religions

Tracked for Impact Factor

CITESCORE 1.0

Article

The Abbesses of Iceland

Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir

Special Issue
Between Man and Nature: The Making of Benedictine Settlements in Medieval Iceland

Edited by
Prof. Dr. Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir

MDPI

https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040533

religions

MDPI

Article

The Abbesses of Iceland

Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir

Department of Archaeology, University of Iceland, 101 Reykjavík, Iceland; sjk@hi.is

Abstract: The female monasteries that operated in Iceland during medieval times, Kirkjubæjarklaustur and Reynistaðarklaustur, are the largest- and longest-operating institutions run by women to ever exist in the country. The names of the abbesses—the leaders of the female monasteries, some of which led the monasteries for up to half a century—are known from written documents and material remains that describe the abbesses' diverse tasks and obligations while in office. In the article, the stories of the Icelandic abbesses will be told not only in order to highlight their contributions to the overall development of medieval Icelandic society but also to show their influence on the lives of people, lay and religious, in the country. Moreover, the abbesses' stories demonstrate how each of them managed to synchronize with their natural and social surroundings while faithfully keeping their dedication to the Benedictine Order.

Keywords: medieval Iceland; female monasteries; abbess; prioress; monasticism; Benedictine Order; *Ora labora*; Kirkjubæjarklaustur; Reynistaðarklaustur

Citation: Kristjánsdóttir, Steinunn. 2023. The Abbesses of Iceland. *Religions* 14: 533. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040533

Academic Editor: José María Salvador González

Received: 29 March 2023
Revised: 12 April 2023
Accepted: 13 April 2023
Published: 16 April 2023

1. Introduction

Two female monastic houses operated in Iceland during medieval times. The first one was Kirkjubæjarklaustur (1186–1543), established in 1186; the second one, Reynistaðarklaustur (1295–1551), was founded in 1295. Kirkjubæjarklaustur belonged to the southern bishopric in Iceland, Skálholt, but Reynistaðarklaustur belonged to the northern one at Hólar. Both were operated until the Protestant Reformation, a turbulent period in Iceland, which lasted from 1539 to 1551. Kirkjubæjarklaustur was dissolved in 1543, that is, two years after the Reformation took place in the bishopric of Skálholt, but Reyni-staðarklaustur was closed down in 1551, one year after the Reformation in the Hólar bishopric. Apart from these two convents, twelve male monastic houses operated in Iceland for shorter or longer periods from 1030 until 1554, showing the strength of the Church from early on in the country (Figure 1). The female houses both belonged to the Benedictine Order, but the male monastic houses worked under the Orders of St. Benedict or St. Augustine (Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 2–5).

The abbesses, who led the two female monastic houses, Kirkjubæjarklaustur and Reynistaðarklaustur, are all known by name (Tables 1 and 2). Nevertheless, they are barely mentioned in historical overviews, but as we will see, they should be positioned among the most influential people of medieval society in Iceland. Such marginalization of the female houses is well recognized in Iceland´s neighboring countries (Gilchrist 1994; Burton and Stöber 2015; Collins 2019, p. 28). The invisibility of the abbesses and their work in historical overviews should in fact not come as a surprise bearing in mind women´s continuing combat for visibility and request for gender awareness in research (Moen 2019). The monastic houses in Iceland are also quite often, wrongly identified as primarily serving as retirement homes for secular chieftains, leaving women—young and old—outside the scope of Icelandic monasticism. The broad service provided by the Icelandic monastic houses—both male and female—to all people is, on the other hand, well documented, showing that they were busy places with both lay and religious residents of all ages and sexes (Kristjánsdóttir 2023). As we will see, many of the abbesses served their institutions for decades, even lasting up to half a century, just as the abbots did in their houses.

Additionally, both written and archeological sources show that the female houses were active in the production of valuables for society, mainly through their manufacturing of textiles, at the same time as they contributed to the academic and vocational training of girls and boys. Through their commitment to practicing the habits of their Order, Ora et labora, the abbesses supervised lay workers, oblates, novices, and priests residing in their convents. Accordingly, they ran large ranches for their production and likewise for the inhabitants' own consumption. The convents' textile production was a commodity known to have been purchased for the country's churches. Both convents, moreover, received multiple donations that provided them with further valuables for their inner work that, in fact, built up their economic wealth. The aim of this article is, accordingly, to present the Icelandic abbesses' wide-ranging obligations and miscellaneous work. Their stories underline, moreover, how they successfully dealt with matters related to external political struggles, local natural disasters, or inner conflicts until their convents were dissolved by governmental forces that none of the monasteries—male or female—survived. Additionally, their involvement in political struggles proves that the convents did matter for the overall running of Icelandic society. Although not being a part of the ruling authority, they exercised power through their teaching and production of ecclesiastical textiles based on the preaching of the Catholic agenda.

