

# Redefining Modernism: An Exploration of Modernist Possibilities in Icelandic Saga

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## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Dr. Ken Seigneurie's World Literature 401 course *Early Modernities Beyond the Medieval*. The instructions for this paper were to triangulate among a literary text, its cultural context, and a claim from Susan Stanford Friedman's *Planetary Modernisms* (a course text; included in the Works Cited). This paper uses MLA citation style.

Icelandic sagas are not typically considered as expressions of modernity: while they are European, these thousand-year-old tales do not emerge during the Modern era. Challenging the definition of "modern," however, Susan Stanford Friedman's 2016 book *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* supports the hypothesis of non-Western modernisms by asserting a relational, rather than nominal, understanding of modernity. This paper will test Friedman's notion of relational modernity by exploring the possibility that *Eirik the Red's Saga* evokes a modernism that reflects a modernity. While known primarily for its account of the Vikings' arrival in North America, the rise of Christianity in Greenland is a central theme of this saga, and the focus of this paper. Beginning with Friedman's distinction between nominal and relational understandings of "the modern," this paper will analyse close readings of the character Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir, detailing how she acts as a nexus for the tensions and struggles that Greenland's society faced during their gradual conversion to Christianity. My analysis also examines how the saga simultaneously embraces and resists Iceland's impending cultural change in the face of Norwegian imperialism at the time of its textual

crystallisation in the 13th century. Alongside considerations of the saga's oral origins and historical context, my analysis will use Friedman's notion of relational modernity and modernism to consider whether *Eirik the Red's Saga* may be regarded as evidencing a non-Western modernism.

A basic understanding of modernism and modernity is essential to this thesis. This paper considers modernity as a period of rapid change within a society, characterised primarily by a break with its traditional past. Modernism, meanwhile, is the aesthetic production that emerges from a modernity, both as its product and as a response to it. In Western scholarship and cultural discourse, modernism has often been thought of as the definitive aesthetic movement that emerged in the West at varying points between the Enlightenment and the end of the 19th Century, and that ended with World War II ("Modernity").<sup>1</sup> In *Planetary Modernisms*, Friedman describes Western scholarship's understanding of modernity as a "nominal" understanding that looks upon its subject as "a set of characteristics existing within discernable boundaries of meaning, space, and time" (33). The nominal understanding of modernity is a problem, according to Friedman, because it is not stable across the disciplines. The social sciences, for example, define "the Modern" as the era that broke with medieval institutions and outlooks (29), while the humanities consider "the Modern" as a reaction against these post-Renaissance Enlightenment structures (30).

Because the nominal understanding of modernity and modernism is unable to sustain its set meaning across the disciplines, Friedman proposes a contrasting relational understanding of modernity that "looks for the latent structure rather than the manifest contents [of modernity]" (33). Friedman looks at modernity as rupture from whatever preceded it, and at modernism as the aesthetic contents of that rupture. By doing so, modernity and modernism become a set of conditions and reflections of social rupture, and may occur at different places in the world at different moments in history (33-34).

Although the action of *Eirik the Red's Saga* largely concerns Greenland and its inhabitants, it is considered an Icelandic saga. At this point in history, Greenland was considered an Icelandic colony, and can therefore be understood as an

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<sup>1</sup> "Western" in a socio-economic and political, rather than geographical, sense.

extension of Icelandic culture and identity. In their global context, the settlement of these islands was part of the Scandinavian expansion that included the Norse invasion of the British Isles. Most of Iceland's and Greenland's Norse settlers arrived by way of Britain, which created a strong Celtic and Gaelic influence over Iceland's otherwise Norse culture (Jóhannesson 18-19). Icelandic historian Jón Jóhannesson explains that Christianity was gradually introduced to Iceland and Greenland by Celtic and later European influences (126-27), and marked a strong contrast to the traditional pagan religions the Icelandic settlers brought from Scandinavia.

