

## **ICONOGRAPHISK POST**

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# The Seal of Dignity of Archbishop Olav of Nidaros (1350–1370). Reflections on its Iconography and Cultural Context

Abstract: Medieval seals provide interesting historical and art historical source material as they reflect a number of elements in medieval society, of which iconography is one. The imagery in the seal of dignity of Olav I, Archbishop of Nidaros (1350–1370), is an artwork of high quality. This article provides a detailed examination of the cultural context of the seal by bringing together earlier knowledge and some new insights. It discusses stylistic relations to comparable seals from different areas outside the Nidaros archdiocese. These are the seals of the Cardinal of San Clemente, the Bishop of Durham and Queen Blanche of Norway and Sweden. The great seal of Olav was innovative at the time in Norway. It was hagiographic with a suppliant bishop's figure. It contained rich micro-architectural elements, and heraldry now formed part of the imagery of the seal. The stylistic connections presented in the article are a reminder of the significance of the long-distance travels of the medieval clergy and the resulting network of cultural interactions (including correspondence), especially during this period of increasing papal influence.

Keywords: Olav I of Nidaros, Seal Image, Iconography, Micro-architecture, Archbishop, Nidaros, Identity, France, 14th century.



Fig. 1. The seal of dignity of Archbishop Olav I (1350–1370). © Riksarkivet, Oslo.

# The Seal of Dignity of Archbishop Olav of Nidaros (1350–1370)

# Reflections on its Iconography and Cultural Context

Guðrún Harðardóttir

#### Introduction

Seals were significant items in the medieval world. One of their most important functions was to authenticate documents of various sorts. Therefore, the imagery on medieval seals is normally supposed to reflect the status of the seal owners, as an expression of their identity, closely linked to their position in society. Seals contained both an image of some kind, which was somehow related to the owner, and a written legend around the edges. The seal owner was identified primarily through its iconography. For example, kings were usually presented sitting on a throne with a globe and a sceptre, or on horseback wielding a sword. The highest-ranking officials of the church had elaborate seals that were often pieces of high-quality artwork. The visual message of ecclesiastic seals was quite universal.1

The main seals of bishops were called "seals of dignity". The one made for Archbishop Olav of Nidaros (fig. 1), ordained in 1350, is the subject of this article, focusing mainly on the seal's artistic and cultural context. Bishops' seals of dignity followed general formats in their iconography which were similar from country to country. In the High Middle Ages, this type of seal usually shows a bishop, vested in liturgical clothes, standing or sitting inside a pointed oval form. Such seals were in use from the 12th until the 14th century.<sup>2</sup> During the

early 14th century, architectural elements were introduced around the bishop. Later on, an image of a saint became dominant, and the bishop was reduced to a kneeling suppliant below the saint.<sup>3</sup> In the sequence of the seals of the archbishops of Nidaros, the one of Olav was innovative in three ways. It was hagiographic, i.e. with a saint in the centre and the bishop below, it had a new type of rich architectural framework, and heraldry in the form of blazoned shields was now present in the seal imagery.<sup>4</sup>

Archbishop Olav was a former abbot of the Benedictine house of Nidarholm in Nidaros. As *electus*, he had to travel to the papal curia to receive his symbol of power, the *pallium*. Due to the internal conflicts in the medieval church during the period 1309–1378, the pope resided in Avignon instead of in Rome. Olav was not, however, the first Nidarosian electus to travel to Avignon. His three predecessors, Eiliv korte, Pål Bårdsson and Arne Vade, had also done so.<sup>5</sup>

These were difficult years in Norway. The Black Death had struck the country in the autumn of 1349 and resulted in the deaths of thousands of inhabitants, including the Archbishop Arne Vade. Most of the twelve Nidrosian canons died in the plague, but one of them survived and had Olav elected as the successor.<sup>6</sup> Despite the tragic circumstances, he had a most prestigious seal of dignity made for him. It is of such high quality that it deserves a more thorough discussion than it has been assigned in earlier literature on the Norwegian seals. Such a discussion involves a French connection related to the seal of Pierre Bertrand, Cardinal of San Clemente, which in turn is related to the influential second seal of Richard of Bury, Bishop of Durham (figs. 7-8). Another important seal is that of Queen Blanche of Norway and Sweden (fig. 9). The seal of Archbishop Olav will be examined in the context of these seals.

