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The Burden of History: Kirkjubæjarklaustur and the Biography of Landscape

Sigrún Hannesdóttir

Department of Archaeology, University of Iceland, 102 Reykjavík, Iceland; sha@hi.is

Abstract: The importance of landscape has long been recognized within monastic studies, both as an economic and spiritual resource. This paper focuses on the surrounding landscape of a single monastic site, that is Kirkjubæjarklaustur on Síða (south Iceland), one of the two female monasteries established in Medieval Iceland. Through written sources, legends, and placenames, the aim of this paper is to reconstruct the biography of the landscape from before the founding of the monastery to after the Reformation. In particular, the paper considers how the perceived sacredness of the site of Kirkjubæjarklaustur may have been shaped by stories of Christian settlers prior to the monastic foundation and how the monastic memory informed the way in which the landscape was experienced after the Reformation and beyond.

Keywords: monastic studies; monastic archaeology; medieval history; Icelandic history; female monasticism; landscape biographies

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1. Introduction

On the 20th of July in 1997, a sculpture was revealed in the village Kirkjubæjarklaustur[1] in Skaftárhreppur, in the south of Iceland, depicting two cloaked nuns carrying a heavy load on their backs. The sculpture was titled "the Burden of History" and was revealed on a date which commemorates events related to the volcanic eruption in Laki in 1783, when a branch of lava miraculously stopped just before reaching the parish church where a service was being held. According to popular belief, it was reverend Jón Steingrímsson's powerful sermon that hindered the stream of lava and saved the congregation. In a news announcement about the reveal of the statue, it was said to be fitting that Kirkjubæjarklaustur, which was full of nature's artwork, had now received a manmade piece of art that was connected so directly with the history which "had, on occasion, placed a burden on the shoulders on the inhabitants of Skaftárhreppur" (Byrði sögunnar afhjúpað á Kirkjubæjarklaustri 1997, p. 22).

Kirkjubæjarklaustur indeed has a rich history; according to Landnáma, it was inhabited during the settlement period of Iceland, and for more than 250 years, it was the site of a Benedictine female monastery. This paper sheds light on the complex biography of the site of Kirkjubæjarklaustur, from before the monastic foundation until after the Reformation in the mid-15th century, with the aim of uncovering the dynamic relationship between the monastic community at Kirkjubær and its surrounding landscape. The paper follows two lines of inquiry: First, it looks at Landnáma's narratives about pre-Christian settlers at Kirkjubær and considers their significance in relation the monastery. The questions posed here are whether the perceived Christian roots of the site were important for the monastic foundation, and indeed, the role of the monastery in establishing the sacrality of the site. Secondly, the paper draws attention to a number of topographies in the vicinity of the monastic site, which bear names that refer to the monastery and many of which are linked to folk tales about its members. These topographies and associated stories reveal the way in which the monastic memory was absorbed into the landscape and informed the way in which it was experienced after the Reformation and beyond. Thus, by highlighting the biography of Kirkjubæjarklaustur, this paper demonstrates how the landscape acquires meaning through its collective history, which is constantly subject to revaluation.

2. Kirkjubæjarklaustur

According to annals, the monastery at Kirkjubær was founded in 1186. It was the first female monastery established in Iceland and remained the only one for more than a century, until the monastery of Reynistaður was established in 1295 in Skagafjörður, in northern Iceland. Þorlákur Þórhallsson, bishop of Skálholt (1178–1193), is cited as the founder of Kirkjubæjarklaustur, although it has been argued that its establishment came from a joint initiative from the bishop and Halldóra Eyjólfsdóttir, who became the monastery's abbess soon after the foundation (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 20–22; Figure 1). Kirkjubæjarklaustur remained in operation until the protestant Reformation in the mid-16th century, when the monarch became the head of the church, and monastic and ecclesiastical estates were largely secularized (Sigurðardóttir 1988, p. 72; see also Ísleifsdóttir 2013, pp. 353–56).

