

Arctic Garden of Delights:  
The Purpose of the Book of Reynistaður  
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In the late fourteenth century, a curious book was put together in Skagafjörður, Northern Iceland. It was written by a group of scribes, and they rummaged, it seems, through a fair part of the literature available to them in their mother-tongue, copied, excerpted, stitched passages together, and re-organized them. After the initial efforts of these scribes, others added supplementary information on slips that were inserted into the manuscript.<sup>1</sup> The book, therefore, much resembles a “work in progress” and does not have the look of a finished product, as is witnessed by its extraordinary codicological make-up: It consists now of 43 full-sized quarto-leaves, in addition to the inserted slips. The first 31 leaves form two large gatherings within which smaller, irregular gatherings are found. The last part of the manuscript has suffered some damage, leaving five lacunae and making the original collation of leaves difficult to ascertain. The book had begun to disintegrate when Árni Magnússon got hold of it around 1700, for he obtained the best part of it from Skálholt, but additional bifolia came to him from the farm of Gaulverjabær, and one bifolium was later discovered in a different manuscript. The codex from Skagafjörður now bears the shelfmark AM 764 4to in the

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1. On the working methods of the scribes, see Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, “Genbrug i Skagafjörður: Arbejdsmetoder hos skrivere i klostret på Reynistaður,” in *Reykholt som makt- og lærdomssenter i den islandske og nordiske kontekst*, ed. Else Mundal (Reykholt: Snorrastofa, 2006), pp. 141–53.

Arnarnagnæan Collection and is among the manuscripts that remained in Copenhagen after the division of the collection between Iceland and Denmark.

Scholars were long puzzled, if not irritated, by AM 764 4to, and this was due not only to its bizarre physical make-up, but also to its contents, which seemed to be a haphazard collection of encyclopedic text snippets and excerpts from saints' lives and pseudo-historical works thrown together for no apparent reason. But a close study of the contents and composition of the first half of the manuscript has revealed that instead of being a series of disjointed excerpts, it represents an ambitious attempt at compiling a universal history in Icelandic.<sup>2</sup> The book opens with a brief description of the world, and the diverse material that follows is then organized within the framework of *aetates mundi*—the ages of the world—an organizational principle widely used in medieval chronicles. The last age in the Icelandic chronicle is the eighth—which begins after Judgment Day and lasts forever. It does not mark the end of the book, however, for the universal chronicle is followed by more than twenty leaves, containing mainly saints' lives, miracles, and *exempla*. Some of this material is now lost due to the defective status of the manuscript.

Having established that AM 764 4o is not without rhyme or reason—the universal chronicle in the first half of the manuscript shows, on the contrary, an effort on the scribes' part to mould a collection of disparate sources into a structured whole—a natural next step in the inquiry might be to focus on the uses of the book and its intended audience. The preponderance of religious literature indicates that the book was aimed at clerics or cloistered people, rather than laymen, and the numerous sources on which the scribes drew suggest that the manuscript was conceived within an ecclesiastical establishment of some sort where the scribes had access to a considerable library.<sup>3</sup> Paleographic and orthographic analysis has revealed that AM 764 4to belongs to a group of manuscripts associated with the family of Akrrar in Blönduhlíð, which had connections to the Benedictine

2. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, "Universal History in Fourteenth-century Iceland. Studies in AM 764 4to," Ph. D. diss. University of London, 2000.

3. For an overview of the sources used for the compilation of the universal chronicle, see Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, "Genbrug i Skagafjörður," pp. 145–8.

nunnery at Reynistaður. The convent has therefore been seen as the likely home of a scribal school, which must have produced a considerable number of manuscripts; scholars have been able to assign fifteen extant manuscripts or fragments to members of the school, most of them lawbooks or books of religious texts.<sup>4</sup> As usual, one has to take into account that for each manuscript preserved, several have been lost. Scribes working at Reynistaður would naturally have had access to books owned by the convent, and the episcopal library at Hólar, as well as the monastic libraries of Þingeyrar and Möðruvellir, were not far away. The oldest surviving inventory for Reynistaður was done in 1525. It lists around 35 books, and among them are works which were used as sources for AM 764 4to, that is, *Vitae patrum*, *Nikulás saga*, *Martinus saga*, *Guðmundar saga biskups* and miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary.<sup>5</sup>

Reynistaður therefore seems to be the place where AM 764 4to was written, and I will from now on refer to the manuscript as the Book of Reynistaður, Reynistaðarbók. But was the nunnery also the place for which the book was intended? Or was it made to order, as one suspects was the case with the three exemplars of the Life of Saint Peter attributed to the same group of scribes? The latter does not seem particularly likely, given the rough and ready physical appearance of the book. At least one of the hands involved in the writing seems to be that of an untrained individual, and the overall impression is of a work in progress, even a draft, rather than a book intended for the market. One might still, of course, suggest that Reynistaðarbók was a prototype for a book that could have been commissioned, but it seems more natural to look for the inception of the work closer to the scribes' home. The manuscript represents a much edited selection of texts. This selection is unique, it seems, not least in the way it endeavors to keep women in focus. In what follows, my aim is to bring

4. Peter Foote, ed., *A Saga of St Peter the Apostle. Perg. 4:0 nr 19 in The Royal Library, Stockholm*, Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile 19 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger 1990), pp. 11–65; Stefán Karlsson, “Ritun Reykjarfjarðarbókar. Excursus: Bókagerð bænda,” *Opuscula* 4, Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana 30 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1970), pp. 120–40; Ólafur Halldórsson, “Úr sögu skinnbóka,” *Skírnir* 137 (1963), pp. 83–105.

