

## Article

# Ólöf the Rich and a Cloth from Svalbarð, Iceland

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**Abstract:** About fifteen illustrated cloths have been preserved from medieval times in Iceland. One of them is an antependium from Svalbarð church on Svalbarðsströnd. The embroidered iconography on it is believed to depict the story of John the Apostle, who was the patron saint of the Svalbarð church. Upon closer inspection, the cloth appears to have been cut from a larger cloth, most likely a wall-hanging, in order to be used as an antependium. Moreover, the story that is embroidered on it seems to be related to secular people, because none of those appearing on it have halos around their heads, but halos are generally used in iconography to differentiate sanctified people from seculars. In this article, this discovery is discussed, and a theory that the embroidery shows the story of the most prominent woman of medieval Iceland, Ólöf the Rich, is proposed.

**Keywords:** embroidery; John the Apostle; Hand of God; halo; Skarðsbók; Svalbarð; stockfish; Kalmar Union; Anglo-Hanse War; Bishops Lynn

## 1. Introduction

At least fifteen illustrated medieval textiles from Iceland have been preserved. The majority of them are antependia, but among these cloths is one known tapestry (Icel. *refill*) which originates from Hvammur in Dalir, southwest Iceland. Most of the medieval cloths are preserved in the National Museum of Iceland, and some of them are kept in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. In addition, one cloth is on display in a museum in the Netherlands (Guðjónsson 1962, pp. 127–38) and one is kept in the Louvre (Wandel 1952, pp. 51–54). A fragment of the tapestry from Hvammur is on permanent display at the National Museum of Iceland, but the largest part of it is located in Copenhagen (Guðjónsson 1985). One of the embroidered medieval antependia preserved from Iceland comes from Svalbarð Church on Svalbarðsströnd coast in Northern Iceland, and it is the subject of discussion in this article. The embroidery on it is generally believed to depict a modified version of the story of John the Apostle. Upon closer inspection, it has become clear that the cloth is a fragment of a larger cloth, probably a wall-hanging. Moreover, it can be argued that it demonstrates the story of one of the most prominent Icelandic women of the Middle Ages, Ólöf the Rich Loftsdóttir (1410–1479), from Skarð farm on Skarðsströnd coast in Western Iceland. In this article, the memorable life of Ólöf the Rich is discussed, and a new hypothesis about the artwork embroidered into the Svalbarð cloth is presented with the view that it may depict her story. Finally, the cloth is used as an example of how blurred the boundaries between the secular and the sacred were in the Middle Ages, unlike what happened after the Protestant Reformation. This sharp division between the secular and the sacred was refined even further during the Enlightenment in Northern Europe, moving to the clear separation that exists today.

## 2. The Cloth from Svalbarð

The Svalbarð cloth is the size of a traditional antependium, 88 × 111 cm, and was used as such when given to the National Museum in Copenhagen in 1847 (Figure 1). The underlay is linen, but it is embroidered with images made from multicolored and white



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woolen thread with a rib-stitch. The cloth has also been stitched here and there with a flower stitch (Icel. blómstursaumur), probably long after it was made. The embroidery consists of twelve image fragments in an equal number of circles, appearing in three horizontal rows. The circles that frame each fragment are different in color. One circle is red, four are blue, and seven are amber. It appears that the amber ones are meant to represent a golden color. These same colors also appear in the other embroidery on the cloth, such as on its edges, but in some places the color of the linen is left exposed. The circles are connected with various versions of roses in smaller circles, but there is also a braid pattern made from three-leaved petals. This braid pattern also appears on all edges of the garment, except for the left one. Diagonal bands run along its edges on three sides, both left and right, and at the bottom but not at the top. The diagonal bands are decorated with half diamonds, but this type of diamond band can be seen on more Icelandic medieval interior textiles. The colors in the diagonal bands are the same as in other embroidery on the garment. It must also be highlighted here, in order to avoid misperceptions, that the cloth appears to have been damaged in later years, and strips of equal length are missing from both the left and right edges, as if the damage was caused when the cloth was folded (see Figure 1 for details).



**Figure 1.** The Svalbarð cloth as it is today. The missing edges to the left and the right show damage that occurred long after it was in use (© National Museum of Iceland).

In the embroidered circles is a bishop with a miter on his head, men in armor with weapons, noble people dressed in secular clothing, and, finally, commoners. Moreover, the Hand of God (*manus dei*) is apparent in eight out of twelve circles. The Hand of God is a well-known symbol in medieval iconography, particularly where important events or stories of well-known leaders, both spiritual and secular, are displayed. The Hand of God represents divine providence or blessing over an action or a journey. Blessing is often indicated by three raised fingers. The Hand of God can also represent self-coronation, where it implies that God has blessed the choice of a worldly leader (Aurell 2020, pp. 85–95). An example of this is the coronation of Constantine the Great, where the Hand of God appears on coins issued during his time (Grierson and Mays 1992, p. 88; Ross 1996, pp. 87, 91). It likewise appears on the headpiece of the French crown and elsewhere in secular iconography, such as on the Bayeux tapestry showing King Edward’s funeral (Pastan and White 2014, Figure 15).

### 3. Tveggja Postula Saga Jóns ok Jakobs in Skarðsbók

The age of the Svalbarð cloth is uncertain, but the iconography embroidered in it and its entire design strongly suggest that it is from the medieval Catholic era, being designed in the Romanesque style. The clothing of the people depicted even indicates that it is from the second half of the 15th century, as is discussed later. Selma Jónsdóttir, an art historian and former director of the National Art Museum of Iceland, believed that the cloth was from the 14th century and that it was made in the convent Reynistaðarklaustur (Jónsdóttir 1965, p. 141). This dating was based on the assumption that the convent almost ceased to exist during the time of the Black Death in 1402 and that textile making therefore was discontinued. Research shows, on the other hand, that the Reynistaðarklaustur convent flourished like never before after the epidemic in the 15th century. The convent's livestock included 192 cattle, 598 sheep, and 49 horses in 1446, which is considered a large farm even by modern standards (Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 166–67). There are also records of an extensive increase in the number of new nuns entering the convent in the 15th century. As an example, the Bishop of Hólar ordained eight new nuns in the convent in 1431 (*Diplomatarium Islandicum* (DI IV 1897, pp. 384, 700; Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 166–68)). Unlike Jónsdóttir, the museum curator at the National Museum of Iceland, Gísli Gestsson, argued that the cloth was from the 15th century, because he believed that the images derived from the "Exempla". "Exempla" is a medieval manuscript preserved from the 15th century in Iceland that contains reference images for artisans to use while making cloths, manuscripts, or statues of saintly figures (Kristjánsdóttir 2013). However, Gestsson (1964, pp. 34–35) believed, just like Jónsdóttir, that the cloth was made in the Reynistaðarklaustur convent, which seems to be the case.