During his ordination journey, Olav could hardly have been aware of the immense consequences the Black Death, including the economic collapse of his church in the years to come. When he began the trip, he was representing a wealthy archdiocese worthy of a sophisticated seal matrix.

# Seal Images and Stylistic Influence

In the case of ecclesiastic officials or institutions, communication with sealed letters and other documents took place both locally and internationally. Because of this, the seal image was the art form that travelled most during the Middle Ages. Like the church officials themselves, it could therefore be the carriers of new styles and fashions. Due to the nature of ecclesiastic correspondence, the routes for the highest quality of seal art tended to be from south to north, i.e. from Rome or Avignon to the metropolitan sees further north. Seals then travelled from the metropolitan centres to the local dioceses and vice versa. They could therefore be effective channels for direct stylistic contact between distant places and introduce new trends in a rather short time. The second seal of Richard of Bury, Bishop of Durham, is an example of the strong influence an impressive seal image could have on the iconography of other bishops' seals in England (cf. fig. 8).7

Bishops' seals of dignity tended to be quite large, providing space for high quality artwork. Their size generally corresponded to the owner's position in the hierarchical order of the church. 8 The archbishops' seals were the largest, approximately 80–100 mm in height, the bishops' seals were 70–80 mm, and lesser monastic officials only 50-60 mm. Archbishop Olav's seal was by far the largest Norwegian one, with a height of no less than 96 mm. The seals of his predecessors Eiliv (1311–1332) and Pål Bårdsson (1333–1346), of the traditional type, were only 80 and 75 mm respectively. However, some changes in style are detectable already between the seal of Eiliv (fig. 3) and that of his predecessor, Jørund (1288-1309), which was the last of the earlier, 13th century types (fig. 2).<sup>10</sup>

These older seals usually show a Romanesque, rigidly frontal figure against a plain background, while Eiliv's figure presents a somewhat swaying, gothic form. The seal of Pål also has a touch of gothic but the seal of his successor, Arne Vade (1346–1349), again presents a frontal figure (fig. 4). The latter was the first of the Nidaros archbishops' seals to incorporate architectural elements above the bishop's figure. 11 In this respect, the seal of Arne Vade was in line with a general development towards an increasing use of architectural elements on the seals of higher church officials that is believed to have started in Île de France.<sup>12</sup> From the mid-13th century, or approximately from the completion of the St. Chapelle in Paris, there was an increasing transfer of the aesthetic vocabulary of architecture into other spheres of art. The results of this migration of largescale forms into small-scale art objects has been termed "microarchitecture". 13

Very few medieval sources actually comment on how architecture in seals of the church officials was perceived. Some late 14th century examples provide the term "tabernaculum" for the architecture surrounding a figure. <sup>14</sup> Following



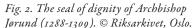




Fig. 3. The seal of dignity of Archbishop Eiliv (1311–1332). © Riksarkivet, Oslo.

the doctrine of the transubstantiation, confirmed by the Lateran Council in 1215, there was a growing veneration of the Host that resulted in the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1264 which was fully confirmed in the liturgical calendar in 1317. Along with this development, "the decades around 1300 mark a particularly close, indeed unsurpassed, moment of rapprochement between macro- and micro-architectural worlds." Elements from monumental architecture were more and more frequently used in small pieces of metalwork, 17 and their appearance on seals was relatively early in comparison with other forms of art. 18 A rich architectural framing of a figure on a seal image provided a visual message of elevated status, for example evident in canopied sediliae. 19

The seal of Archbishop Olav (1350-1370) falls within the timeframe of this development and represents a major shift in style by introducing rich microarchitectural features. Instead of the simple canopy on the seal of his predeces-

sor, the upper two-thirds of Olav's seal consist of an architectural structure, a type of baldachin around the enthroned figure of St. Olav, patron saint of the Nidaros Cathedral. Beside him on two levels are other saints of whom only St. Hallvard and St. Catherine are recognizable. Below, in the trefoil arch, there was probably a small kneeling bishop with mitre and crozier, and beside him shields with the cathedral's heraldic signs. The upper part of the background is ornamented with a floral pattern, but around the bishop's figure, there is a diamond pattern similar to that on the earlier seals.<sup>20</sup> This design was reused for Vinald Henriksson (1387–1402) and Aslak Bolt (1430–1450) and most likely for the archbishops between them. Since the seals of Vinald and Aslak



Fig. 4. The seal of dignity of Archbishop Arne Vade (1346–1349).
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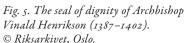




Fig. 6. The seal of dignity of Archbishop Aslak Bolt (1430-1450). © Riksarkivet, Oslo.