5. *DI IX*, pp. 320–322. On the history of the nunnery, see Anna Sigurðardóttir, *Allt hafði annan róm áður í páfádóm: Nunnuklaustrin tvö á Íslandi á miðöldum og brot úr kristnisögu*, (Reykjavík: Kvinnasögusafn Íslands, 1988), pp. 85–179.

out the most significant evidence of this focus (it is not possible, in a short article, to treat all the material in the manuscript adequately), and subsequently to discuss the possible uses for which the book may have been intended.

### Women in the Old Testament

Let us begin with the first half of the manuscript, the universal chronicle. It is not easy to give a simple overview of the diverse material on which the scribes drew to sketch the history of mankind from the Creation till Judgment Day. The *aetates* scheme divides this linear history into eight parts: the first age begins with Adam, the second with Noah, the third with Abraham, the fourth with Moses, the fifth with King David, the sixth with the Incarnation. The seventh age concerns the indefinite period that elapses between the death of each individual and the Last Judgment. After a description of the coming of Antichrist and Judgment Day, the chronicle ends with a passage on the eternal bliss of the righteous in heaven.

This framework belongs to a long tradition which can be traced back to Saint Augustine and even beyond.<sup>6</sup> Icelanders will have encountered accounts of the *aetates mundi* in the works of Bede, Isidore, and Honorius, and the twelfth-century *Veraldar saga* is an early example of such a work written in the vernacular.<sup>7</sup> A universal history written into the frame of *aetates mundi* is above all the history of salvation, an illustration of the progress of mankind from the Fall to Redemption. Such an illustration inevitably draws on the examples of individuals—good as well as bad—in order to show God’s guiding hand at work. Even though the outline of such a narrative is given, and the form prescribed, there is nevertheless room for variation in

6. For an overview of universal histories, see Michael I. Allen, “Universal History 300–1000: Origins and Western Developments,” in *Historiography in the Middle Ages*, ed. Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, (Leiden: Brill 2003), pp. 17–42, and Anna-Dorothee v. den Brincken, *Studien zur lateinischen Weltchronistik bis in das Zeitalter Ottos von Freising* (Düsseldorf: Michael Triltsch, 1957). On *aetates*-schemes, see Roderich Schmidt, “Aetates mundi: Die Weltalter als Gliederungsprinzip der Geschichte,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 67 (1955–6), pp. 288–317.

7. On the development of the genre in Iceland, see Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, “Um aldir alda: Veraldarsögur miðalda og íslenskar aldartölur,” *Ritið* 2005 no. 3, pp. 111–33.

the way the message is conveyed, not least when choosing exemplary characters and anecdotes.

In *Reynistaðarbók*, the Old Testament provides the backbone for the narrative of the first four ages of the world and well into the fifth. The method used by the scribes is to cull narrative passages from the Bible and link them with genealogies to keep the chronological thread. The line of history is thus maintained through references to a chronology based on counting the generations from Adam and on calculations of the number of years within each age of the world.

The main characteristic of the *Reynistaðarbók* chronicle is brevity—the scribes do not seem to have room for many anecdotes, and those they include are usually drastically shortened—sometimes the stories are not really told, but merely alluded to. The information on Job may serve as an example:

Sonaron Esau var Job er mjök var freistaðr. *Ymago mundi* segir at hann væri síðan konungr þrjátígi ára. Hann átti sjau sonu ok þrjár dætur, sjau þúsundir sauða ok þrjár þúsundir úlbalda, fjórar þúsundir yxna ok svá mǫrg asna. Þetta var hans eign. (3r<sup>27-29</sup>)<sup>8</sup>

Job is here merely a link in the genealogical chain, and his loss and suffering are not mentioned; it is only said that he was “severely tested.” Given these editorial constraints, it is instructive to see what information the scribes chose to retain. It comes as no surprise that they included key passages on Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, Abraham, Moses, and David, since these characters or events each signal the beginning of a new *aetas*. In the hexaemeron narrative in the first age, the text is also amplified with a considerable amount of encyclopedic material. Other “standard” narratives, such as the story of Cain and Abel, the building of the tower of Babel, and Jacob’s wrestling with the angel are also included. But when one reads these sparse accounts, it is striking how conscious the scribes seem to be of

8. In the references to the manuscript I have normalized the orthography. “The grandson of Esau was Job, who was severely tested. *Imago mundi* says he was subsequently king for thirty years. He had seven sons and three daughters, seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels, four thousand cattle and an equal number of asses. That was his property.” Cf. *Imago mundi* III.8.

keeping women in the picture. Even though the genealogies are traced through the male line, the scribes usually take care to mention wives, sisters, or daughters of the main Old Testament male characters. This, for instance, is the information on the people in the Ark:

Þá var Núi sex hundruð vetra er hann gekk í ǫrkina. Kona hans hét Poarþa. Þrír synir hans, Kam, Sem, Jafed, gengu í ǫrkina. Kona Kams hét Katafloa, kona Sem Parþia, kona Jafed Fliva (2v<sup>25-27</sup>).<sup>9</sup>

Later we learn of Sarah, Abraham's wife, Cetora his mistress, and Hagar the servant, who bore Ishmael. The fate of Lot's wife is recounted, we hear of Rebecca, the wife of Isaac, and her giving birth to the twins Esau and Jacob. It is mentioned that Jacob had as wives two sisters, Leah and Rachel, and the fact that Rachel was infertile. The third *aetas* ends with a brief mention of Joseph—which includes his wife, Asenek—and an account of Levi's descendants down to Aron and Moses who, it is said, are the sons of Amram and his wife Joabeth.