Both of these scholars, Gestsson and Jónsdóttir, assumed that the motif of the cloth is of a religious nature, since it is generally believed that it is an antependium and because the Hand of God appears frequently on the embroidery. Initially, Matthías Þórðarson, the director of the National Museum of Iceland between 1908 and 1947, claimed that the images appearing in the Svalbarð cloth show various fragments of the life of Jesus Christ, from his birth to the crowning of thorns (in Gestsson 1964, p. 5). Gestsson, on the other hand, pointed out that the images more likely depict the story of John the Apostle, but he was the patron saint of the Svalbarð Church. Churches invariably owned a statue or images of their patron saint (Cormack 2011, p. 10). John the Apostle would thus probably have appeared in other iconography in the church. In an article published in the Yearbook of the Icelandic Archaeological Society in 1963, he connected the image fragments that appear in the twelve rings with events described in the story of John the Apostle, which appears in several Icelandic medieval manuscripts, mainly in "*Skarðsbók postulasagna*" (Eng. *The Apostolate Stories of Skarðsbók*). *Skarðsbók* was made in the Helgafellsklaustur monastery in 1363 for the Skarðverjar clan (Drechsler 2021, pp. 54–55, 63–116). The clan's main estate was Skarð, the residency of Ólöf the Rich.

The story of John the Apostle otherwise exists in five vernacular versions in as many parchment manuscripts, all of which are believed to have been made in the 13th and 14th centuries in Iceland. One of these parchment manuscripts is the abovementioned manuscript, *Skarðsbók postulasagna*, a collection of stories about the twelve apostles. John's story is included in the *Two Apostles' story of John and Jacob*, that focuses on these two apostles. John's story is included in "*Tveggja postula saga Jóns ok Jakobs*" (Eng. *The Combined Saga of the Apostles John and Jakob*). Gestsson (1964) succeeded in connecting the images on the Svalbarð cloth with all five preserved Icelandic versions of story of John the Apostle, but only by mixing them together. Gestsson also had his doubts. For example, he discussed the color of the bird in the first circle of the cloth (Figure 2). In the story of John the Apostle, a white cock is mentioned, but on the cloth, the bird is multicolored: gold, blue, and red. Additionally, Gestsson (1964) pointed out that, the last circle, which according to his theory should show John the Apostle's death, does not show the correct altar. Moreover, the grave is not displayed in accordance with the traditional narrative.



**Figure 2.** Details of the top left-hand corner of the cloth, showing the partially shortened blue arch on top of the red circle. Additionally, note the lute player and falcon with a hood.

The fact is, however, that churchly tapestries and wall-hangings often depict images or stories with secular roots, such as the Bayeux tapestry, which illustrates a well-known battle (Saul 2005; Pastan and White 2014). Furthermore, when the edges of the Svalbarð cloth are examined, evidence starts emerging that it is a fragment of a larger cloth, most likely a wall-hanging. This can be seen especially because the braid pattern along the right edge is missing from the left edge, and a blue arch on top of the red circle is cut short (Figures 1 and 2). These features indicate that the cloth has been cut on the left side. The cloth also appears to have been cut short at the bottom, where the pattern does not match the diagonal band that was clearly placed on the garment after it was originally made. The cloth may indeed have creased, and the bottom border may have become uneven when the diagonal band was added to it, but this is not the case for the left edge. It is not inconceivable that the diagonal band belonged to the original cloth and was sown back onto a shortened cloth to be used as an antependium. Reuse of the type that can be seen on the textile is not uncommon. It was customary to reuse anything that had any value in it, whether clothes, artifacts, or building materials. This was the case in the past as much as it is nowadays.

If it turns out that the Svalbarð cloth is part of a larger cloth, there is reason to reanalyze the artwork depicted. The first thing that attracts our attention is that none of the figures appearing on it have a halo, as halos are invariably placed around the heads of holy men and women in religious images from the Catholic tradition. The halo is specifically meant to differentiate holy men and women from ordinary people in the artwork. The halo is usually circular and extends around the saint's head. Halos can also be almond-shaped, but this is commonly reserved for images of the Mary, the mother of God, and the Risen Christ. Sometimes a radiant halo is used, instead of a halo, to show the sanctity of a saint, but a radiant halo is described as rays of light emanating from the holy man's head (Norris 2005). In vernacular paintings and embroidered cloths where John the Apostle appears, he is always identified with a halo. Examples of that can be seen in the antependium from Höfði in Höfðaströnd and in the "Exempla". By the end of the Catholic Era, it may have become rarer to display saints with halos. As can be seen in another embroidered cloth from Skarð, dating to the last phase of the Catholic period in Iceland, where they are not shown with halos around their heads. The dating of that cloth from Skarð is based on the fact that the name of the last abbess of Reynistaðarklaustur, Sólveig Hrafnadóttir (in office 1508–1151), is embroidered on it, but otherwise it depicts St. Þorlákur, St. Olav king of Norway, St. Benedict, St. Earl Magnús of Orkney, St. Egidius, and St. Hallvard. The problem with the later cloth from Skarð is not the dating but the fact that it is half finished, which may explain why the halos are missing (Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 140, 156).

Other religious symbols, such as the Hand of God described above, do not exclude the possibility that the cloth is of a secular nature, as God was all-encompassing in the lives

of medieval people. Furthermore, it was customary for wealthy people from noble families to donate religious artwork depicting themselves as well as indulgences to the respective church with the hope of gaining God's grace on matters big and small (Pietraszek 2019). The altarpiece kept in the church at Skarð on Skarðströnd, the residency of Ólöf the Rich, is a good example of this (Figure 3). There, she appears in the role of a donor (e. *donator*) (Figure 4).



**Figure 3.** The altarpiece at Skarð church on Skarðströnd (© National Museum of Iceland).



**Figure 4.** Details showing Ólöf the Rich as she appears in the altarpiece at Skarð.

The altarpiece is from the 15th century and is believed to have been made in Holland or Germany by order from Ólöf the Rich. It is divided into three parts and shows the birth of Jesus in three sections. In the central section is a statue of Mary and Joseph, while on his right side, there is a statue of a woman who is believed to depict Ólöf the Rich (Júníusdóttir 2016, pp. 19–20). There, Ólöf is handing over her gifts to Joseph, *vaðmál*<sup>1</sup> and a walrus tusk, which is said to have been the most valuable commodity in Iceland throughout the Middle Ages. It is worth noting here that Ólöf's sister-in-law, Margrét the Rich Vigfúsdóttir, who resided in Möðruvellir in Eyjafjörður, also gave the church at her

residency an altarpiece that is still preserved. Margrét's gift was reported in the inventory of Ólafur Rögnvaldsson in 1461, Bishop of Hólar, and was said to be adorned with golden effigies made of alabaster (DI V 1899–1902, p. 308). Perhaps Margrét the Rich is one of them.

