cille is not dissimilar to the representations of Colum Cille in examples of other Irish saints' hagiography. In these, Colum Cille is represented as granting saints associated with his own *familia* land to ensure the foundation of their own monasteries.<sup>5</sup> The granting of land from Patrick to ensure a church dedicated to Colum Cille might indicate a certain lack of knowledge in regard to the rivalry between Iona and Armagh.<sup>6</sup> The scribe of *Hauksbók*, Haukr Erlendsson, has been described as having a 'weakness for things Irish,' which may have accounted for the awareness of the two Irish saints, as well as the lack of cultural awareness as to the rivalry between their *familiae* (Cormack 1994: 92). Their use in this passage to legitimise Orlyg's Irish background serves to emphasise their perceived prestige as saints from Ireland that were bastions of Christian piety. It is of note also that Colum Cille is referred to in *Hauksbók* not only as Kolumba, but as Kollumkilli, the Irish version of his name adapted to Old Norse. This indicates awareness of both names, but the equal presence of the Irish name may be viewed as another indication of the scribe's purposeful accentuation of the saint's Irish origin. Liturgical references to Colum Cille likewise seem to prefer the Norse version of his Irish name rather than Kolumba as utilised in the earlier recension of *Landnámabók* and *Kjalnesinga saga*. The Mass of Colum Cille according to Icelandic and Norwegian litanies is referred to as Kollumkillamessa (Rekdal 2003–2004: 263; Marner 2013: 5). Kollumkilli here would indicate an -a genitive form, making Kollumkilli the only name of the two which appears to adhere to Old Norse grammatical rules as a weak masculine noun.<sup>7</sup> This could plausibly indicate that this version of his name may have been in more common use, as has been noted, Kollumkilli 'was what Icelandic and Irish laymen used to call St Columba' (Sigurðsson 2000: 92). The use of Kolumba in written sources appears to have come from church influence, rather than oral tradition.

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- 4 A 'great' bell was at least also sent to Þingvöllr by Olaf II of Norway in order to promote the building of a church (Finlay and Faulkes 2014: 142).
  - 5 For an example of this, see *Betha Farannáin* 'Life of St Farannán', Plummer 1910: 1–6.
  - 6 While the raids on Iona ultimately led to Armagh's full primacy over Ireland and Scotland, the rivalry between the Columban and Patrician *familiae* began at least in the seventh century (Simms 2020: 269); interesting references to this rivalry are also visible in Patrician texts, in *Bethu Phádraig* this is especially seen in commentary such as: 'A place close by it, to the south, belonged to Patrick. One of his household, Dicholl's son, set up there. Colomb Cille hath it now through cunning' (Stokes 1887: 79).
  - 7 It should be noted that the traditional Latin spelling of *Columba* (sans K) is attested in the entry for the saint's feast day in the *calendarium* found in *Lundarbók*, a manuscript which was produced in Bergen for the Faroese diocese of Kirkjubøur (Dreschler 2021).

## 2. Kollumkilli in Church Dedication and Devotion

While there are no examples of hagiographical texts about Colum Cille from the Norse perspective, some evidence for the veneration of the saint in Norway is present in the existence of at least one medieval church dedication. Columbakirken was likely constructed in Bergen in the twelfth century and was one of the oldest churches in the town, though it disappeared by the fifteenth century. It was situated in the densely populated older settlement alongside churches dedicated to Peter and Nicholas but was also not likely to have been a parish church (Kristensen 2014: 38; Lorentzen 1952: 162). Though a lack of concrete evidence makes determining the true founders of these churches difficult, a compelling recent claim has been made that the church was dedicated by Haraldr Gillikristr, who was born either in Ireland or the Hebrides and claimed to be the son of Magnús berfœttr Ólafsson (Hansen 2005: 227).<sup>8</sup>

In the thirteenth-century *Morkinskinna*, which details the sagas of Norwegian kings from 1030–1157, Haraldr Gillikristr is also given notable association with Colum Cille. Haraldr agrees to face the ordeal of treading over hot ploughshares to prove his Norse paternity to Sigurðr I and calls upon Colum Cille (in the text his Latin name is used) for protection. His feet are found to be clear of burns, and Sigurðr accepts his claim of identity, making Haraldr his paternal half-brother. In the text, Haraldr is described as having come from the Hebrides to Norway and said to not have spoken Norse fluently, for which Sigurðr would not allow anyone to mock him. It is possible then that Haraldr Gillikristr (from Irish *Gilla Críst* ‘servant of Christ’) was a speaker of Irish, or a less comprehensible Gaelic-influenced dialect of Old Norse (*Morkinskinna*: 352, 355–356).<sup>9</sup> This utilisation of Colum Cille as a representation of Haraldr’s Christian faith might be a genuine reflection of his devotion to the saint, though also serving to emphasise his Irish background.

After assuming the Norwegian throne alongside Magnús inn blindi Sigurðarson in 1130, Haraldr later defeated his nephew in Bergen in 1134, bodily maiming him and taking over the throne completely. In celebration of this defeat, Haraldr built a church dedicated to St Olav (Olavskirken på Bakkene), as described in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* (*Morkinskinna*, 358–367; Gade 2009: 794). If Columbakirken was indeed built between 1120 and 1180 (Hansen 2005: 99), and Haraldr, who apparently had a penchant for things Irish (Kristensen 2014:

8 In *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* there is another example of the Norse awareness of the connection between Columba and the Hebrides. He appears, along with Sts Oláfr and Magnús of Orkney, in a dream said to have been had by Alexander II of Scotland prior to his conquest of the Hebrides (Antonsson 2007: 210–211).