#### The one who stands out—Judith

The fourth age begins with the story of Moses, which ends with a list of the Ten Commandments and is followed by a brief account of Joshua. The scribes then explain that after Joshua and until the reign of Saul the Jews were governed by judges. This information is followed by a few stories set during that time: 1) The rape of the young wife in Gabaon, which sparked the war of the tribes of Israel, a tale which is not scriptural but taken from Honorius' *Speculum ecclesiae*; 2) The death of Abimelech, son of Gideon, at the hands of a woman (Idc 9.5, 53); 3) Samson and Delilah (Idc 15.16–18, 16.4–30); 4) The Ark of the Covenant taken by the Philistines and brought to Asedod (I Sm 4.10–11, 5.1–7); 5) Samuel born to Helkana and Anna, who had been barren (I Sam 1.2, 2.1). Four out of these

9. "Noah was six hundred years old when he boarded the Ark. His wife was called Poarþa. Three of his sons, Ham, Shem, Japheth, boarded the Ark. Ham's wife was Chatafloa, Shem's wife was Parþia, Japhet's wife was Fliva." On the tradition of the women's names, see Francis Lee Utley, "The One Hundred and Three Names of Noah's Wife," *Speculum* 16 (1941), pp. 426–52.

five stories involve women, and three concern violent intercourse between the sexes.

Those three stories foreshadow the longest story in the whole chronicle, which appears in the fifth age and is exceptional in that the scribes copied it more or less complete, without major abridgment. This is the deuterocanonical Book of Judith, the story of the pious widow in Bethulia who saves her people by killing Holofernes, the leader of the Assyrian army besieging the town. The fact that the story of Judith is included, almost *in extenso*, indicates the importance attached to it by the scribes or those who commissioned the writing of the manuscript.<sup>10</sup> Wherein lies the appeal of this story for the prospective users of the manuscript? There are no glosses accompanying the text in the manuscript nor any kind of explanatory prose, so one has to deduce the meaning it had for its fourteenth-century Icelandic readers/listeners from the context in which it is put within the book and from the exegetical tradition of the medieval church.

Judith became one of the most celebrated biblical figures in the Middle Ages (and she held a strong attraction for artists and sculptors for much longer, as evident from the numerous works of art that depict her, usually in the act of beheading Holofernes). In medieval exegesis, her chastity was emphasized and juxtaposed with the lustfulness of Holofernes as well as with the frailty of Eve. Judith became the embodiment of virtue and the conqueror of evil—her victory over Holofernes symbolizes the victory of the Christian Church over its persecutors, as well as that of virtue over vice. She was seen as an Old Testament prefiguration of the Virgin Mary, and the image based on Genesis 3.15 of the woman crushing the serpent's head was applied to both of them.<sup>11</sup> Judith differs from Mary, however, in an obvious way, in that she is not a virgin; she had been married and borne a son. In the story, much emphasis is put on her chaste conduct in her widowhood, but the sexual attraction she holds for Holofernes is nevertheless the driving force behind the plot. She is described as being the most beautiful of women, and her allure is sanctioned by

10. The text is edited in Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, "The Book of Judith: A Medieval Icelandic Translation," *Gripla* 11 (2000), pp. 79–124.

11. Marina Warner, *Alone of all her sex: The myth and cult of the Virgin Mary*, 2nd ed. (London: Picador, 1985), p. 55; Margarita Stocker, *Judith: Sexual Warrior. Women and Power in Western Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 11.

God, for it will bring about the downfall of the enemy. Her story is therefore the antithesis to the story of Samson and Delilah, briefly touched on in *Reynistaðarbók*, where Delilah uses the power she wields over Samson to betray him into the hands of his enemies.

Another important aspect of Judith is her relationship with the elders of her own community. She overrides their decisions, sets off on a different course of action in order to get the siege lifted, and the Jewish leaders are unable to stop her; she expressly forbids the elders to monitor her actions and is accompanied on her mission only by her maidservant. The narrative is often reminiscent of a folk-tale, and here it is a tale with a heroine and her helper who free their people, rather than a hero who in the end wins the princess and half the kingdom.<sup>12</sup> The tale has a well-balanced gallery of characters: on one side there are Judith and her maid and the Jewish people under the leadership of Ozias, on the other Holofernes with his eunuch servant and the Assyrian army. In between comes Achior the Assyrian, who speaks up against Holofernes, is thrown out of the Assyrian camp, and ends up on the Jewish side. The narrative has a chiasmic structure and a fair amount of suspense, culminating in the decapitation of Holofernes. Everything is retained in the Icelandic version except prayers and lengthy speeches, indicating a preoccupation with the narrative strand of the text.

The Old Testament books of Esther and Judith were natural texts to turn to when seeking models for medieval women, particularly women of authority. In her study of women's involvement in the production of medieval literature, Joan M. Ferrante points out that women sought to, and were encouraged to, identify with renowned female characters of ancient and biblical history:

What is particularly striking in the letters and in texts commissioned by women is how much women, even those playing male roles in secular government or rising above sex in their religious lives, are

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12. On narrative technique in the story see Lois Alonso-Schökel, "Narrative Structures in the Book of Judith" in *Protocol of the Eleventh Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture* (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1975), pp. 1–20; Toni Craven, *Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 70 (Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1983).

aware of themselves as women and identify with powerful or effective, not oppressed, women in history—with Mary as queen of heaven or mother of God; with Judith and Esther, who saved their people; with the queen of Sheba, who traveled far to hear Solomon’s wisdom; with the Christian empresses Helena, who found the true cross, Galla Placidia and Pulcheria, who fought heresy, and queen Clothild, who converted her husband and thereby his people. These are women to be reckoned with, women for a woman in power to identify with.<sup>13</sup>