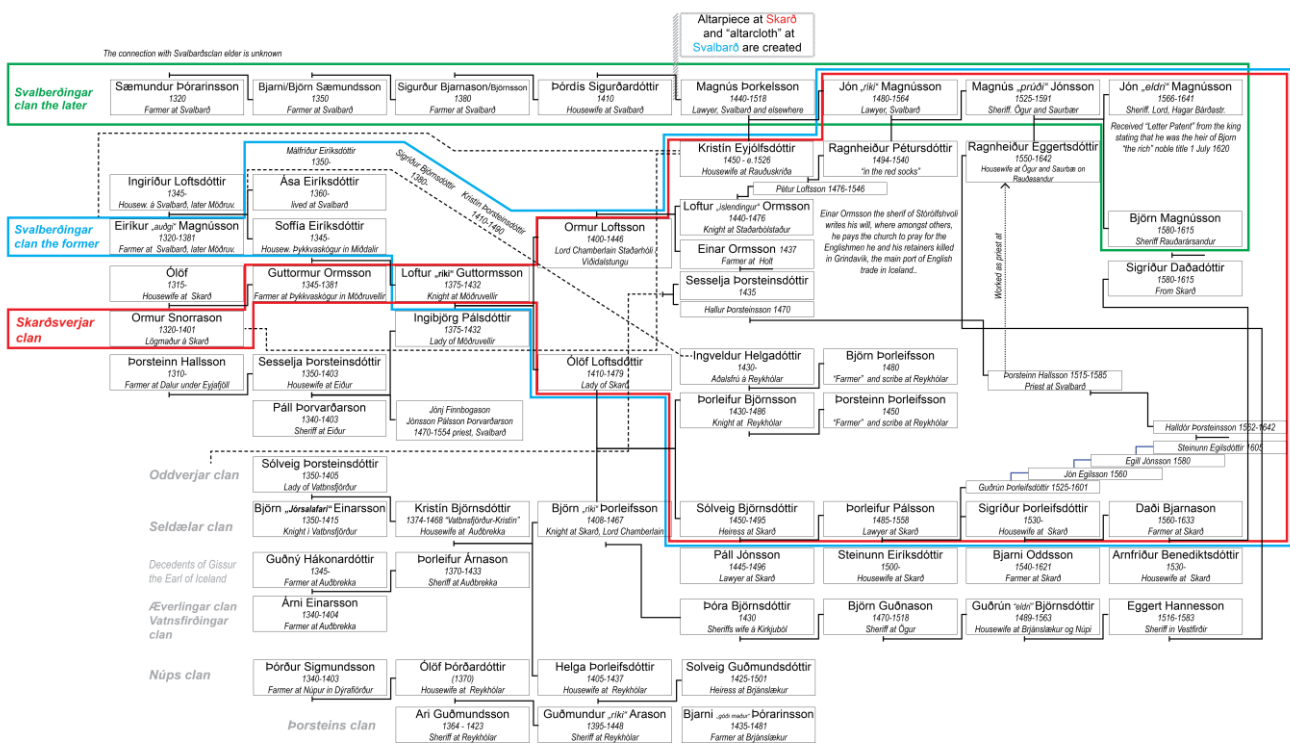
Finally, yet importantly, there is evidence for the existence of strong connections between Skarð on Skarðströnd and Svalbarð on Svalbarðsströnd in the Middle Ages. In fact, both Gestsson (1964) and Jónsdóttir (1965) pointed out these connections, not least because Gestsson traced the iconography on the Svalbarð cloth to the *“Tveggja postula saga Jóns ok Jakobs”*, as it appears in *Skarðsbók* book, owned by the family of Skarð. Another detail of the cloth to mention here is that the bird in the first circle looks more like a falcon rather than a cock, but Gestsson does not mention that possibility. Thus, the fact that the bird is seen flying in two of the other circles was also overlooked. The truth is that the falcon was the heraldic symbol of Ólöf's family (see Figure 2).

Who was Ólöf the Rich, and what is it in her story that may have led to her being embroidered in a wall-hanging?

#### 4. The Noble Houses of Skarðverjar and Svalbarðingar

It is not known for sure when Ólöf was born, but it is believed to have been around 1410, the year that her parents, Loftur the Rich Guttormsson and Ingibjörg Pálsdóttir, married. They both died in the large smallpox pandemic of 1432. After their parents' death, Ólöf and her siblings inherited considerable funds and property, including the Skarðverjar clan's estate, Skarð on Skarðströnd (DI IV 1897, pp. 518–20; Sigurjónsson 1975, pp. 134–70; Pétursson 1990, pp. 53–54; Arnórsdóttir 2009, pp. 19–34). Ólöf married Björn Þorleifsson in 1440, but he was of the noble houses of the Vatnsfirðingar clan, which included the clans of Æverlingar and Oddverjar, while Ólöf was descended from both Skarðverjar and Svalbarðingar clans on her father's side (Figure 5). Thus, at the wedding of Ólöf and Björn, the country's most powerful families were brought together (Arnórsdóttir 2010, p. 327). Ólöf's father, Loftur, was a knight and one of the main advocates of chivalry and the romantic movement in the country during the Middle Ages. Björn, the husband of Ólöf, also gained the status of knighthood from the Norwegian king in the mid-15th century (Sigurjónsson 1975, pp. 114–34; Ólason 1924, pp. 507–11).

Chivalry first gained real popularity in Iceland after the Icelanders made an alliance with the King of Norway in 1262/64. Knighthood was the rank of the ruling class of nobility in Norway and was, in fact, the highest position of nobility at that time. The Icelandic knights thus became part of the Norwegian nobility. *Konungs-skuggsjá* (1250–1260) and *Hirðskráin* (1270) are the two most well-known “manuals” on Norwegian chivalry and court rules. They were written in Norway but later copied many times in Iceland (Jónsson 1990, pp. 331–32, 344–45). It is highly probable that these texts were used to organize the royal court. Additionally, a number of European chivalric stories were either translated into—or originally written in Icelandic following the increasing popularity of chivalry within the Norwegian monarchy, later the Kalmar Union, of which Iceland also became a part. Some of the chivalric stories were written in the monasteries of Helgafell-sklaustur and Þingeyraklaustur, but the chivalry orders were actually a combination of the old monastic orders and new ideas about chivalry (Drechsler 2021, pp. 54–55, 63–116). The chivalric orders became a great attraction for young men from noble families in Iceland, as they were elsewhere in Northern Europe at this time. They were also attractive for men from the lower classes who saw a route to fame and fortune through being knighted (Coring 2021). Chivalry codes and stories have been preserved in tapestries and wall hangings throughout Europe, including the “Story of the Buzzars”,<sup>2</sup> “Tournament Tapestry of Frederick the Wise”,<sup>3</sup> and “Histoire des neuf preux” (Eng. Story of the Nine Heroes) (Rachlin 2020). Some wall hangings, displaying images of knights, are preserved from medieval Iceland as well as in post-medieval replicas of the medieval cloths (Eldjárn 1963, nr. 8). These cloths underline the long-lasting popularity of the chivalric tradition in Iceland.