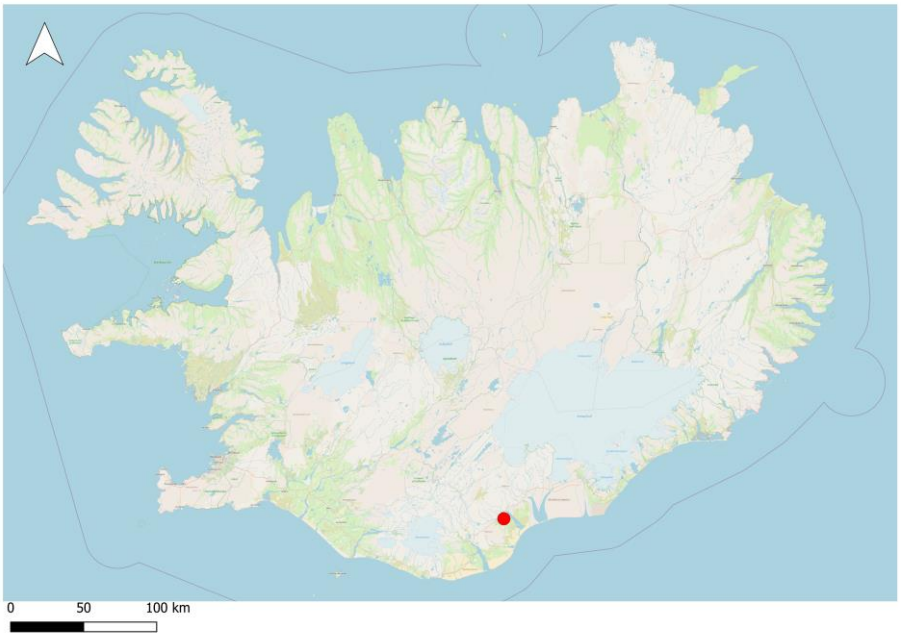

Figure 1. A map of Iceland showing the location of Kirkjubæjarklaustur.

No ruins of Kirkjubæjarklaustur remain above ground, but in the period 2002–2006, archaeological excavations took place at the site. Covering an area of around 140 m^2, located at the northeast corner of the complex, the excavation revealed only a small part of the monastic ruins, dating to the 15th century. Nevertheless, it provided important information about the layout of the monastic complex, as the four rooms which were excavated suggest that the abbey may have been built around a cloistral garden, that is, in the European monastic tradition rather than traditional Icelandic farmsteads (Mímisson and Einarsson 2009). Amongst interesting finds from the site were two altar stones, one of red jasper and one of an imported sedimentary rock, as well as two pieces from stained glass windows. However, the only room which could be associated with a specific function, based on finds, was a room at the northwest end of the area, where a range of tools for textile work was found, including the remains of a loom, loom weights, and knitting needles (Mímisson and Einarsson 2009).

Further archaeological research on the site is ongoing as a part of the project "Between Man and Nature", the overarching aim of which is to study the relationship between Benedictine communities in medieval Iceland and their surrounding natural environments (Between Man and Nature n.d.).

3. Biographies of Landscape

The concept of landscape can be defined in a number of ways, but in archaeological study, it is broadly seen as the result of people's engagement with their surroundings

(Carragáin and Turner 2016, p. 2). Landscape comprises occupied space, both real and imagined (Nordeide 2013, p. 3), and, as put by Tilley (1994, p. 26), it is something that is "lived in and through". As such, "landscape provides a concept that can be used to trace the relationships between people, places and things in the past, and from the past to the present and future" (Carragáin and Turner 2016, p. 2).