(figs. 5-6) are better preserved than that of Olav, it is possible to reconstruct the missing part of its lower scene.<sup>21</sup>

A number of scholars <sup>22</sup> have commented on different aspects of Archbishop Olav's seal and it (or those of Vinald and Aslak) has often been used as an illustration in various history books dealing with this period. In his 1903 article Harry Fett, discussing the art of the Norwegian seals, used Vinald's version of the seal for his obeservations. He interpreted the long reuse of the image as a lack of artistic invention in Norway after 1350 or a decline in creativity among local goldsmiths at the time after the Black Death.<sup>23</sup> It seems that Fett based this opinion on the repeated reuse of the matrix, and that he regarded the seal as a local Norwegian production. In 1927, Kielland made use of and commented on the architectural elements of the image of the archbishop's seal in trying to visualize the appearance of the now lost St. Olav's shrine. He also seems to

take it for granted that the image on the great seals of the archbishops in use during the period 1350–1450 was the work of Nidaros goldsmiths.<sup>24</sup>

Others who have commented on this seal are Hallvard Trætteberg in various articles (1953, 1968, 1970); Audun Dybdahl (1999) in an article on saints in Norwegian seals; the editors of the important catalogue of the archbishops' seals, Geistlige segl fra Nidaros bispedømme (2012; from here on Geistlige segl); and Øystein Ekroll (2016) in an article on St. Olav in the Norwegian seal material. Trætteberg refers to the seal as presenting a façade-like structure embracing the figure of the saint which is "framed by a complex architectural structure probably indicating the Nidaros cathedral".25 Dybdahl also mentions the possibility of the architectural framework surrounding St. Olav as representative of the Nidaros Cathedral: the St. Olav's figure "is framed by a structure that probably is meant to represent Nidaros cathedral with saints in niches". The comments in Geistlige segl and those of Ekroll are discussed further below.

## The Seal of Archbishop Olav in a Wider Context

Axel L. Romdahl, in an article in Fornvännen 1911, was the first to point out the likeness of the seal of Archbishop Olav to that of the Cardinal of San Clemente (1331-1349; fig. 7). Both Romdahl and the editors of Geistlige segl published a photograph of the latter seal for a visual comparison but do not discuss the similarity further or place the two seals in a greater context. The resemblance of the two seals is presented in the following way in Geistlige segl: "The seal is an almost direct copy of a French seal belonging to Pierre Bertrand, Cardinal of San Clemente. There sits St. Clemens with his anchor in the main niche."27

It is interesting to consider whether the seal of Archbishop Olav should be perceived as an imitation of that of the Cardinal of San Clemente, or as a product of the same artistic milieu and therefore stylistically related. In Geistlige *segl*, the editors state the possibility of the matrix being made abroad: "[...] the seal of Archbishop Olav I [is] a piece of jewellery of the highest international quality. It is strikingly similar to a slightly older French seal [...] The central figure, St. Clemens, is exchanged for St. Olav. The archbishops of Nidaros were to travel to the papal court to receive the pallium and we know that some of them studied abroad. That may have been an inspiration for the choice of form and motif."28 In the catalogue text, it is suggested that the matrix was made somewhere outside Norway.<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 7. The seal of dignity of Pierre Bertrand, Cardinal of San Clemente (1331–1349). After Geistlige segl fra Nidaros bispedømme 2012, ill. p. 22.

In 2016, Ekroll took the opinion expressed in *Geistlige segl* (2012) a bit further by suggesting that the matrix may have been made by a French goldsmith during Olav's ordination journey: "This design of the great seal must therefore have been regarded as so good and with such high prestige that it was not important to renew the design during this period." In the case of Archbishop Eiliv (1311–1332), there is concrete evidence of his use of the seal before he returned back to Norway after his ordination – it is attached to a letter written in Vienna in 1312. This fact makes it clear that the seal was made somewhere on his way to or from Avignon.<sup>31</sup>

In 1911, Romdahl had already pointed to evidence of a direct influence from France: "During the first half of the 14th century, we find in this country [France] both prelate and princess seals with exactly the same character as the

Fig. 8. The second seal of Richard of Bury, Bishop of Durham, in use 1335-1345. After Pourquoi les sceaux 2011, ill. p. 435.