**Figure 5.** A table showing the connections of families from Skarð and Svalbarð (© Guðjón Þór Er-  
lendsson).

Björn Þorleifsson, Ólöf’s husband, was one of at least 40 Icelanders who were knighted from 1262/64 to 1660, but in 1536 King Kristján III illegally abolished the Norwegian Privy Council, and with the advent of absolute monarchy this aristocratic class ceased to exist. Thus, Björn was a true noble of nobles, and his and Ólöf’s descendants were the main noble families of the country for generations. The marriage of Ólöf and Björn was, therefore, undoubtedly a power relationship between two equals, but the importance of the Svalbarðingar clan is especially visible in the choice of Skarð as the couple’s home. The Svalbarð cloth may then have come to Svalbarð from Skarð through marriage or nepotism. It is worth noting that Hallbera Þorsteinsdóttir, who founded Reynisstaðarklaustur, where the cloth was probably produced, was from the Oddverjar clan, just like Björn Þorleifsson’s grandmother (Sigurðsson 2002).

Ólöf the Rich Loftsdóttir died in 1479 (Vestfjarðarannáll hinn elzti 1933, p. 31). Although her life is not known further than what is listed above, she appears several times in official letters that have been preserved (see, for example DI V 1899–1902, pp. 176, 231–32, 500, 777–78). Additionally, a confession of hers, which is claimed to have been documented at her deathbed in 1479, has survived (DI VI 1900–1904, pp. 236–47). Ólöf’s confession has caused a debate between scholars, because it describes, in a frank way, a highly sinful woman, even containing a detailed exposure of her and Björn’s sexual behavior. A close study of the text reveals it to be a “mirror” or “speculum penetentis”, a fictional document possibly used to teach priests about the structure of confession or simply produced as a mockery of Ólöf, or both (Kress 1999). Her confession has, therefore, been interpreted either as a *parodia* on confessions or written to express the attitudes of the clergy towards the sinful behavior of noble people, using Ólöf as an example (Karlsson 1985; Pétursson 1990, pp. 53–59; Kress 1999; Arnórsdóttir 2009, pp. 19–34). Here, it is suggested that Ólöf’s confession may also represent a piece of defamation written on behalf of the Icelandic clergy because, as we describe, their tolerance of her dwindled steadily throughout her lifetime.

However, it was not only the merging of the two clans at Skarð and Svalbarð with the marriage of Ólöf and Björn that made Ólöf the Rich the most influential woman of the 15th century in Iceland. Sadly, part of that endeavor was the slaying of her husband, Björn, in

1467. The lead-up to, and aftermath of, Björn's slaying was long and complicated, just like the reasons for his initial power and wealth. Into the couple's story are woven generational family feuds, power rivalries, and the stockfish trade, which was in great demand in Europe due to Lent in the Middle Ages. Local documents detailing their story, however, are mostly oral sources and later accounts. These accounts are only briefly mentioned in contemporary sources, although the slaying of Björn is well documented in English sources.

### 5. The Slaying of Björn Þorleifsson in August 1467

In 1448, Kristján I granted trade licenses to the English for fishing and trade in Iceland following the payment of a toll, the so-called sack fee. However, the English were quickly found to be breaking this agreement. The king then revoked his permission and assigned his Lord Chamberlain in Iceland, Björn—Ólöf's husband, to supervise their removal. In August 1467, Björn, together with his and Ólöf's son, Þorleifur, and the company of a few other men, rode to Rif on Snæfellsnes to make sure that the English followed the king's order. There, they clashed with Englishmen from Bishops Lyn (now Kings Lynn, in Northfolk, England). Björn was slayed along with seven followers, and Þorleifur was taken hostage. There are no contemporary sources on how Björn's death happened exactly, other than mentions of this incident in documents produced overseas, as it was a major event (Carus-Wilson 1937, p. 136; DI XVI 1952–1972, bls. 419). It is said that the Englishmen in Rif who killed Björn dismembered his body. Björn's body is then said to have been quartered and put into a bag or barrel. He was thereafter buried in the monastic cemetery at Helgafellsklaustur, which is located close to Skarð (*Safn til sögu Íslands* 1856, vol. 2, p. 653). It appears to have been customary to bury noble men or chieftains who had been slayed inside monastic grounds, and a number of such cases are known from Icelandic medieval documents (Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 90–94). Other contemporary overseas accounts claim, on the other hand, that Björn's body was taken to a ship and then thrown into the sea (Figure 6). Later sources say that Þorleifur, the son of Björn and Ólöf, got into a fight with the Englishmen and was imprisoned when Björn went to rescue him, but was then killed (Þorsteinsson 1970, pp. 208–12).



**Figure 6.** A carving of a ship like the one Englishmen sailed on to reach Iceland. Located on a church bench in St Nicolas Chapel in Bishops Lynn (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

Apparently, demands for a ransom for Þorleifur were sent to Ólöf along with the news of Björn's death. She was, at that point, visiting the Helgafellsklaustur monastery. The story goes that when Ólöf got the news, she said "Don't cry farmer Björn but gather our retainers" (Icel. *Eigi skal gráta Björn bónda, heldur safna liði*). She is then claimed to have put on ring armor under her dress, as she was preparing for a battle (*Safn til sögu*



*Íslands 1856*, vol. 1, p. 674). Ólöf did pay the ransom for her son while at the same time she gathered her retainers and relatives. As well as riding there herself, she sent forces around the country to take all the Englishmen who were found captive. Numerous contemporary sources mention the maelstrom that came out of Björn's killing, even though Ólöf herself is rarely mentioned by name (see, for example, *Carus-Wilson 1937*, p. 136 and onwards, *Vestfjarðarannáll hinn elzti 1933*, p. 30 and *DI V 1899–1902*, p. 417 and onwards).

Nevertheless, the sources all agree that Björn's slaying at Rif in 1467 had a huge impact that extended far beyond the country, as the stakes were high. When King Kristján I received news of the slaying, he closed the Baltic Sea to English trade and gave his permission for the piracy of English ships. There are also references to this command from the king in English documents (*Carus-Wilson 1937*, p. 136 and onwards). The disputes escalated and eventually led to the Anglo-Hanse War, which lasted for five years, from 1469 to 1474. The war ended with the victory of the Kalmar Union King who enjoyed the support of the Hanseatic League. After that, the English could only trade with Icelanders with the king's permission. The events leading to the Anglo-Hanse War occurred during the War of the Roses in England, and the Englishmen are thought to have been too weak from internal conflict to win an external war (*DI XVI 1952–1972*, p. 497). In a peace treaty signed in Utrecht in 1474, the Hanseatic merchants received a freeport in London, which they held until the 19th century. The freeport was then sold to a train company and is now known as Cannon Street Station in London (*Wagner 2001*, p. 105).

