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"Inn besti hlutr"? Martha of Bethany and Women's Roles in Medieval Iceland

The composite Old Norse-Icelandic legend of Mary Magdalen and her "sister," Martha of Bethany, likely composed during the fourteenth century, is extant in part or in full in five late medieval manuscripts: AM 233 fol. (ca. 1350–1375), AM 235 fol. (ca. 1400), Stock. Perg. 2 fol. (ca. 1425–1445), NoRA fragm. 79 (ca. 1350), and AM 764 4to (ca. 1376–1386) (Widding, Bekker-Nielsen, and Shook 1963: 320–321; *ONP* 1989: 436, 464, 473, 489; Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir 2000: 54–55).[1] The saga tells the tale of the two women from Bethany who welcomed Jesus into their

[1] *Mǫrtu saga ok Maríu Magðalenu* has been edited once, by C. R. Unger (1877a). The individual manuscripts used in Unger's edition are as follows: AM 233a fol. (19v–25v; pp. 513–550[23], 550–551 lower text), AM 235 fol. (19r–30r; pp. 513–553 var.), Stock. Perg. 2 fol. (67r–74r; pp. 550[24]–553[13], 513–522[27] var., 527[7]–535[27] var., 539[31]–550[23] var.). NoRA 79 fragm. (the two smaller fragments) and AM 764 4to (15v–16r) are not used in Unger's edition. I am in the process of preparing a new, scholarly edition of the composite legend, which will utilize all available manuscripts preserving the text.

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Abstract: This article examines the composite Old Norse-Icelandic legend of Mary Magdalen and Martha, the so-called *Mǫrtu saga ok Maríu Magðalenu*, in light of its unusual focus on Martha. Most medieval legends of the "sister saints," both in Latin and in the vernacular, focus almost exclusively on Mary Magdalen, the model of the contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*). However, the Old Norse-Icelandic compilation, which draws from a number of Latin sources, gives Martha, the model of the active life (*vita activa*), a primary role in the saga and condenses key aspects of the legend pertaining to Mary Magdalen. It is argued that the concentration on Martha can be seen within the context of how saints' lives oftentimes functioned in medieval Christendom, namely to both prescribe and describe societal expectations. Women in Iceland, both lay and religious, were by necessity active in the domestic sphere. Martha, as the model of the *vita activa* and of hospitality, would have been a much more practical saintly model for Icelandic women than Mary Magdalen, whose *vita contemplativa* would have had little practical application in medieval Iceland's agrarian society, where domestic work and hospitality were of fundamental importance, both on the farm and in the convents.

Keywords: Martha, Mary Magdalen, hagiography, women, monasticism, Kirkjubær, Reynistaður.

home and whose brother, Lazarus, Jesus raised from the dead. Mary of Bethany was conflated with two other biblical women in the Middle Ages. Therefore, the so-called *Mǫrtu saga ok Maríu Magðalenu* also tells the story of Mary Magdalen, the faithful follower of Jesus out of whom he cast seven demons, and of the unnamed sinner in Luke who, at the house of Simon the Pharisee, anointed Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair. The legend is extremely learned in style, incorporating extensive biblical exegesis and drawing from a variety of Latin sources, including Gregory the Great, Augustine of Hippo, Peter Comestor, and the Venerable Bede.

Mǫrtu saga ok Maríu Magðalenu begins with a detailed introduction to Martha, which appears to have been based on Vincent of Beauvais' first section on Martha in his legend of the sister saints in *Speculum historiale* (Foote 1962: 25). The text praises Martha's numerous virtues, noting that she was noble, devout, well-versed in the laws of Moses, and obedient to all of God's commandments. It is further related that Martha, who was from Bethany, was modest, courteous, clever, beautiful, refined, loving, and chaste. Her father was famous in Syria as well as its surrounding regions, and Martha was wealthy due to the inheritance she received from him. She had a brother, Lazarus, and a sister, Mary Magdalen. Mary is presented in stark contrast to her sister, and the saga tells that she lived according to her carnal desires. Martha, on the other hand, is said to be of the two sisters the wiser, more faithful, and more generous. She was especially famous for her hospitality and domestic abilities, which are epitomized in her reception of Jesus into her home at Bethany; the saga relates that Jesus rewarded her for her service by coming into her house as a guest more often and more gladly than any other place.

The saga summarizes the various biblical stories involving the two sisters of Bethany, including the feast at the home of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus' visit to Bethany, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, Martha's recognition of Jesus as Savior and Son of God, and an account of the Resurrection. After the Resurrection, Mary, Martha, and many of Christ's other disciples were persecuted and ultimately exiled. Mary and Martha, along with Bishop Maximinus and other followers of Christ, were put on a ship which drifted to Marseilles in Provence, where Mary Magdalen preached the word of God and converted not only the citizens, but also the Duke of Marseilles and his wife. The saga also gives a detailed account of Martha's time in Tarascon, where she overcame a dragon, resurrected a boy who had drowned, and, after establishing a

church, remained for the rest of her life. Mary Magdalen is said to have spent the last thirty years of her life as a hermit in the wilderness, where she was fed only heavenly food and carried up into heaven by angels seven times a day until her death. Martha died shortly thereafter and was visited by the spirit of her sister before her death. After relating the translation of Mary Magdalen's body, the saga concludes with an account of the miracles she performed post-mortem, which generally center around men and women who are sick, have sinned, or have been wrongfully imprisoned.