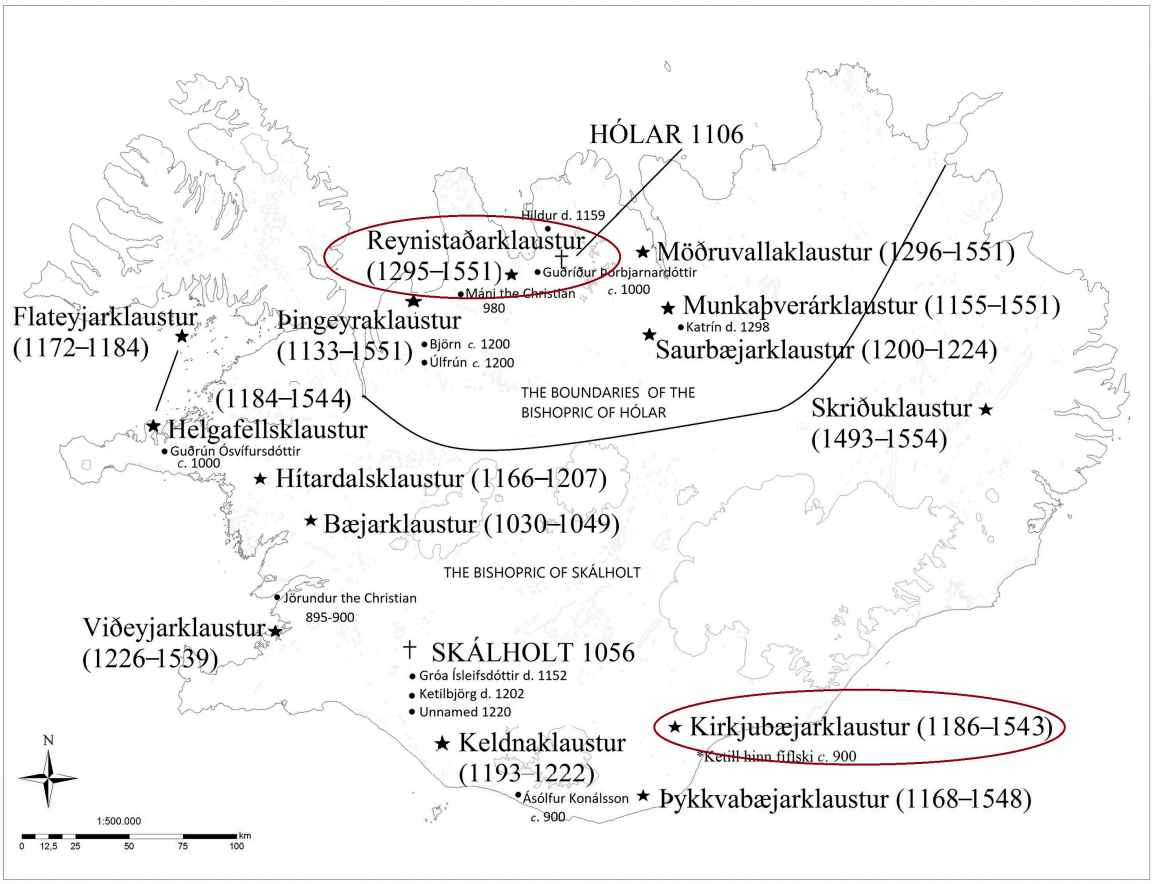

Figure 1. The monastic houses operating in Iceland during medieval times. The red circles indicate the two female houses. The location of the two bishoprics, Skálholt and Hólar, are also shown (Kristjánsdóttir 2023, p. 3).

Table 1. The abbesses and prioresses of Kirkjubæjarklaustur.

Kirkjubæjarklaustur Abbess	Years In Office	Total Years	Special Remarks
Halldóra Eyjólfsdóttir	1189–1210	21	Abbess
Guðrún hin yngri	1210–1217	7	Prioress
Digur-Helgi Þorsteinsson, later even his son and other chieftains	1217–1293	76	Local chieftains take over the convent
Þuríður	1285	1	Prioress
Agatha Helgadóttir	1293–1342	49	Abbess
Agnes (Jórunn Hauksdóttir)	1343–1361	18	Abbess
Þorgerður	1361–1387	26	Abbess
Halldóra Runólfsdóttir	1387–1387	1	Abbess
Halldóra Runólfsdóttir	1391–1402	6	A new bishop installed Halldóra again
Guðrún Halldórsdóttir	1403–1430	27	Abbess
Guðrún	1430–1440	10	Abbess
Halldóra	1442–1488	46	Abbess
Oddný	1488–1500	12	Abbess
Halldóra Sigvaldadóttir	1500–1543	43	Abbess

Table 2. The abbesses and prioresses of Reynistaðarklaustur.

Reynistaðarklaustur Abbess	Years in Office	Total Years	Special Remarks
Katrín	1298–1299	1	Abbess
Hallbera Þorsteinsdóttir	1299–1330	31	Abbess
Kristína (Guðný Helgadóttir)	1331–1368	37	Abbess
Oddbjörg Jónsdóttir	1369–1388	19	Abbess
Ingibjörg Örnólfsdóttir	1390–1402	12	Abbess
Þórunn Ormsdóttir	1408–1435	27	Prioress
Þuríður Halldórsdóttir	1408	1	Sub-prioress
Barbara (Þóra Finnsdóttir)	1437–1461	24	Abbess
Agnes Jónsdóttir	1461–1507	46	Abbess
Sólveig Hrafnsdóttir	1507–1551	42	Abbess

2. The Abbesses of Kirkjubæjarklaustur

The first abbess serving in Iceland was Halldóra Eyjólfsdóttir, abbess of Kirkjubæjarklaustur (*Diplomatarium Islandicum*, hereafter DI III 1896, p. 154). According to annals, she was placed in office in 1189, three years after the convent was established by Þorlákur helgi Þórhallsson, bishop of Skálholt from 1178 to 1193 (*Annales Regii* 1888, p. 120; *Skálholts Annales* 1888, p. 180). Documents are otherwise silent about who Halldóra Eyjólfsdóttir was, nor is it known where Halldóra underwent her postulancy, which could have taken up to two years, before taking on the novitiate for up to another two years. She was definitely an Icelander, but the opportunities for her to prepare for the upcoming post were not many in her home country because no monastery of the Benedictine Order operated at that point in the southern bishopric in Iceland, Skálholt. As a standard, the preparation for life under the Order needed to take place in a religious institution (Clark 2011, pp. 74–77). Bishop Þorlákur helgi was, first and foremost, an Augustinian cleric (Jensson 2017, p. 914). She could have, however, gained her training in any of the three then-serving Benedictine houses in the bishopric of Hólar, but all were male monasteries. Another possibility is that Halldóra took her vow abroad. It is well known that women early on traveled from Iceland to distant lands as much as men did. Many Icelandic clerics also gained their education abroad, whereof some served later as bishops. Bishop Þorlákur helgi is one of them (Jensson 2017, pp. 914–15). Moreover, numerous Icelanders—men and women—went on a pilgrimage to holy lands during medieval times. The most famous one is Guðríður Þor-bjarnardóttir, who went to Rome in the early 11th century, where she must have taken

vows, since she became an anchoress, living in solitude on her home farm in Glaumbær after returning to Iceland (Brown 2007). Still, she is not the only Icelandic pilgrim woman. For example, 39 Icelanders were registered by name in a monastery in Reichenau ca. 1100 AD along with 40,000 other pilgrims, who all stopped there on their way to Rome. Among these 39 Icelandic pilgrims were 11 women (DI I 1857–1876, pp. 170–72).

Abbess Halldóra ran her convent until her death in 1210 (*Henrik Høyers Annaler* 1888, p. 62; *Annales Regii* 1888, p. 123; *Gottskálks Annaler* 1888, p. 325; *Oddaverja Annall* 1888, p. 478). Written documents show that Kirkjubæjarklaustur became well equipped and wealthy while she was in office, although it must have been a difficult task for Halldóra to build up the first convent ever operated in Iceland. Moreover, she was set in office during one of the most serious political conflicts in medieval Iceland, the *staðamál*. The conflicts centered around churchly reforms, originally initiated by Pope Gregory VII, just as the so-called Investiture Controversy did on the mainland nearly a century earlier. The so-called Gregorian reforms were observed by royal kings as undercutting their power. Amongst other things, the conflicts centered around their rights interfering in the process of choosing and installing bishops and abbots in office and even the rights to run a church on their own properties and gain income from its operation. In Iceland, it was the chieftains and clerics who fought (Guðmundsson 2000, pp. 84–93; Wood 2013). The *staðamál* conflicts did not, however, start in Iceland until Bishop Þorlákur helgi was installed as the bishop of Skálholt in 1178, but he was the first of the Icelandic bishops who aimed to bring about the churchly reforms in the spirit of Pope Gregory, of which he gained knowledge during his studies abroad. Nevertheless, Bishop Þorlákur failed in his endeavor due to the firm resistance from the ruling chieftains in the country. Oddly, after his death in 1193, the local chieftains managed to take over most of the churchly institutions operating in Iceland, including the monastic houses, and even to install bishops of their own family clans. Due to the chieftains' firm resistance, and other conflicts going on at the same time between the Icelandic family clans, the *staðamál* conflicts were not fully solved until 1297, with a nearly complete victory of the Church. However, it must be underlined here that the chieftains' authority over the domestic ecclesiastical institutions was greatly reduced in 1238 when Archbishop Sigurður Indriðason of Niðarós (r. 1231–1252) refused to appoint bishops according to the preferences of the Icelandic chieftains as had been done before. Foreign bishops were thus placed in office in both episcopal sees in Iceland, and monasticism gradually started to prosper again (Jensson 2014, pp. 16–38; Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 36–46, 39–40).