The shock that the family had endured due to the slaying of Björn and its aftermath appears to have been deep and long-lasting, not least because the lives of medieval people were colored by sin and redemption. This is evidenced by the number of testaments of her family that have been preserved from the Middle Ages. For example, the will of Ólöf's nephew and Loftur's grandson, Einar Ormsson, states that a memorial service is to be held for the Englishmen killed by his retainers in Grindavík, one of the main ports of the English in Iceland (*DI V 1899–1902*, p. 571). The altarpiece in the church at Skarð can be mentioned here again. The story says that Ólöf had promised to give this particular altarpiece to the church at her estate if she managed to recover her son, Þorleifur, from the Englishmen (*Júníusdóttir 2016*, p. 19). It may, in addition to this, be speculated that the Svalbarð cloth was woven and embroidered as a soul mass over the sinful couple, Ólöf and Björn, in order to atone Ólöf's sins.

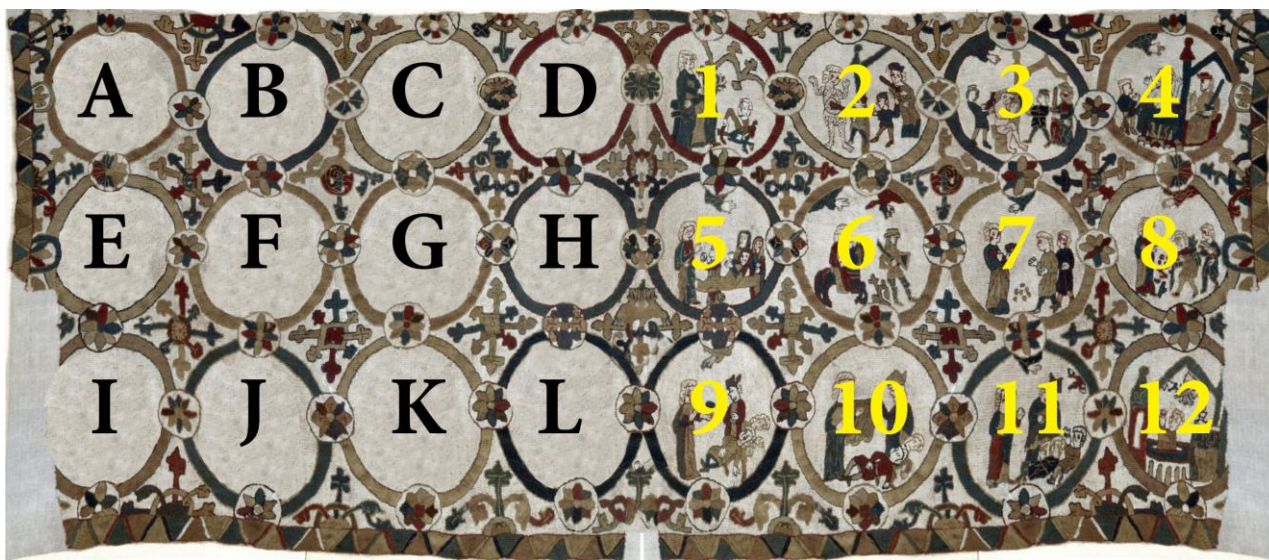
Thus, as will be discussed further in the following text, it is not improbable that the story of Ólöf the Rich was recorded in a wall-hanging, just like the famous Battle of Hastings was embroidered on the Bayeux tapestry, in light of the fact that the slaying of Björn and its consequences are among the better-known events in the history of the Icelandic Middle Ages. The twelve circles in the Svalbarð cloth do, in fact, resemble fragments of the eventful story of Ólöf and her legendary revenge for the killing of her husband, Björn.

## 6. The Story in the Cloth

Medieval European iconography was full of symbols, both secular and religious, from which people learned how to read (*Ross 1996*). Symbols, such as the Hand of God and halos over the heads of saints, have already been discussed, but the positions of characters, their sizes, and the color of the stitching also had clear meanings for contemporary readers. In all of the circles in the Svalbarð cloth, the main characters are facing the same direction: to the right. A similar sequence of readings can be found in other European tapestries and wall-hangings, such as the one preserved from Alsace in Strasbourg, which dates from around 1440 (*Martin 1983*). This position means that the imagery should be read from left to right and that the main character's face should be followed as they move forward through the story. The size of people in iconography of the time before the Renaissance often indicates their importance in the story, rather than showing their actual size, and a similar method is used to belittle enemies. Different colors also have fixed meanings. Ultramarine blue was the symbol of what was most holy according to Bede (*Pastoureau 2001*), red (ochre) was

the color of the Holy Spirit and of Christian martyrs, and gold represented hope and purity (Pulliam 2012).

In that regard, for the red circle on the Svalbard cloth, the first represents the introduction of the historical character depicted in the garment (see Figures 1 and 7). In rings 1, 5, and 12, the main character appears in variations of the classic pose of a woman, referred to as “Pudica” (Stewart 2008). It is worth noting that Ólöf the Rich appears in the same pose on the altarpiece of the church of Skarð. The bishop, who appears in circles 9 and 10, is, on the other hand, in a position called “Adlocutio”. The positions of the Hand of God even switch from right to left in circles 6–11. God’s right hand usually has a blue sleeve, but from circles 7 to 9, the left hand first has a blue sleeve, then a red one, and finally, a golden one. This appears to signify the hierarchy of God’s influence from blue to gold. As highlighted before, the people in the iconography embroidered into the Svalbarð cloth are all dressed in 15th century clothing. Common people appear in rather simple tunics, while noble people appear in the costumes of noble women, men, and bishops. The main character’s clothing is a multicolored 15th century dress. Its colors are symbolic, blue and gold, but the main character also wears a cloak in some of the scenes. A multicolored coat as the main character is wearing would usually represent turmoil, while a two-colored coat would not. The main character is dressed in armor and a classical noble woman’s cloak in rings 6 and 7, and the woman wears a gorget around her neck. It can be argued that a female dress like this could be a male saintly robe, and the main character would therefore be a male, but a man in a long robe without a halo looks out of turn. The donator in the altarpiece in Skarð church wears a similar dress gathered at the waist. Circle 6 further suggests that the main character is a woman, because she is sitting on a horse in a side saddle with both legs shown on the same side down the horse’s loin. The woman in the cloth may thus be Ólöf the Rich, and the events in each circle resemble her story in the following way, starting in the upper left corner:



**Figure 7.** The Svalbarð cloth doubled with mirroring of the basic structure (© Guðjón Þór Erlendsson).

**Circle 1.** The first circle is red and marks a focal point in the story. It draws the eye to the main character who is a woman from a noble family. The woman has a falcon in her lap, the heraldic symbol of the Svalbarðingar clan. The colors of the bird’s feathers indicate the summer colors of Icelandic falcons. At her feet, a man is playing a lute with a bow. Later sources describing Ólöf’s wealth mention her having a court “poet” named Svartur Þórðarson of Hofstaðir. The lutes that angels play on the altarpiece in Skarð are of the same shape as the instrument on the cloth.

