A HISTORY OF THE OLD ICELANDIC COMMONWEALTH

Íslendinga Saga

by Jón Jóhannesson

Translated by Haraldur Bessason

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The publication of the present volume coincides with the eleven hundredth anniversary of the settlement of Iceland. It is the hope of the editors that, within the English speaking world, this translation of Jón Jóhannesson's *Íslendinga saga* will serve both academic and more general interest in Iceland's long and colourful history.

Robert J. Glendinning
Haraldur Bessason

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From the Author's Foreword

The main purpose of this book is to provide an outline for studies of Icelandic history at the University of Iceland. But above and beyond this it is hoped that it will be a useful source of information to anyone interested in history.

Even though the book has been a long time in the writing, it may be expected to fall short, in various ways, of providing an exhaustive analysis. Basic research remains to be done in many more areas than most people would suspect, and it is likely that some of this research will remain in abeyance for a long time to come. Secondly, the views of scholars regarding the historical source-value of Old Icelandic literature, particularly the Family Sagas and the earliest written Sagas of Kings, have changed completely during the last twenty or thirty years. Therefore, most of the earlier historical surveys dealing with the first two or three hundred years of Icelandic history have become obsolete sooner than would have been anticipated. Thirdly, there is reason to expect that archeological research in Iceland, particularly the investigations of the ruins of ancient farm buildings, will uncover information of historical significance. The same holds true for the work of geologists. Currently, studies in tephrochronology (i.e. the dating of layers of volcanic ash) and climatology appear to be of the greatest importance for historians. It is quite obvious that even minor fluctuations in climatic conditions may have affected the living conditions of the Icelandic people and either alleviated or aggravated their struggle for existence. Accordingly, it may become necessary to re-evaluate gradually, in the light of climatological research, currently accepted ideas on Icelandic history.

As has been indicated in bibliographical references in the main text, this book is based on diverse sources. Many of the problems encountered have been clarified with the help of existing scholarly literature, while it has also been most helpful to consult personally with people well informed in Icelandic history. Even though I shall have to forgo the listing of names of individuals and titles of books, I must give recognition to my teacher in Icelandic history at the University of Iceland, Professor Árni Pálsson. I am indebted to him for his guidance in many fields of historical research. I am also indebted to the various historical works which I studied at the University, particularly *Réttarsaga althingis* by Einar Arnórsson and *Kristnisaga Íslands* by Jón Helgason.

Jón Jóhannesson

A Prefatory Note from the Translator

I am deeply indebted to Professor Hjálmar V. Lárusson of the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba, Hermann Pálsson, Reader in Icelandic at the University of Edinburgh, and Professor Robert J. Glendinning, my co-editor of the present series, for their careful and extensive editing of my translation.

Recognition must also be given to many others from whose help I have benefitted. Dr. Guðrún P. Helgadóttir compared the entire translation with the Icelandic original and eliminated a number of inaccuracies. Professor Emeritus Richard Beck, Mr. George Noble, former Director of the University Extension Library at the University of Manitoba, and my graduate students Miss Julian O. Thorsteinson and Mr. Howard S. Reilly read the manuscript, either in part or in its entirety, offered constructive criticisms and made corrections.

Mrs. Lenore Good and Mr. Gunnar Gunnarsson have helped with the preparation of footnotes and indices. The maps from the original volume have been re-drawn by Mr. Gylfi Már Guðbergsson, who also made the folded map of Iceland at the back of this volume.

The illustrations, all of which appeared in the Icelandic original of the present work, are reproduced here with the kind of permission of Mr. Thór Magnússon, Curator of the National Museum of Iceland. The Photography is by Mr. Gísli Gestsson.

Dr. Hallvard Magerøy, Professor of Icelandic at the University of Oslo most generously gave me his permission to make free use of the many footnotes which he added in his Norwegian translation of the present work in 1969. Most of these have been reproduced here either wholly or in part and together with a few notes added in this translation they are identified by the use of square brackets.

In some instances, translations of passages from Old Icelandic texts have either been borrowed from or based on the following standard works and translations: *Egil's Saga,* translated by Gwyn Jones, Syracuse University Press, 1960; *Eyrbyggja Saga,* translated by Paul Schach. Introduction and verse translation by Lee M. Hollander, University of Nebraska Press, 1959; *Hrafnkel's Saga and other Stories,* translated by Hermann Pálsson, Penguin Classics, 1970; *Laxdœla Saga,* translated by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, Penguin Classics, 1969; *The Age of the Sturlungs: Icelandic Civilization in the Thirteenth Century* by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (Islandica, Vol. XXXVI), translated by Jóhann S. Hannesson, Cornell University Press, 1953; *The Book of Settlements* (Landnámabók), translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, University of Manitoba Press, 1972; *The Book of the Icelanders* (Íslendingabók) by Ari Thorgilsson (Islandica, Vol. XX), translated by Halldór

Hermannsson, Cornell University Press, 1930; *The History of Iceland* by Knut Gjerset, Macmillan (New York), 1924; *The Poetic Edda,* translated by Lee M. Hollander, University of Texas Press, 1962; *The Viking Achievement* by Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, Sidgwick & Jackson (London) 1970; *The Vinland Sagas,* translated by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, Penguin Classics, 1965.

Except for a few modernized vowel symbols Old Icelandic forms of personal names and technical terms have been retained, since these forms have become familiar through Old Icelandic literature. On the other hand, the Modern Icelandic spelling of place names has been used throughout, since it is consistent with present-day maps of Iceland. With the exception of *Þ* (þ), transliterated below as Th (th), Icelandic symbols occurring in proper names have been retained. These symbols together with some examples from English showing approximately the Modern Icelandic sound value of each symbol are as follows: *á* (like *ow* in Engl. *cow*); *é* (like *ye* in *yes*); *í* (like *ee* in green); *ó* (like *o* in note); *ú* (like *oo* in school); *ý* (the same as Icel. *í*); *æ* (like *i(gh)* in *high*); *ö* (like *ö* in German *hören* and similar to *eu* in French *peur*); *au* (a diphthong like *eu* in French *feuille,* not found in English); *ei* and *ey* (a diphthong like *a* in *hate*); *ð* (a voiced spirant like *th* in breathe).