In *Eirik the Red's Saga*, the character Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir occupies a central place in the narration that describes the social tensions caused by the rise of Christianity in Greenland. Various episodes in the saga place Gudrid at the centre of these tensions between the traditional paganism and the more recently-arrived Christianity. Chapter 4 recounts how a seeress of the old religion, needing someone to sing some ward songs so that she can speak with the spirits, asks Gudrid to sing the incantation for her: apparently, Gudrid is the only one at the gathering who knows the right songs (6). Gudrid is reluctant to take part in the incantation, "...because I am a Christian woman" (6). After the seeress appeals to Gudrid's sense of honour and to the Christian value of doing good (the songs will allow the seeress to speak to the spirits and learn why Greenland is afflicted with a lean season), Gudrid capitulates and sings the song, even though it is contrary to her Christian beliefs. That no one except for Gudrid knows the ward songs is key: the text positions her as the preserver of the old ways as well as the champion of the new Christian faith. In Gudrid, the conflict between old and new belief systems plays out in one individual's consciousness.

Indeed, Gudrid operates as a nexus for the Christian conversion of Greenland. She features in another episode where Christian themes mingle and clash with traditional pagan ones: in chapter 6, Gudrid's first husband dies, and before he is buried, his body suddenly sits up and asks to speak with Gudrid (10-11) – a decidedly un-Christian plot development. His words, however, are Christian-themed: he speaks of the salvation received by those who had held to the Christian faith in life, and he requests a Christian burial instead of a traditional pagan one (10). Unlike chapter 4, the Christian lifestyle that Gudrid

represents wins out over her society's predominantly pagan practices: her husband's body is given a Christian burial ceremony (11). While these two episodes both include elements of pagan versus Christian practices, they differ in that the latter sees a shift in status quo: where chapter 4 sees Gudrid capitulate to her society's pagan traditions, chapter 6 ends with a decision to act in accordance with her Christian beliefs. Gudrid is the common thread in the interplay between paganism and Christianity in these two chapters, conveying the tension that existed throughout Greenland's conversion process. Notably, the episodes that feature Gudrid as a nexus between paganism and Christianity create a pattern that gradually sees Christianity emerge as the more dominant belief system.

Accordingly, Gudrid's character ushers in and legitimises Christianity in Greenland. After her first husband dies, Gudrid marries Thorstein Eiriksson (9), the son of the founder of Greenland's colony. By marrying Gudrid into the colony's most prominent family, the saga's author marries her role as the champion of Christianity into the heart of Greenlandic society. As a woman, Gudrid will continue the line of Greenland's founding family, grafting in Christian beliefs. When Thorstein Eiriksson later dies (10), Gudrid is recognised as being "under Eirik's [her father-in-law's] protection" (12) – she is one of the family, and her membership in such a prominent family further legitimises the presence of Christianity in Greenlandic society.

Gudrid is also tied to many of the genealogies that feature in *Eirik the Red's Saga*. The saga begins with a genealogy centred around a woman named Aud the Deep-Minded, a Norse woman who converts to Christianity after her husband conquers Ireland, a stronghold of Celtic Christianity (1). When her husband dies in battle, Aud sets sail for Iceland, bringing her faith and religious practices with her (2). She also brings along many men from the British Isles who had been taken prisoner during Viking raids (2), one of whom would become Gudrid's grandfather (2). Aud is a literary prototype for Gudrid: both are capable, intelligent women, well-respected by their communities. Aud foreshadows the rise of Christianity in Iceland and Greenland that is mapped out by Gudrid's story: where Aud brings Christianity to Iceland, Gudrid follows it farther west to Greenland. Moreover, if Gudrid portrays Greenland's struggle between its traditional pagan religion and the rising Christian religion, Aud's genealogy lays

the foundation for this tension, setting up Christianity as the “right” and logical endgame of Icelandic and Greenlandic society. In effect, the text suggests that the introduction of Christianity to Iceland and Greenland triggers a religious modernity: it represents a new way of living, requiring radical departure from the Icelanders’ and Greenlanders’ ancestral pagan Norse traditions. To settle in Iceland or Greenland, it would seem, is to cast off an old pagan Norse identity and to take up the new Icelandic identity that is a Christianised hybrid of Norse and Celtic cultures.