The Centrality of Martha in the Old Norse-Icelandic Legend

A peculiarity of the Old Norse-Icelandic legend of Mary Magdalen and Martha is its focus on Martha. In most medieval legends involving the sisters, Martha is overshadowed by Mary Magdalen. Indeed, Mary Magdalen is most often the legend's sole focus, while Martha is mentioned only in passing as the sister of this highly popular and, in some ways, much more interesting saint. However, in the Old Norse-Icelandic legend, Martha takes center stage. Furthermore, it seems as though Martha's part of the legend was seen to be of some importance in medieval Iceland, judging by the late fourteenth-century codex AM 764 4to. This manuscript, discussed in more detail below, contains extracts from the composite legend that focus exclusively on Martha, specifically the dragon episode and a description of the miracles that took place around the time of Martha's funeral.

The source material used by the Old Norse-Icelandic compiler of *Mǫrtu saga ok Maríu Magðalenu* is also of interest in this regard. One of the four main Latin sources for the life of Martha is Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale*, the most popular section of his monumental *Speculum maius*. This text, according to Peter Foote (1962), forms the backbone of the composite Old Norse-Icelandic legend of Mary Magdalen and Martha (25). Other Latin versions of the Mary Magdalen and Martha legend, such as the extremely popular and frequently translated *Legenda aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine, would likely have been at the Old Norse-Icelandic compiler's disposal, especially considering the wide variety of

Latin sources that the compiler made use of.[2] The decision to use this particular source for his composite legend of the sister saints is noteworthy, as very few of these Latin legends of the two saints focus much, if at all, on Martha. Jacobus' legend of St. Mary Magdalen, for example, mentions Martha only in passing, and even his separate legend of St. Martha is very brief and treats neither the saint's background nor her interactions with Jesus, even at Bethany, in much detail.

In contrast, Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale* not only concentrates a great deal on Martha but also emphasizes her background and her role as hostess to the Lord. The compiler of the Old Norse-Icelandic legend clearly saw these as key aspects of the legend, since he uses Vincent of Beauvais' account as the source of sections relating to Martha's hospitality. He furthermore adds detail and biblical commentary to the scene at Bethany described in Luke 10: 38–42 in which Martha rebukes Mary for failing to help her serve Jesus, and Jesus replies: "Martha, þu ert sorgmoð miok ok berr annsemd fyrir marga luti, en eitt er nauðsynligt; Maria valdi ser hinn bezta lut, þann sem eigi mun af henni tekinn vera" (Unger 1877a: 520).[3] The compiler draws particularly from the twelfth-century French theologian Peter Comestor to further emphasize the virtues of Martha's hospitality as equally valid and important in comparison to Mary's part:

> ...Commestor segir, framarr þat er Maria sat hia fótum honum ok heyrdi ord hans, i þvi er hun valdi ser þann lut, er eigi mundi verda af henni tekinn, en eigi fyrir þvi at hun væri hærri at verðleikum, þviat þadan vandiz varr herra at þiggia heimbod at hinni sælu Marthe i hennar herberghi (Unger 1877a: 520–521).[4]

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[2] According to Foote (1962), the Latin sources used by the compiler comprise Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale*, Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica*, Gregory the Great's *Homiliarum in Evangelia,* Augustine's *In Iohannis Evangelivm Trancatvs,* Honorius Augustodunensis' sermon for Palm Sunday in his *Speculum ecclesiae*, and Bede's *In Marci Evangelivm Expositio*. The end of the text, which consists of an account of the translation of the Magdalen's relics Vézelay and the subsequent miracles, is derived from various separate Latin sources listed in *Bibliotheca hagiographica latina* (25–26).

[3] Martha, you are very distressed and worry about many things, but only one thing is necessary; Mary chose the better part, which will not be taken away from her. *All English translations, unless indicated by quotation marks, are my own. Certain stylistic features of the Old Norse-Icelandic, such as the use of the historical present, have been avoided in translation.*

[4] Comestor says further that when Mary sat at his feet and listened to his words, she chose that part which would not be taken away from her, but not because she was greater in terms of merit, because from then on the Lord was accustomed to accepting invitations to the blessed Martha's home. The Latin reads: "…autem sororis illius audientis Dominum praelata est a Domino ministerio Marthae, non quod majoris meriti, sed quia non auferetur ab ea" (Peter Comestor: *Historia scholastica*, col. 1571).