An index of names, as well as genealogical tables for the principal families of Medieval Iceland, have been added to the present translation for the benefit of those who may not have had the opportunity to read the old Icelandic historical literature.

Finally, I thank the author's wife, Dr. Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, and *Almenna bókafélagið,* Reykjavík, the publisher of the Icelandic original (Íslendinga saga I, Reykjavik 1956), for granting permission for the publication of an English translation.

H.B.

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DISCOVERY AND SETTLEMENT

Thule

We have no records to tell us when people first set foot on Icelandic soil, or when the first fire was kindled there. However it is obvious that this cannot have happened in the very remote past as it presupposes the existence of ocean-going ships. Without these there would hardly have been an Icelandic nation, for the beginning of Icelandic society and the whole course of its history are closely linked with the evolution of ship-building and navigation in north-western Europe. The earliest archeological finds indicating human habitation in Iceland date from about 300 A.D. But there are scholars who maintain that the country had been known some six hundred years earlier, and we must briefly consider these theories.

Pytheas of Marseille was an astronomer, mathematician and geographer, who explored north-western Europe, probably in the fourth century B.C. His own account of the exploration is now lost but parts of it have survived in the works of later authors, notably the geographer Strabo, who lived around the time of the birth of Christ. In Strabo's works, Pytheas' descriptions are taken out of context and probably distorted, and it is quite clear that Strabo and most others not only questioned the accuracy of his descriptions but even tried to make him seem ridiculous. Modern scholars, however, have concluded that this treatment of Pytheas' writings was completely undeserved and that he must have been an outstanding scientist. Pytheas is said to have mentioned a country which he called Thule, situated six days' sailing north of Britain and close to the frozen sea. He also seems to have maintained that in Thule the sun stayed above the horizon all night at summer solstice. This description fits Iceland, but Pytheas evidently implied that Thule was inhabited and this would rule Iceland out as there is not the slightest reason to believe that anyone was living there at this early date.

Consequently it has been suggested that the description of Thule refers to Norway, Shetland or even Orkney, but unless some fresh evidence comes to light this question must remain unsolved. The derivation of the name 'Thule' itself is obscure and has not yet been satisfactorily accounted for.[1]

According to some scholars the climate in Scandinavia in the days of Pytheas was exceptionally cold, and the same conditions must also have prevailed in Iceland. This makes it less likely that Pytheas could have sailed so far north. For a long time after the days of Pytheas the name 'Thule' was used for various parts of northern Europe, but there is no reason to consider this problem here. After Iceland was discovered people identified it with the Thule of Pytheas, and there are many who still believe that Iceland was the country he described; hence 'Thule' came to be the first name for Iceland, and for a long time after its discovery by the Norsemen, authors did not use it to denote any other country.

Did the Romans Reach Iceland?

In the present century three Roman copper coins (antoniniani), dating from the period A.D. 270-305, were found in eastern Iceland. Two of these coins were dug up in the ruins of a Norse farmhouse built in the Age of Settlements near Bragðavellir in Hamarsfjörður. The third coin was found on the beach near the farm at Hvalnes in Lón. All three coins probably came from the same hoard and they are the only known artifacts in Iceland older than the Age of Settlements (c. 870-930).[2] They are well preserved, which suggests that they must have been buried in the ground for a long time and that the Norse settlers in Iceland either found them there or brought them from abroad. The first alternative seems more plausible since it is unlikely that the Norsemen would dig up and bring to Iceland old copper coins which had long gone out of circulation and become quite worthless. On the other hand, one can easily imagine the Norse settlers searching carefully for any signs of previous habitation in their new land; they would have given special heed to artifacts of non-Scandinavian origin. Thus it is not surprising that they would think it remarkable to find such coins in Iceland. It is significant, too, that the coin discoveries were made in the south-east corner of Iceland — the very part where seafarers from Europe would have been most likely to land. In the fourth century, Britain was an important naval power, and one cannot rule out the possibility that some Roman ships from this quarter were driven off course and reached Iceland, in which case the three an-

[1] Cf. Fridthjof Nansen, *Nord i Taakeheimen* (Kristiania, 1911); Gaston E. Broche, *Pythéas le Massaliote* (Paris, 1936). Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, *Ultima Thule* (New York, 1940).

[2] [Cf. p. 13, and pp. 31-32.]

toniniani would be the remaining testimony of their adventure.[3]

Papar[4]

The documentary evidence we have suggests that after Pytheas the Irish were the next to explore the North Atlantic. They were converted to Christianity shortly after St. Patrick came to Ireland from Britain in 432 A.D., but they had some previous knowledge of Christianity. St. Patrick became the apostle of Ireland and the faith grew in strength, exerting immense influence on the population. When Britain was invaded by the heathen Angles and Saxons, the Irish Church became isolated and developed its own distinctive features. Irish missionaries travelled in large numbers to other parts of the British Isles and also to the Continent. Some of them founded religious houses abroad, the most celebrated one being the monastery on the island of Iona in the Hebrides, which was founded by St. Columba (Irish Collumcille) in 563 A.D. Iona became an important centre of missionary activity, and from there Christianity reached the Picts on the mainland of Scotland, and Orkney and Shetland. Various branches of learning were assiduously cultivated in Ireland, and a good many Irishmen became teachers abroad. Some of the monks craved solitude to serve God in peace, and therefore they set out in search of secluded places. There are many stories about their voyages in search of new lands, but most of these are full of fantasy. The Irish must have read various accounts of Thule in books that came to Ireland with the Christian faith, and it was only reasonable that they should look for that island.

The coracle (curach) was the most common type of boat used by the Irish explorers. Curachs were constructed of twig frames covered with skins or hides[5] which were sewn together. These skin boats varied in size according to use. Those intended for long voyages were quite large and made of two or three layers of skin; they were propelled by sails or oars.[6] In these boats the Irish were gradually able to reach almost every point around the British Isles and far into the northern seas.