Landscape has deep roots in monastic archaeology. The earliest studies of monastic landscape, which appeared in the 1960s, stemmed from an interest in the economic history of the medieval period at large. These studies often focused on economic growth, land exploitation, and technological innovations undertaken by monastic houses to meet the Benedictine ideal of self-sufficiency (Gilchrist 2014, p. 240). As such, they were largely dominated by instrumentalist approaches that classified features in the landscape by function or technology and thus disintegrated the landscape into defined units, such as pastures, woodland, water management, vineyards, and so forth (Austin 2013, pp. 8–9; see Bond 2004; Aston 2000). As Roberta Gilchrist has demonstrated, such considerations of landscape allowed monastic archaeology to emerge as a field of study in itself, with a research agenda distinct from architectural and art history (2014, pp. 236–40). Undeniably, they also produced important knowledge about each of these features in the landscape and economic management of monasteries (Austin 2013, p. 9). However, as focus shifted from the monastic complexes themselves to their estates and wider regions, Gilchrist points out that "somewhat ironically, the religious and social aspects of medieval beliefs were neglected" (2014, p. 242).

More recent approaches to monastic landscapes within archaeology have placed focus on the creation of ritual landscapes and engaged with topics such as memory, embodiment, and gender (e.g., Curran 2019; Collins 2018; Gilchrist 2020). Underlying these approaches is an understanding of space as a cultural product—a medium through which social hierarchies are created and played out (Collins 2018, p. 29; Gilchrist 1994, p. 17). Rejecting functionalist analyses of the landscape as described above, archaeologists have begun to approach monastic landscapes as "organized worlds of meaning", in which each feature is invested with social memory (Gilchrist 2020, p. 145; from Tuan 2005, p. 179). Roberta Gilchrist, a pioneer in this field, has identified two channels for such approaches: "The first (. . .) considers how medieval monastic communities actively shaped landscapes to forge collective institutional memories; the second addresses the memorialization and reuse of monastic landscapes by post-Reformation communities". Notably, both strands involve a biographical approach in considering how landscapes are, in a long-term view, constructed through layers of occupation and memory.

Biographical approaches to landscape in archaeology can be traced to similar approaches to material culture. Important in introducing the topic into the field was a collection of essays from 1986, titled The Social Life of Things, edited by Arjun Appadurai. The collection contained, for instance, an influential essay by Igor Kopytoff (1986), in which he examined the cultural biographies of things, commodities in particular, through various stages in their life histories, including production, use, and disposal. As things shift stages, according to Kopytoff, so do their meanings and values. As put by Kolen and Renes (2015, p. 26), biographical approaches are used to show the way in which things "not only string together the life histories of the individuals who contributed to them in some way, but [. . .] also create their own long life paths on different timescales through successive social contexts".

While biographical approaches were first incorporated into the study of archaeological objects, biographical landscape studies soon after appeared in archaeology. A common aim of such studies is to elucidate the way in which the perception and use of specific landscapes change through time and how the collective history of a place gives rise to its meaning (Kolen and Renes 2015, pp. 26–27). An example relevant to monastic studies is provided in Alexandra Walsham's book, The Reformation of the Landscape, which explores how the religious changes that took place in England and Ireland following the Reformation in the 16th century and the landscapes in which these changes took place concurrently

shaped each other. Walsham argues that after the Reformation, former monastic landscapes and other significant sites, such as shrines, became disputed spaces, the meaning of which members of different groups, Protestants and Catholics, sought to control and shape. Through these landscapes, the monastic memory was recontextualized and often so to serve post-Reformation narratives (Walsham 2011, pp. 10, 232; Gilchrist 2020, p. 145). Walsham's book demonstrates that the landscape was not only the backdrop of the Reformation but played an active role in its conflicts. Other authors who have applied biographical approaches to monastic landscapes include David Austin, who directed archaeological investigations at the site of the former Cistercian monastery in Strata Florida in Wales. In his study, Austin reconstructs the history of the site from before the arrival of the Cistercians to the present, thus elucidating not only the landscape in which the members of the monastic settlement lived but also the "legacy they left embedded in the communities of the region" (Austin 2013, p. 11). Austin argues that whether monasteries have been transformed into cathedral chapters, architectural ruins, or field names, their presence in the landscape in Britain has been a matter of political interest since their dissolution. As expressions of the protestant triumph, former monastic sites were incorporated into narratives of national identities. On another level, some former monastic sites retained a sense of local inheritance, for instance through continuity in ritual practice, such as burial (2013, p. 3). The value of a biographical approach has similarly been demonstrated by Willmott and Bryson (2013) in their study of Monk Bretton Priory in South Yorkshire, England, in which they critique the traditional opposition drawn between the medieval and post-medieval phases of monastic sites. Wilmott and Bryson reject the assumption that the dissolution marks an endpoint to the history of monastic sites and emphasize the need for in-depth analyses of the evolution of landscapes in the long-term.