Nordic seals mentioned here."<sup>32</sup> Kielland follows Romdahl concerning the strength of the French influence on the Norwegian seal material, especially via Norwegian workshops in the Oslo area.<sup>33</sup>

Yet another seal that must be drawn into this discussion is the influential seal of Richard of Bury, Bishop of Durham, dating from 1335 (fig. 8), which shares important elements with that of the Cardinal of San Clemente. It is one of the most impressive English medieval seals and, as Brigitte Bedos-Rezak states in her study on the destruction of seals after the death of seal owners, "is of a spectacular beauty." In his influential article "The Episcopal Seals of Richard of Bury" (1980), T. A. Heslop discusses its exceptional quality and examines its great impact on later seal production in England. He also places it in a larger artistic context and focuses on certain elements in its design – the pose of the

figure and the elaborate architectural setting – and part of his discussion incorporates the seal of the Cardinal of San Clemente. On the basis of the figure's pose and the legends, he concludes that the seals of the Bishop of Durham and those of the bishops of Langres from before 1335 and Arras from 1331 show enough likeness to be attributed to the same artistic milieu in France: Île de France.<sup>35</sup> Although there are iconographic differences between the Durham and the San Clemente seals, the former being an effigy type and the latter a hagiographic, there are important details in the architectural settings that are not present in the seals of Arras and Langres. These are the three-dimensional qualities of the canopy work beside and above the main figures and, more specifically, the tracery behind the main figures.<sup>36</sup> Marc Gil has later suggested that the design of the seal of the Cardinal of San Clemente may have been based on the design of the seal of Queen Jeanne II of Navarre.<sup>37</sup>

The type of tracery present in the Durham and San Clemente seals is not to be found in the seals of French bishops during the decade before 1350, but the tracery in the San Clemente seal makes it more likely than not that it was made in the same stylistic milieu as the Durham one.<sup>38</sup> The likeness of the seal of Archbishop Olav to that of Cardinal of San Clemente opens up for the possibility that the approximately 20 year long interval between the Durham–San Clemente and the Nidaros seals is not too large for them to be attributed to the same artistic milieu.

An additional point is that the united kingdoms of Norway and Sweden at the time had a French queen: Blanche of Namur (c. 1315–1363), who married King Magnus Eiriksson (1316–1374) in 1335. Her seal, preserved on a document from 1346, showing her in full-length figure with surrounding architectural elements and coats of arms, closely resembles other French royal seals (fig. 9).<sup>39</sup> Her seal is dated some four years earlier than that of Archbishop Olav, and interestingly enough it has a particular element in common with those of Olav, the Cardinal of San Clemente and Jeanne of Navarre: the small square "balconies", placed to the extreme left and right on these seals. This detail is evidently a part of the same artistic vocabulary, and one wonders if, as Romdahl suggested, a French-trained craftsman may have been imported to the royal court.<sup>40</sup> Whether the matrix itself or the craftsman was imported, the French provenance of the queen's seal seems beyond questioning. A foreign origin for a high-status seal matrix was not unknown in Norway. An earlier example is the

Fig. 9. The seal of Queen Blanche (d. 1363) who married King Magnus Eriksson in 1335. After Fleetwood 1947, ill. nr 76.



second seal of King Håkon Håkonson (1217–1263), which was a gift from King Henry III of England, made by his court engraver, Walter of Croxton.<sup>41</sup>

At the time of Archbishop Olav, the pope resided in Avignon, which meant that *electi* had to travel through France for their ordination. The route taken by Olav is not known, but it is possible that he passed through Île de France on his way to or from Avignon, had his matrix made there – or received it as a gift from someone with contacts in that area. Medieval itineraries are described in Icelandic manuscripts, where the road towards the south normally goes from Denmark through Germany, <sup>42</sup> but the fact that Archbishop Eiliv used his seal in Vienna during his ordination trip to Avignon shows that detours from the main routes were quite possible. <sup>43</sup> Another common road from the north, the Via Francigena (from Canterbury to Rome), passed through France and cities like Reims (some 150 km northwest of Paris). <sup>44</sup> One of the Icelandic annals informs us that an Icelandic priest travelled to Avignon in 1345, and on his way back stayed for a while in Paris. <sup>45</sup> So may Archbishop Olav also have done. Another possibility is that the matrix of Olav's seal was made in Avignon in the style and manner of Île de France. In any case by someone trained there.