**Circle 2.** There are four men in the picture, two commoners and two nobles. The second nobleman is holding up his hands in the motion of surrender, while his abdomen is carved up with an inverted V-cut. This may depict Björn, Ólöf’s husband. An English commoner is shown to be pulling the guts out of him with his right hand, while in his left hand, he holds a knife. The commoner behind him is holding a tool that resembles a medieval torture device, either a “tongue ripper” or a “heretical fork”. The commander of the group is standing by with a sword and watching. The same commander appears again in circle 4. Björn—assuming it is him—is covered in wounds. It is worth remembering that Ólöf’s parents, Loftur and Ingibjörg, both died from a pox that raged around the country in around 1432. Ólöf and Björn had then been married for only a few years, but there is otherwise no mention of illness in the family at Skarð.

**Circle 3.** An Englishman is shown to be cutting the hair of a young man who can be interpreted as Þorleifur, the son of Ólöf and Björn. Hair and hairstyles in the Middle Ages were symbols of both status and honor (Coates 1999; Norris 2005). In the story of Queen Clothilda of France, for example, Clovis’s widow states that she would prefer her grandsons to be killed rather than have their hair cut. Similar references to hair and honor can be found in local Icelandic accounts. To be forcibly sheared by commoners was a source of great humiliation for a young knight like Þorleifur (Milliken 2021). However, the Hand of God blesses the young man in the circle.

**Circle 4.** Here, the man appearing as Björn in circle 2 is shown, as can be seen from the V cut on his abdomen. *Mos Teutonicus*, a well-known method used to store and transport corpses during the Middle Ages, is being performed here (Woodward 1997, p. 6). The story that Björn’s body was quartered and put into a bag or barrel suggests that the English were trying to store the body in some way, while a ransom for the body and Þorleifur was negotiated. This would have involved the body being cut up and even boiled, as shown here. The meat was then either cut off from the bones and buried or salted with the bones. The meat and bones being separated and disposed of would explain the diverging accounts of what happened to the body. A person, dressed as a commoner, holds a large tong that also appears in circle 8 (see Figures 1 and 8).



**Figure 8.** An illustration in the manuscript *Skarðsbók*, showing the Hand of God, a bishop, a priest, and commoners (© Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir).

**Circle 5.** The main character, Ólöf, is comforting four women, one of whom is in bed, and of the other three, two are children or young women. Ólöf’s son, Þorleifur, had two children with his wife, Ingveldur Helgadóttir, at this time. Jarðrúður, who would have been around seven years old when the events in Rif and their aftermath took place, while

Kristín would have been around two years old. It is worth noting that Ólöf's posture in this frame is the same as that in the altarpiece at Skarð showing her in the role of a donator.

**Circle 6.** This picture is not only full of symbols, but it is a good indicator of the cloth's age. It is here that Ólöf is depicted as gathering her retainers and taking revenge for Björn's slaying, illustrating that, as the legend says, she stated, "Don't cry farmer Björn, but gather our retainers". As mentioned above, Ólöf was in the Helgafellsklaustur monastery when she received news of the slaying and subsequently put on an armor, as she was 'symbolically' preparing for battle. In this circle, the ring armor with a dress over it can be seen. This may be a symbolic description of her intentions, or it may represent protection from an attack. The neck protection part of the armor is clearly visible over the dress. On the other hand, the soldier, who also appears in this circle, is wearing a short coat over plate armor, protectors on the legs and hands (e. heater) and a sword of the Langmesser type. On his head, he wears a boiler helmet or hat (chaperon or pansara) (van Buren 2011). Ólöf is shown as riding in the saddle with both of her legs placed on the same side of the horse. Moreover, between Ólöf and the soldier is a small cross, possibly representing the monastery at Helgafellsklaustur. The right Hand of God indicates his blessing over this deed, but above Ólöf and the soldier is the falcon, and a snake is on the ground in front of the cross. These symbols are, respectively, the coats of arms and the seal/crest of Ólöf's father, Loftur, and his descendants, and therefore symbolize the blessing given to his daughter and her intentions.

**Circle 7.** This circle depicts Ólöf paying the ransom for Þorleifur to two Englishmen. She holds a payment in her left hand, while in her right hand, she holds up two fingers. This could either be a sign that she wants both her husband and son for the payment, or it may represent an oath according to medieval palmistry studies (Schlecht et al. 2011).

**Circle 8.** This circle shows the Englishmen delivering items to Ólöf, possibly Björn and Þorleifur's weapons and shields and/or Björn's remains.

**Circle 9.** Here, the Englishmen are dead, and Ólöf is handing over money to the bishop, who is dressed in the traditional episcopal clothes of the time, symbolizing who he is. The miter worn on his head is shown correctly from different angles, demonstrating that the cloth's manufacturers had a good understanding of its appearance. Circles 9–11 may be showing Ólöf's attempt at being absolved from her sins. In 1478, she donated the valuable farm Miðhlíð in Barðaströnd to the Bishop Magnús of Skálholt (DI VIII 1906–1913, pp. 64–65). Magnús was the abbot of the Helgafellsklaustur monastery when Björn was buried in the monastic cemetery there, but Magnús became the bishop of Skálholt only seven years later, in 1477. Ólöf was well-known for refusing any call to donate wealth to the church, so this was out of character. It is worth noting that, according to the fragment of Ólöf's story in this circle, the bishop did not give his blessing over the act. This would have been symbolized by three fingers held up, but above the image, God's left hand is shown with a golden sleeve, symbolizing the transcendent spiritual world. This indicates that this particular performance was not fully acceptable to God.

**Circle 10.** Here, a bishop is removing Ólöf's cloak. The bishop's miter is the same as that used on the altar piece in the Skarð church. No blessing over this event is shown.

**Circle 11.** In this circle, the bishop is spreading Ólöf's cloak over the English bodies, who are raising their hands in an act of ascendance, and a similar posture can be seen in circle 12. Like in circle 6, there is a lot of symbolism here. The right Hand of God and the falcon, the heraldic symbol of the family of Ólöf, appear again, appearing to bless Ólöf's endeavor. This could also be a reference to the story of Saint Martin who gave half of his cloak to a beggar. The act marked the beginning of his sainthood and is commonly used as a symbol of charity. It should be noted that Saint Martin became a popular saint in England after the Norman invasion in 1066.