The following sections apply a biographical view to the site of Kirkjubæjarklaustur.

First this paper considers how the perceived sacredness of this single monastic landscape was linked to narratives about pre-Christian settlers and religious activities on the site before the establishment of the monastery in the 12th century. Secondly, it explores placenames in the landscape and associated folk tales, which demonstrate how the monastic memory became ingrained in the landscape and was re-imagined throughout the centuries.

4. Christian Foundations

"Madr het Ketill en fiflski son Iorunar manvitzbrekku d(ottur) Ketilz flafnefs. hann fór af Sudureyium til Islandz. (hann) var kristin. hann nam land milli Geirlandz aár ok Fiardar áar fyrir ofann Nykoma. Ketill bio i Kirkiubæ. Þar haufdu áadr setet papar ok eigi mattu þar heidner menn bua."

In this manner, the settlement of Kirkjubær is described in Sturlubók's version of Landnáma, the Book of Settlement (Landnámabók 1900, p. 212). According to this description, the farm was settled by a Christian man from the Hebrides, Ketill, who bore the epithet the Foolish. A later version of Landnáma explains that he acquired the epithet from heathen men who disdained his Christian faith (Halldórsson 2000, p. 21). According to the text, Kirkjubær had previously been inhabited by Irish hermit monks, the Papar, and, because of its sacrality, Kirkjubær could not be inhabited by heathen men (Landnámabók 1900, pp. 212–13). The next section of Landnáma tells of a man, Hildir, the son of Eysteinn Hrani, who lived in Skarð near Kirkjubær. After the death of Ketill the Foolish, Hildir wished to move his farm to Kirkjubær. However, as he approached the boundary of Kirkjubær he died a sudden death, and his burial mound became a landmark known as Hildishaugur (Landnámabók 1900, p. 213):

> *Hillder villdi færa bv sitt i Kirkiubæ epter Ketel ok hufdi at þar mundi heidinn madr mega bua. En er hann kom nær at rungardi vard hann brad daudr þar liggr hann i Hilldishaugi.*

Landnáma, which describes the settlement of Iceland in the 9th and 10th centuries, is believed to have been first written in the 12th century, but the earliest surviving copies

date to the 13th and 14th centuries. Sturlubók is believed to have been compiled by Sturla Þórðarsson in c. 1275–1280 (Benediktsson 1969, pp. 275–76). The historical value of Landnámabók as the source for settlement period has been contested by scholars since the 20th century and, instead, its text is more commonly seen as reflective of the cultural memory and ideas of the period when it was written (Hermann 2010, p. 72; Barraclough 2012, pp. 81–82). In particular, certain versions of the text are often thought to exaggerate the part of Christianity in the founding of Iceland (e.g., Hjalti Hugason 2000, pp. 64–68). In the context of Kirkjubær in particular, one of the aspects in Landnáma's narrative that grasped the attention of scholars early on was the name of the farm (e. Church Farm), which was taken as an indication that a church had been built there in pre-Christian times, either by the Irish hermits, who were, supposedly, the first inhabitants of the area, or by Ketill the Foolish (see Böðvarsson 1874, p. 327; Gíslason 1956, p. 11; Jónsson 1856, p. 139; Henderson 1957, p. 186). Indeed, placenames in Iceland featuring kirkja-/kirkju- (e. church) are thought to reflect the presence of a church or, in some cases, refer to an area owned by a church (Cormack 2010, pp. 35–38). However, while there is no doubt that the name Kirkjubær refers to a church structure, it remains a question as to how far back it can be traced. Scholars have questioned whether all the placenames featured in Landnáma truly existed in the settlement period, stressing the influence of later occupations or cultural memories. It should, for instance, be recognized that there may have been multiple political incentives for having later placenames appearing long-established by retrospectively including them in Landnáma narratives (Barraclough 2012).