Ferrante mentions that Hrabanus Maurus dedicated his commentaries on Esther and Judith to the empress Judith, the second wife of Charlemagne’s son. The extraordinary virtues of the heroines make them “models for men as well as women, but [their] actions make them particularly apt models for the empress,” or so Hrabanus thought.<sup>14</sup>

Judith must have been considered an apt model for members of the religious community at Reynistaður—or her story would not occupy such a central place in the manuscript. One imagines she would have appealed to the nuns on several levels. The traditional exegetical interpretation of her as an example of chastity, where her beauty serves no purpose but the one chosen by God, is obvious in the context of Reynistaðarbók where men and women of the past are used to illustrate sinful or virtuous behaviour. But the sheer amount of space devoted to Judith in the book may also indicate that the text was valued as very entertaining reading, and last but not least the nuns may have appreciated a tale of a woman who was, like many of them, not new in the world—a woman who through widowhood had acquired at least a quasi-independent status, and honor to boot, and consequently could take action when she felt the actions of the men fell short, both in the practical terms of lifting the siege of the enemy, and when it came to obeying and honoring God.

13. Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex. Women’s Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 7. Ferrante’s list is of course selective but we might note that Mary, Judith, Helena and the queen of Sheba are all mentioned in Reynistaðarbók. On Old Testament parallels to Judith cf. Sidnie Ann White, “In the Steps of Jael and Deborah: Judith as Heroine,” in “*No One Spoke Ill of Her*”: *Essays on Judith*, ed. James C. VanderKam, Society of Biblical Literature. Early Judaism and its Literature 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 5–16. For a feminist reading of the significance of Judith, see Stocker, *Judith*, e.g., pp. 12–3.

14. Ferrante, *To the Glory*, p. 55.

**Women and visions**

The story of Judith is preceded and followed by stories of powerful rulers; the chapter immediately before is taken from the Book of Daniel and contains the famous tale of King Belshazzar and the writing on the wall. After Judith, we find accounts of Alexander the Great, the kings of Britain, and Roman emperors. In the sixth age, the chronicle switches again to biblical and hagiographic sources where the Virgin Mary inevitably enters the scene with the annunciation and the birth of Jesus. The incarnation marks the beginning of the sixth age and it is followed by chapters from the apocryphal *Pseudo-Matthew Gospel* (*De infantia salvatoris*) and further sections from the Gospels. It is noteworthy in this material that Mary is present in most of the passages chosen. She and Joseph naturally play a part in the stories from *De infantia salvatoris*, which depict miracles performed by the baby Jesus on the way to Egypt. Of the Gospel stories, those most extensively related in *Reynistaðarbók* are the one about Jesus twelve years old in the synagogue and the story of the wedding at Cana. In both cases, the narrative involves a dialogue between mother and son, giving Mary a voice. The chronicle gives a brief summary of Jesus' miracles, ending with a remark on Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. At that point two miracles associated with Martha are inserted into the Gospel material, both taken from *Marthe saga ok Marie Magdalene*. Christ's crucifixion and ascension are treated in a brief manner, but when it comes to the assumption of the Virgin, the scribes copy a condensed version of Elisabeth of Schönau's vision, a text preserved more fully in *Guðmundar saga biskups* by Arngrímur Brandsson. In *Reynistaðarbók*, the vision is introduced with these words:

Sjau árum eptir þíning Guðs var sæl mæri Maria uppnúmin, en þaðan á fertuganda degi tók hon holds upprisu, þat er tveimur náttum eptir Mattheusmessu. Var þat langan tíma mjök óvíst fyrir alþýðu, en hversu þat varð ljóst skal hér næst greina (16r<sup>14-17</sup>)<sup>15</sup>

15. "Seven years after the passion of God the Blessed Virgin Mary was assumed [in Heaven], and on the fortieth day thereafter she rose [from death] in the flesh, that is two nights after the feast of St Matthew. This occurrence was for a long time unclear to most people, but we will now relate how it was revealed." The text was edited by Ole Widding

It is explained that the Virgin starts to appear to Elisabeth frequently. On one occasion, instructed by her spiritual father, Elisabeth ventures to ask her whether, God willing, she would tell her whether she had been resurrected in spirit only, or in body as well as in spirit. Elisabeth then adds: “Sþyr ek fyrir þá sœk þessa hlutar þína mildi, at mér er sagt at eigi finnisk skrifat í bókum heilagra feðra af þinni uppnumning” (16r<sup>31-32</sup>).<sup>16</sup> The Virgin answers: “Þat sem þú spyr máttu eigi at sinni vís verða en þó er þat fyrir ætlat at þessi hlutr skal fyrir þik birtaz ok auðsýnaz” (16r<sup>33-34</sup>).<sup>17</sup> The vision proper then follows a little later on. It is important here that Elisabeth is chosen as the authority through which the knowledge of the Assumption is to be revealed. She gains access to a truth which had eluded the Church Fathers.

The rest of the account of the sixth age is largely taken up by a list of popes and emperors based on Martin of Troppau’s *Chronicon pontificum et imperatorum*, to which is added information on other prominent leaders of the church. This account is supplemented here and there by short anecdotes or *exempla* linked in some way to the person in question; the longest of these are attached to Jerome and Gregory the Great.

It was common for universal chroniclers to bring the history down to their own time and stop there, in the sixth age. In the frequent recycling of material that is characteristic of the genre, subsequent writers would continue the thread, tracing the narrative further, to their times. But sometimes the authors had one eye on the world beyond, as it were, and gave some indication of events to come. That is the case in Reynistaðarbók. The chronological thread ends with pope Clement (d. 1270), but before leaving the sixth age the scribes relate how it will eventually come to an end with the coming of Antichrist. They then turn to otherworldly matters with the remark that the seventh age is not in this world—it seems to run concurrently with the first six ages:

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and Hans Bekker-Nielsen, “Elisabeth of Schönau’s Visions in an Old Icelandic Manuscript, AM 764, 40,” *Opuscula* 2.1, Bibliotheca Arnarnagnæana 25.1 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1961), pp. 93–6.