About 825 A.D. the Irish monk Dicuil, who was a teacher in France, wrote a book called *De mensura orbis terrae* (On Measuring the Earth). In this work he mentions certain islands which, from their description must be the Faroes. Dicuil says that these islands had been inhabited by Irish hermits for about a century. He also states that before the hermits came the islands had been uninhabited from the beginning of time, and

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[3] Kristján Eldjárn, *Gengið á reka* (Akureyri, 1948), pp. 10-24; "Fund af romerske mönter på Island", *Nordisk numismatisk årsskrift* (1949); [also by the same author, *Kuml og haugfé* (Reykjavík, 1956), pp. 11-22.]

[4] [plural form of the sing. *papi*, 'priest'.]

[5] *Curach* is a cognate of the Latin *corium*, skin.

[6] P. W. Joyce, *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*, II, pp. 423-426.

that they had once more become depopulated at the time of his writing because of pillaging by Norwegian vikings. This suggests that the Irish must have discovered the Faroes in the first quarter of the 8th century, or perhaps a little earlier.[7] Eventually the Irish found the country which is now called Iceland.

The Venerable Bede (d. 735 A.D.) states in his commentaries on the Books of Kings (In libros regum questionum XXX liber) that the inhabitants of Thule and those of the remotest parts of the Scythian regions (i.e. northern Russia) were able to see the sun both by night and by day for a brief period every summer. Bede claims to have this on the authority of ancient chronicles and contemporary accounts by people who had come from these lands.[8] It is impossible to determine whether 'Thule' refers here to Iceland or to some other country such as Norway. But if Iceland is meant, Irish hermits must have settled there not long after they came to live in the Faroes, and Bede may have obtained information about Thule from Irish priests.

In the work mentioned above, Dicuil excerpts authors like Pliny, Isidore, Priscian, and Solinus on the subject of Thule and asserts that it was *semper deserta* (continuously uninhabited), but adds that

> thirty years ago (about 795 A.D.)[9], I was told by some priests who had stayed on this island from early February to the beginning of August that not only at summer solstice, but also for a few days both before and after, it looks as if the sun, when it sets at night, is merely hiding for a while behind a knoll. During this brief interval dusk does not even fall, so that a man can do what he wants, even pick lice out of his shirt as if the sun were overhead. And if men were up in the highlands the sun would perhaps not be lost to their sight at all. The middle of this short period coincides with midnight at the equator; on the other hand, I presume that immediately before and after winter solstice in Thule the sun can be seen only for a short interval every day, the middle of which interval would then correspond with mid-day at the equator. The records which describe the ocean around the island as being frozen over must be in error. The same accounts are also erroneous in maintaining that, while in this northern land a period of continuous darkness extends from the autumnal equinox to its vernal counterpart, the remaining span from spring to autumn is one of uninterrupted daylight. The above misstatements have been brought to light by the fact that the priests sailed up to the island at the time of year when, in accordance with the law of nature, it was very cold. At that time, however, day and night alternated until about summer solstice. One day's sailing to the north of the island the priests sighted the frozen sea.[10]

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[7] [Kristján Eldjárn maintains that Dicuil means Iceland, cf. *Kuml og haugfé*, p. 12.]
[8] Migne, *Patrologia latina*, XCI, p. 732.
[9] [Cf. p. 3.]
[10] *Dicuili liber de mensura orbis terrae* (Berlin, 1870), pp. 42-44.

Dicuil is believed to have been a reliable scholar, and it is commonly held that his references to Thule apply to Iceland, even though it may seem strange that his report should not include any accounts of the Scandinavian peninsula as well. But Dicuil only intended to correct earlier statements which geographers had made as to the temperature of the sea around Thule and the proportionate length of its day and night. This limited objective explains why he does not mention various things which would have been of interest to the modern reader. The priests referred to in his book must have come from Ireland, and if the report of the frozen sea one day's sailing north of Thule is factual, the priests must have been explorers. It is tempting to suggest that, being familiar with that part of Pliny's description in which the frozen sea is said to be a day and a night's sailing north of Thule, the priests attempted to verify his statement for themselves.

Since Dicuil describes Thule as "continuously uninhabited," it seems unlikely that the information which the Irish priests possessed about Thule and the proportion of daylight to darkness there at winter solstice could have been obtained from someone who had been there before them. Dicuil's contention that Thule was uninhabited would not necessarily contradict Bede's previously mentioned reference to people who had come from the northern lands. One may assume that the early settlements of Irish hermits were both intermittent and limited in size. It is understandable that Dicuil would not have regarded the Irish priests as the discoverers of Thule, for even though they may in reality have been the first sailors to travel that far into the north, Dicuil would have believed that they had merely reached the land which had been known to Pytheas and others under the name of Thule. The priests themselves would probably have concurred with Dicuil in this assumption.

According to the Irish calendar the first day of February marked the beginning of spring, while autumn began with the first day of August.[11] It is difficult to understand why the priests mentioned by Dicuil should have chosen to stay in Thule from February to August. But in spite of all the mystery surrounding these ancient events, it seems highly probable that in the late 8th century Irish priests were exploring the northern seas as far north as Iceland, which they identified with Thule. However, it is impossible to tell when they first reached Iceland.

Ari the Learned's *Íslendingabók* (The Book of Icelanders, from ca. 1125 A.D.), is our oldest reliable source for the voyages of the Irish priests to Iceland and their sojourn in that country. *Íslendingabók* states that "at that time (when the Norwegians began to settle in Iceland in the latter part of the 9th century), there were some Christians here (in

[11] P. W. Joyce, *op. cit.*, pp. 388-390.