This paper will not delve into debates about the value of Landnáma as a historical source but places focus rather on the cultural memory principle, which, as argued by Barraclough (2012, p. 82; see also Hermann 2010) "offers a more flexible framework for interpreting this literary corpus without resorting to polarised debates regarding the possible historicity or fictionality of the texts". Thus, while the name Kirkjubær and the narrative of its settlement as a whole does not serve as a testimony of a pre-Christian dwelling or church on the site, Landnáma's text certainly underpinned the Christian foundations of the place for the 13th-century reader and reflects contemporary values of the location. Without a doubt, the monastic foundation, as a "subsequent chronological layer" in Kirkjubær, influenced the narrative of its settlement in Landnáma (see Barraclough 2012, p. 81). This can be seen in a later edition of Landnáma, presented in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta* (*The Greatest Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason*), which was composed in the first half of the 14th century. For the most part, *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta* is a compilation of texts from earlier sources and, most notably, includes an extended biography of king Ólafur Tryggvason. What is interesting about this version of Landnáma is that it demonstrates the author's awareness of the monastery and its significant connection to the sacred history of the site (Halldórsson 2000, p. 22):

> *En er hann var kominn nærr at túngarði aa Kirkiubæ varð hann bráðdauðr. Þar liggr hann i Hilldishaugi. Ok svá segiz at fleirum varð heiðnum mǫnnum ef þangat villdo færa bú sitt, þvíat guð hafði þann stað valit ser til dýrkanar. Þar er nú nunnuklaustr.*

In this version of the text, Hildir Eysteinsson is not the only heathen man who died when approaching Kirkjubær; other heathen men who had attempted to inhabit the farm met the same fate. The reason being, explains the text, that God had reserved the place for his own worship. The section ends by establishing that a female monastery had been founded in the location. Thus, the text not only emphasizes the site's long history of Christian inhabitants but also firmly reasons its sacrality and consolidates the monastic foundation by stating that God himself had decreed Kirkjubær to be a place of worship.

While the Benedictine settlement at Kirkjubær may have created an agenda for the author of Landáma to underline the Christian history of the place, the religious and political significance of the location did exist before the monastic foundation. The first reliable mention of the placename Kirkjubær appears in charters from around 1150. They record the properties, rights, and duties of four of its neighboring farms, Dalbær and Uppsalir in Landbrot and Keldunúpur and Breiðabólstaður on Síða, which had been donated to

God, or to Christ and the Virgin Mary, St Peter, and St Nicholas, respectively, and were to provide alms for the poor. These farms were required to pay certain fees to Kirkjubær and in return received priestly services (Diplomatarium Islandicum I 1857–1876, pp. 194–204). These charters, which are amongst the earliest records of such bequests in medieval Iceland, confirm that there was a church and an ecclesiastical center in some form at Kirkjubær at least from the first half of the 12th century. Moreover, the fact that these four farms were required to undertake these activities, in connection to Kirkjubær, may be telling of its perceived sacredness or attachment to Christianity, even before the founding of the monastery. Reusing earlier ecclesiastical sites or sites of some historical significance for the foundation of monasteries was not an uncommon practice in medieval Europe. For instance, Collins (2018, pp. 33–34) has noted that many Irish monasteries, both male and female, were built on or near either pre-historic or early medieval monuments, secular or religious. In a Scandinavian context, the island of Selja, just off the western coast of Norway, provides an example of continuity of a religious place; in the period of early Christianity, it was the location of a sanctuary and pilgrim site associated with the legend of St Sunniva and the Seljumenn, and later it became the site of a Benedictine monastery dedicated to St Alban (Hommedal 2019).

