

*Monasteries on the Edge of the World: Church and Society in Late Medieval Iceland* is a historical project investigating the monasteries and convents of the far northwestern corner of the medieval European world. In the scattered population of this isolated and rural society, the communities of monks and nuns were small and relatively poor, yet they had a powerful impact on the people around them. They were important schools and centers of learning, their graveyards were prestigious sites for wealthy patrons to seek burial in the shelter of continuous monastic prayer, and over the course of the Middle Ages, they became increasingly wealthy and powerful landowners.

While the image of the sequestered and industrious monk is an enduring symbol of the Middle Ages, very little is known about the Icelandic iteration of this compelling figure. What scholarship has been written about them is almost entirely in Icelandic, inaccessible to the general audience, and very difficult for scholars of the medieval church and religious life to engage with. This has meant that the ascetics of Iceland have not been able to take their due place in the historical tapestry of the Middle Ages: a very small place, but a significant one nonetheless. *Monasteries on the Edge of the World* is a step forward in finding space in the historical narrative for the monks, nuns, canons, hermits and anchorites of this tiny North Atlantic island.

This project has two core aims: to answer central questions about the nature of monastic culture in Iceland, and to make the sources for this fascinating field of study more accessible. It will take as its focus the later Middle Ages, c. 1262 to c. 1500, a period which has drawn the interest and attention of fewer historians of Iceland than the earlier Middle Ages, but which also preserves a rich variety of sources. The most important of these sources is *The Saga of Bishop Lárentíus*, a narrative about Lárentíus Kálfsson (1267-1331), who during the course of his career was a cathedral schoolmaster, a Benedictine monk, a canon law expert, a wandering teacher, and finally a bishop. The project will result in full English translation of *The Saga of Bishop Lárentíus*, bringing the most compelling and detailed surviving narrative about an Icelandic monk to a new and broader audience.

Alongside the story of this learned and headstrong monk, the project will illuminate a very different type of source: administrative documents. These include contracts for formal schooling, wills and donations to ecclesiastical institutions, and financial arrangements for work, housing, retirement, and burial at monasteries and churches; most of these texts have never been read by a non-Icelandic audience. With all of these tools in hand, important unanswered questions can be explored: What did it mean for a wealthy Icelander to 'retire' into a monastery, and why did lay people choose to live at or near religious houses? How did monastic education work? Did Icelanders make a clear distinction between different monastic orders, and how did these relate to distinctions made elsewhere in Europe?

This project shows how monasteries impacted Icelandic society in a far greater variety of ways than has been understood. They operated within local and international ecclesiastical networks, tying this tiny island to the culture and movements of the mainland; they cultivated learning and trained students, attracted pious patrons, and exercised power in both secular and religious spheres. Understanding how these monks, nuns, and other ascetics were distinct, and how they were similar to their southern peers, helps us better understand the Middle Ages as a whole.