The compiler praises Mary's choice as the ideal one spiritually, but also takes care to note that Martha's role was not to be dismissed, emphasizing hospitality and the role of women in the home. Furthermore, like its source, the Old Norse-Icelandic legend emphasizes that Martha remained a model of hospitality for the remainder of her days, which she spent in Tarascon: "Gestrisni, þa sem hun hafdi vanz i Bethania, helt hun sva einkannliga, at eptir þvi sem fyrri hafdi hun þoknaz bædi gudi ok monnom, vard hun enn storliga fræg ok leiddi med sinum lofligum lifnadi ok heilagri predikan mǫrg þushundrat manna gudi til handa..." (Unger 1877a: 535).[5]

It is noteworthy that in contrast the apocryphal Mary Magdalen section of the legend was condensed considerably from *Speculum historiale*. Vincent of Beauvais' account dedicates several lengthy chapters to an episode in which Mary Magdalen grants the duke of Marseilles and his wife a child after their conversion to Christianity. The duke and his pregnant wife undertake a journey to Jerusalem to verify what the Magdalen had been preaching. On the journey, the duke's wife gives birth to a son but dies in childbirth. The crew leaves behind both the duke's wife and his newborn son, who is sure not to survive. When traveling back to Marseilles, the duke and his crew encounter the hill where they left the duke's son and deceased wife, and by the good graces of Mary Magdalen the boy is found alive, and the duke's wife is miraculously brought back to life. In the Old Norse-Icelandic version of the legend, this entire episode is altered and abbreviated to four short sentences, which read:

> En þvi at hertoginn villdi reyna, hvart þeir lutir væri sannir, er Maria Magdalena hafdi sagt af Kristi, for hann til Jorsala at vitia heilaga staði, ok vard viss sanninda um alla þa luti, er Jesus gerdi her i heimi. Ok er hann kom aptr, fann hann son sinn iartegnasamligha fæddan. Nokkurum tima siðarr tok fruin sott ok andaðiz. En fyrir bænir sællar Marie Magðalene lifnadi hun, ok lofudu allir truandi menn gud (Unger 1877a: 533).[6]

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[5] She continued to show the hospitality that she was accustomed to in Bethany so extraordinarily, so that she was as pleasing to both God and men as she was before. She became even more famous and with her praiseworthy way of life and her holy preaching, she led many hundreds of thousands of people to God. The Latin reads: "...& hospitalitate, quam apud Bethaniam specialiter exercuerat, Deo & hominibus in tantum placuit, vt multa populorum millia per eius laudabilem prædicationem, & sanctam conuersationem..." (Vincent of Beauvais: *Speculum historiale,* 358).

[6] But because the duke wanted to find out whether those things that Mary Magdalen had told of Christ were true, he went to Jerusalem to visit holy places and became aware of the truth of all of those things which Jesus did here in the world. And when he came back, he found his son miraculously born. Sometime later his wife became ill and died. But because of the prayers of holy Mary Magdalen she came back to life, and all believers praised God.

This alteration and abbreviation is especially unusual since, as Sherry Reames (2003) notes, this section of the Magdalen legend "...bears close resemblances to secular romance and would become a favorite part of the vernacular legends of Mary Magdalen" (51). Considering the popularity of the romance genre in late medieval Iceland, which began a century before the legend's supposed composition, this particular episode would surely have been very well received.[7] The condensing of sections relating to Mary Magdalen is also peculiar since none of the sections in *Speculum historiale* pertaining to Martha seem to have been abbreviated in the Old Norse-Icelandic version of the legend.

Saints' Lives and Women's Roles in the Middle Ages

The unusual focus on Martha in the Old Norse-Icelandic legend can be best explained if one takes into consideration the purpose of saints' lives and the way in which they very often served as a means through which to both reflect and convey views and societal expectations of the lives of medieval women. Until the latter part of the twentieth century, the scholarly consensus on saints' lives was that they should be interpreted primarily as stories of holy men and women who embodied the Christian spirit, and that the saints themselves were first and foremost models of Christian spirituality. Their piety and unconditional devotion to God made them models of faith, devotion, and patience, and, as such, saints' lives were for centuries thought to be primarily concerned with spiritual exemplarity (Winstead 2007: 336). However, contemporary scholarship argues that saints' lives are about much more than piety and spirituality alone. Karen Winstead (2007) writes:

> One of the achievements of late twentieth-century criticism was to recognize that saints' lives are 'about' not just piety and spirituality but also politics, economics, social control, gender, and sexuality, and that what their compilers have to say on these topics is intended to be relevant to, and sometimes critical of, contemporary life. Their saints' careers are available to suggest, or to criticize, contemporary courses of action (336).

[7] The birth of the romance genre in Iceland is commonly marked by Brother Robert's 1226 translation of Thomas' *Tristan* for King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway.

Accordingly, saints' lives can be interpreted as mirrors of society, mediums through which to both convey and reflect societal and behavioral expectations. Saints' lives may for this reason be especially useful as sources of history for medieval women. Jane Schulenburg (1998) notes that *vitae*, which focus on women and which are concerned with the roles of women both in the Church and in society as a whole, provide both contemporary perceptions as well as contemporary ideals of women. As such, saints' lives "...provide an excellent condensing lens (although filtered and not without its own particular perspective) through which to view medieval perceptions of women as well as various indices of women's opportunities, experiences, and lives" (17).