#### Conclusion

The great seal of Archbishop Olav I of Nidaros has been examined in a wider cultural context than in earlier research, and important details in its design have revealed new possibilities of its artistic provenance, especially pointing to Île de France. These details link Olav's seal to other prestigious seals, such as those of Pierre Bertrand, Cardinal of San Clemente and Richard of Bury, Bishop of Durham. The same may also apply to the seal of the French-born Queen Blanche of Norway and Sweden. The stylistic features of these seals seem to indicate a common place of production, or at least a common artistic context, located in the region of Île de France. Olav's seal may well have been produced in this region, or in an Avignon workshop by someone trained there.

This prestigious seal reveals an appetite for sophisticated status objects that ought to remind us that the countries of the Far North were not culturally isolated, at least not on the elite level of society. The higher clergy frequently travelled abroad observing changes in fashion and new artistic trends as they went. Archbishop Olav's seal provides us with material proof, not only of a French connection, but also of the trend sensitivity of the northern prelates, in this case the newly ordained Nidrosian archbishop.

#### Notes

- 1 Heslop 1987a, 116; Svanberg 1987, 238; New 2010, 59-63.
- 2 Bautier 1995, 226-235.
- 3 Trætteberg 1970, 199; New 2010, 62. These articles contain a convenient overview of the general trends in medieval seal types. The illustrations in the now digitized catalogues, such as Danske gejstlige sigiller fra middelalderen by Henry Petersen and Svenska sigiller från medeltiden by Hans Hildebrand, provide a good visual overview of types.
- 4 These are observations made by the author, based on Trætteberg 1970, 197-200; Geistlige segl 2012, 48–60. The hagiographic type with a suppliant bishop's figure was common in counterseals of which the earliest preserved of the Nidaros archbishops is the one of Sørle (1253–1254).
- 5 Geistlige segl 2012, 54; Kolsrud 1958, 258; Islandske annaler, 276.
- 6 Kolsrud 1958, 271–272; *Islandske annaler*, 275–276.
- 7 Bautier 1968, 219-220; Heslop 1987b, 496. For more general references to the reciprocity of medieval art and society, see for example: Emile Mâle, The Gothic Image. Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century, transl. Dora Nussey, New York (Harper &Row) 1972; Nicola Coldstream, Medieval architecture, Oxford (Oxford University Press) 2002.
- 8 Heslop 1987a, 116.
- 9 Diederich 2012, 100–101; Harðardóttir 2016, 204; *Geistlige segl* 2012, 40–67.
- 10 *Geistlige segl* 2012, 48–49, 53–58; Morgan 2004, 26.
- 11 Geistlige segl 2012, 48-49; Morgan 2004, 26, 53-58; Kielland 1927, 172; Trætteberg 1970, 197-200.
- 12 New 2010, 62; Gardner 2011, 442-443.
- 13 Bucher 1976, 72, 83. See note 17.
- 14 Sillence 2018, 101. This is more in line with the architectural elements in for example the seal of Archbishop Gaute (1475–1510) and later examples rather than the one of Olav I, see Geistlige segl 2012, 77.
- 15 Timmermann 2018, 59–60; Rubin 1991, 181–185, 209.
- 16 Timmermann 2018, 61.
- 17 A pioneering discussion on microarchitecture as an integral element of gothic architecture was discussed in Bucher 1976, 71-89. There has been increasing interest in the concept of medieval microarchitecture in recent years which is for example evident in two conference volumes, one in German: Mikroarchitektur im Mittelalter: ein gattungsübergreifendes Phänomen zwischen Realität und Imagination (Beiträge der gleichnamigen Tagung im Germanischen Nationalmuseum Nürnberg vom 26. bis 29. Oktober 2005), Christine Kratzke & Uwe Albrecht (eds.), Leipzig 2008 – and