Inevitably, one of the churchly institutions that the chieftains managed to enforce authority over was Kirkjubæjarklaustur. The takeover, which occurred in 1217, did not happen all at once but gradually. Several nuns appear to have resided in Kirkjubær the last decades of the takeover, but the Church did not fully regain control over the convent until 1293, when the Bishop of Skálholt, Árni Þorláksson (in office 1269–1298), was about to settle the *staðamál* conflicts (Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 41–42). Still, the first indications of the takeover can be observed as early as in 1196—only ten years after the establishment of the convent—when Abbess Halldóra is claimed to have asked the priest Guðmundur góði Arason to assist her in operating her convent. It is uncertain why she asked this of him, if she ever did, but it has been suggested that she was forced to do so because the ruling chieftains had by then started their campaign to usurp the churchly institutions in the country (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 25–26). The representative of the Oddaverjar clan, Páll Jónsson—an illegitimate son of the main objector of the Gregorian reforms—had, for example, been elected on the local Icelandic assembly as a bishop in 1195, serving as the successor of the founder of the convent, Bishop Þorlákur helgi (*Páls Saga* 2002, pp. 299–303). Furthermore, at this point, it was anticipated that a bishop would be soon installed in the bishopric of Hólar because the serving bishop, Brandur Sæmundarson, was growing old. The aforementioned Guðmundur góði was meant to be his successor, representing the Ásbirningar clan in northern Iceland. After Brandur's death, Guðmundur was elected as a bishop in Hólar and thus did not move to Kirkjubæjarklaustur as the chieftains had planned

(Sigurðardóttir 1988, p. 26). However, with Abbess Halldóra's death in 1210, Bishop Páll used the opportunity to replace her with only a prioress, Guðrún. In the Benedictine Order, a prioress was placed over a convent if it was not considered stable or large enough in order to be ranked as an abbey. Usually, this was a temporary arrangement, but a prioress served merely as the head of a group of nuns (Collins 2021; personal communication with Professor James G. Clark). When Prioress Guðrún died seven years later, chieftain Digur-Helgi was placed to administrate the convent, which seems to have, with this act, fully lost its status as a monastic house. At least, in context of this shift, Kirkjubæjarklaustur is only named Kirkjubær *beneficium* in documents, not as a convent (Júlíusson 2014, p. 110). Ögmundur, Digur-Helgi's son, operated the Kirkjubær *beneficium* after his father, and other chieftains did so after him. Still, annals mention the death of a second prioress—Þuríður—in 1285 and eight nuns residing there after 1250. This is as would be expected for a manor house with a church and related religious activity. One of these nuns was, in fact, Ögmundur´s daughter, Arnbjörg (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 32, 34). As we will see, the convent regained its previous status because of the abbesses' efficiency. Stable but prosperous times were ahead.

The first abbess to serve Kirkjubæjarklaustur after the takeover was Agatha Helgadóttir—who sat in office for nearly 50 years—the longest serving of all abbesses in Iceland. After her, seven women served as abbesses there until 1500, when the last one, Halldóra Sigvaldadóttir, was placed in office. Abbess Halldóra chaired her convent for 43 years, until its dissolution due to the Reformation (Table 1). In the 250 years after its recovery, the operation of Kirkjubæjarklaustur was highly successful apart from occasional unpleasantries, such as when the plague epidemic came to Iceland for the first time in 1402. Kirkjubæjarklaustur lost many of its servants, lay and religious, including the abbess, Halldóra Runólfsdóttir. She was immediately replaced the year after by a new abbess, Guðrún Halldórsdóttir, who served her convent for nearly three decades (*Lögmanns Annáll* 1888, p. 286; Sigurðardóttir 1988, p. 56).

It is noticeable that the abbesses generally sat in office continually until their death, but in one instance, the abbess of Kirkjubæjarklaustur was dismissed without a known reason. This case is linked to Bishop Michael's (in office 1382–1391) reforms of all the ecclesiastical institutions in Iceland, including Kirkjubæjarklaustur. As expected, Bishop Michael replaced Abbess Þorgerður upon her death in 1387 with a new abbess, Halldóra Runólfsdóttir, but dismissed this new abbess the same year. Abbess Halldóra was, however, reinstated in office in 1391 by Michael's successor, Bishop Vilchin (in office 1391–1405), but no abbess appears to have officially overseen the convent in the meantime (*Gottskálks Annaler* 1888, p. 365; Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 151–52). Such unfriendly interference by bishops is well known from other female monasteries in Northern Europe, but so is their gentle care and respect for the abbesses (Burton 2015; Golding 2015). Indeed, a letter written in 1543 by the first Lutheran bishop of Iceland, Gissur Einarsson, highlights his respectful attitude toward Abbess Halldóra Sigvaldadóttir, but by then, two years had passed since Lutheranism had been adopted in the bishopric of Skálholt. Nevertheless, in his formal letter, Gissur gently asks Abbess Halldóra to send a woman who had sought refuge in her convent back to her violent husband. Obviously, the bishop did not request that the abbess would release the woman: he simply proposes it. In the letter, the violence on behalf of the husband—Bergur Ingimundarson—is described, but the bishop claims that this behavior would not be enough reason for a divorce (DI XI 1915–1925, p. 271; Arnórsdóttir 2010, p. 143). Moreover, upon closer investigation, it appears that the couple resided in the western quarter of the country, but the convent is located in the eastern quarter, meaning that the beaten woman had traveled a long way over mountains and arduous glacier rivers, passing two male monastic houses, in order to gain sanctuary in the female convent of Kirkjubæjarklaustur. Another interesting letter is preserved on a different matter; in it, Bishop Gissur respectfully asks Abbess Halldóra to provide him a horse, a bull, a sheep, and butter (DI X 1911–1921, p. 562). It must be noted here that Bishop Gissur was the

oldest son of Abbess Halldóra's brother, but she had fostered him in her convent since 1512 (Sigurðardóttir 1988, p. 64).

One of the nuns in Kirkjubæjarklaustur changed her name when she was appointed to oversee the convent. It was Jórunn Hauksdóttir who chose to take the name of St. Agnes after her promotion (*Skálholts Annales* 1888, p. 210; Sigurðardóttir 1988). In one case, a nun in Kirkjubæjarklaustur was set in office as an abbess in Reynistaðarklaustur (*Skálholts Annales* 1888, p. 227). Written documents otherwise show that it was customary to choose new abbesses from among the nuns at the monastery. Moreover, they generally came from noble families. Abbess Agatha Helgadóttir was, for example, the bishop's niece. Her mother, Ásbjörg, was the sister of Bishop Árni Helgason (in office 1304–1320) and was also a nun in Kirkjubæjarklaustur, as were two other sisters of hers. It has been suggested that Ásbjörg and Agatha, mother and daughter, may initially have entered the convent together around 1260 (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 33, 36–38). The story of the last abbess, Halldóra Sigvaldadóttir, is also interesting in this context. An inventory made on the initiative of Bishop Stefán Jónsson (in office 1491–1518) in 1494 shows that she was a nun there before she was appointed as abbess over it. In the inventory, the bishop lists the nun's finger rings but records that Halldóra's ring is worn and that he promises to provide her with a new one (DI VII 1903–1907, p. 232). However, this incident may show that the bishop already had her in mind as the coming successor of Abbess Oddný (Table 1). In total, Halldóra Sigvaldadóttir spent at least 50 years of her life in the convent as a nun and later as abbess. Furthermore, it is likely that she resided in her house until her death, but all religious women in Iceland were permitted, by the Danish king—who ruled the country at the time of the Reformation—to dwell in their convents after their dissolution (DI X 1911–1921, pp. 247–48; *Danske Kansellis Registranter 1535–1550* 1881–1882, p. 362). Still, no documents are preserved about Halldóra´s death.