In the Middle Ages, both Mary Magdalen and Martha were frequently used in the ways outlined by Winstead and Schulenburg, that is, to both describe and prescribe societal expectations for women. Since during his visit to Bethany she sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his words, Mary Magdalen was traditionally the model of the *vita contemplativa*, which was generally associated with men and women in religious orders, and was presented as a model for cloistered women, as can be seen for example in Raymond of Capua's life of Catherine of Siena.[8] In contrast, Martha – who concerned herself with practical matters during Jesus' visit to her home – was associated with the *vita activa* and therefore the laity and the clergy (Constable 1995: 72). As a result of her connection to the laity, Martha was also the model for those virtues associated with the domestic realm, especially hospitality.[9] Accordingly, Martha was often portrayed as a model for women within the domestic arena, as evident from works, such as the *Book of the Knight of the Tower*, which originated in 1371 with Angevin nobleman Geoffrey IV de La Tour-Landry as a tutorial for his three daughters. The work praises Martha's hospitality towards the servants and ministers of God, and offers her as a model of good behavior for young women (Barnhouse 2006: 3, 8–11). The Old Norse-Icelandic legend's peculiar focus on Martha, the classic model of the *vita activa*, would have served a similar function as Geoffrey's work, and should therefore be interpreted in light of women's roles in medieval Iceland and the kinds of saintly models, which both lay and religious women would have been expected to follow, particularly with regard to hospitality and work in the domestic sphere.

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[8] See Raymond of Capua: *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, esp. p. 168.

[9] This association is reflected in artistic depictions, where Martha was very often depicted with a soup ladle, a broom, a cooking pot, or a key or a bunch of keys, designating her role as household mistress (Peters 1994: 160).

St. Martha as a Model for Women in Medieval Iceland

Medieval Iceland was an agrarian society, and work was a fundamental part of daily life; as such, female work in the domestic sphere was highly valued. Many Icelandic farms had a *ráðskona* (or *ráðakona*, translated by Jenny Jochens (1995) as "woman in charge" (116)), which is what Martha is described as being in the Old Norse-Icelandic legend ("hin roksamazta radskona").[10] The role of housekeeper was the most prestigious female position on an Icelandic farm, where there was a well-established division of work between men and women (Jochens 1995: 116). This division is articulated in medieval Icelandic law, which indicated that a wife was in charge of matters inside the home (*fyrir innan stokk*), while the husband managed everything outside (*fyrir útan stokk*) (Jochens 1995: 117). As the law states, "Þar er sa*m*farar hiona er*o oc* sca*l* h*ann* raða f*yrir* fe *þeirr*a *oc* cavpo*m*. E*igi er* kono scyllt at eiga ibue ne*m*a ho*n* vile. EN ef ho*n* á ibve me*ð* ho*nom*. Þa a ho*n* at raða bv ráðo*m* f*yrir* INa*n* stocc. ef ho*n* vill *oc* smala nyt" (Finsen 1852: 44).[11] Men primarily hunted, fished, and gathered grain and hay to bring back to the farm, whereas a medieval Icelandic woman's domain comprised such tasks as gathering, dairy work, food preparation and storage, laundry and bathing, body service, and wool work (Jochens 1995: 121–140). Martha of Bethany, the archetype of the active and domestic life, would have been the ideal model for such practical tasks.

The artistic depictions of St. Martha with her most common attribute, a bunch of keys designating her role as household mistress or *châtelaine*, also finds some analogues in Old Norse literature, as well as Viking Age artifacts and iconography. Viking women are typically portrayed as the keepers of the keys of the household, and archaeological evidence supports this notion: keys have been found in women's graves from the Viking Age (Wolf 2004: 13), such as in sites at Dråby in Sjælland, Denmark (Jesch 2003: 25–26), Selfoss in Iceland (Kristján Eldjárn 2000: 74–75, 401–402), and Adwick-le-Street in South Yorkshire (Speed and Rogers 2004: 51–90). Within literature, the image of a woman with a bunch of keys is perhaps best illustrated in the Eddic

[10] The most authoritative woman in charge (Unger 1877a: 514).

[11] "Where man and wife are in wedlock, then he shall have charge of their property and buying and selling. It is not required of a wife that she should own a share in the household, but if she has a share in the household with him, then she is to run the indoor household if she wishes and the dairying" (Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 2000: p. 66).

poem *Rígsþula* (a poetic account of the various classes in medieval Scandinavian society), in the stanza regarding the freeman Karl and his wife, Snør:

> Heim óku þá
> hanginluklu,
> geitakyrtlu,
> giptu Karli.
> Snør heiter sú,
> settiz under ripti.
> Biuggu hión,
> bauga deildu.
> Breiddu blæiur
> ok bú gørðu (Dronke 1997: 167).[12]

The keys serve as a concrete symbol of a woman's domain *fyrir innan stokk* and the authority she holds therein. A saintly model such as Martha would have been useful in the eyes of the person compiling the saga in order to reinforce the necessity of the role of household mistress or *ráðskona/ráðakona* on the Icelandic farm.

Hospitality was a fundamental societal value in medieval Iceland (Van den Toorn 1955: 58; Guðrún Nordal 1998: 149–150),[13] and like Martha of Bethany, whose role as a hostess is given considerable emphasis in the Old Norse-Icelandic legend, women in Old Norse-Icelandic society played a key role in hosting and serving their guests (Anna Sigurðardóttir 1985: 37). Although husbands were the ones responsible for inviting guests to their homes for feasts and banquets and were primarily in charge of the supplies, the vital role of women in the area of hospitality is undeniable (Jochens 1995: 132). This is even reflected in the mythology, and, as Jochens observes, both the goddesses and the valkyries were depicted serving drinks to the gods (1996: 71).[14] In Eddic poetry, mythical women play the same role, and in Nordic society, the daughter of the household served beer to Viking visitors. This carried over into medieval Icelandic culture, where women were also normally in charge of serving

[12] Home they drove then / a dangling-keyed girl, / goatskin-kirtled, / married her to Carl. / Daughter-in-law she is called, / took her place beneath the bridal veil. / They dwelt as man and wife, / dispensed rings. / They spread their counterpanes / and created a household (Dronke 1997: 167).