Iceland) whom the Norwegians called *papar* (priests). Because they would not live among heathens, they went away from Iceland, leaving behind Irish books, bells, and croziers, all of which goes to show that these men must have been Irish."[12]

Landnámabók[13] asserts that *papar* were living at Kirkjubær (Church farm) in the Síða district[14] when a Norse settler called Ketill the Foolish (hinn fíflski) came to Iceland and made his home there. Ketill the Foolish and his successors at Kirkjubær were Christians, and it was believed that heathens should not live there. One can easily imagine that the peculiar ways of the Irish hermits instilled fear in the Norsemen.

In addition to written sources there are several place names in Iceland which remind one of the Irish hermits: *Papey* (Papar Island), Papafjörður at Lón[15] (cf. *Papós, Papafjarðarós,* Papafjörður Estuary), *Papafell* (Papar Hill) in Strandasýsla and perhaps *Papi*, a deep pool in the river Laxá in Laxárdalur in Dalir. Finally, there is *Pappýli* (*Papabýli*, Papar Dwelling) known from the *Hauksbók*.[16] Pappýli appears to have been the name of a district, since there is a reference to two farms, Breiðabólstaður and Hof in Pappýli. Although the exact location of this district is no longer known, it must have been somewhere in the Skaftafellsthing in the south-eastern part of Iceland.[17] If we can rely on these sources, a small number of *papar* must have come to Iceland and made their home there, particularly in the south-eastern regions of the country.

The word *papi* is probably borrowed from the Irish *pob(b)a* or *pab(b)a* (hermit or monk). The Irish word is a loanword from the Latin *papa* meaning 'father'. After the Norwegians had founded settlements west of the North Sea, i.e. first in Shetland and later in Orkney, the Faroes and other regions, they must have encountered hermits from Ireland, and for some obscure reason the Norsemen referred to them as *papar*. And it is from these Norse settlements that reports of the *papar* were later brought to Iceland. It is of interest to note that two of the place names just mentioned, *Papey* and *Pappýli*, are not only common in Shetland, but are also known in both Orkney and the Faroes. The Irish hermits apparently lived in small communities, each member spending his life in a small beehive-shaped hut. These structures were probably similar in form to the so-called *fjárborgir* known in Iceland from later periods. The *fjárborgir* were sheep shelters of dry masonry. Ruins of ancient hermit settlements excavated in the British Isles show that in addition to the huts, each settlement had within its enclosure a well, a church

[12] [Kristján Eldjárn does not consider this information quite reliable, cf. *Kuml og haugfé*, p. 12.]
[13] [Cf. p. 11.]
[14] [In Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla.]
[15] [In Austur-Skaftafellssýsla.]
[16] [Lawman Haukr Erlendsson's version of *Landnámabók*.]
[17] [Cf. Guðni Jónsson's review of the present work, *Skírnir*, 130 (1956), p. 256.]

and a garden. Perhaps this arrangement was followed in the Irish colony at Kirkjubær in the south-east of Iceland.

The artifacts which, according to Ari the Learned, were left behind in Iceland give no indication as to the number of priests in each settlement. One may speculate that the Irish books mentioned by Ari were devotional literature in Latin, illuminated in an Irish style, and that each hermit possessed such books. The bells were used, among other things, to summon the congregation and also to exorcise evil spirits.[18] These were little hand bells as useful to one individual as to a whole group of men. The Irish croziers mentioned in *Íslendingabók* were carried by abbots and bishops, who could retire from the world and settle in secluded hermitages without forfeiting their titles or the *insignia* pertaining to their office.

In his version of *Landnámabók*, Haukr Erlendsson states that the objects which the *papar* left in Iceland were first discovered in "Papey in the east and in Pappýli". Whatever caused them to leave such objects there, they cannot have done so of their own free will. Perhaps some of them could not make their escape, or alternatively had to flee in a great hurry. It is also conceivable that these objects had belonged to *papar* who died in Iceland. Since they did not take women with them the colony was doomed to die out sooner or later unless new recruits came from elsewhere.

The Irish hermits had no appreciable influence on the history of the Icelandic people. They seem to have brought sheep to the Faroes since they needed wool for clothing. But there is no evidence that they ever brought any sheep with them to Iceland, even though this is in itself not unlikely. During the Age of Settlements Iceland was visited by Irishmen who resembled the *papar* in some respects, but these are not counted among the latter. Mention will be made of them at a later point.[19]

The Norsemen Arrive in Iceland

The dawn of Scandinavian history breaks just about the time when Dicuil is consulting the priests who had sailed to Thule. It is now that the Viking Age begins, a period which can be said to have come to an end in the 11th century, though viking piracy persisted somewhat longer. The vikings made their first attack on England in 793 A.D., on Ireland in 795, and in 802 and 806 they plundered the Columban monastery on Iona, to mention but a few examples. In his discussion of the viking raids on England in 793, Alcuin writes that at that time no one had believed it was

[18] P. W. Joyce, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 372-376.

[19] [Cf. pp. 122-123.] and Einar Ól. Sveinsson, "Papar", *Skírnir*, 119 (1945), pp. 170-203; cf. also by the same author, *Landnám í Skaftafellsthingi* (Reykjavik, 1948), pp. 1-39; [Hermann Pálsson, "Minnisgreinar um Papa", *Saga. Timarit sögufélags*, 5 (1955).]

possible to make such voyages. One may surmise from this that the voyages in 793 must have been about the first time the Norsemen sailed across the North Sea. But historians have maintained that the Norwegians must have reached both Shetland and Orkney quite a few years earlier, even though the evidence for these early Norwegian ventures is inconclusive. People from Norway settled in Shetland and Orkney and subjugated the Picts and the *papar* who inhabited these islands when they came. The Norwegians pushed on south to the Hebrides, Scotland, the Isle of Man, Ireland, and the western coast of England. In all these countries they founded colonies in the 9th and 10th centuries, colonies which did not endure with equal tenacity. During the same period the Danes were following a more southerly course, concentrating their attacks on England, France and Germany. The Danes also raided Ireland, while their neighbours, the Swedes, turned to the east and attacked the Baltic regions. From there the Swedes pressed along the great rivers of Russia all the way to the Black Sea. Like the Norwegians, they established a number of states or colonies in the territories they conquered.