3. The Abbesses of Reynistaðarklaustur

When Kirkjubæjarklaustur regained its previous status as a female convent operating under the supervision of an abbess, the second convent—Reynistaðarklaustur—was established in the bishopric of Hólar (*Lárentíus Saga Biskups* 1998, p. 242). In fact, during the period of the *staðamál* conflicts, lasting (with breaks) from 1193 to 1297, no monastic house was established by churchly authorities in the country. On the other hand, three monasteries were founded by wealthy chieftains, but only one of these houses survived the conflicts. It was eventually taken over by the Church and operated until the Reformation. In addition to Reynistaðarklaustur, a male monastic house—Möðruvalla-klaustur—was established in 1296, but the last monastic house ever founded in medieval Iceland was Skriðuklaustur, established in 1493 (Figure 1). After the *staðamál* conflicts ended, all the remaining monastic houses in Iceland operated uninterrupted until the Reformation (Kristjánsdóttir 2023).

The first abbess of Reynistaðarklaustur was placed in office three years after its establishment, just as in Kirkjubæjarklaustur. The abbess's name was Katrín (Table 2). She took her training and vows (Icel. hreinlífisbúningur) in the male Benedictine house, Munkaþverárklaustur, where she had lived as an anchoress for some years (*Þorláks Saga C* 2002, p. 262). Unfortunately, Abbess Katrín did not serve her post for long, as she died in 1299. The same year, a new abbess—Hallbera Þorsteinsdóttir, who was, in fact, one of Reynistaðarklaustur's founders—replaced her (Jónsson 1887, p. 252). Hallbera and a few other noble women, as she was herself, donated miscellaneous valuables to the convent when it was established, but the largest donation came from the bishop of Hólar, Jörundur Þorsteinsson (in office 1267–1313). He donated 23 farms to the convent, all belonging to the episcopal see at Hólar, as well as half the *beneficum* of Reynistaður, where the convent was operated from its beginning to its end (DI II 1893, pp. 300–2). Abbess Hallbera chaired her convent until her death in 1330 (*Lárentíus Saga Biskups* 1998, p. 431).

Hallbera Þorsteinsdóttir lived under three bishops during her successful career as the abbess of Reynistaðarklaustur through three decades. It is obvious from written documents that she was a woman highly respected by both lay and religious people. However, one

of the three bishops she lived under did not show her the respect she deserved. This was Bishop Auðun Þorbergsson (in office 1313–1320) of Hólar, who requested full authority over her convent in an official letter dated April 2, 1315 (DI II 1893, pp. 397–99). Perhaps he aimed to close Reynistaðarklaustur, but it has been suggested that he wanted to take back the 23 farms Bishop Jörundur had donated to the convent at the time of its founding in 1295. Otherwise, the reason for his request is not known, but it was rejected by the Norwegian king Magnús Eiríksson, who ruled the country at the time (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 95–96). The other two bishops she lived under were the convent´s founder—Bishop Jörundur—and Bishop Lárentíus (in office 1323–1331). Bishop Lárentíus's admiration of Abbess Hallbera is well documented both in stories and in a song of praise (*Lárentíus Saga Biskups* 1998, pp. 239, 386; Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 93–94). When she died in December 1330, Bishop Lárentíus was immediately messaged. He promised to visit the nuns soon after Christmas, which he did. On this occasion, one of them, Guðný Helgadóttir, was chosen as Hallbera's successor (*Lárentíus Saga Biskups* 1998, p. 431).

After Hallbera's death, six abbesses and two prioresses served Reynistaðarklaustur until the closure of the convent in 1551. Just like Kirkjubæjarklaustur, Reynistaðarklaustur once faced true problems during its otherwise successful operation of over 250 years. However, the problems were not political like those the *staðamál* caused for Kirkjubæjarklaustur; the roots were the plague epidemic. When Abbess Ingibjörg Örnólfsdóttir died in the epidemic in 1402, no-one replaced her until one of the nuns, Þórunn Ormsdóttir, was installed as a prioress—not an abbess—in 1408. At first, she even received assistance from a sub-prioress, Þuríður Halldórsdóttir, but this was only during her first year in office. It therefore seems that the convent did lose its status as an abbey following the plague, but how many nuns died in the epidemic is not known. Henceforth, it took the prioresses 27 years to fully recover from the plague, but the recovery was nevertheless successful. Reynistaðarklaustur became rich with lands, livestock, and other valuables because people believed that donations to the Church would eliminate the epidemic. At the least, under the administration of Þórunn Ormsdóttir, lasting until 1435, a considerable growth can be observed in Reynistaðarklaustur (Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 137–42). The growth, however, was not only economical, as even the number of new nuns increased. Two new women entered the convent in 1413 (DI IV 1897, p. 343), and another eight entered in 1431 (DI IV 1897, p. 438), bringing with them both physical and financial capital that mattered greatly in the process of recovery. One of the new nuns, Þóra Finnsdóttir, was placed in office in 1437 as the first abbess of Reynistaðarklaustur after the plague, replacing Prioress Þórunn (Table 2). Þóra changed her name to Barbara, as St. Barbara was one of the fourteen holy helpers—a group of saints venerated as the protectors of serious diseases, including the plague. Previously, the abbess Guðný Helgadóttir changed her name to Kristína, after St. Christina (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 99, 110–28). Most likely, Katrín was not the given name of the first abbess of Reynistaðarklaustur either. In this context, we can recall Abbess Agnes in Kirkjubæjarklaustur, whose name was Jórunn Hauksdóttir before she was placed in office. We can also recall that one of the abbesses of Reynistaðarklaustur came from Kirkjubæjarklaustur, where she was a nun. This was Oddbjörg Jónsdóttir, and she was placed in office after Kristína's death in 1368 (*Lögmanns Annáll* 1888, p. 279). This may indicate cooperation between the two convents, but the reason for why she came from the other convent is not known. Otherwise, the abbesses were generally chosen from the nuns themselves, as in Kirkjubæjarklaustur. Abbess Oddbjörg served for nearly two decades, but she died in some unidentified epidemic that killed many people in Iceland, lay and religious, in 1388. Two years after her death, Ingibjörg Örnólfsdóttir was set in office in her place (*Gottskálks Annaler* 1888, pp. 366, 367). Ingibjörg had entered Reynistaðarklaustur in 1378, and her father had donated a number of valuables to the convent on the occasion of her arrival—even some in the name of another man, who apparently was indebted to him (DI III 1896, p. 334). The donation underlines Ingibjörg's wealth, but as we will see in the following sections, there are other similar examples documented in which fathers

secured their daughters' education and future life in the convent through donations to the monastery.