[13] This societal value is perhaps best exhibited in the Eddic poem *Hávamál* ("Sayings of the High One") and the first 79 stanzas, which comprise the *Gestaþáttr*.

[14] This is seen, for example, in Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning,* in which it is explained that the valkyries' job is to "...bera drykkiu og gæta borðbúnaðar og ölgagna" (…serve drinks and take care of table service and drinking vessels) (*Edda* 389).

guests (Jochens 1995: 107).[15] Good hospitality also included generosity, and women in the *Íslendingasögur* often ensured that their guests were treated well and were given the best that the household had to offer.[16]

That St. Martha was in fact considered a model of domesticity and hospitality for laywomen in Old Norse society is evident in *Guðmundar saga Arasonar D*, written in 1345 by Abbot Arngrímr Brandsson. Towards the end of the saga, Arngrímr compares a woman who faithfully served Bishop Guðmundr Arason to Martha. He describes the preparations she made for the arrival of her bishop and the rewards she received through her faithful service to the minister of God:

> Húsfrú þessi virðir ei langt hvat kostrinn þolir, til þess at ölmusur herra Guðmundar hafi sínar nauðsynjar: lætr fara sömu leið naut ok sauði, svá at dagliga stendr hún at matgera sem önnur Martha. Ok einn dag, sem herra Guðmundr hefir lykt morgintíðum, gengr hann með fylgð sinni fyrir þat hús, er hans vinkona stendr í starfi. Biskup nemr stað fyrir dyrunum ok segir: hvat er nú, sæti mín, mun ei líða kvikfénu, ef svá lætr lengi? – Hún svarar: annat elskar ek meirr en kvikfé, en þat er yður þökk ok vinátta, þvíat hvat er mik kostar, vil ek henni halda. Herra biskup talar: fullt verðskyldar þú mína vináttu, en gefa má guð minn, at þú hafir eigi færra kvikfé í vár en þeir, er nú þykkjast sitja með fullum kostum. Svá gekk út sem guðs maðr sagði, þvíat hún hafði heykost hinn bezta en fátt at fóðra, ok því seldi hún hey til beggja handa þeim er heylausir vóru, sakir þess, at vetrartími var mjög harðr næst eftirkomandi; fèkk húsfrúin með þessum hætti fullbýli á sína jörð. Hún hafði í svá mikilli virðíng verðleika herra Guðmundar, at í þá sæíng, sem hann vandist at sofa þá er hann gisti hana, bar hún kranka menn, ok skipaðist æ jafnan til lèttis á nökkvern veg. Svá ok fyrir þann stein, er biskupinn hafði vígt henni, urðu margar heilsubætr; hann gekk ok víða yfir landeign hennar, ok því segja menn, at sú jörð standi úbrigðlig með hamingju (145–146).[17]

[15] In *Egils saga*, for example, Hildiríðr serves ale to her guests at a banquet after her father, Högni, orders a large bowl of beer to be brought in: "Hildiríðr bóndadóttir bar öl gestum" (Hildirid the farmer's daughter served ale to the guests) (Sigurður Nordal 1993: 17). Women serving is also evidenced in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, where the married women (Þórhilda and Bergþóra) are designated as the ones who served the guests at Hallgerðr's wedding feast: "Þórhildr gengr um beina og báru þær Bergþóra mat á borð" (Thorhild served and she and Bergthora brought food to the table) (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1954: 89).

[16] An example of this can be found in *Egils saga* when Egill is journeying through Värmland and visits the home of Ármóðr skegg, a wealthy man who stingily serves his guests. The saga relates that the household mistress spoke something to her daughter, who recited a verse to Egill, implying that much better food than Ármóðr was letting on was available for them and that he should wait for them to serve the better food (Sigurður Nordal 1993: 223–225).

[17] This housemistress did not consider for long whether the provisions might last. So that Lord Guðmundr might have what he needed for almsgiving, she had cattle and sheep

Notably, the housemistress is not praised for passively listening to Bishop Guðmundr preach the word of God, but instead for faithfully and selflessly serving him and his followers, for which she is rewarded manifold. In other words, she is praised for taking on the part of Martha, not that of Mary. The scene serves not only as a concrete example of the societal regard for domestic work and hospitality in medieval Iceland and the special role women played in generously serving their guests, but also shows that Martha was presented as the embodiment of this ideal, particularly when it came to serving the ministers of God and caring for the poor.[18]

The focus on Martha also reflects the lives and expectations of women in religious orders, who would have taken Martha as an example of a chaste life and also as a model of hospitality, charity, and the *vita activa*. There were only two convents in medieval Iceland; the first, at Kirkjubær, was established in 1186 and the second, Reynistaður, was founded in 1296 (Magnús Stefánsson 1975: 83). Both were Benedictine convents, and