9 That the term *írskr* in Old Norse sources could be applied to Scandinavians from Ireland as well as to the Irish seems particularly relevant here (Hines 2002: 21); a reviewer also noted that *Gilla* names were often used by Scandinavians of Gaelic background (Abrams 2010).

45; Hødnebø and Magerøy 1979: 584–586), was at the very least connected with church construction in Bergen on top of his clear association with Colum Cille, it does not seem implausible that he could have had a role in its foundation.

Some evidence for a larger following of Colum Cille is visible through the inclusion of his 9 June feast day on examples of *primstaven*. These wooden perpetual calendars were used to track the time and seasonal changes of the year—one side of the stick tracked summer, and the other winter (Skeie 2019: 65). They were also utilised to track the feast days of the saints and other holy days, which were marked with a particular engraving. In many cases this was a cross or other religious symbol such as a bishop’s staff, but in others, such as St Bernardinus, whose feast day seems to have been corrupted into ‘Bjørnevåk,’ the carving is often that of a bear paw, a sun, or a bear (Dybdahl 2013). The symbol most commonly used to represent Colum Cille’s feast day is almost always a salmon, or salmon accompanied by a cross. It has been suggested that this reflects a story in which Colum Cille miraculously provides extraordinarily large salmon to his companions as well as some fishermen as related by Adomnán in *Vita Sancti Columbae* (Adomnán, *Vitae Columbae*, §ii. 19: 364–367). The use of the salmon additionally appears to be due to early June having been the beginning of the salmon spawning season, as well as the beginning of summer (Rekdal 2003–2004: 263). Colum Cille was given the epithet *Kolbjørn med laksen* ‘Kolbjørn with the salmon’ in Norway due to this utilisation of the salmon to mark *Kolumbamesse*, which recalls the role of salmon in Irish tradition.<sup>10</sup> Colum Cille’s feast day is marked on *primstaven* primarily originating from the diocese of Bergen, which likely seems due to the dedication of the church to him there (Dybdahl 2021; Dybdahl 2011). This inclusion of his feast day would indicate that it was being actively observed by the local community in Bergen and that this seems to have been isolated to this area.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Conclusions

Some evidence would suggest that Colum Cille was venerated by Norse settlers in both Ireland and Scotland, and particularly in the Hebrides, though the actual timeline of their conversion is unclear (Abrams 2007: 171–172). While Iona ultimately lost grasp of its momentous status by the time Scotland was fully settled by the Norse, its prestige in cultural memory remained, and this influence equally extended to ‘the minds of the newly settled Norse inhabitants of the Hebrides’

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10 For example, the Salmon of Knowledge in the Fenian Cycle, see Meyer 1904: 185–186.

11 My thanks to Seán D. Vrieland for pointing out to me that the *Lundarbók* (mentioned in an earlier footnote) calendar marks both Columba and St Brendan’s feast days—given its Bergen provenance, one suggestion for Columba’s inclusion may be his local cult in Bergen discussed here. As he pointed out to me, Brendan’s feast day is probably on account of Brandansvík, the bay in Kirkjubæur.



(Jennings 1998: 43). It has been argued that settlers of Gaelic-Norse background who ultimately migrated to Iceland brought various aspects of Irish Christianity with them, though this ultimately does not seem to have had significant influence on the tenth–eleventh-century conversion of Iceland overall (Ulf-Møller 2016; Hines 2002: 20–21). Even so, settlers of Irish background in *Landnámabók* such as Orlyg and Asólfr alskik Konálsson,<sup>12</sup> are presented as being devout Christians dedicated to their faith, and in Orlyg’s case, intentionally associated with two saints likewise of Irish origin.

If it is understood that medieval Norse authors insecure about their own status as Christians collected ideas about Irish Christianity that could be readapted to their interests, viewing Colum Cille and his cult in Scandinavia from the same perspective as the veneration of Sunniva is necessary in this regard. In the later medieval Norse mind, imagining the Irish as being inherently pious allowed them to shape their own identity as Christians and utilise the practice of venerating Irish saints to recoup and reshape their previous pagan practice. This conscious importation of Colum Cille may also be seen in the presentation of Haraldr Gillikristr calling upon his intercession. An individual of presumed Hebridean background would certainly have been aware of Colum Cille and Iona, and it seems historically likely that Haraldr would have been a devotee of the saint, but again this comes through the lens of Norse perception of the Gaelic world. With the idea of Kolbjørn in mind, the re-creation of the memory of Colum Cille from this distinct perspective allowed for medieval Norse Christians to share in the cultural past of Ireland and Scotland,<sup>13</sup> as well as to adopt their own traditions to the saint.

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12 Asólfr has not been discussed in this paper but is described in *Hauksbók* as a most holy Christian hermit who arrived from Ireland with twelve followers (*Landnámabók*, 64–65; Ulf-Møller 2016: 903–904).

13 For these ideas concerning the preservation and adaption of cultural memory, see Tymoczko 2014: 57; Rekdal 2014.

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