As argued by Collins, continuity, or indeed "the impression of continuity", in the use of religious places gave them "historical currency and rootedness in a particular area" (Collins 2018, p. 33). The landscape in which the Benedictine monastery at Kirkjubær was founded in the late 12th century seems to have comprised multiple layers of meaning which gave rise to its sacredness. The narrative of Kirkjubær's settlement and Christian roots, which may have existed in some form in cultural memory before the establishment of the monastery, for example as an oral narrative, may well have directed the choice of location for the monastery (Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir 2023, p. 79). Not accounting for the authenticity of the narrative here, it must certainly have been meaningful if the founders and members of the monastery, as well as the surrounding community, perceived it to be built on sacred land, with a previous connection to monasticism. Although the monastery itself was clearly an important element in the construction of sacredness at Kirkjubær, we are also able to discern echoes from the earlier past, complicating the chronological relationships between the Landnáma narratives, occupation, and cultural memory at Kirkjubær.

5. Placenames and Folk Tales

As mentioned in the previous section, Landnáma states that the mound of Hildir Eysteinsson, the first heathen man who died as he approached Kirkjubær, became a landmark, known as Hildishaugur. In a report written by the parish priest at Kirkjubær, Bergur Jónsson, in 1817, for the Danish Royal Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities, he described an oval, sandy mound, just east of the farm, which he believed to be Hildishaugur. Bergur also accounted that attempts had been made to open the mound, during which the farmhouses at Kirkjubær had caught fire, as had the tools of the excavators (Frásögur um Fornaldarleifar 1817–1823 1983, p. 95). A landmark with the name Hildishaugur still exists east of Kirkjubær to this day, and although its placement in the landscape may have changed throughout the centuries, it serves as a relic of the place's Christian legacy.

Many other modern placenames near Kirkjubær refer to the history of the place, especially to the monastery and its inhabitants, illustrating how its memory became ingrained in the landscape (see Austin 2013, p. 11). Among the most famous topographical features is Kirkjugólf (Church Floor), a natural basalt rock formation, which in later centuries was popularly believed to have been the floor of the monastic church (Figure 2). The Scottish missionary, Ebenezer Henderson, who travelled around Iceland in the early 19th century, described these formations in his writings, where he postulated that the Irish hermit monks who had been the first to settle the site had found these rock pillars and used it as a foundation for their church. Henderson suggested that these formations may have reminded the monks of a similar formation, the Giant's Causeway, in their home country (Henderson 1957, p. 186). The phenomenon was mentioned by multiple other scholars and travelers

in the 19th and early 20th century, some of whom posited that it had been the floor of the monastic church, while others rejected such speculations altogether (Þórarinsson 1981; see Vigfússon 1892, p. 68; Jónsson 1894, pp. 19–20).

Figure 2. Kirkjugólf is a natural basalt rock formation which in later centuries was popularly believed to have been the floor of the monastic church. By Villy Fink Isaksen—own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=42632505 (accessed on 3 May 2023).

A number of placenames around Kirkjubær refer to the sisters who inhabited the monastery and the origin of these names are often described in folk tales, which were collected in the 19th century. They demonstrate how the monastic memory was reimagined in the centuries after the Reformation through topographies in the landscape. Among these names is Systravatn (Sisters' Lake), which is located on the mountain that rises above Kirkjubær. The lake is said to have acquired its name from two nuns who had walked there, either together or separately, and found a beautiful golden comb in the water. The first nun who ventured into the water to fetch the comb drowned, but the second nun went into the water on horseback and was never seen again—nor was the horse or the comb (Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri II 1864, pp. 71–72).

Indeed, the monastic placenames and associated folk tales often touch upon a common theme, namely the moral corruption, or, as in the case of Systravatn, the vanity or greed of the nuns, which contrasted starkly the monastic vows of chastity, obedience, and modesty. Multiple other topographies in the landscape exist near Kirkjubæjarklaustur which have been connected to narratives of nuns breaking the codes of behavior set by their religious order. These narratives commonly feature the neighboring male monastery, Þykkvabæjarklaustur, the members of which were said to have paid regular visits to Kirkjubær (Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri II 1864, p. 72). These stories fall within the theme of clerical hypocrisy which was well known in popular culture from the medieval period onwards (see Dolan 2007, p. 510). After the Reformation however, the motif of unmasking the low moral standards of clerics and members of monastic houses gained a deeper political function, namely as propaganda against Catholicism. In England, it is well known for instance that post-Reformation documents relating to monasteries, and especially female monasteries, tended to portray them as disreputable and poorly managed institutions, generating a stereotype of "impoverished houses rocked by female vanity and sexual scandal" (Gilchrist 1994, pp. 24–25). Examples of this phenomenon also exist in Norway, where, in a doc-

