

# The Celtic Christian Outdoor Altar at Esjuberg in Kjalarnes, South-West Iceland: The Story and the Work

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In old Icelandic manuscripts, *Landnámabók* (*the Book of Settlements*, written around 1300) and *Kjalnesinga saga* (*Saga of Kjalarness*) written in the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century) there is a narrative of settlers who sailed to Iceland from the British Isles, mainly from Ireland and the Hebrides Isles west of Scotland. Most of these people settled in the west and south-west parts of Iceland. These settlers were both of British and Norse origin and many of them were ‘Celtic’ Christians or influenced by ‘Celtic’ Christianity.<sup>1</sup> According to the studies by *deCODE Genetics* in Iceland, a considerable number of the settlers in Iceland came from the British Isles, mainly women. According to the study, 62% of the female settlers of Iceland originated from the British Isles and 37% from the Nordic countries. The results suggest that the settlers of Iceland were by and large British women and Nordic males. These results showed that 80% of the male settlers originated from Norway and other Scandinavian countries, but only 19% from the British Isles.<sup>2</sup> The ‘Celtic’ heritage is clearly observable in the Icelandic sagas and in other old Icelandic narratives.<sup>3</sup>

*Landnámabók* and *Kjalnesinga saga* both mention the settler Örlygur Hrappsson who came with his family from the Hebrides.<sup>4</sup> According to the saga, a bishop in the Hebrides by the name of Patrick (Patrekr) was said to be the foster father of Örlygur. Bishop Patrick advised Örlygur to go to Iceland and take with him timber to build a church, an iron bell, a golden coin, a *plenarium* and consecrated soil which should be put under each corner of the church. The church was then to be dedicated to God and the Irish Saint Columba, Colum Cille in Irish, Kolumkilli in Icelandic,<sup>5</sup> who in 563 had established the monastery at the Holy Island of Iona in the Hebrides.<sup>6</sup> Örlygur received precise descriptions from Bishop Patrick as to where in Iceland the church should be built and as the saga tells us, it was at Kjalarnes (now a

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<sup>1</sup> Gísli Sigurðsson, 2000, 14–34; Hermann Pálsson, 1996, 7–226; *Kjalnesinga saga*, 1959, 3–44; *Landnámabók*, 1986, 31–210.

<sup>2</sup> Helgason A, Sigurðardóttir S, Nicholson J, Sykes B, Hill EW, Bradley DG, Bosnes V, Gulcher JR, Ward R, Stefánsson K., 2000, 697–717. <https://www.decode.com/the-majority-of-icelandic-female-settlers-came-from-the-british-isles/>.

<sup>3</sup> Gísli Sigurðsson, 2000, 1–119; Hermann Pálsson, 1996, 7–226.

<sup>4</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga*, 1959, 3–4; *Landnámabók*, 1986, 52–53.

<sup>5</sup> *Landnámabók*, 1986, 52–53.

<sup>6</sup> Hermann Pálsson, 1996, 103–104.

part of the Capital area). When Örlygur arrived at Kjalarnes, he was greeted by the first settler there, Helgi bjóla Ketilsson. Helgi bjóla was a son of Ketill flatnefur, Flat Nose, who was a chieftain in the Hebrides in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Helgi bjóla gave Örlygur a piece of land to live on and he settled at a certain place named Esjuberg.<sup>7</sup> A farm situated under the roots of Mt Esja, which from the north now embraces and shelters the town of Reykjavik, bears the name of Esjuberg like its predecessors of former times. According to Landnámabók, this happened around 900, i.e. 100 years before the official adoption of Christianity in Iceland.<sup>8</sup> The Church which Örlygur had erected at Esjuberg is in fact the first church in Iceland to be mentioned in the ancient Icelandic manuscripts or any other literary sources. This implies that it could have been the very first church to be raised in Iceland. The story of this church has lived in oral tradition in Iceland over the ages.