There were, in fact, setbacks in Reynistaðarklaustur worth mentioning while the convent was still in the process of recovering from the plague. This time, the reputation of the convent was at risk, because in 1431, two of the nuns became pregnant. One of them was the former sub-prioress Þuríður, but the other one was Þóra Illugadóttir, daughter of the convent's steward. Þóra Illugadóttir was in fact one of those who entered the convent that very same year, so she must thus have been pregnant when she took her vow. What was even worse was that the father of Þóra's child was the convent's priest and confessor, Þórður Hróbjartsson. The father of Þuríður's child was a butler from the Hólar episcopal see, Þorlákur Sigurðsson. Both Þóra and Þórður left the convent, but the bishop of Hólar absolved Þuríður and Þorlákur from their sin (Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 142–43). This case shows that it was possible to resign from taking vows and even how personal matters could be solved.

Despite these setbacks, Reynistaðarklaustur must have been observed as stable and strong enough to be designated the status of an abbey again following the period of the plague. Indeed, its reputation was not lost either. With Abbess Barbara, set in office after 35 years of recovery, a long period of prosperity started for the convent, lasting until its closure over a century later. After Abbess Barbara's death in 1461, Abbess Agnes Jóns-dóttir replaced her. Agnes had entered the convent with Barbara (Þóra Finnsdóttir) in 1431. Abbess Agnes was, however, involved in a scandal related to an illegal marriage on the grounds of consanguinity. Still, it was not until after her death that the case became an official matter of the Church, but it was substantiated that Abbess Agnes knew before the couple was married that they were close kin and that she did not attempt to check the marriage's legitimacy (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 140–42; Arnórsdóttir 2010, pp. 190–93). Nevertheless, Abbess Agnes chaired Reynistaðarklaustur for the longest period of all the convent's abbesses: 46 years, slightly longer than the last abbess there, Sólveig Hrafnsdóttir. In fact, both Abbess Agnes and Abbes Sólveig spent most of their lifetimes in Reynistaðarklaustur, at first as nuns and later as abbesses. Sólveig entered the monastery in 1493 but was appointed an abbess over it in 1507 (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 139–43). Abbess Sólveig did not move away at the time of the convent's closure in 1551 but dwelled there until she died in 1563, 70 years after she initially took her vow (Kristjánsdóttir 2021, pp. 92–93). Interestingly, Abbess Sólveig herself donated a farm to the convent when she entered it in 1493 (DI VII 1903–1907, pp. 163–64). Oddly, both Abbesses, Agnes and Sólveig, had brothers serving as abbots. They were Ásgrímur Jónsson, abbot of Þingeyraklaustur, and Brandur Hrafnsson, abbot of Skriðuklaustur (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 140, 145).

4. Ora et Labora

The female houses generally owned fewer farms than the male houses (see further discussion below), but the question is whether farms should be used as the main indicator of wealth, as has been done since the Reformation. There are other valuables to count, such as livestock, interiors, and overall housing. Books and textiles can certainly be listed here as highly priced valuables and even commodities, but a manuscript or ecclesiastical fabric could cost up to three or four farms depending on its elegance (Jónsson 1915–1929, p. 234). Some of the male monastic houses were known for their manuscript making and the two convents for production of textiles. If the Icelandic female and male monastic houses are thus to be compared with regard to the number of livestock and fabrics they possess, it is noticeable how similar they are (Figure 2 and Table 3). However, a certain multiplicity is indeed evident in both male and female houses in regard to their inner work and size, as is recognized in monastic houses in Iceland's neighboring countries (Gilchrist 1994; Burton and Stöber 2015; Collins 2021).

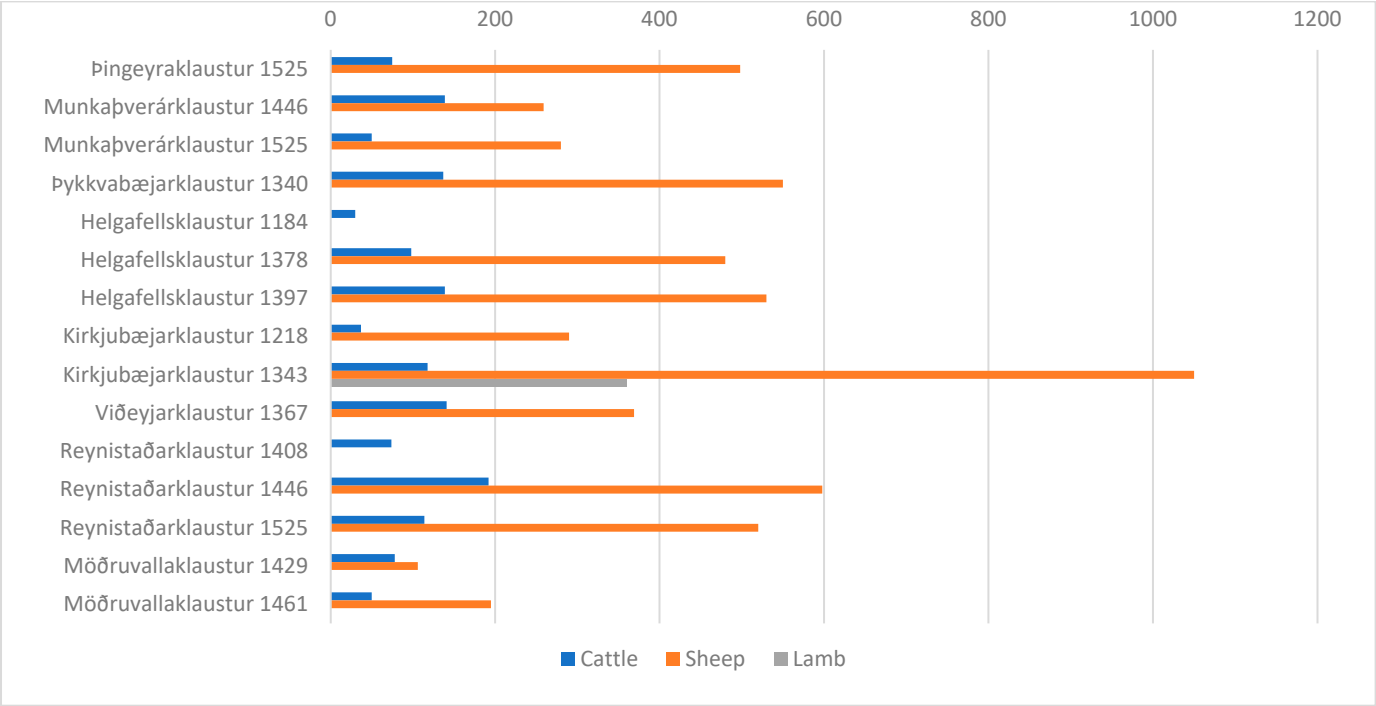

Figure 2. Livestock of the Icelandic monastic houses. The count is based on preserved inventories.

