

Abstract

By approaching *Landnámabók* as an origin myth, a political myth, and a religious myth, this work explores and articulates the specific cosmological principles, social and political constructions, and religious constructions that *Landnámabók* would have absorbed from, added to, or reinforced in the medieval Icelandic worldview with which it was interacting. Although it was intended to be a chronicle, *Landnámabók* is also comparable to myth, because it explains the origins of the local world of the Icelanders, and in doing so, presents a sweeping and overarching conception of this world.

Introducing *Landnámabók*

Landnámabók is an Old Norse-Icelandic text which exists in five versions, three of which are from the middle ages. Presumably, the earliest of these is *Sturlubók*, so named because it was compiled by Sturla Þórðarson, who lived between approximately 1214 and 1284 (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 4). “A vellum MS of it existed down to the eighteenth century, when it was destroyed in the fire of Copenhagen in 1728. But before it left Iceland it had been copied by Rev. Jón Erlendsson of Villingaholt, and it is his copy (AM 107 fol.) which is our chief source for *Sturlubók*” (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 3). Jón Erlendsson also copied the *Hauksbók* version, which was compiled by Haukr Erlendsson (d. 1331). In addition to Jón’s copy, fourteen leaves of Haukr’s original copy survive in AM 371, 4to (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 4). Finally, there are a couple of leaves of an early fifteenth century version known as *Melabók* (AM 445 b 4to) (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 4).¹

There is a fair amount of overlap between material from *Landnámabók* and episodes in the *Íslendingasögur*. Early scholars of Old Norse-Icelandic literature developed and debated strikingly elaborate theories about the relationship between the *Landnámabækur* and sagas.² Scholars generally believed that settlement accounts were written down as early as the first half of the twelfth century, because in *Hauksbók*, Haukr cites Ari fróði and Kolskeggr hinn vitri among his sources for information about the settlement: “Nú er yfir farit um landnámu þau, er varit hafa á Íslandi, eptir því sem fróðir menn hafa skrifat, fyrst Ari prestr hinn fróði Þorgilsson ok Kolskeggr hinn vitri” (*Landnámabók* 395). (“Now we have gone through the land-claims which have taken place in Iceland, following what wise men have written, the first of whom were Ari fróði and Kolskeggr hinn vitri”). The earliest of the *Íslendingasögur*, on the other hand, are generally believed to have been written in the first half of the thirteenth century (Vésteinn Ólason 112). For this rea-

¹ For a more detailed overview of the manuscripts of *Landnámabók*, see Jakob Benediktsson’s introduction to the Íslenzk Fornit series’ edition of *Landnámabók*. (*Íslendingabók. Landnámabók. Íslenzk Fornrit I*. Ed. Jakob Benediktsson. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968. V-CLIV.)

² E.g. “Maurer thought that Hænsa-Þóris saga was used in *Landnámabók* (viz. *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*). He reckoned that the saga had already influenced the lost *Styrmisbók*, an opinion shared by Björn M. Ólsen. On the other hand, Sigurður Nordal points out (*Íslensk fornrit III*, p. xxix) that the entire influence of Hænsa-Þóris saga on *Landnámabók* can most easily be explained by assuming that Sturla Þórðarson used the saga, whereas Haukur Erlendsson used *Sturlubók*- as he himself said that he did...” (Jónas Kristjánsson 139).

son, the fact that “there is remarkable agreement between accounts of individual settlements in *Landnámabók* and the sagas of the Icelanders” is generally attributed to the idea that the writers of *Íslendingasögur* adapted and elaborated on material from the *Landnámabækur* (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 144). Nevertheless, it is very likely that the compilers of the surviving versions of *Landnámabók* added material which first appeared in sagas. For example, Chapter 111 of *Sturlubók* is so disjointed and difficult to follow that one is inclined to believe that it can only be attempting – unsuccessfully – to summarise a long and complex saga. If we grant that the general outline of the settlement comes from a proto-*Landnámabók*, it is still generally hard to say whether any given story first made it into the literature via an *Íslendingasaga* or via a version of *Landnámabók*. Besides the *Íslendingasögur*, the compilers of *Landnámabók* also drew on a wide variety of other sources, including the “historical” writing of Ari fróði, oral traditions, place names, and genealogies.

***Landnámabók* as Myth: the World-Building Enterprise**

Since the settlement of Iceland is a topic of interest to contemporary historians, *Landnámabók* is used as a historical source. The question of how “reliable” various passages are, by today’s historiographical standards, has therefore been discussed (e.g. Jakob Benediktsson 1969). A few of its contents have been independently investigated by archeologists, although the archeological evidence is not unambiguous and is open to different interpretations. For example, the earliest structures that were found in excavations which took place in Reykjavík during the nineteen-eighties were from slightly before a layer of volcanic ash which has been dated to 870 +/- 2 (Smith par. 25). This tephra layer “also occurs in bogs around Reykjavik at the same level as the appearance of pollen types that mark the onset of local attempts at cultivation” (Smith par. 25). This evidence more or less agrees with the dating found in *Landnámabók*, which says that the first human occupation of Reykjavík was that of Ingólfr, who settled there a couple of years after he came to Iceland in 874.