The Norwegians reached the Faroes in the first quarter of the 9th century, drove away the Irish monks who lived there, and colonized the islands. Grímr Kamban is said to have been the first settler there, and some of his descendants emigrated to Iceland. In the latter part of the 9th century a certain Óttarr of Hálogaland became the first Norse seafarer to make the voyage east to the White Sea.[20] He was a contemporary of the first Norsemen who sailed to Iceland.

The earliest written sources for the discovery of Iceland by the Norsemen are two Latin works from Norway. One of these is *Historia Norwegiæ* from about 1170.[21] The other is a historical compilation by the monk Theodricus, written about 1180. But both these works are very brief, and the text of *Historia Norwegiæ* is so corrupt in the passage dealing with the discovery of Iceland that it is of little use.

Although they are of a later date than these Norwegian sources, the two versions of the Icelandic *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements), compiled by the historians Sturla Thórðarson and Haukr Erlendsson, contain much fuller accounts of the discovery of Iceland. However, one must remember that all these Norwegian and Icelandic sources were written some three to four and a half centuries after Iceland was discovered, so that we cannot treat them as completely reliable. In fact, they contradict one another on significant points. But these are the

[20] *Tímarit hins íslenzka bókmenntafélags*, 4 (1884), pp. 155-158; [cf. also *Det norske folks liv og historie*, I (Oslo, 1930), pp. 250-253.]

[21] [The date of *Historia Norwegiæ* is debatable. Many scholars believe the work may have been written even later in the 12th century.]

only sources that we possess and it is possible to show that certain elements in these records are derived from still older writings which have been lost. In Sturla Thórðarson's version of *Landnámabók* the following passage occurs:

> The story goes that some people intended to sail from Norway to the Faroes — a viking called Naddoðr, to name one of them. They were driven out to sea westwards, and came to a vast country. They went ashore in the Austfirðir, climbed a high mountain, and scanned the country in all directions looking for smoke or any other sign that the land was inhabited, but they saw nothing. In the summer they went back to the Faroes, and as they were sailing away from the coast a lot of snow fell on the mountains, so they called the country Snæland. They were full of praise for it. According to Sæmundr the Learned the place in the Austfirðir where they landed is the one now called Reyðarfjall.[22]

This passage evidently derives from some work by Sæmundr the Learned (d.1133), the first Icelandic historian. But medieval authors are known to have been eclectic in their use of sources, so that it is by no means certain that the whole paragraph is derived from Sæmundr. The sentence "— a viking called Naddoðr, to name one of them" is probably erroneous and of later date. The monk Theodricus gives a similar although somewhat shorter account, but he refers to the sailors as *traders* and makes no mention of the *viking* Naddoðr. It could be argued that Theodricus' version is the earlier of the two, and that Sturla Thórðarson or someone else has confused two independent traditions, one about traders, and the other about a viking called Naddoðr.

The next chapter in Sturla Thórðarson's *Landnámabók* tells about a man of Swedish origin called Garðarr Svávarsson who set out in search of Snowland (Snæland), making land at Eastern Horn[23] (just east of Hornafjörður). Garðarr sailed around the country and thus observed that it was an island. He spent the winter at Húsavík on Skjálfandi[24] (on the north coast). In the spring, after he had put out to sea, a boat drifted away from his ship with a man called Náttfari aboard, and a slave and a bondwoman. Náttfari took possession of Reykjadalur and *marked his land claim on trees*. He became the first Norseman to make his home in Iceland as far as the records show, though, like the *papar*, he is not included among the settlers. It may be that Náttfari's method of claiming new land was not considered to have been in accordance with the law. The wording in *Landnámabók* would seem to indicate this.

Garðarr Svávarsson returned to Norway full of praise for the coun-

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[22] No doubt the mountain *Reyður*, south of Reyðarfjörður, cf. Kr. Kålund, *Historisk-topografisk Beskrivelse af Island*, II, p. 252.

[23] [In Austur-Skaftafellssýla.]

[24] [In Suður-Thingeyjarsýsla.]

try, which was now given the name *Garðarshólmr* (Garðarr's Isle). The names Garðarr, Svávarr, and Náttfari are of East Norse origin, mostly found in Sweden. It seems improbable that the Norwegians would have applied the name *hólmr* (an isle) to a land as big as Iceland, but on the other hand, this usage is found in the East Norse part of Scandinavia, e.g. *Borgundarhólmr* (now Bornholm). This onomastic feature lends credibility to Sturla Thórðarson's description of Garðarr Svávarsson's voyage. In this part of *Landnámabók* Sturla Thórðarson must have drawn on ancient historical records now irretrievably lost.

The main difference between Sturla Thórðarson's account of the Norse discovery of Iceland and that of Haukr Erlendsson lies in the latter's contention that Garðarr Svávarsson was the first Scandinavian to reach Iceland. Haukr's source appears to have been the same as that of the original version of *Landnámabók*[25] and *Historia Norwegiæ*. The conflicting accounts cannot be explained away and may be very old, going back to the Age of Settlements itself.

The question of who should be given credit for discovering the country must have touched the pride of all concerned. There were no doubt political motivations as well, as the discovery could be used to strengthen the claims to ownership. In this connection mention should be made of the story that King Haraldr Finehair of Norway promised Uni, the son of Garðarr Svávarsson, the earldom of Iceland if Uni could successfully bring the country under the Norwegian crown. It is quite credible that King Haraldr should have attempted to take advantage of Uni's inherited claim to Iceland. But this tradition is of somewhat dubious provenance.[26]

Genealogical records indicate that these Norsemen must have lived about the middle of the 9th century, or a little later. By that time the Scandinavians had already established a strong reputation as seafarers. Our sources indicate also that some of the early Scandinavian voyagers who reached Iceland were driven off course and that they came upon it by sheer accident. It happened frequently in later periods that ships drifted to Iceland over long distances, as in the year 1337, for example, when a small ship bound for Scotland from Norway was driven ashore at Lón in the south-eastern part of Iceland.[27] Credible as these stories may be, it has nevertheless been suggested that the Norsemen learned about Iceland from the Irish *papar*. But one can hardly assume that the *papar* would have told the Norsemen about Iceland deliberately.