16. “I ask your kindness about this matter, because I am told nothing is found in the writings of holy fathers concerning your assumption.”

17. “That which you ask, you are not yet to know, but it is nevertheless intended that it shall be shown and revealed to you [or: through you].”

each man enters the seventh age on his death as his soul begins the waiting for Judgment Day:<sup>18</sup>

Af sjaunda heimsaldri kunnum vér fátt at segja því at hann er eigi í þessu lífi heldr í ǫðru sem vér gátum í fyrstu ok byrjaz á dauða-stundu hvers manns, þá er sál ok líkami gera sinn skilnat svá sem veröldinni er vel kunnigt at holdit ferr í mold ok verðr at ǫngu en ǫndin ferr ósýniliga úr þessari veröld ok í þann stað er hverr hefir sér til verkat. (22r<sup>18-21</sup>)<sup>19</sup>

To illustrate the different dwelling places of the souls, the scribes present three short visions. The first one tells of a woman who indulged in carnal sins so that her soul was committed to hell upon death. Her daughter is visited in sleep by a handsome man, who leads her through a valley of horror and disgust. There the daughter sees her mother being immersed in a fiery pit and sucked by serpents. The next story is preceded by a comment on the importance of suffering and the ways in which the living can free souls in purgatory from suffering. The story then recounts the vision of a Roman lady, who is met by a deceased woman describing to her the torments of purgatory. In the final *exemplum*, the daughter of a laborer is led in her sleep through the valley of Paradise, where she meets her deceased father.

The tradition of using visions to illustrate the afterlife goes back to Pope Gregory the Great, one of the “fathers of purgatory.” When faced with the problem of how to describe the horrors and delights of the other worlds in his *Dialogues*, Gregory resorted to storytelling. He described the purgation of sins (which he believed would happen in the place where they were committed) through a series of *exempla*. This way of conveying the agonies awaiting sinners set the pattern for descriptions of the Otherworld throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>20</sup> The scribes of AM 764 4to follow this tradition, but their choice of stories

18. Such a scheme could be modelled on Bede, cf. Bede Venerabilis, *Opera Pars VI. Opera didascalica 2*, ed. Ch. W. Jones, CCSL 123B (Turnholt: Brepols, 1977), pp. 536–7.

19. “We cannot say much about the seventh age of the world, for it is not in this life but in the other life, as we stated previously, and begins at each man’s hour of death, when body and soul part, as is universally known: the flesh is laid in earth and perishes, but the spirit leaves this world invisibly and enters the dwelling place which each man has won for himself.”

20. Jacques Le Goff, *La naissance du Purgatoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), pp. 124–8.

nevertheless departs from the line taken by Gregory. For whereas Gregory described the Otherworld as seen through the eyes of men, usually monks or clerics, the main characters in the miracles included in AM 764 4to are women. This is in line with the development of visionary literature. Early examples of the genre centered around men as visionaries, but visions experienced by women became gradually more frequent, and from the thirteenth century onwards the majority of visions were attributed to women.<sup>21</sup>

After having thus outlined the cosmology of the Otherworld, the scribes turn again to the sixth age and Judgment Day. The chronicle ends with a passage on the eternal bliss of the righteous in the heavenly Paradise, based, as are the passages on Antichrist and Judgment Day, on a chapter from *Compendium Theologicae Veritatis* by the Dominican Hugo Ripelin of Strasbourg.<sup>22</sup>

### The second half—more *exempla*

Thus far we have seen how *exempla* and other narrative passages are used to enliven the rather dry treatment of world history presented in the first half of Reynistaðarbók, as well as to illustrate virtues, vices, reward, and punishment. In the latter half of the manuscript, *exempla* really come into their own, for narratives of that kind are from then on the mainstay of the text. One might say that they develop the theme introduced in the visions of the seventh age, namely that of the relationship between this life and the other, emphasising the importance of virtuous conduct as a guarantee against torments in the afterlife.

The choice of material here may again offer interesting clues about the intended audience of the book. There are several lacunae in this part of the manuscript, as was mentioned above, so it is not possible to assess the make-up of these sections with complete accuracy. It is nevertheless bound to strike any observer that the material is unusual for an Icelandic manuscript, as several of the texts are not found else-

21. Peter Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter*, Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 23 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1981), pp. 226–8.

22. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, “Dómsdagslýsing í AM 764 4to,” *Opuscula* 10, Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana 40 (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1996), pp. 186–93. On Ripelin in Iceland, see Ian McDougall, “Latin Sources of the Old Icelandic *Speculum Penitentis*,” *Opuscula* 10, Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana 40 (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1996), pp. 136–85.

where (this is also true of the Judith text discussed earlier). These are texts involving Saints Ursula, Sunnifa, Walburga, Cuthbert, Edward the Confessor, Remigius, and Malcus, all saints whose veneration is not widely attested in Iceland.<sup>23</sup> In addition, we find miracles of Mary and Saint Peter and some other short passages. The last five leaves of the manuscript contain texts of a different kind, annals and genealogies, for example, which will have to be left out of the present discussion.<sup>24</sup>