ument from 1528, King Frederik states that the nuns of Nonneseter in Bergen had been "hunted", due to their "debauched and wicked" way of life (see Ommundsen 2010, p. 567). Placenames around Kirkjubæjarklaustur that convey similar ideas include Sönghóll (Singing Hill), where the monks from Þykkvabær were said to have stopped on their way to Kirkjubær and sung to announce their arrival. When the singing reached Kirkjubær, the abbess had the church bells rung and the nuns hurried toward the monks to greet them by Skaftá, in an area called Glennarar, which is said to refer to the striding of the nuns (Figure 3). Other stories describe, in more detail and in rather comical ways, the visits of the monks, which were often accompanied by feasting and carnal indulgences (Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri II 1864, p. 72).

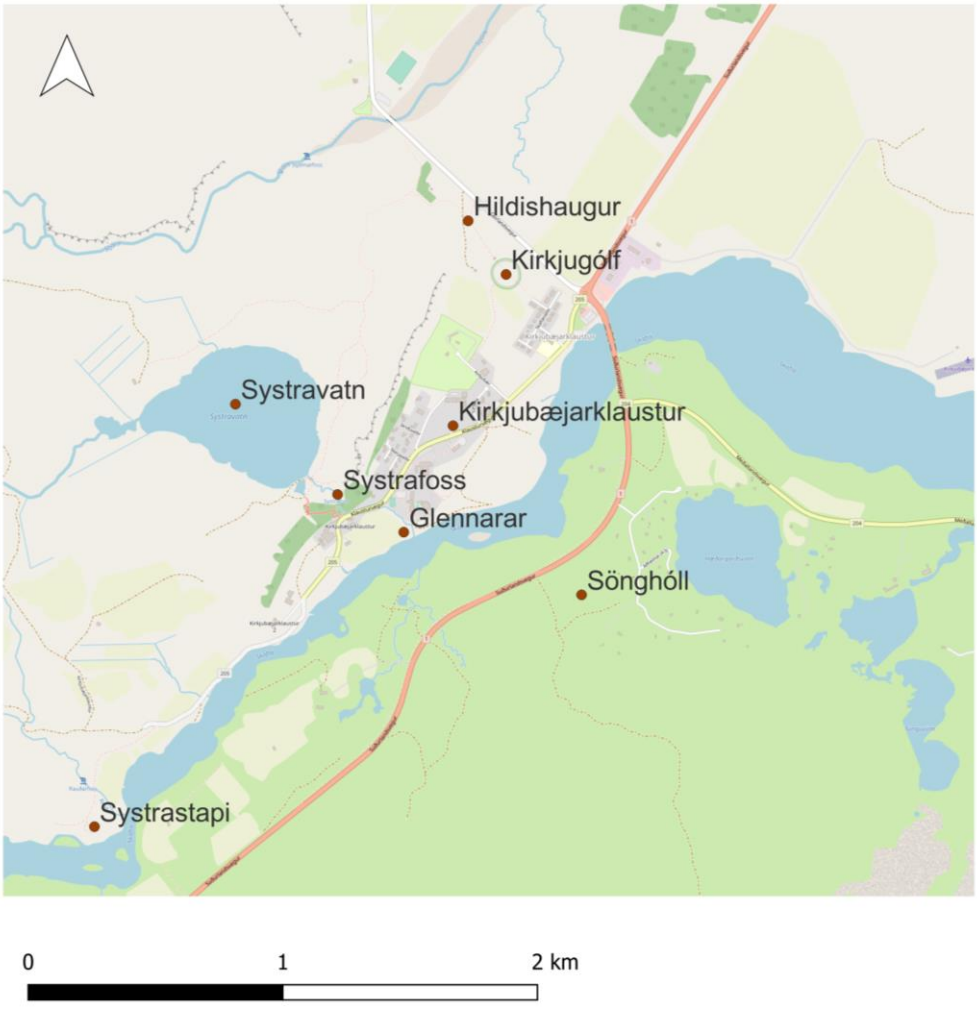

Figure 3. A map showing the location of Kirkjubæjarklaustur and the placenames discussed in the paper.