The first Norseman to try to settle in Iceland, according to our

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[25] Jón Jóhannesson, *Gerðir Landnámabókar* (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 45.
[26] Ibid, pp. 117-119.
[27] *Isl. Annaler.*

sources, was a man called Flóki Vilgerðarson, a great viking, who decided to live at Vatnsfjörður west of Barðaströnd.[28] But Flóki and his men neglected to make any hay for their livestock in the summer, and this oversight proved to be disastrous for them, as the next winter and spring were extremely severe. This put an end to their settlement. Before leaving the country Flóki gave it a new name, Ísland (Iceland), and so it is called to this day.

Next, two blood-brothers from Norway, Ingólfr and Hjörleifr, went to explore the country. They stayed the first winter at *Álftafjörður* on the east coast of Iceland.[29] Later the two returned to Iceland to settle there. This first permanent settlement in the country may be said to mark the beginning of the history of the Icelanders.

Landnámabók (The Book of Settlements)

Landnámabók is our chief source of information on the colonization of Iceland. Its nucleus is a list of settlers or pioneers[30] who either took possession of uninhabited areas or obtained land in some other legitimate way. The book indicates also the boundaries of each settlement claim.[31] In most cases it also tells us where the settlers made their homes, and relates various stories about them, their ancestors and descendants. In the present work, *Landnámabók* is so frequently cited that it will be useful to consider its source value briefly. The original version of *Landnámabók* is now lost, but it is almost certain that it was written in the early 12th century, and thus it is one of the earliest written works in the Icelandic language. It is very likely that Ari the Learned (d.1148) had a hand in its compilation.

The arrangement of *Landnámabók*, where in most instances a separate chapter is devoted to each settlement, made it easy for later scribes or copyists to make alterations or additions without destroying the unity of the work.

Landnámabók survives in three medieval versions. The oldest, *Sturlubók*, a version produced by Sturla Thórðarson the lawman (d.1284), is the only version which has been preserved in its entirety. The second version, *Hauksbók*, compiled by Haukr Erlendsson the lawman (d.1334), is almost complete. The third version is *Melabók* which, with a high degree of certainty, has been ascribed to Snorri Markússon the lawman (d.1313) of Melar in Melasveit. Only fragments of it have survived, some of them as parts of a 17th century composite version of *Landnámabók* called *Thórðarbók*.

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[28] [In Barðastrandarsýsla.]
[29] Originally the name was *Álftafjörðr hinn syðri*.
[30] [The Icelandic term is *landnámsmaðr* (land-taking-man), plural, *landnámsmenn*.]
[31] [*landnám*, 'land taking'.]

Scholarly research has shown that of all these versions *Melabók* is the one that has preserved the original text of *Landnámabók* most faithfully. This makes it all the more regrettable that only fragments of it should have come down to us in such a poor state of preservation. Sturla Thórðarson, on the other hand, made many alterations in the original text. Most of these changes can be traced to writings from a later period which have no independent source value, such as various sagas which are still extant. Haukr Erlendsson followed *Sturlubók* and another version, now lost, compiled by the prior Styrmir Kárason the Learned (d.1245).[32]

Anyone wishing to use *Landnámabók* as an historical source must always make a point of getting as close as possible to the original text. Not only is the original version of the book very old, but also, it seems to have been written in the same critical spirit as the *Book of the Icelanders (Íslendingabók)*; that is, for the purpose of recording fact rather than for entertainment. But even when the original text has been established, there is still room for doubt, as it was written about two centuries after the Age of Settlements came to a close. Oral traditions become garbled in a shorter time than two hundred years. However, the laws of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth provided a strong motivation for people to commit genealogies to memory so that they would know all their kinsmen, fourth cousins and closer. Within this circle of relatives, individuals were mutually affected by laws dealing with such matters as inheritance, maintenance of the poor, and payment of wergild. Canon Law prohibited marriage between a man and a woman who were even more distantly related than fourth cousins, unless they first paid a special dispensation fee. Most of the contemporaries of the author (or authors) of the original version of *Landnámabók* were fifth generation Icelanders; only a few were further removed from the original settlers. The fact that the author (or authors) of the earliest *Landnámabók* grew up in a society where it was particularly important to know one's ancestry makes it highly probable that the book contained reliable information on other matters as well. Thus it is safe to assume that the original text of *Landnámabók* gave a coherent overall picture of the settlement, even though it may have been erroneous in detail and may have been lacking in certain features which would clarify the picture. The memory of the Age of Settlements must have been somewhat blurred when it was handed down to the 12th century. But even though the reconstructed text of the original *Landnámabók* is in places fragmentary or uncertain, the extant versions constitute the most remarkable sources any nation has for its beginnings.

[32] Cf. Jón Jóhannesson, *Gerðir Landnámabókar* (Reykjavík, 1941).

Chronology[33]

Landnámabók describes the settlement of Iceland. *Íslendingabók*, on the other hand, brief as it is, traces the history of the Icelandic people from the beginning of the settlement down to the year 1120. In this book, Ari Thorgilsson the Learned has made an attempt to determine the year in which the settlement began. His account runs as follows:

> Iceland was first settled from Norway in the days of Haraldr Finehair, son of Hálfdan the Black, about the time — according to the opinion and calculation of Teitr my foster-father, the wisest man I have known, son of Bishop Ísleifr; and of my paternal uncle Thorkell Gellisson, who remembered far back; and of Thuriðr, daughter of Snorri the Priest, who was both learned in many things and trustworthy — when Ívarr, son of Ragnarr Loðbrók, caused Edmund the Saint, King of the English, to be slain; and, according to what is recorded in his saga, that was 870 years after the birth of Christ.
>
> A Norwegian[34] called Ingólfr,[35] it is told for certain, first went from there to Iceland when Haraldr Finehair was sixteen years old, and for the second time several winters later. He settled south in Reykjavík.