It is regrettable that the material on Saint Sunnifa has been almost entirely lost due to a lacuna in the manuscript; only the last few lines of a miracle attributed to her have been preserved (fol. 35<sup>r1-16</sup>). Immediately before the lacuna, there are six miracles of Saint Walburga (two of them fragmentary), and it is therefore not unreasonable to assume that the manuscript likewise originally contained a group of miracles connected with Sunnifa, the only Scandinavian female saint before the emergence of the Birgitta cultus in the fifteenth century. The legend of Sunnifa and the saints of Selja was included by Oddr Snorrason in his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* but that text has no parallels with the material in *Reynistaðarbók*. The legend has obvious similarities with the story of Ursula and the eleven thousand maidens which is retold briefly in *Reynistaðarbók* (fol. 31<sup>v14-24</sup>). That story has, again, links with Elisabeth of Schönau, who provided the source for *Reynistaðarbók*'s account of the assumption of the Virgin. Elisabeth became associated with the legend when she was asked if she could throw light on the confusing remains of the martyrs—and duly responded with an account of a vision she had experienced. The Ursula-text in *Reynistaðarbók* does not refer to the vision, but the mention of her in the manuscript is a testament to an interest in the female saint, and provides, like Elisabeth's vision of the Assumption earlier, a connection to the body of legends and religious writings associated with religious women in Germany. That connection also manifests itself in the inclusion of

23. Margaret Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland: Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400*, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 78 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1994), p. 35.

24. There will not be room for a discussion on the English saints, Edward and Cuthbert, here. For information on that material, see Christine E. Fell, "Anglo-Saxon saints in Old Norse sources and vice versa," in *Proceedings of the Eighth Viking Congress. Århus 24-31 August 1977*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Peter Foote and Olaf Olsen (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), pp. 95-106.

the miracles of Saint Walburga, one of the Anglo-Saxon nuns who played an important part in Boniface's mission to Germany in the eighth century.<sup>25</sup> Walburga accompanied Saint Lioba when she went to become the first abbess at Tauberbischofsheim, and their connection is hinted at towards the end of one of the miracles in *Reynistaðarbók*: “Ok er pílargrímur sællar Walburge hafði úti svá skrifaðan atburð gerði Liubila abbadís ok allir þeir er heyrðu [...] margfaldar þakkir hæsta Guði . . .” (34r<sup>22-24</sup>).<sup>26</sup> Walburga went on to become an abbess at the double monastery of Heidenheim. Schönau was also a double house, and it has been argued that such establishments were the most conducive to women's learning and book-production.<sup>27</sup> It is therefore not unexpected that material selected to inspire religious women should stem, ultimately, from such an environment.

The women saints, then, are presumably included in *Reynistaðarbók* because they are women, representing the tradition of the female religious to which the Benedictine nuns at *Reynistaður* belonged. But what are we to think of the inclusion of Saints Remigius and Malcus? They are, on the face of it, difficult to place in any direct context with Icelandic nuns in the fourteenth century—the one bishop in Rheims, the other a monk, presumably in Egypt. These texts need to be viewed in light of their content and taken into consideration alongside other texts in the manuscript.

*Remigius saga* is not preserved elsewhere, and a direct source has not been found, but according to the *Handlist* the text consists of material ultimately derived from Remigius' *Vita* by Bishop Hincmar of Rheims.<sup>28</sup> The saga naturally follows the pattern for the life of a confessor; we learn of Remigius' birth and youth, his election as bishop, his exemplary conduct and his miracles. Based on what we

25. See Kirsten Wolf, “A Fragmentary Excerpt on Saint Walburga in AM 764 4to,” *Gripla* 11 (2000), pp. 209–20, where the text is edited.

26. “And when the end of this event, which we have described, had come for the pilgrim of the Blessed Walburga, abbess Lioba and all those who had heard gave [...] multiple thanks to the highest God.”

27. Alison I. Beach, *Women as Scribes: Book Production and Monastic Reform in Twelfth-Century Bavaria*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), e.g. pp. 2–5.

28. Ole Widding, Hans Bekker-Nielsen, and L. K. Schook, “The Lives of the Saints in Old Norse Prose: A Handlist,” *Mediaeval Studies* 25 (1963), p. 331. The saga was edited by C. R. Unger in *Heilagra manna sögur. Fortællinger og legender om hellige mænd og kvinder*, 2 vols. (Christiania [Oslo]: Bentzen, 1877), vol. 2, pp. 222–7.

know of the scribes' treatment of sources we may assume that here, as elsewhere, they used but a selection of passages from the material available to them. In the selection from the Life of Remigius, women seem, again, to be favored. This is evident in the description of the circumstances surrounding Remigius' conception and birth, where the reactions and feelings of his mother Cilinia in particular are dwelt on. And in the sparse collection of miracles one in particular stands out on account of its length—a story describing how Remigius cures a girl possessed by an evil spirit. So although we cannot answer the question why Bishop Remigius rather than someone else should be included in this manuscript, his story seems to have been subjected to the same selective editorial policy as we have seen applied to the biblical material in *Reynistaðarbók*.

The story of Saint Malchus was perhaps more directly relevant to the *Reynistaður* community since it concerns the wordly temptations that visit those who have chosen to renounce the world and enter a monastery.<sup>29</sup> The young Malchus enters a community of monks, but after several years the thought of his inheritance begins to prey on his mind and he decides to leave the monastery, much against the advice of his abbot. Before he reaches his old home he is taken captive by heathens, together with a woman, and is forced to live with her in a hut and tend to the sheep. Malchus and the woman agree to live together in chastity, thus deceiving their captors. They manage to escape and Malchus returns to his old abbey while the woman enters a nunnery. The fate of Malchus and his unnamed woman friend found resonance with Abelard and Heloise<sup>30</sup> and could have gone down equally well with Icelanders who had taken vows. The story of Malchus is in *Reynistaðarbók* attributed to Saint Jerome, as are some of the other stories of hermits included in the manuscript.<sup>31</sup> Several of these cover similar ground as the story of Malchus. One (25r<sup>14</sup>–25v<sup>25</sup>) describes a young man who enters a monastery but is lured by the devil

29. C. R. Unger, ed., *Heilagra manna sögur*, vol. 1, pp. 437–46.

30. Abelard, *The Story of Abelard's Adversities. A Translation with Notes of the Historia calamitatum with a preface by Étienne Gilson*, trans. J. T. Muckle (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1964), pp. 73–4. Cf. Ferrante, *To the Glory*, p. 57.