Two archaeological investigations have been carried out to find some remains of the supposed church. The former research was carried out in 1901 by Brynjúlfur Jónsson<sup>9</sup>, a renowned scholar in Iceland, and the second was carried out in 1981 by the archaeologist Guðmundur Ólafsson<sup>10</sup> of the National Museum of Iceland. The results show that there are various old structural remains to be found in the area of Esjuberg but no remains of a church were found there. Archaeological research at Esjuberg has been met with considerable obstacles, the most significant being rock slides from Mt Esja in recent ages. However, local place names are known from there which indicate a Christian communion, including Bænhúshóll (Prayer House Hill), Kirkjuflöt (Church Field) and Kirkjugarður (Churchyard or Cemetery).<sup>11</sup> In an Icelandic contemporary medieval manuscript, (*Kirkjutal Páls Jónssonar biskups í Skálholti*), it is asserted that a church existed at Esjuberg in the year 1200, and it is believed to have stood there quite certainly until the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> In Landnámabók there is an account of two churches dedicated to the Irish St Columba. Apart from the Church at Esjuberg, a church is said to have been erected at the farm of Innri-Hólmur in the Hvalfjörður district in West Iceland, which also was dedicated to God and St Columba.<sup>13</sup> A church is still standing at Innri-Hólmur.

Since around 1980 there have been on-going discussions amongst the parishioners of Brautarholt Parish, which includes the Esjuberg district, to construct a memorial to Örlygur's

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<sup>7</sup> Hermann Pálsson, 1996, 103–116; Kjalnesinga saga, 1959, 4–5; Landnámabók, 1986, 50–54.

<sup>8</sup> Hermann Pálsson, 1996, 103 – 116; Landnámabók, 1986, 31–56.

<sup>9</sup> Brynjúlfur Jónsson, 1902, 33–35.

<sup>10</sup> Guðmundur Ólafsson, 1981, 1–9.

<sup>11</sup> Esjuberg, Örnefnaskrár í vörslu *Stofnunar Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum*.

<sup>12</sup> Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 1993, 98.

<sup>13</sup> Landnámabók, 1986, 64–65.

church as being the first church in Iceland mentioned in literary sources and probably erected a century before the official adoption of Christianity in the country.<sup>14</sup>

*The Historical Society of Steini in Kjalarnes*, which was established in 2010, was soon drawn to this challenging task and has organized and executed the job needed, in collaboration with the Bishopric of the Evangelical National Church of Iceland and the parish board of Brautarholtskirkja in Kjalarnes. The board of the Historical Society decided on building an outdoor altar at Esjuberg, a circular structure, 15 m in diameter, shaped like a Celtic cross. Walking lanes from four openings in its outer wall, facing the four head directions, and going through an inner wall, will form a cross on the ground, with 4 x 9 m arms, stretching noticeably out of the circular space. In the middle and core of the outdoor sanctuary there will be a Celtic cross (2 meters high) on the top of a circa 1 m. high altar stone, weighing almost 11 tons. The cross will take the shape of the St Johns Cross at the Holy Island of Iona but the board of the Historical Society Steini will decide on its symbolic and religious markings. The designer of this Celtic outdoor sanctuary is a board member, the Rev. Gunnthor Ingason. In 2008 he graduated from the University of Wales, Lampeter, with an MA degree in Celtic Christianity. Rev. Ingason's original design has been professionally redrawn by the landscape architect, Sigurborg Ósk Haraldsdóttir, who grew up in the Kjalarnes district. All material used for the building originates from Kjalarnes, and all the wall structure, of turf and stone, will be arranged by an experienced Icelandic stone mason.

The present residents of Kjalarnes are a mixture of natives and immigrants. This project of having a Celtic outdoor sanctuary built at Esjuberg has been much favoured by them and they have shown much interest in the Celtic heritage on the west and south-west corner of Iceland. Many people and businesses have supported this project, both financially and with volunteer work. Children of the local primary school have also been involved in this work. The Celtic outdoor altar will be consecrated as a Christian sanctuary, but adherents of all religions will of course be welcome to visit it. In addition to introducing this project as being of a Christian and cultural importance we would like to connect it to healthy outdoor activities and to enjoying nature in an attractive and a beautiful landscape in the vicinity of the City of Reykjavik. This approach is in tune with ancient Celtic Christianity which placed emphasis on the beauty and divine origin of nature. The Celtic outdoor altar is located close to a walking path that leads to the top of Mt Esja and thus it is a good place for hikers to take a

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<sup>14</sup> Documents belonging to the Brautarholt Parish.

break, rest and relax in the beautiful surroundings. The consecration of the Celtic outdoor altar at Esjuberg is scheduled to take place in June 2019.

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