The 'Saga of Edmund' is undoubtedly the *Passio Sancti Edmundi* by Abbo of Fleury, even though the latter does not give the year of Edmund's death. This particular piece of information must have been derived from Anglo-Saxon annals and then inserted into the version of the source to which Ari refers in his book. If we assume that oral accounts of King Edmund were not in circulation among the Icelanders we must find another way to explain the various references to his saga in Ari's *Íslendingabók*, and the question then arises whether there was not a special reason why this Icelandic historian and his informants paid such close attention to this insignificant source and chose the year of St. Edmund's death as a point of departure for their chronology. The most plausible explanation is that these people traced their ancestry back to St. Edmund,

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[33] [Cf. Ólafía Einarsdóttir, *Studier i kronologisk metode i tidlig islandsk historieskrivning* (Stockholm, 1964).]

[34] [The original has *norrœnn*.]

[35] Ari fails to mention Ingólfr's father in *Íslendingabók*, while other sources of information are not in agreement on this. In *Thórðarbók* Ingólfr is referred to as "the son of Björnólfr of Fjalir and a brother of Björn of Heyangr" (*Landn.* (1921), p. 26) and this appears to be derived from the original text of *Landnámabók*. But in *Egils Saga* and *Eyrbyggja Saga* he is referred to as the son of Örn (Arnarson) and in the *Sturlubók* version of *Landnámabók* as the son of Örn the son of Björnólfr, which may reflect Sturla's attempt to fuse together the two divergent accounts.

or at least back to some Edmund whom they identified with St. Edmund of East Anglia. This is reflected in later writings.[36]

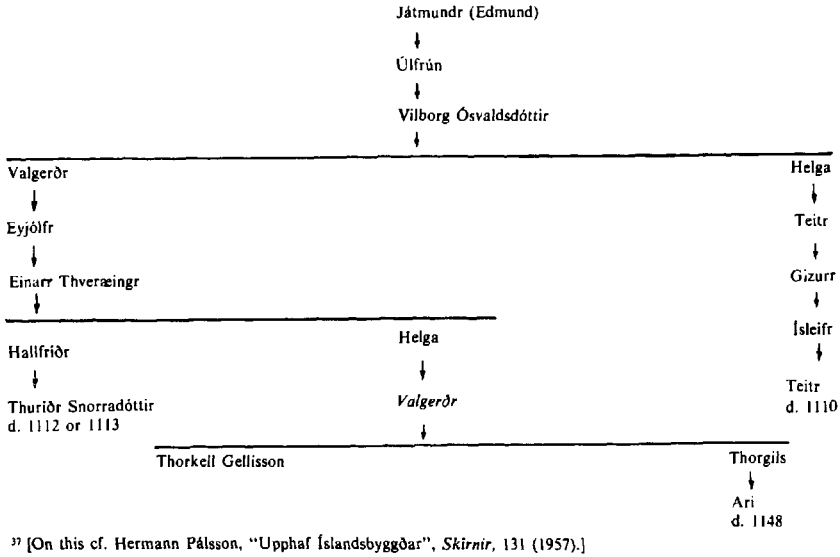
Next we shall consider how Ari the Learned's informants were able to reach the conclusion that Iceland was first settled from Norway "about the time" when King Edmund was martyred. Their calculations appear to have been based on two premises: the age of King Haraldr Finehair, and the length of the Age of Settlements. The statement that King Haraldr Finehair was sixteen years old when Ingólfr Arnarson made his first voyage to Iceland is more likely to have been derived from oral tradition than from the calculation of historians.[37] In *Íslendingabók* Ari maintains that King Haraldr died in 931 or 932 at the age of approximately eighty. This means that Ingólfr must have made his first voyage to Iceland about 867 or 868. According to Ari, Ingólfr made his second voyage only "a few winters later", or probably about 870.

Ari the Learned has this to say about the length of the Age of Settlements:

> Wise men have also said that Iceland was fully settled in sixty winters so that there was no further settlement made afterwards. It was about that time that Hrafn Hængsson became lawspeaker.

According to Ari's own reckoning, Hrafn Hængsson assumed the office of lawspeaker in the year 930, so that "about that time" Iceland appears to have been fully settled. This agrees with what has been stated

[36] The genealogy is as follows: (*Landn.* St., I, p. 56; cf. also *Isl. fornr.*, XII, p. 284):



[37] [On this cf. Hermann Pálsson, "Upphaf Íslandsbyggðar", *Skirnir*, 131 (1957).]

already, that the settlement began about 870.[38] It is possible, however, that the duration of the Age of Settlements was estimated on the basis of King Haraldr's life span.

In certain later sources, admittedly, the two voyages of Ingólfr Arnarson are given different dates, but these are not to be trusted. *Sturlubók* and some of the Icelandic annals state that Ingólfr established a settlement in Iceland in 874. It was on the basis of this dating that the Icelanders celebrated the millennium of the settlement of their country in 1874, and many historians have accepted this date, even though it is very unlikely that it could have been derived from ancient sources independent of Ari the Learned. The discrepancy between these dates has not been satisfactorily explained. But the present state of our knowledge makes it necessary to reject the sources which run counter to *Íslendingabók*. Many scholars in recent times have argued that Ari and Sæmundr the Learned, the first authors to write continuous accounts of the lives of Norwegian Kings, followed the same chronological system and dated the life of Haraldr Finehair 10 to 15 years earlier than he actually lived. Even though this thesis has some weaknesses, it must be admitted that the supporting evidence is quite strong. It is quite possible that both Ari and Sæmundr failed to establish a correct chronology for the life of King Haraldr Finehair for lack of reliable information.[39] If King Haraldr Finehair is to be moved forward in history, it will also become necessary to make corresponding adjustments to other dates and suppose that the settlement of Iceland started later than Ari and Sæmundr thought. But this, in turn, hinges on the old tradition that King Haraldr was 16 years old when Ingólfr Arnarson made his first voyage to Iceland.