Table 3. Ecclesiastical garments owned by the monastic houses. The female convents are emphasized in italics (Kristjánsdóttir 2023, p. 164).

Monastic House	Inventory	Chasuble	Gown	Robe	Dalmatic	Antipendium	Vestment
Skálholt							
Þykkvabæjarklaustur	1340	30	29	11	19	9	30
Helgafellsklaustur	1378	20	14	12	4	4	15
Helgafellsklaustur	1397	20	12	12	4	8	20
Viðeyjarklaustur	1367	25	21	11	7	12	16
Kirkjubæjarklaustur	*1343*	*22*	*20*	*8*	*6*	*14*	
Kirkjubæjarklaustur	*1397*	*24*	*13*	*4*	*5*	*14*	*8*
Hólar							
Þingeyraklaustur	1525	15	9	5	4	3	9
Munkaþverárklaustur	1429	14	18			5	4
Munkaþverárklaustur	1525	20	13	5	2	8	10
Möðruvallaklaustur	1525	2	12	7	3	3	10
Reynistaðarklaustur	*1408*	*12*	*6*		*10*	*13*	*10*
Reynistaðarklaustur	*1525*					*7*	
Total		184	155	63	60	96	117

Archeological finds from Kirkjubæjarklaustur highlight the textile work carried out within it. Among the finds are a vertical loom and numerous other tools used for textile-making (Mímisson and Einarsson 2009). In fact, annals provide witness to the convent's production of ecclesiastical garments, antependia, wall hangings, and tapestries. Bishop Vilchin, for example, ordered tapestries from the nuns in Kirkjubæjarklaustur for the cathedral in Skálholt and even dalmatics and other canonicals for the episcopal see (*Lögmanns Annáll* 1888, pp. 287–88). What is more, inventories from Kirkjubæjarklaustur show that the convent owned a similar number of chasubles and gowns as the male monastic houses (Table 3). One of the chasubles documented in the inventory from 1397 is listed separately because of its elegance (DI IV 1897, p. 238). Since there were never more than one or two priests serving the convent at any given time, these churchly garments must have been its stock—production meant to be sold (Kristjánsdóttir 2023, p. 164). Moreover, it is

not only the list of ecclesiastical garments or Bishop Vilchin's purchase of fabrics for his episcopal see that indicate an extensive production of textiles in Kirkjubæjarklaustur—this is also suggested by their large flock of sheep. In fact, the nuns there kept more sheep than any other monastic house in Iceland, a larger number than is seen even in present-day farms (Figure 2). The sheep were presumably kept for wool but also for meat and dairy products, as the other animals were kept for. Yet, the large flock of animals demanded extra workload, which the lay people took care of, including collecting and preparing the wool for textile production. The animals were also used for feeding and clothing all residents and occasional guests in the convent.

The livestock at Reynistaðarklaustur do not indicate a clear emphasis on textile-making, as in Kirkjubæjarklaustur. On the other hand, about 15 embroidered antependia are preserved from medieval times in Iceland, and at least six of which are assumed to have been made in Reynistaðarklaustur (Jónsdóttir 1965; Guðjónsson 1997). One of them is an antependium from Grenjaðarstaður Church in northern Iceland, depicting the story of St. Martin (Figure 3). It is on display in the Louvre Museum in Paris (Wendel 1952, pp. 51–54). Jónsdóttir (1965) convincingly traced the donation of several farms to Reynistaðarklaustur from the churches that apparently purchased these six preserved antependia, including the one from Grenjaðarstaður Church. It must have required a considerable workforce of lay people and even academically educated personnel, because these antependia are embroidered with known religious motives. The ecclesiastical textiles were in this manner influential in preaching the Catholic Christian agenda which the Icelandic society relied upon during the medieval times.

Figure 3. An antependium from Grenjaðarstaðar Church in northern Iceland, now on display in the Louvre Museum. It is believed to have been made in Reynistaðarklaustur (© Musée du Louvre).

Although Kirkjubæjarklaustur is the only monastic house for which lambs are listed, the livestock of the two convents is quite similar since they are both based on cattle and sheep farming. What may additionally be identified from the inventories from Reynistaðarklaustur is the growth in the number of animals after Abbess Barbara was set in office 35 years after the plague. Moreover, as time went on, the emphasis seems to

have shifted from cattle to sheep farming. However, no such comparison can be made for Kirkjubæjarklaustur, since inventories from that monastery are missing after 1397. On the other hand, both convents were known from official documents as places of academic education, most likely vocational training, too. The education provided by the monastic houses may well have been the best available in the country, aside from what was available in Skálholt and Hólar. However, academic education could also be earned in some of the nobles' homes or abroad, but the education and training in ecclesiastical textile making would only have been available in the convents. Still, the education given provided the abbesses the opportunity to influence and govern the well-being of Icelandic citizens, just as the ecclesiastical textile making did.

5. Trust and Prosperity

Economic wealth and overall wellness do not come from nothing. In fact, numerous documents are preserved from Reynistaðarklaustur involving donations, underlining the trust the convent had from the local community, which contributed greatly to its prosperity. Generally, the reciprocal relationships between convents and their local population are widely recognized through the support of patronage, benefaction, tenant work, or even trade, providing in return church services, such as baptism, last rites, or remembrance through burial rights (Collins 2019, p. 43). As we will see, such a relationship can be observed in the Icelandic convents. The new nuns entering Reynistaðarklaustur in 1408 and 1431, for instance, all brought valuables with them, just as Abbess Sólveig Hrafns-dóttir did in 1493. One particularly interesting agreement was also made in 1434 with a widowed woman, Margrét Bjarnardóttir, when she wished to enter Reynistaðarklaustur after her husband's death. In the agreement, several donations made to specific women, as well as to a few men, and to Kirkjubæjarklaustur, are mentioned (DI IV 1897, pp. 520–21, 551). It is known that Margrét once donated an antependium—possibly made in Reynistaðarklaustur—and a psalm book to Múli church in Þingeyjarþing (DI IV 1897, p. 375). The educational agreements even list donations of miscellaneous valuables, animals, lands, textiles, cash, and single items, all contributing to the growth of the beneficial work carried out inside the convent. For example, while Þórunn Ormsdóttir was serving as a prioress in Reynistaðarklaustur, she sealed a contract with the former steward of the convent, Björgólfur, about education for his daughter and one of his female relatives (DI III 1896, pp. 750–51). There is also an agreement preserved from Reynistaðarklaustur about the education of a boy, showing that the nuns there educated both boys and girls. This agreement was sealed in 1443 by Abbess Barbara and the boy's parents. As was customary in other agreements, the abbess promised to feed and clothe the novice during the training period (DI IV 1897, pp. 640–41). Among other interesting documents preserved from Reynistaðarklaustur are four corrody agreements. The earliest one was made in 1380 between the convent and siblings (DI III 1896, pp. 354, 357). The other three were made in 1394, 1427, and 1459, in which two were concerned men and one was a woman (DI IV 1897, pp. 343, 551; DI V 1899–1902, pp. 193–94). Oddly, two involve the arrangement of a final resting place in Reynistaðarklaustur´s burial ground, in which one requested a burial in the convent's steeple and the other in the church's narthex (DI III 1896, pp. 496–8; DI IV 1897, pp. 482–83). The man who wished to be buried in the narthex donated to the nuns—notably listing some of them by name—various tools for textile-making as well as ready-made fabrics, a horse, a cow, and cash (DI IV 1897, pp. 482–83). One more donation from the local population to Reynistaðarklaustur deserves to be mentioned here. The donor was a woman—Úlfhildur Ketilsdóttir—who, in 1443, gave all her books to the convent (DI IV 1897, pp. 636–37). It is not known how many books there were, but according to an inventory made in 1525, the convent had 37 books (DI IX 1909–1913, pp. 320–21). Some of them may have come from Úlfhildur's donation.