However, much of what *Landnámabók* says cannot be independently confirmed or denied by archeological evidence. Historians must be resigned to the fact that “we have

very seldom any real possibility of proving or disproving such stories, apart from those which in their character are pure folk-tales, where the likelihood of their being true is very small indeed... we can never be sure- even in the case of more probable stories... that *Landnámabók* has preserved the exact truth” (Jakob Benediktsson, “*Landnámabók*” 146-147).

Another way to approach *Landnámabók* is to regard it as myth, and to use theories and methods which were developed for the study of myth. This approach bypasses many of the frustrations that the historian must face. To define and approach *Landnámabók* as ‘myth’ is to withhold judgement about which parts of it is true or untrue. This is despite the fact that “we have inherited our concept of myth from the Greeks, for whom ‘myth’ came to be viewed as a category of fictitious discourse... a form of speech opposed to the reasoned discourse of *logos*. As such, myth became defined as a discourse opposed both to truth... and to the rational” (Overing 2). More recently, it has been recognised that myths are nevertheless a powerful form of communication. In fact, they can convince and influence people in ways that rational discourse cannot, due to their narrative style and their entertainment value (Overing 2). For the purposes of this paper, I will bracket the question of how much historical value the accounts in *Landnámabók* have. Regardless of whether or not the various stories are “true” in a historical sense, there is no question that they influenced the way that medieval Icelanders saw the world around them, and themselves.

For my purposes here, I will be defining ‘myth’ quite broadly, as narratives which ‘build the world,’ or in other words, narratives which shape and influence the cosmologies and other socially-constructed ‘realities’ in which human beings live. “Man does not have a given relationship to the world. He must ongoingly establish a relationship with it... culture must be continuously produced and reproduced by man. Its structures are, therefore, inherently precarious and predestined to change” (Berger 6). Even basic cosmological concepts such as time and space are “historically and culturally relative” social constructions (Harrison 1). Taking his cue from this fact, the sociologist of religion Peter Berger describes human culture as a “world-building enterprise” which can be divided into three processes:

These are externalization, objectivation, and internalization... Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and the

mental activity of man. Objectivation is the attainment by the products of this activity (again both physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the reappropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness.” (4)

For example, human beings invented the concept of kingship (externalisation), and when the concept was shared and enacted by enough of the population, kingship became a part of social reality (objectivation).³ If an individual learns about kingship and uses this concept to think about and interact with the world, that is internalisation.

The texts found in medieval manuscripts played a role in world-building: they were the products of externalisation, they were a concrete vehicle for sharing and spreading their contents, and these contents were probably internalised by individuals, some of whom went on to create new texts which in turn shaped the social reality. The fact that the social reality which people internalise provides a basis for the new cultural products which they externalise is the reason why the medieval text, in the words of Reginald Bloch, “both reflects its cultural moment, thus enabling anthropological description, and is a prime vehicle for the change of that which it reflects” (15-16). He adds that the medieval text is a “‘generator of public consciousness’ which can be said to exist through it” (Bloch 15).

A popular interpretation of *Landnámabók* is that it was written to “provide the landowners of... [the] day with illustrious ancestors to strengthen their claims to the land” (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 147). Later on I will evaluate the possibility that *Landnámabók* provided legitimation for landowners. It is clear, however, that a lot of the material in the various versions of *Landnámabók* “is not explicable in these terms” (Clunies Ross, “Land” 161). The primary motivation behind *Landnámabók* may well have been an etiological impulse, a will to collect lore about the early days of Iceland and to organise it systematically. In the way that it organises the material, *Landnámabók* “builds a world.” It deals with fundamental categories used in understanding a world, such as time, space,

³ Something cannot be said to be part of social reality unless it is shared by more than one person: “Culture is objective in that it may be experienced and apprehended, as it were, in company... the cultural world remains real by virtue of collective recognition” (Berger 10).

place, territory, and origins, and it also situates the Icelanders in a particular relation to their lands, to the rest of Europeans, to one another, and to sacred realities.

This being said, not all of the material in any version of *Landnámabók* has been completely assimilated into a coherent worldview. This should come as no surprise, since like so many medieval chronicles, the *Landnámabækur* are above all compilations: “Facing the past, the medieval chronicler viewed himself essentially as a faithful conveyor of the written record and his text as a vehicle for transmitting segments of past texts conjoined” (Spiegel 102). Unlike most contemporary historians, his goal was not to interpret the past so much as it was to faithfully reflect it as it had passed down by witnesses. He was therefore unlikely to consciously choose and adapt his sources for the sake of ideological coherency (Spiegel 101).⁴ Nevertheless, certain ‘perceptual grids’ “already residing in the social reality... governed both the nature of his perceptions and the manner in which he transmitted them” (Spiegel 103). In this work, I shall examine the various ideological traditions informing the material in *Landnámabók*, and the way in which the compilation organises this material to build its world. To begin with, I will look at the basic cosmology of the compilation. Then I will explore its political aspects, and address the question of whether the compilation is intentionally or incidentally political. Finally, I will look at the role of religious conceptions in the world that it builds, especially the way that these conceptions play into its understanding of history.