The Origin of the Icelanders

The ethnic origin of the Icelanders, as well as their position in Scandinavian society, still remains somewhat of a mystery, even though the central facts are not in dispute. *Landnámabók* implies that people who settled Iceland came either from Norway or the Norwegian colonies in the British Isles, but it does not make this point explicitly in every instance. In his *Íslendingabók*, Ari the Learned mentions only those settlers who came from Norway. He has this to say:

> And then (i.e. when Ingólfr had settled in Iceland) a very great emigration started out hither from Norway until King Haraldr forbade it, because he thought that Norway would be depopulated. Then they

[38] Cf. *Tímarit hins íslenzka bókmenntafélags* 18 (1897), p. 190-194.

[39] A useful summary on this subject can be found in *Íslenzk fornrit*, XXVI, *Heimskringla*, I, pp. lxxiv-lxxxi; [cf. also Halvdan Koht, *Innhogg og utsyn i norsk historie* (Kristiania, 1921); *Harald Hårfagre og rikssamlinga* (Oslo, 1955); Per Wieselgren, *Författarskapet till Eigla* (Lund, 1927).]

> came to this agreement: that every man[40] who was not exempted and went from there to Iceland should pay the king five ounces (i.e. of silver) . . . These are the origins of that tax which is now called 'land-dues'.

It is likely that in this account Ari did not intend to explain the ethnic origin of the Icelanders but to point out the reasons which led to the levy of the tax referred to in *Íslendingabók* as 'land-dues' (landaurar). Nor should one attach too much importance to the fact that Ari, in his brief account, only mentions Norway as the homeland of the first settlers who came to Iceland. By pointing out in several places that certain settlers were *norrœnir* (Norse or Norwegian), his account clearly implies that some of the settlers came from other lands. Such a remark would not have been necessary if all the settlers had come from Norway. Nonetheless, Ari's statements clearly indicate that he believed the majority of the settlers to have come from there. It does not affect this interpretation of our source that the fear of depopulation may have applied only to those districts of Norway whence most of the settlers had come. *Landnámabók* indicates that most of the settlers (those who formally claimed land), as well as other immigrants, came from Norway. Therefore, the two histories — *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* — may be said to be in agreement as to the origin of the Icelanders.

Even if this interpretation is accepted, it is still important to determine how great a proportion of the settlers came from the Norse colonies in the British Isles. It is logical to assume that during the earliest period the influence of Celtic culture and the racial intermingling of Celtic and Norse elements was in direct proportion to the number of immigrants from those colonies.

Various attempts have been made to determine the ratio between these two elements. There are, however, many reasons why this research is of dubious value. If *Landnámabók* had been contemporary with the events it describes, one would have few misgivings about its reliability. The problem is that the earliest part of this work was not committed to writing until about two centuries after the close of the period which it describes, and therefore it is far too unreliable for any statistical purposes. In addition, there is no mention of the origin of a great many of the settlers and other pioneers.[41] It must also be taken into account that the Scandinavians were constantly on the move during the Viking Age. As a result, one often finds it difficult to determine the ethnic origin of the settlers or where they are likely to have spent the first part of their lives, even when we are told from what place they set out for Iceland.

While we cannot quote any figures, we may conclude that the first

[40] Probably each free male judging from the treaty of the Icelanders with King Ólafr the Saint.
[41] [That is, those who accompanied the settlers.]

settlers in Iceland had many connections with the British Isles. According to *Landnámabók*, many of these men had made their home in the western settlements for some time before they finally moved to Iceland, and some were even born there. In several instances the families of settlers had lived in the British Isles for generations.

The news of Ingólfr Arnarson's settlement in Iceland must have spread rapidly throughout the Scandinavian world. Norsemen in the British Isles, where there was little scope for them, were among the earliest people to settle in Iceland, and they took possession of large areas of land. Among these were Helgi the Lean who settled Eyjafjörður,[42] and Auðr the Deepminded who claimed land in the Dalir[43] district in western Iceland; it has also been noted that a good many of the settlers were in one way or another associated with the Hebrides.

As was implied earlier, many of the settlers who came to Iceland directly from Norway had previously had contacts with the western settlements. At this time Norway was a completely rural society, with not a single town, and it was considered an essential part of the education of every free man to go on viking expeditions, not only to acquire fame and fortune, but also to widen his outlook. Those who stayed behind were referred to as *heimskir*.[44] Some spent only one summer as vikings, but others would go again and again and make raiding their way of life. Several of these professional vikings are listed among the settlers of Iceland.

There are references to vikings who raided only along the coast of Norway, but King Haraldr Finehair put a stop to the activities of these individuals. Others made longer expeditions to the Baltic and to the British Isles. Many of these settled in the west or sailed from there to Iceland. But many also returned to Norway. This is borne out by a vast number of archeological finds in both western and southern Norway,[45] whence most of the vikings set sail. Many of the artifacts found here are unmistakably of Celtic origin, and it appears likely that they were obtained on viking raids rather than through peaceful trading. Of course, it must be borne in mind that one and the same man might be, depending on circumstances, raider, merchant, or explorer.

It is thus safe to assume that among the settlers who came to Iceland from Norway there were many who had previously been to the viking colonies in the west. This is partly confirmed by stories that were told of these men. Also, their navigational skill serves to strengthen this assumption, as no one would undertake a voyage from Norway to Iceland

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[42] [In Eyjafjarðarsýsla.]
[43] [In Dalasýsla.]
[44] Cf. stories about Hrafn the Foolish, a settler and ancestor of the Oddaverjar, and about Gormr the Foolish, King of Denmark, cf. Jón Jónsson, *Víkingasaga*, p. 231. [*heimskr* means 'dull-witted', 'simple'.]
[45] *Viking Antiquities*, Part V (Oslo, 1940), ed. Haakon Shetelig and Jan Petersen.