Unfortunately, similar agreements are completely lacking from Kirkjubæjarklaustur. This does not mean, however, that they were not made. In fact, the convent amassed quite a few holdings and other valuables during its operation. By the time of the takeover in

1217, for example, the convent owned 9 farms, which grew to 19 farms in 1343 and finally to 23 in 1397, when the last inventory that included the counting of farms was made (DI I 1857–1876, p. 394; DI IV 1897, pp. 238–39; Júlíusson 2014, p. 110). However, the Danish king, who ruled the country at the time of the convent's dissolution in 1543, acquired ownership of Kirkjubæjarklaustur's lands. There were 40 farms in the convent's possession at that point (Júlíusson 2014, p. 111). The number of farms owned by Reynistaðar-klaustur and Kirkjubæjarklaustur seems, therefore, to have been similar (Figure 4). As previously mentioned, the bishop of Hólar donated 23 farms to Reynistaðarklaustur at the time of its founding in 1295. However, some of them appear to have been abandoned due to the plague, because the convent held a maximum of 17 of these farms in 1408. Nevertheless, after 1411, the convent's holdings started to grow progressively again in number (Júlíusson 2014, pp. 64–65). In 1446, it had 44 farms; however, 6 were deserted (DI IV 1897, pp. 700–1). When the last inventory was made in 1525, the number of farms had roughly stayed unchanged since 1446 (DI IX 1909–1913, p. 321).

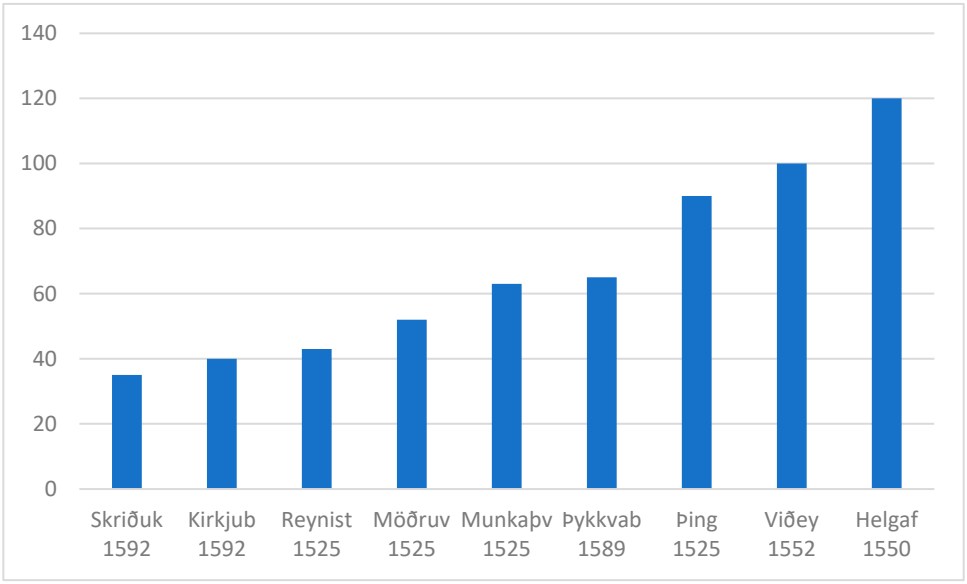

Figure 4. Number of farms owned by the largest monastic houses in Iceland around the time of their dissolution, based on Árni Daníel Júlíusson 2014.

The ecclesiastical textiles owned by the two convents were displayed earlier in Table 3. Moreover, the inventories made in Kirkjubæjarklaustur in 1218, 1343, 1397, and 1494 show how well equipped it was with other churchly interiors and valuables. Books numbered 51, in addition to some unnamed readers, in 1397 (DI IV 1897, p. 238). The convent also possessed the remarkable book *Kirkjubæjarbók*, written around 1500, containing the hagiographies of ten female saints whose aims were to protect women, their lives, and their work (Wolf 2011). The seven saintly statues the convent owned in 1397 are likewise particularly noteworthy, but among them is St. Catherine, the protector of textile makers (DI IV 1897, p. 238; Kristjánsdóttir 2023, pp. 95–96). In fact, Reynistaðarklaustur also possessed in 1525 seven saintly likenesses, including one of St Catherine (DI IX 1909–1913, p. 320).

6. Conclusions

As we have seen, to serve as an abbess over a monastic house was a specific profession of women, although mainly accessible for those who belonged to the nobility. The majority of the medieval Icelandic abbesses served their posts until their death, some serving up to half a century. However, during periods of instability or inner difficulties, the abbesses were replaced by prioresses, as is required in the Benedictine Order. The local bishops were allowed to make such arrangements, but neither an abbess nor a prioress chaired

Kirkjubæjarklaustur for a period after the chieftains took over the convent with firm assistance from a nationally chosen bishop in 1217. The nuns started to increase again in number after 1250, and a prioress at some point set over it again, but apparently, the convent was not considered stable or large enough to be ranked as an abbey until 1293. Reynistaðarklaustur, on the other hand, faced difficulties following the plague, forcing the convent to operate under a prioress for 27 years, i.e., 1408–1435. Still, both convents regained their previous status and were chaired effectively by their abbesses until the Reformation, when they were forced to close because their operation did not fit the new Lutheran custom. Nevertheless, in light of the preserved documents, Ora et labora was apparently the guiding light for the Icelandic abbesses throughout both good and bad times and in harmony with their natural and social surroundings. The agreements, donations, and overall governance undertaken by the Icelandic abbesses show that their domain reached outside the borders of their convents, emphasizing their relationship with local society. Common people trusted them for their own well-being, as well as their relatives´, in both life and death. The miscellaneous donations to the abbesses' convents prove that they were highly respected leaders. The abbesses' overall work, ranging from textile making to the protection of women, underlines their power to influence how Icelandic society developed. The convents' gendered multivocality has often been ignored in research by being observed as places exclusively for women and the male houses being exclusively for men. As a matter of fact, the female monastic houses obviously played an important role for women as well as for men, lay and religious, for centuries.

The invisibility of the abbesses of Iceland can undoubtedly be related to the long-lasting marginalizing of women and women's work in historical overviews; at least, there is nothing else in their stories that otherwise justifies their invisibility. The long-standing habit of measuring the wealth of monastic houses based on the number of their farm holdings, not in other valuables such as ecclesiastical textiles, may similarly have placed female houses as secondary to the male ones, as textile making is in fact most commonly based on the work of women. Good reputation mattered the most. Thus, the abbesses who led the two female monastic houses in Iceland, Kirkjubæjarklaustur and Reynistaðarklaustur, should conclusively be positioned among the most influential leaders in Iceland as having contributed to the overall well-being of its citizens—high and low, men and women—in accordance with the governmental structure of medieval society, which was based on the Catholic agenda.