- the other in French: Jean-Marie Guilloët & Ambre Vilain (eds.), Microarchitectures médiévales: l'échelle à l'épreuve de la matière, Paris (Éditions Picard, INHA) 2018.
- 18 Gardner 2011, 442-443.
- 19 Cameron 2018, 160.
- 20 Geistlige segl 2012, 57-59.
- 21 Geistlige segl 2012, 23, 59-69.
- 22 Fett 1903; Romdahl 1911; Kielland 1927; Trætteberg, 1953, 1968, 1970; Dybdahl 1999; Geistlige segl 2012; Ekroll 2016.
- 23 Fett 1903, 98: "hvilket tydelig viser den mangel paa nyskabningsevne, som nu udbreder sig i vor norske seglkunst".
- 24 Kielland 1927, 170, 172, text to fig. 154.
- 25 Trætteberg, 1953, 51: "rammes inn av forgrenet arkitekturverk som antakelig betyr Nidaroskatedralen"; Trætteberg 1968, 66, 71–72; Trætteberg 1970, 200.
- 26 Dybdahl 1999, 101: "innrammes av et byggverk som trolig skal forestille Nidaros domkirke med helgener i nisjer."
- 27 Geistlige segl 2012, 60: Seglet er en nesten direkte kopi av et fransk segl tilhørende Pierre Bertrand, kardinal av San Clemente. Der sitter Sankt Clemens med sitt anker i hovednisjen."
- 28 Geistlige segl 2012, 22: "et gullsmedarbeid av topp internasjonal kvalitet. Det likner påfallende et litt tidligere fransk segl ... Sentralfiguren, Sankt Clemens, er byttet ut med Sankt Olav. Erkebiskopene i Nidaros skulle til pavestolen for å få sitt pallium, og vi vet at noen av dem hadde studert i utlandet. Det kan ha gitt inspirasjon til valg av motiv og utforming."
- 29 Geistlige segl 2012, 60.
- 30 Ekroll 2016, 156–157: "Denne utforminga av storseglet må derfor ha blitt sett på som så god og med så høg prestisje att det ikkje var viktig å fornye uttrykket gjennom heile denne tida."
- 31 *Geistlige segl* 2012, 54.
- 32 Romdahl 1911, 103–104: "Vi återfinna i detta land [France] under förra hälften af 1300-talet både prelat- och furstinnesigill med fullständigt samma karaktär som de här omtalade nordiska sigillen." Romdahl drew the seal of Pierre Bertand into his discussion of Swedish seals, the ones of Archbishop Peter from 1334, Bishop Sigge 1342, Archbishop Hemming 1343, Bishop Frender 1344 and Queen Blanche 1346, and Ödgisl Birgerson, Bishop of Västerås 1345. In addition, he mentions the secret seal of the Bishop of Strängnäs 1345. The secret seals are not part of this discussion although the hagiographic types first developed on secret seals before being used in seals of dignity. See Trætteberg 1970, 197-201. An overview of Swedish seals is available in Emil Hildebrand, Svenska sigiller I–II, 1862–1867.

- 33 Kielland 1927, 148–149.
- 34 Bedos-Rezak 2006, 352 ("... est d'une beauté spectaculaire").
- 35 Heslop 1980, 157-158; Heslop 1987b, 496. In the 1987b text Heslop firmly states: "Whatever the nationality of the engraver, this particular seal's influence was felt most strongly in England, where it initiated a fashion that lasted for a century and a half."
- 36 Heslop 1980, 158.
- 37 Gil 2011, 429-430. Anne Heath (2018) has also commented on these aspects of microarchitecture and the French context in her article "Making New Impressions: The 'Episcopal' Seals of Benedictine Abbots in the 13th and 14th Centuries', 256–258.
- 38 Heslop 1980, 157-158.
- 39 Nyquist 2017, 334–336, 352; Kjelland 1927, 271, n. 32.
- 40 Romdahl 1911, 104.
- 41 Kielland 1927, 124.
- 42 Sturlunga saga, skýringar og fræði 1988, 49-65, 269 (map).
- 43 Geistlige segl 2012, 53-54.
- 44 Zweidler 2003, 7 (map).
- 45 Porsteinsson & Grímsdóttir 1989, 208; Islandske annaler, 274.

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