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brought in, and stood daily preparing food like a second Martha. And one day when Lord Guðmundr had finished matins, he went with his followers to the house where his female friend stood at work. The bishop stopped in front of the door and said, "What is this now, my dear, will the livestock last if this goes on long?" She answered: "I love one thing more than livestock, and that is your thanks and friendship, because whatever it costs me, I will maintain it." The lord bishop spoke, "You fully deserve my friendship, and may my God grant that you do not have fewer livestock this spring than those who now seem to have enough provisions." So it happened as the man of God said, that she had the best stores of hay but few to feed. She therefore gave hay to all those who were without it, because the following winter was exceptionally harsh. For this reason the housemistress received full provisions for her farm. She received so much honor and merit from Lord Guðmundr that when she brought the sick into the bed he was accustomed to sleeping in when he visited her, they were always healed in some way. There were also many healings because of the stone where the bishop had blessed her. He also walked widely over her grounds, and therefore people say that the earth there will always stand with fortune.

[18] It should be noted that both sisters are reflected in the D version of *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, as demonstrated by Ásdís Egilsdóttir (1996: 105–106). In the first part of the saga, a woman tearfully repents of her sins, in classic Mary Magdalen fashion. The text relates that "…hún kemr fyrir sira Guðmund með geysiligum gráti beiskrar iðranar; segist af hjarta gjöra sinn viðskilnað við sagða glæpi, ok biðr sik undir ásjón sira Guðmundar, lík þeirri, er [í] húsi Simonis kraup að fótum várs drottins Jesú Christi, þváandi löstuna í lækjum táranna, fylgjandi honum allt til pínu krossins; svá fylgdi þessi kona síðan allar stundir sira Guðmundi, þegar úfriðr skildi þau eigi" (…she came before the Reverend Guðmundr with tremendous weeping of bitter repentance, and said from the heart that she repented of her crimes. She prayed before the Reverend Guðmundr, just like the woman who knelt at the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ in the house of Simon, washing her sins away in a stream of tears and accompanying him all the way to his Crucifixion. In the same way, this woman followed the Reverend Guðmundr at all times, when discord did not separate them) (Arngrímr Brandsson: *Saga Guðmundar Arasonar*, 16)

in his rule St. Benedict specified a combination of "ora et labora" (Constable 1995: 28). As such, study, work, and prayer were the fundamentals of life under the Benedictine rule, which had a respect for the "pots and pans" of monastic life (Wolf 2006: 284). Indeed, St. Benedict's rule states that "Otiositas inimica est animae, et ideo certis temporibus occupari debent fratres in labore manuum, certis iterum horis in lectione divina" (Fry 1981: 248).[19] Accordingly, the daily hours were divided up between sleeping, manual labor, meals, prayer, and listening to the Holy Word (Magnús Stefánsson 1975: 82). Like the monasteries, the convents were vital parts of the regions in which they were located and provided various spiritual and practical services that are today distributed among various religious and secular establishments (Inga Huld Hákonardóttir 2000: 226). The Benedictine rule therefore consisted of a combination of both the active and the contemplative lives; in other words, both Martha and Mary were necessary models.

Due to the near absence of sources detailing the daily lives of Icelandic nuns, it is difficult to move beyond pure speculation as to what specific kinds of activities Icelandic nuns engaged in during their working hours. It is unlikely that the sisters at Kirkjubær and Reynistaður occupied their time with strenuous tasks such as livestock farming, haymaking, or dairy work, which their servants would have tended to (Anna Sigurðardóttir 1988: 253).[20] However, considering the small size of the convents, the nuns most likely had to cook for themselves and do their own housework (Wolf 2006: 284). Anna Sigurðardóttir (1988) speculates that Icelandic nuns may have been capable healers, much like the twelfth-century German abbess Hildegard of Bingen (254). Indeed, it is believed that the monasteries in Iceland functioned as hospitals of sorts. An excavation

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[19] Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading (Fry 1981: 249).

[20] That the nuns were not accustomed to hard labor is attested in a notice in *Lögmannsannáll. s.a.* 1403–1404, which relates that Abbess Halldóra, along with seven nuns and many others, died from the Black Death. The remaining six nuns were left to milk the cows themselves, a task in which they were not particularly successful: "Man*n*dauda aar hid mi*c*la a Islandi. ... Obit*us* Halld*o*rv abbadis*ar* j K*ir*kiu bæ. ok vij syst*ra*. en*n* vi lifdv ept*ir*. Vigd f*ru* G*ud*run abbadis Halldors dott*ir*. Eyddi stadinn þ*ri*a tima ad m*ann*folki suo at v*m* sid*ir* miolkudv syst*urn*ar kv fenadin*n* þær e*r* t*il* u*oru*. ok kun*n*v flest allar lited t*il* *sem* se*n* u*ar*. e*r* slikan*n* starfa hofdv alld*ri* fyr*ri* haft" (The year of great death in Iceland ... The death of Halldóra Abbess of Kirkjubær, and of seven nuns, but six survived. Guðrún Halldórsdóttir was consecrated abbess. The convent was deserted three times, so that finally the sisters who were still there milked the cows, and most of them had little knowledge of how to do it, which is to be expected, since they had never before attempted such an activity) (Storm 1888: 286).