Funding: This research was funded by the Icelandic Research Fund, grant number 228576-052.

Acknowledgments: I want to thank Professor James G. Clark for useful and inspiring comments while writing this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Annales Regii. 1888. Storm, Gustav, ed. Christiania: Det Norske Historisek Kildeskriftfond.

Arnórsdóttir, Agnes. 2010. *Property and Virginity. The Christianization of Marriage in Medieval Iceland 1200–1600*. Århus: Århus University Press.

Brown, Nancy Marie. 2007. *The Far Traveler Voyages of a Viking Woman*. Orlando: Hartcourt.

Burton, Janet. 2015. Medieval Nunneries and Male authority. In *Women in the Medieval Monastic World*. Edited by Janet Burton and Karen Stöber. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 123–44.

Burton, Janet, and Karen Stöber. 2015. Introduction. In *Women in the Medieval Monastic World*. Edited by Janet Burton and Karen Stöber. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 1–13.

Clark, James G. 2011. *The Benedictines in the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.

Collins, Tracy. 2019. Space and place: Archaeologies of female monasticism in later medieval Ireland. In *Gender and Medieval Places, Spaces and Thresholds*. Edited by Victoria Blud, Diane Heath and Einat Klafter. London: London University Press, pp. 25–44.

Collins, Tracy. 2021. *Female Monasticism in Medieval Ireland*. Cork: Cork University Press.

Danske Kansellis Registranter 1535–1550. 1881–1882. Copenhagen: Selskapet før Udgivelse af Kilder til Dansk Historie.

Diplomatarium Islandicum (DI I). 1857–1876. Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag.

Diplomatarium Islandicum (DI II). 1893. Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag.

Diplomatarium Islandicum (DI III 1896,). 1896. Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag.
Diplomatarium Islandicum (DI IV). 1897. Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag.
Diplomatarium Islandicum (DI V). 1899–1902. Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag.
Diplomatarium Islandicum (DI VII). 1903–1907. Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag.
Diplomatarium Islandicum (DI IX 1909–1913,). 1909–1913. Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag.
Diplomatarium Islandicum (DI X). 1911–1921. Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag.
Diplomatarium Islandicum (DI XI). 1915–1925. Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag.
Gilchrist, Roberta. 1994. *Gender and Material Culture. The Archaeology of Religious Woman*. London and New York: Routledge.
Golding, Brian. 2015. Bishops and Nuns: Forms of the curia monialium in Twelfth- and Thirteenth Century England. In *Women in the Medieval Monastic World*. Edited by Janet Burton and Karen Stöber. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 97–122.
Gottskálks Annaler. 1888. Storm, Gustav, ed. Christiania: Det Norske Historisek Kildeskriftfond.
Guðjónsson, Elsa E. 1997. Íslensk kirkjuklæði á miðöldum. In *Kirkja og Kirkjuskrúð. Miðaldakirkjan í Noregi og á Íslandi. Samstæður og Andstæður*. Edited by Lilja Árnadóttir and Ketil Kiran. Reykjavík: NIKU and National Museum of Iceland, pp. 85–92.
Guðmundsson, Gunnar F. 2000. Íslenskt samfélag og Rómarkirkja. In *Kristni á Íslandi*. Edited by Hjalti Hugason. Reykjavík: Alþingi.
Henrik Høyers Annaler. 1888. Storm, Gustav, ed. Christiania: Det Norske Historisek Kildeskriftfond.
Jensson, Gottskálk. 2014. Íslenskar klausturreglur og libertas ecclesie á ofanverðri 12. öld. In *Íslensk Klausturmenning á Miðöldum*. Edited by Haraldur Bernharðsson. Reykjavík: Miðaldastofa Háskóla Íslands and Háskólaútgáfan, pp. 9–57.
Jensson, Gottskálk. 2017. Latin Hagiography in Medieval Iceland. In *Hagiographies VII. Corpus Christianorum*. Edited by Monique Gaullet. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 875–949.
Jónsdóttir, Selma. 1965. Gömul krossfestingarmynd. *Skírnir* 139: 134–47.
Jónsson, Guðbrandur. 1915–1929. Dómkirkjan á Hólum í Hjaltadal. Lýsing íslenskra miðaldakirkna. In *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenskra bókmennta að fornu og nýju, no. V*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafjelag, pp. 1–418.
Jónsson, Janus. 1887. Um klaustrin á Íslandi. *Tímarit Hins Íslenzka Bókmenntafélags* 8: 174–265.
Júlíusson, Árni Daníel. 2014. *Jarðeignir Kirkjunnar og Tekjur af Þeim 1000–1550*. Reykjavík: Center for Agrarian Historical Dynamics.
Kristjánsdóttir, Steinunn. 2021. Lokun íslensku klaustranna. *Ritröð Guðfræðistofnunar* 53: 74–96.
Kristjánsdóttir, Steinunn. 2023. *Monastic Iceland*. London and New York: Routledge.
Lárentíus Saga Biskups. 1998. Íslensk fornrit. Biskupasögur III. Grímsdóttir, Guðrún Ása, ed. Reykja-vík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, pp. 213–441.
Lögmanns Annáll. 1888. Storm, Gustav, ed. Christiania: Det Norske Historisek Kildeskriftfond.
Mímisson, Kristján, and Bjarni F. Einarsson. 2009. 'Ora labora'. Efnisveruleiki klausturlífs á Kirkjubæjarklaustri. In *Endurfundir*. Edited by Guðmundur Ólafsson and Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir. Reykjavík: National Museum of Iceland, pp. 44–57.
Moen, Marianne. 2019. Gender and Archaeology: Where Are We Now? *Archaeologies* 15: 206–26. [CrossRef]
Oddaverja Annall. 1888. Storm, Gustav, ed. Christiania: Det Norske Historisek Kildeskriftfond.
Páls Saga. 2002. Íslensk fornrit. Biskupasögur II. Egilsdóttir, Ásdís, ed. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, pp. 287–364.
Sigurðardóttir, Anna. 1988. *Allt Hafði Annan Róm í Páfadóm. Nunnuklaustrin Tvö á Íslandi á Miðöldum og Brot úr Kristnisögu*. Reykjavík: Kvennasögusafn Íslands.
Skálholts Annales. 1888. Storm, Gustav, ed. Christiania: Det Norske Historisek Kildeskriftfond.
Þorláks Saga C. 2002. Íslensk fornrit. Biskupasögur II. Egilsdóttir, Ásdís, ed. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, pp. 251–94.
Wendel, Gertie. 1952. Íslenzk altarisklæði í erlendum söfnum. Translated by Kristján Eldjárn. *Melkorka* 3: 51–54.
Wolf, Kirsten. 2011. *Female Legendary from Iceland: Kirkjubæjarbók (AM 429 2mo)*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.
Wood, Susan. 2013. *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.