While the abovementioned stories emerged after the Reformation, at least one story of a placename by Kirkjubæjarklaustur can be traced to the medieval period. Systrastapi (Sister's Rock) refers to a natural palagonite rock hill, west of Kirkjubær. The name of this rock is said to originate from the story of a nun, who was condemned to death and burned at the stake in the year 1343. The narrative appears in annals that were compiled by the end of the 14th century (see Haug 1997; Rowe 2002). In one annal, the nun in question is named Kristín and is said to have made a pact with the Devil, defiled the eucharist by throwing it into the privy chamber, and lain with multiple laymen (Flatøbogens annaler 1888, p. 402). In another annal, the nun is unnamed but is said to have been guilty of blaspheming the pope (Lögmanns-annáll 1888, p. 274). In later, folkloristic versions of

the story, two nuns were burned together for these two reasons, respectively. Neither of the two annals mention Systrastapi; this reference is only made in later version where the burned remains of the nuns are said to have been buried in two mounds by Systrastapi, one of which remained evergreen while only thorns grew out of the other, which seems to suggest that after the Reformation one of the nuns was considered innocent but the other guilty (Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri II 1864, p. 72).

Although the story appears in medieval annals, it should be questioned whether it was based on true historical event; judging by the discrepancy between the two descriptions, they seem to be based on rumors or tell-tale stories rather than firsthand accounts. Based on written sources, no person was burned at the stake in Iceland until after the Reformation (see Kristjánsdóttir et al. 2018), and this would therefore have been an exceptional event, but the annals cite neither who ordered the sentence nor who carried it out. However, regardless of whether the account is historically accurate, the folkloristic version of the story demonstrates again how narratives related to the monastery were reevaluated in later centuries with allusion to the landscape. The folk tale does not specify which of the nuns was considered innocent after the Reformation, but perhaps it was not necessary; it may have been evident after the Reformation that blaspheming the pope was not an offence that warranted such a gruesome death.

6. Conclusions

In arguing that the landscape is, both physically and metaphorically, composed of layers of occupation and memory, Walsham (2011, p. 564) describes it as "a surface upon which society successively lays down fresh sediments of meaning without ever being able to remove or conceal existing ones, which remain as powerful latent presences". By reconstructing the biography of the landscape in which Kirkjubæjarklaustur was built in the late 12th century, this paper has demonstrated how its collective history constantly influenced the way in which it was understood and valued. First, the paper examined Landáma's narrative of pre-Christian settlers of Kirkjubær and its significance for its sacredness. It was argued that the perceived continuity of Christianity on the site was important for the monastic foundation and created a sense of rootedness. However, while the establishment of the monastery could be seen as a motif to underline the Christian legacy of the place, we can also discern echoes of the site's sacrality from the earlier past. Thus, in examining the construction of sacredness on the site of Kirkjubæjarklaustur, the relationship between the narratives in Landáma, the cultural memories and layers of occupation become difficult to disentangle.

The latter thread of this paper focused on placenames around Kirkjubæjarklaustur and associated folk tales. It demonstrated that although the ruins of the monastery are invisible above surface, its memory is deeply embedded in the landscape. While some features in the landscape may have conjured images of the holy Papar and pre-Christian churches, others conveyed comical tales of morally corrupt nuns and monks. This way, the monastic landscape channeled, and continues to channel, constant reimagination and revaluation of the past.

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Note

[1] The name Kirkjubæjarklaustur (e. Monastery of Kirkjubær) can be traced to the monastery that operated there in the medieval period. Kirkjubær is the farm on which the monastery was established.

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