

Project title: **'Monasteries on the Edge of the World: Church and Society in Late Medieval Iceland.'**

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Monasteries on the Edge of the World: Church and Society in Late Medieval Iceland is a project investigating the historical circumstances and development of monasteries in Iceland during the later Middle Ages, c. 1262 to 1550. These religious houses were relatively small and poor by the standards of late medieval Europe, but they still exerted a major influence on social and religious life in Iceland. They served as important schools and centers of learning, were prestigious locations for burial and commemoration of prominent Icelanders, and over the course of the Middle Ages became extremely wealthy and powerful landowners. This project makes use of narrative texts, annals, administrative documents, and legal codes to produce original published research in on Icelandic monasteries and their relationship to medieval society. The main source for the project is The Saga of Bishop Lárentíus, a mid-fourteenth century text about Bishop Lárentíus Kálfsson (1267-1331), an Icelandic bishop of the northern diocese of Hólar during a time of increasing Norwegian hegemony in the Icelandic church. During the course of his career, Lárentíus was a cathedral schoolmaster, a Benedictine monk, a canon law expert working for the archbishop of Niðarós, and a wandering teacher, before his final election as bishop. The project will result in full English translation of The Saga of Bishop Lárentíus with accompanying introduction and commentary. Alongside this saga, the project also makes innovative use of different types of administrative documents: contracts for formal schooling, wills and donations to ecclesiastical institutions, and financial arrangements for work, housing, retirement, and burial at monasteries and churches. Three journal articles and a book chapter will be published based on original work exploring these documents in light of the information provided by The Saga of Bishop Lárentíus. Pressing and underexplored questions will be answered and illuminated in the context of wider medieval discourses and practices. What did it mean for a wealthy Icelander to 'retire' into a monastery, and how did this practice relate to other ways lay people chose to live at or near religious houses? How did monastic education change and develop during the final century before the coming of the Lutheran faith? Did Icelanders make a clear distinction between different monastic orders, and how did these relate to broader medieval ideas about the various ways of living a holy life? This project shows how monasteries impacted Icelandic society in a far greater variety of ways than has traditionally been understood. They operated within local and international ecclesiastical networks, cultivated learning and cultural production, attracted the attention and resources of pious patrons, and exercised power in both secular and religious spheres. Their position on an isolated periphery of Europe makes their similarities to and differences from the wider movements of medieval Latin monasticism deeply important to our understanding of the Middle Ages as a whole.