**Circle 12.** Ólöf the Rich was buried under the altar of Skarð church in 1479, but this last circle may display the end of her life and story. Here, the interior of a church is shown with a person ascending from a coffin in front of the altar. Above the coffin, on the walls of the church, God's hand appears, as does the falcon, although in outline only. Coats of arms

were often painted on church walls, included in stone reliefs or even presented on hanging shields or tapestries. There are examples of painted coats of arms in the Church of Our Lady in Aarhus. The towers shown in the last frame of the cloth are identical to the towers of Bethlehem in the altarpiece in the Skarð church. The circle may alternatively show the funeral of Björn and his spirit rising to Heaven (*Ars Moriendi*).

### 7. What May Be Missing in the Cloth?

It should be pointed out here that there is nothing that rules out the story of John the Apostle appearing in the cloth, as Gísli Gestsson's research indicated, but, if so, this was most likely done to hide the story of Ólöf in it. Large parts of the story of John the Apostle, as told in the Icelandic manuscript of *Skarðsbók*, have no equivalents in other accounts abroad. Moreover, the order of the picture frames does not match the story of John well enough in regard to the primary events of his life. John is considered to have been one of the three most important apostles of the church. He was one of the fishermen from Galilee who became followers of Jesus and experienced the miracle of fishing. He was also present at the wedding of Mary Magdalene and the resurrection of Jairus' daughter. It is known that he sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper and was present at the crucifixion and the empty tomb after Jesus' resurrection. None of these significant events in the life of John the Apostle are depicted on the Svalbarð cloth. Two different stories about his death exist. One is that he disappeared into a bright light in a cave underneath his church (Zuzic 1960). The other is that he went outside his hometown of Ephesus and got his disciples to dig a cruciform tomb, in which he then died (Hall 1979). Neither version can be seen on the Svalbarð cloth. Furthermore, John the apostle is most commonly shown in medieval imagery—even that preserved in Iceland—with a halo while either writing or receiving a book or papyrus rolls or sometimes holding a bowl with a snake in it. These items do not appear in the Svalbarð cloth. The main character on the cloth also wears a mixed-colored garment with blue, gold, and red colors, but John is only associated with blue and green colors, as shown, for example, in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (Pulliam 2012).

As was suggested above, the Svalbarð cloth may be a part of a larger wall-hanging since its edges have been cut on the left and possibly at the bottom, in order to adjust it to an antependium, both in regard to the size and the symbolic images appearing in it. This thus provides the opportunity to speculate that the part that is missing from the cloth did display the story of Björn himself. If the cloth is mirrored, it may be presumed that it is missing at least as many rings as it has now (Figure 7). The mirroring may also connect the red circle in which the characters are introduced by a blue band to another red circle on the missing half. Furthermore, the decorations on the left edge of the cloth are more logical and consistent. The story of Björn could have appeared in the cloth as follows:

Top row:

- A. Björn accepts the king's commission and is knighted;
- B. Björn and Þorleifur ride out with their men to drive the Englishmen out of the country;
- C. The ambush of the English and the battle;
- D. Björn is shown as a knight and servant of God.

Middle row:

- E. Björn's body is cut up, salted/boiled, and put in a ship;
- F. Þorleifur is in chains;
- G. The English negotiator goes to Helgafellsklaustur monastery;
- H. The ransom demand is given to Ólöf.

Bottom row:

- I. Þorleifur is set free by the Englishmen;
- J. Þorleifur, Ólöf, and her relatives attack the Englishmen;
- K. Englishmen are in slavery at Skarð;
- L. Englishmen are killed.

Oddly enough, it should not be excluded that the cloth could hide the story of both Ólöf and Björn in the imagery related to the story of John and Jakob in the *“Tveggja postula saga Jóns ok Jakobs”* preserved in *Skarðsbók*. The images of John were described above, and Jakob is often depicted as a pilgrim with staff and a shell or as a knight in medieval literature. A fiery personality, he was killed by sword by Herod Agrippa. His body is said to have been thrown into the sea and ended up on the coast of Spain or, in other accounts, it was taken there by ship (Zuzic 1960). Jakob is said to have appeared at the Battle of Clavijo in Spain and is Spain’s military saint. Therefore, the mixing of the story of the knight Björn Þorleifsson with the history and miracles of the apostle Jakob fits well.

If the story of the couple Ólöf and Björn is hidden in the story of the two apostles, John and Jakob, it likewise underlines how intertwined secular power was with the spiritual world in the Middle Ages.

### 8. Spiritual and Worldly Authority

The idea that the power of the church was fully separated from secular power has its roots in the Enlightenment. Before that, spiritual and secular power were intertwined and inseparable in people’s minds. Matter and spirit were one. In the Middle Ages, kings saw their power as a divine gift from God and believed that their lineage was a spiritually chosen lineage. Noble families, which were more-or-less connected to the royal families, considered themselves to be part of this power and inheritance. Only the Pope had the power to bless and confirm the divine right of kings to exercise power. Kings were crowned by the Pope or his representatives in Europe, and in Norway and Iceland the clergy members were recruited from the upper and lower nobility and were thus active participants in medieval politics. Bishops, abbesses, and abbots came from the aristocracy and worked secretly and openly for their affairs, forming a part of the structure of the governmental and political system of Chieftaincy in medieval Iceland (Kristjánssdóttir 2017, pp. 465–75).

Furthermore, the Church of Rome steadily strengthened its position in the Middle Ages by increasing the numbers of archbishoprics, bishoprics, and monasteries in the northernmost areas of Europe, along with efforts to exert greater secular influence. Being a European country, Iceland was not immune from this development. One of the most powerful actions of the Church was to make the Pope the special and unique representative of God on Earth. Various attempts at reforms were also made throughout the Middle Ages. The best known is the Gregorian Reform, when Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085) tried to curb the liberalism of the Church. With the Gregorian Reform, Church property was supposed to be “recovered”, as the secular leaders had taken over churches without permission to run and derive income from them. An attempt was also made to consider the fact that the noble houses could influence positions within the church, e.g., bishops, abbots, or abbesses. Great controversy arose from the reform of Pope Gregory VII, first on the mainland, but later in Iceland. Secular rulers—kings, princes, and later, Icelandic chieftains—saw this as a direct challenge to their power. The canon law codes were disputed, as they were observed by the secular powers to be diminishing the opportunity for the chieftains to interfere in churchly matters. Additionally, the general legislative and judicial powers of the Church were disputed, even rules on the celibacy of the servants of God on Earth, priests, abbots, and bishops, which were highly important for maintaining the dynasties. The Pope was victorious in these disputes in Iceland just a few decades after Icelanders swore an alliance with the Norwegian king. These devastated members of the ancient Icelandic nobility, such as the clans of Sturlungar, Oddaverjar, and Svíndælingar, which had, to a large extent, donated their estates to the church with the condition that their descendants would inherit and run these estates as priests. This then led to a new trade-based nobility class made up of clans such as those of Skarðsverjar and Svalbarðingar in the early medieval period. The victory of the Church by the end of the 13th century boosted its power and independence, which lasted until the Reformation in the middle of

the 16th century (Howe 1988; Guðmundsson 2000, pp. 20–24, 84–85; Kristjánsdóttir 2017, pp. 23–30).