To continue in this vein, reading the saga’s portrayal of Christianity as evidence for its modernist sentiment makes sense given the saga’s historical context. The events described in the saga occurred during the late 10th and early 11th Centuries, and the story existed in oral form for two centuries (Magnusson and Pálsson, Chronological Table, 119). Given that the saga was written down shortly before Greenland and Iceland fell to Norwegian control in the 1260’s (Chronological Table, 119), the saga’s account of Greenland’s conversion arguably marks the emergence of a new Icelandic identity that is similar to and yet subtly divergent from that of Iceland’s new Norwegian rulers: they have similar Norse roots, but Iceland has a Celtic influence that distinguishes it from Norway. In this way, the saga’s use of Gudrid as a metaphor for the rise of Christianity in Greenland acts as a subtle form of resistance against Norwegian imperialism. Given that the saga seems to arise as a product of and commentary on the social and political upheaval involved in Greenland and Iceland’s fall to Norway, the saga could thus be read as evoking a modernist temper.

Such a cut-and-dry consideration of whether *Eirik the Red’s Saga* indicates a modernist movement falls short, however. The social rupture by which Friedman characterises modernity must seek to break from its past. If anything, though, this text does the opposite: it clings to the past, trying to generate a sense of Greenlandic identity in the face of impending change. As a text, the saga seems to be written for a Christian audience – it was written after the 11th and 12th Century conversions of Iceland and Greenland, respectively. More to the point, the author allows for their Christian audience’s unfamiliarity with the old pagan religion: in chapter 4, when the seeress asks for someone to sing the ward songs, the author inserts a clause explaining what exactly a ward song is: “She asked for

women who knew the chants required for carrying out magic rites, *which are called ward songs*” (6 emphasis added). The text schools its audience in the vocabulary of the old religion, suggesting they are no longer familiar with it. For the saga’s 13th Century audience, Christianity is the status quo and paganism is no longer a part of Icelandic identity, at least as far as official storytelling and political policy are concerned. As its readers lose their autonomy to Norwegian influence, the saga attempts to cling to the idealised Celtic hybridity that made Icelandic identity so distinct from Norse culture. In this reading of the text, the saga does not evoke a modernist movement, as it does not seek to break from its surrounding culture.

A counter-reading of my earlier interpretation of Christianity as a form of resistance in *Eirik the Red’s Saga* further denies any modernist leanings in the text. In this counter-reading, the same themes of Christianity that initially suggest an Icelandic modernity operate as a literary appeasement policy towards Norwegian culture. Given the tension between Iceland and Norway at the time of the saga’s crystallisation, the prominence of Christian themes in this saga may operate as an appeal to Norwegian influences, pointing out commonalities between the two cultures in hopes of maintaining friendly relations. Such may have very well been the case with Iceland’s official conversion to Christianity in 1000 CE, which seems to have occurred at the behest of the Norwegian king Olaf Tryggvason (Jóhannesson 127). If this is indeed the case with *Eirik the Red’s Saga*, its modernist leanings are debatable: while it arises in reaction to an impending change within Greenlandic culture, the saga does not embrace this rupture from its past. Rather, the saga seeks to hold onto the past, recalling stories that would serve the people of Greenland and Iceland well during this period of change.

In short, there are a vast number of arguments for and against *Eirik the Red’s Saga* evoking a modernism. Given that the saga exists as part of a larger body of Icelandic sagas, the ultimate verdict as to whether this particular saga is part of a modernist movement cannot be based on a close reading of one text: consideration would have to be given to the total body of sagas in light of their broader historical context, which is far beyond the scope of one paper. Some elements of *Eirik the Red’s Saga* – namely, the saga’s resistance of Norwegian imperialism by reminding its Icelandic readers of their unique cultural heritage –

could suggest a modernism. An alternative reading of this interpretation suggests otherwise, arguing that the resistance mounted by the text does not embrace Greenland and Iceland's impending cultural rupture at the hands of Norwegian imperialism, but rather clings to its past as a last-ditch protectionist reaction. Regardless, the discussion that emerges by considering whether *Eirik the Red's Saga* evokes a modernism speaks to the usefulness of Friedman's relational notion of modernity. Whether or not this era of Icelandic history can be considered a modernity, and whether or not *Eirik the Red's Saga* is part of a modernist expression of that modernity, Friedman's relational approach opens up new ways of reading texts beyond the narrower, nominal understandings of modernism and modernity that have typically been used by Western scholarship.

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