of the Icelandic Augustinian monastery of Skriðuklaustur revealed that, due to the nature of the skeletal material found in the graveyard (the majority of which show distinct indications of chronic disease), the monastery may very well have served as a hospice (Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir 2008: 212). Foreign convents often had hospitals, where the sisters themselves likely prepared medicines and ointments from herbs (Anna Sigurðardóttir 1988: 254). The two Icelandic convents were known to have taken in the elderly and those in need, whom they likely would have given basic medical care. It is also possible that, even though there is no evidence of female scribes in Iceland, Icelandic nuns played a role in illuminating manuscripts, much like AM 429 12mo, a small codex containing the lives of female virgin martyr saints (Wolf 2006: 291). However, as Kirsten Wolf (2006) notes, the Icelandic nuns most likely spent the majority of their working hours on needlework and embroidery, as is evidenced from various sources referring to the handiwork of the nuns, including a 1387 inventory of Kirkjubær which records an abundance of tapestries and embroideries made by the nuns (285). Taking these activities into consideration, along with the tenets of the Benedictine rule, it can safely be assumed that nuns in medieval Iceland, like their laywomen contemporaries, were by no means idle, and that the ideal of the *vita activa* embodied by Martha governed their everyday lives.

Another important principle of the Benedictine rule, which, as previously mentioned, is central both to Old Norse society and Martha's persona, is hospitality. Saints such as Martha were frequently praised in the monastic setting for their active and public roles in the arena of hospitality and generosity and more broadly for their talents in economic and practical matters (Schulenburg 1998: 92). Although the evidence for this is scarce, hospitality was without a doubt an important virtue within the Icelandic convents. The Benedictine rule states that "Omnes supervenientes hospites tamquam Christus suscipiantur, quia ipse dicturus est: *Hospes fui et suscepistis me;* et omnibus congruus honor exhibeatur, *maxime domesticis fidei* et peregrinis" (Fry 1981: 254, 256).[21] This ideal goes hand-in-hand with the principles of charity and generosity within monastic life, which are broader tenets of the Christian tradition as a whole. This is perhaps best illustrated in Luke's story of Dives and Lazarus, the classic example of the necessity of living a charitable life,

[21] "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me* (Matt 25: 35). Proper honor must be shown to all, *especially to those who share our faith* (Gal 6: 10) and to pilgrims" (Fry 1981: 255, 257).

especially towards the poor and the sick, those who were considered to be the least of society.[22]

Kirkjubær and Reynistaður almost certainly would not have been exceptions to these ideals of hospitality, generosity, and charity. While contact with the outside world was no doubt somewhat limited for the well-being of the nuns, the female houses probably would have had some contact nonetheless (Wolf 2006: 284). They likely would have hosted local bishops or their delegates who would come to meet with the abbesses, probably in the convent's chapter house (Anna Sigurðardóttir 1988: 293). Anna Sigurðardóttir (1988) speculates that the abbesses would have prepared beer and ale for such visits, unless one of the sisters was a particularly good brewer, in which case she would do the preparations (257–258). The Icelandic convents moreover hosted laypeople. They served as refuges for those in need, as was the case in Kirkjubær under Abbess Halldóra, where a woman who suffered abuse from her husband was sheltered (Anna Sigurðardóttir 1988: 284). Moreover, as noted above, the Icelandic convents may have functioned as hospitals of sorts, in which case the nuns would fulfill the Benedictine call to hospitality through caring for the sick. It is also known that the convents took in *próventufólk* (prebenders), usually well-to-do elderly people who, in exchange for food, care, and accommodation, donated money or property to the convents, where they generally spent the remainder of their years (Gilchrist 1995: 226). Acceptance of these prebenders into female houses was to be done, according to a 1334 order from Archbishop Páll of Niðaróss, only upon the consent of the bishop, presumably for the safety of the nuns

[22] "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16: 19–31).

(Anna Sigurðardóttir 1988: 283–285). Finally, it is likely that the nuns took in private pupils, and probably also served as teachers to young novices and future bishops, although the religious houses never served as schools in a formal sense (Wolf 2006: 286–288). Although entrance of guests into the convents seems to have been in general fairly well-regulated, the nuns likely interacted a fair deal with those who gained admittance into their houses, especially considering the small size of the convents. It can therefore be safely assumed that the Benedictine ideal of hospitality embodied by St. Martha and given considerable emphasis in *Mǫrtu saga ok Maríu Magðalenu* was by no means ignored in the houses at Kirkjubær and Reynistaður.