Medieval iconography and buildings in Northern Europe bear clear signs of the Catholic ideology, but at the same time, show the intertwined power of the Church and nobility. Ecclesiastical materials were interwoven with works of Catholic symbolism in the residences of the ruling classes, and in the same way symbolism of nobility was depicted in churches and other religious institutions. A number of examples of this can still be found, such as in tapestries, wall-hangings, antependia, altarpieces, rugs, flags, coats of arms, and more. Tapestries, wall-hangings, and rugs also had the great quality of being easily rolled up and transported from place to place. They could, therefore, be installed at certain times of the year or moved between a church and a living room or hall. The Bayeux tapestry is an example of this type of cloth. Another example is the tapestry showing the Trojan War, which was made in Holland/Belgium in around 1470–1490. Contemporary events are “hidden” in classical literature, as the tapestry of the Trojan War most likely presents the reality of the Battle of Poitiers in 1356 (Norris 2005). In the churches hung not only cloths with embroidered stories but also military flags and coats of arms of the nobility. It is common, for example, to see coats of arms carved into stone ornaments and painted on altarpieces or walls. In Westminster Abbey, there is a mausoleum with effigies and plaques commemorating anyone from Geoffrey Chaucer to kings and queens of the realm. A sculpture of Henry V sits on the wall above the singing chapel. As in other chapels of knightly orders, there are flags, swords, and shields in the knightly chapel of Westminster Abbey. Royal coats of arms are found everywhere. On the frieze over the Lady Chapel is the coat of arms of the House of de Bohun, which includes a row of swans forming a continuous chain (Coring 2021, pp. 286–87). Moreover, in the church of Helgafell, the former monastic site of Helgafellsklaustur, is a bell with the well-known symbols of King Henry VIII and his first wife, Catharine of Aragon, engraved. The symbols are the Tudor Rose, St Barbara, and the Pomegranate apple, as well as the year 1547, which is when Henry VIII died (Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 209–10).

Both the Svalbarð cloth and the altarpiece in the church in Skarð are similar examples of nobility depicted on church-based iconography. The Svalbarð cloth could have initially been a wall-hanging in the church at Skarð, but it is known that nearly all churches in Iceland were furnished on the inside with such cloths (Guðjónsson 1997, p. 85). After the Reformation, Catholic imagery was commonly adapted to Lutheran customs, as may have been done to the antependium in question. Catholic iconography was usually removed, but Biblical images were left undamaged or transformed in order to be reused in the new custom. Moreover, due to the fact that the close ties between the two estates, Skarð and Svalbarð, continued until the modern era, the altered cloth may well have been used for the altar in the Svalbarð church, where it was kept until the day it was given to the National Museum of Denmark in 1847. It was transferred to the National Museum of Iceland in 1930 when Icelanders celebrated the 1000-year anniversary of the establishment of the Icelandic parliament, Alþingi.

## 9. Conclusions

Here it has been hypothesized that the antependium from Svalbarð is a fragment of a larger wall-hanging. This can be seen mainly in the inconsistency between the decorations on its right and left margins. If the Svalbarð cloth is a fragment of a wall-hanging, it joins a small group of preserved wall-hangings depicting secular events in Northern Europe dating to the Middle Ages. The story of Ólöf the Rich from Skarð is well-known in oral accounts and folktales, but the examination of the Svalbarð cloth immediately raises the question of whether her significant story was recorded in the part of it that has been preserved. There is little doubt that she was involved in one of the most influential events taking place in medieval Iceland, an event that had severe consequences, even abroad. Her husband’s story may likewise have been recorded in the missing half of the cloth. It cannot be dismissed that the story of both of them, Ólöf and Björn, is hidden within the stories

of two apostles, John and Jakob, as appears in the “*Tveggja postula saga Jóns ok Jakobs*” in *Skarðsbók*. As discussed above, it was common for noble people to make these apostles visible, in one way or another, in medieval iconography, or even as donors—the symbol of charity and relief work—as Ólöf was when the altarpiece in the church at Skarð was made for her.

Tapestries and wall-hangings were made by people who had knowledge of embroidery and the ability to record events in pictorial works with complex symbolism. Medieval people also knew how to read symbolism in iconography, similarly to how the typeface of a book is read. In general, men wrote the medieval accounts, but women sewed stories and events onto textiles. We must also keep in mind the person for whom the source is written, what is included, what is left out, and what is lied about. Returning back to Ólöf’s confession, even though her name is never mentioned in the text, this 15th century *confessio turpissima* has inevitably been presumed to be her final confession in sources following the manuscript. It is graphic in its content and depicts Ólöf as far removed from the chivalric nobility. Its existence shows a clear disdain for her on the side of the Church. Ólöf’s rejection of the church’s advances on her wealth did not make her many friends amongst the clergy. Of course, it can be questioned as to whether Ólöf dressed up in armor and actually said, “Björn the farmer should not be mourned, but gather our retainers”, but the sequence of events surrounding Björn’s slaying, which have been proven to have taken place, make these words relevant. Her behavior and words thus seem to have been preserved in a verbal archive to describe her reaction to her husband’s dreadful death. By showing Björn as a farmer, rather than a noble knight, Ólöf may have aimed to bring her and her deceased husband closer to the general public in order to gain their support. Her descendants and relatives received little benefit from telling the story of her revenge, and the same can be said about the kings and the Church. Thus, it is likely that only Ólöf herself would have benefited from having her story told in her own way, and done so through embroidery on a cloth that the public could read and understand in an official place, such as in a church. Both aristocratic and ecclesiastical authorities knew that imagery was one of the best ways to tell a story or spread propaganda to the public. To this day, such imagery is often the best record of events from past centuries, as the Bayeux tapestry clearly shows. It is known to have hung in the Bayeux cathedral in 1476 (Pastan and White 2014, pp. 20–24), just as the supposed wall-hanging with Ólöf’s story may have hung in the church of her estate, Skarð.

As we have described, Ólöf appears several times in official contemporary documents. She is also known for achievements that are only preserved orally or in sources documented long after her death. This explains why it has been doubted that Ólöf was as influential and powerful as the folktales about her indicate. Nevertheless, whether the stories about Ólöf are true or not, her memory left such a deep mark on the consciousness of Icelanders that it was preserved by word of mouth, in chronicles, in churchly iconography, and on a wall-hanging.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Vaðmál* was Iceland’s main export product from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries.

<sup>2</sup> Paris, Musée du Louvre, Department of Decorative Arts, Charles Lair bequest, 1919, on loan to the Musée de Cluny, 1986.



<sup>3</sup> South Netherlandish. Tapisserie du Tournoi, Musée des beaux arts de Valenciennes.

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