31. These derive from *Verba seniorum*, the popular collection of tales of religious men, printed among other *exempla* in Unger's *Heilagra manna sögur* under the collective heading of *Vitae patrum*.

to return to debauchery. In another (26v<sup>1-28</sup>), a hermit in the desert is visited by a woman who was hired by his enemies to seduce him. He resists the temptation by holding his fingers over fire throughout the night. Other *exempla* focus more on virtues central to monastic discipline, such as obedience and humility. Among these is the story of the nun (30v<sup>7-31r<sup>3</sup></sup>) who feigns idiocy and is bullied by the other sisters, although she takes on everyone's task. Men are the protagonists in most of these stories, but their message can frequently be directed to nuns as well as monks.

Apart from the tales which directly address the circumstances of people who entered religious orders, the majority of the narratives in the latter half of the manuscript concern the fate of the soul after death. This theme is initiated by the visions in the seventh *aetas*, and it is continued here in more *exempla* of the same type as well as in texts of a slightly different origin, such as the debate between body and soul which is found on fol. 30r<sup>5-30v<sup>6</sup></sup>. That text is best known in the version contained in the Norwegian *Book of Homilies* and the Reynistaðarbók version is much condensed by comparison. It nevertheless retains the core of the initial speech given by the soul, where it (or she) chastises the body for its various sinful inclinations and lack of concern for the consequences of those vices for the soul herself, who now misses Paradise because of the wrongdoings she blames on the body. The body retaliates and complains that he has merely followed where the soul has led, but that part of the debate is almost entirely omitted in Reynistaðarbók. One wonders if it is because of the unfavorable comparison the body draws between the soul and Eve: “Adamr myndi ok eigi syndgask ef eigi væri ormr ok áeggjan konu, svá eggjaðir þú mik.”<sup>32</sup>

The ranting of the soul against avarice, envy and gluttony reverberates in a couple of *exempla*, where the conduct of rich men is criticized. One of them is the popular tale of the rich man who died and whose heart was discovered not in his body, but in his treasure chest. Another well-known anecdote describes how a rich man turns his father out of

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32. “Also, Adam would not have sinned, were it not for the serpent and the incitement of a woman; thus you egged me on.” Ole Widding and Hans Bekker-Nielsen, “A Debate of the Body and the Soul in Old Norse Literature,” *Mediaeval Studies* 21 (1959), p. 286. I have normalized the orthography.

the house, but is brought to his senses by his young son, who asks him whether that is the way he expects to be treated when he becomes old and grey.<sup>33</sup> Complementing these illustrations of reprehensible conduct are further visionary *exempla*, including a couple that describe the visions of monks, who are shown the fate of fellow religious.

### The uses of the book

It has not been possible in this brief survey to take all the material in *Reynistaðarbók* into account. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that the tales included in the manuscript could well have served the needs of a religious community of women. But how was it used? It is possible that the book was intended for the communal reading prescribed in the Rule of Saint Benedict. The heterogenous nature of the material used and the somewhat aggressive editorial policy employed in its compilation means, however, that *Reynistaðarbók* cannot be considered a typical work of that kind. Much of the material included in the universal chronicle in the first half of the manuscript is not well suited to reading at mealtimes; the narrative thread is often sacrificed for the sake of brevity and factual information takes preference over style. Many passages are hardly more than lists of people or events. The catalogue of popes and emperors has already been mentioned, as have genealogies from the Old Testament. One could also point to a section on the apostles and their fate, lists of Church Fathers and their most important works, a catalogue of the names of the Virgin Mary, and lists of the Ten Commandments and the books of the Pentateuch.

One of the characteristics of these lists is the attention given to information concerning the liturgy—and, to a lesser extent, to the odd article of canon law and morsels of church history. There are a lot of such additions to the list of popes. The reader learns, for instance, that Sixtus I introduced the singing of *Sanctus* at every mass, that Anitius I ordered clerics to wear tonsure, and that Socher I ordered nuns to carry a veil. Even in the sparse account of the first four ages of the world, the scribes occasionally see it fit to link biblical events to liturgical feasts in the church calendar, stating, for example, that

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33. Cf. Frederic C. Tubach, *Index exemplorum. A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1969), nos. 2499 and 2001, respectively.