That Martha of Bethany was perceived as a model for Icelandic nuns is clear also from AM 764 4to, which contains extracts from *Mǫrtu saga ok Maríu Magðalenu* pertaining to the *miracula* of Martha. Specifically, the codex relates the dragon episode (in which Martha overcomes the dragon Tarasconus with holy water) and a description of the miracles that took place around the time of Martha's funeral (in which bishop Fronto was miraculously transported to Tarascon to perform funeral services for the saint). As Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir (2008) has demonstrated, AM 764 4to (*Reynistaðarbók*) was an Icelandic universal chronicle written specifically for the nuns at Reynistaður presumably for purposes of the nuns' education and religious formation (280, 297–299). She moreover notes that *Reynistaðarbók* is characterized first and foremost by brevity, and that the scribes drastically shortened the stories included in the chronicle. For this reason, it is interesting to note what was preserved. While key passages relating to important biblical figures such as Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David are of course retained, it is clear that a main focus of the codex is stories of women whose lives have instructional value for the nuns at Reynistaður (Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir 2008: 283, 288–293, 297–299). The inclusion of the miracle stories of Martha of Bethany in AM 764 4to therefore suggests that she was in fact considered a model for women in the convents. Indeed, as Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir (2000) notes, "[t]hat [Martha] should appeal to women in general is readily understandable, and if 764 was intended for the convent at Reynistaður the miracles may have been meant to inspire novices" (183).

Conclusion

The Old Norse-Icelandic legend's unusual focus on St. Martha, the saintly model of an active and domestic life, can therefore be best explained as a reflection of the lives of both lay and religious women in the agrarian culture of medieval Iceland. It affirms and reinforces what is already known about medieval Icelandic women's roles and gives some insight into what was expected of women in religious orders as well. Women were, by necessity, active in the domestic sphere in medieval Iceland, and St. Martha would have been the ideal model for such a lifestyle. This applied not only to women on the Icelandic farm, but also to women in the convents, whose daily lives consisted of both prayer and work according to the Benedictine rule. Hospitality, a fundamental value in medieval Icelandic society, is also given a great deal of emphasis in the legend, as women in medieval Icelandic society (both lay and religious) played an important role in hosting and serving guests. The cultural emphasis on women's roles in domestic work and hospitality also explains why aspects of the legend involving Mary Magdalen, the model of the contemplative life, were condensed; while Mary's choice was an admirable one, it was not necessarily the ideal that women in medieval Icelandic society should follow.

A question that remains unanswered, however, is how this text would have been received, particularly by its female audience. Unfortunately, as is the case with most vernacular saints' lives from medieval Iceland, the extant source material gives no indication as to the readership and reception of this particular text. One may presume that the Old Norse-Icelandic legend of Mary Magdalen and Martha, like other translated saints' lives, was read on the feast day of one or both of the saints, and that laywomen and nuns alike would have heard it within this context.[23]

[23] Margaret Cormack (1994) points to the example of *Michaels saga*, written by Bergr Sokkason, Abbott of Munkaþverá 1325–ca. 1350 (32). The prologue of this saga states that it should be read on the feast day of St. Michael: "I nafni grędara varss herra Jesu Kristi byriaz her litill bæklingr heilags Michaelis hofuðengils, til þess eina skrifaðr ok samansettr, at hann iafnlega lesiz a messuðagh Michaelis kirkiusoknar monnum til skemtunar, einkanlega i þeim stǫðum sem hann er kirkiudrotten yfir, at þvi ǫllu sætari verðr hans minning i rettlatra manna hugrenning, sem firir þessa litlu ritning verðr ollum kunnari hans ægæta virðing" (In the name of our savior Lord Jesus Christ, here begins a little booklet of S. Michael the Archangel, written and composed for the sole purpose that it always be read on Michael's feast-day for the enjoyment of the parishioners, especially in those places where he is patron, so that his remembrance will become all the sweeter in the thoughts of righteous men, the better known his great excellence becomes to everyone by means of this little work) (Unger 1877b: 676; Cormack 1994: 32).

Indeed, three of the manuscripts preserving this particular saga (AM 233a fol., AM 235 fol., and Stock. Perg. 2 fol.) are legendaries which appear to have been for ecclesiastical and perhaps even liturgical use. The Martha-heavy content of the legend would have provided clergymen with an opportunity to convey the model of the *vita activa* to the female members of his congregation, who in turn would have been expected to take the good example of Martha as a saintly reinforcement of their roles and duties as women in medieval Icelandic society. Hearing the story of Mary Magdalen and Martha within the context of a church service would have been especially important for Icelandic laywomen, since, as Margaret Cormack (1994) reminds us, "readings from saints' legends on their feast days were probably the primary, if not the sole, source of information about them" (32). We may assume that Icelandic nuns would have had more regular contact with the saga within the walls of the convents, where they presumably read the legend or had it read to them during the hours of the day dedicated to study.[24] The presence of excerpts from the composite legend pertaining to Martha in *Reynistaðarbók* indicates that the story of Martha and the *vita activa* was indeed one that Icelandic nuns would have known. But this more frequent exposure to the legend does not necessarily imply that Martha had greater significance for women who had taken the veil than for those living and working on the medieval Icelandic farm. While the nuns may have welcomed Martha's example as one of service to Christ and of the *vita activa*, the pious laywomen for whom the text also seems to have equally been intended, like the housemistress in the D version of *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, may have also found the possibility of becoming an "önnur Marta" through their everyday tasks on the Icelandic farm an appealing prospect as they heard the story of the sister saints preached from the pulpit – which is perhaps exactly what the compiler had in mind.

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[24] Cormack notes that "[saints' legends] would no doubt have received more use in convents and monasteries" (1994: 39).

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