*primus dies seculi* was the day three nights before the feast of Saint Benedict (1v<sup>38-39</sup>) and that Noah stepped off the Ark two nights before the feast of the apostles Philip and James (3r<sup>1</sup>). The reader also learns the circumstances of the composition of the Old Testament canticles *Confitebor*, *Ego dixi*, *Exultavit cor meum*, *Cantemus*, *Domine audivi* and *Audite coeli quae loquor*. According to the *Breviarium Nidrosiense* these were the canticles to be sung at Lauds during weekdays.<sup>34</sup> Later in the manuscript, an account of the killing of the Innocents in the sixth *aetas* is supplemented by this note: “Tölu þessara sveina kunnu vér eigi greina, en sú tala er stendr í níunda responsorio er svá heitir: centum xl iiii milia, heyrir víst eigi til tölu barnanna heldr er hon sett in Apocalipsi Iohannis fyrir stórmerkis kragt” (14v<sup>34-37</sup>).<sup>35</sup> The “ninth responsorium” refers to the Feast of the Holy Innocents (*ad vesperam*), where the number 140 is given.<sup>36</sup>

This concern for liturgical matters reminds us that knowledge of the liturgy was an important element of monastic education, in particular for pupils who had decided to enter a monastery as novices.<sup>37</sup> The picture of the uses of *Reynistaðarbók* could have served gradually becomes clearer. What emerges is a manuscript which attempts to cater to the educational needs of cloistered women. Such books became more frequent as the Middle Ages wore on, as new intellectual and devotional currents spread, and as an increasing number of women took the veil, thus providing a milieu for the development of literary genres or types of books specifically suited for this new audience. The *Speculum virginum* is one such work, which is constructed as a dialogue between the young nun Theodora and the priest Peregrinus. The work was probably compiled in the middle of the twelfth century<sup>38</sup> and is preserved

34. Hans Buarv and Baltzer M. Børsum, *Appendix to Breviarium Nidrosiense*, (Oslo: Børsum, 1964), pp. 70–1.

35. “We do not know the number of these boys, but the number which is found in the ninth responsorio, centum xl iiii milia, does not refer to the number of the children. It is written in Apocalipsi Johannis in expression of powerful events.”

36. Lilli Gjerløw, ed., *Ordo Nidrosiensis ecclesiae (Orðubók)* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1968), p. 161.

37. Susan Boynton, “Training for the Liturgy as a Form of Monastic Education” in *Medieval Monastic Education*, ed. George Ferzoco and Carolyn Muessig (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), pp. 7–20. See also, e.g., Ida-Christine Riggert, *Die Lüneburger Frauenklöster* (Hannover: Hahn, 1996), pp. 218–9.

38. Jutta Seyfarth, ed., *Speculum virginum*, CCCM 5 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1990), pp. 32–7.

in over fifty manuscripts, some of which contain the work translated into a vernacular language; there is, for instance, a Swedish translation made in the fifteenth century at the Birgittine house at Vadstena.<sup>39</sup> The discussion between Peregrinus and Theodora revolves around the various aspects of virginity, chastity, and life under a religious rule, and much attention is given to virtues and vices. To illustrate the virtues, women from the history of mankind are presented, among them the Old Testament heroes Judith and Jael.<sup>40</sup> The most important role model for virgins is, however, the Virgin Mary, and she is accordingly given ample room in the book. The *Speculum virginum* also contains a section on the hexaameron and the six ages of the world, which is intended to show how the spirit gradually conquers over the flesh, how the virtues gain ground as mankind progresses through history. There are obvious parallels here with *Reynistaðarbók*, but the form of the two works is very different.

Another twelfth-century work designed for women might provide a closer parallel to *Reynistaðarbók*, although the Icelandic work inevitably pales by the comparison. This is Herrad of Hohenberg's *Hortus deliciarum*, an astonishing encyclopedic compilation, which was destroyed, sadly, in the late nineteenth century and is known to us only in a reconstruction. It was a large and beautifully illuminated book of over 300 leaves, containing among other things narratives from the Old Testament with allegorical interpretations, Gospel narratives with commentary, material from the Acts of the Apostles, excerpts from the chronicle by Frechulf of Lisieux, passages on virtues and vices, texts dealing with the Church and society, eschatological texts, excerpts from Peter Lombardus' *Sententiae*, a list of popes, calendar, and computus.<sup>41</sup>

Like *Reynistaðarbók*, the *Hortus* is compiled from many sources

39. Matthäus Bernards, *Speculum virginum. Geistigkeit und Seelenleben der Frau im Hochmittelalter*, Forschungen zur Volkskunde 36/38 (Cologne: Böhlau, 1955), pp. 6–13.

40. *Speculum virginum*, p. 105. Judith and Jael are praised for their humility as well as their courage, and so are a string of secular women, e.g., Semiramis and Helena, Constantine's mother, both included in *Reynistaðarbók*, as is Jael.

41. Herrad of Hohenbourg, *Hortus deliciarum*. Reconstruction. Commentary, ed. Rosalie Green et al. (London: Warburg Institute, 1979). For a list of contents, see Commentary, pp. 2–3. For a thorough study of the work, see Fiona J. Griffiths, *The Garden of Delights. Reform and Renaissance for Women in the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

(Herrad relies heavily on Honorius who is also very present in Reynistaðarbók), and its overarching subject is the history of salvation, or more specifically “the salvation of the Hohenburg canonesses,” as Carolyn Muessig puts it.<sup>42</sup> The canonesses are invited “to increase their knowledge and chances of redemption” through the study of the *Hortus*, which included pagan as well as Christian texts, and where chastity was heavily emphasised.<sup>43</sup> Something similar may have been the purpose behind the compilation of Reynistaðarbók. If so, it gives us an important indication of what someone (the abbess perhaps?) thought should form the body of knowledge for a Benedictine nun in Iceland in the late Middle Ages. The miscellaneous nature of the texts in Reynistaðarbók is a fascinating window through which one sees which works were available in Northern Iceland in the late fourteenth century. But the manuscript does more than that: it gives us a rare insight into the formation of nuns in medieval Iceland.

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42. Carolyn Muessig, “Learning and Mentoring in the Twelfth Century: Hildegard of Bingen and Herrad of Landsberg,” in *Medieval Monastic Education*, ed. George Ferzoco and Carolyn Muessig (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), p. 96.

43. Muessig, “Learning and Mentoring,” p. 97.

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