⁴ Haukr Erlendsson tells us that the governing principle of his compilation when it came to choosing between sources for any given event was to go with the one which had the most material: “hafða ég þat ór hvarri [Sturlubók and Styrmisbók], sem framar greindi, en mikill þorri var þat, er þær sögðu eins báðar...” (*Landnámabók* 397). (“I have taken out of each [Sturlubók and Styrmisbók] which ever gave more than the other, but for the most part they both said the same thing..”)

Chapter 1: *Landnámabók's* Cosmological Principles

Cosmological principles are the basic principles which are used to understand the universe as a whole. They underlie the more specific constructions in social reality. *Landnámabók*, like virtually any other text, presupposes certain cosmological principles, and this chapter is dedicated to making them explicit.

Landnámabók as an Origin Myth

Mircea Eliade defines myths etiologically: “In general, one can say that any myth tells how something came into being, the world, or man, or an animal species, or a social institution, and so on” (140). Among other things, *Landnámabók* explains the origins of various Icelandic families, land-claims, farms, churches, and place-names. It is therefore, in a manner of speaking, an origin myth. Origin myths are set in the past but are oriented towards explaining the present. *Landnámabók* frequently reaches into the present by mentioning descendants of the original settlers, some of whom were contemporaries of the manuscripts. These people provided part of the impetus for the text, since their origins and identity were among the questions of origin that the text was used to answer. Chapter 41 of the *Sturlubók*, for example, tells of the ancestry, land-claims, and attributes of the ancestors of the Sturlungar, the family to which belonged Sturla Þórðarson, the compiler.

Eliade believes that “by the very fact that the creation of the world precedes everything else, the cosmogony enjoys a special prestige [among the origin myths of a given society]. Indeed... the cosmogonic myth furnishes the model for all myths of origin” (140). He has his own reasons for holding this idea, based on his theory that archaic societies lived in cyclical time during which cosmic patterns were always repeating themselves, something for which it is hard to find evidence in medieval Iceland. Nevertheless, it is frequently true that the origin myths of a given society mirror the cosmogonic myths, because the same processes that are believed to bring things into existence in the world are often assumed to be the ones that brought the world itself into existence. This is particularly likely to be the case if the idea of the correspondence of the microcosm to the macrocosm is popular in the society in question. In this conception, “everything ‘here below’ has its analogue ‘up above’ and by participating in the institutional order men, *ipso facto*, participate in the di-

vine cosmos” (Berger 34). This idea was known in medieval philosophy, and it is clear from the prologue to the *Snorra Edda* that it had made its way into Iceland: “Pat var eitt eðli at jörðin var grafin í háum fjalltindum ok spratt þar vatn upp ok þurfti þar eigi lengra at grafa til vaz en í djúpum dølum. Svá eru ok dýr ok fuglar, at jafnlangt er til blóðs í höfði ok fótum... Af þessu skilðu þeir svá at jörðin væri kyk ok hefði líf með nokkurum hætti...” (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning* 3). (“One of the earth’s characteristics is that when it was dug into on high mountain tops, water sprang up there and there was no need to dig for water further there than in deep valleys. It is the same with animals and birds, that it is just as far to blood in the head as in the feet... from this they reasoned that the earth was alive and had life after a certain fashion...”) (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda* 1).

We might therefore expect to find some resemblances between the settlement accounts and the cosmogonic myths that were circulating in medieval Iceland.⁵ These resemblances can help us to make generalizations about the worldview of medieval Icelanders. For this reason, the sections which follow will contain comparisons between the cosmogonic myth found in the Bible, the cosmogonic myth found in the *Snorra Edda*, and *Landnámabók*.

***Landnámabók’s* Conception of Time**

As the Latin term *chronica* suggests, the medieval chronicles of Europe typically aimed to “attribute facts to their corresponding dates or times and place them correctly within the continuous chronology” (Goetz 147). Accordingly, “historiography ordinarily was a diachronic narrative of facts” (Goetz 142). Icelandic histories were no exception. *Íslendingabók*, for example, has a straight-forward chronological order of events, beginning with the settlement of Iceland and proceeding to the adoption of Christian law by the Alþingi. It takes care to articulate the precise temporal relations of the events to one another (e.g. “En þat vas, es hann tók byggva landit, fjórtán vetrum eða fimmtán fyrr en kristni kvæmi hér á

⁵ John Lindow says that the similarities between *Íslendingabók* – another chronicle dealing with the early days of Iceland – and cosmogonic myths of medieval Iceland are a result of “the situation in which Ari was placed, namely, describing the settling of a near-empty land and the building of a society there. In such a case there will quite naturally be parallels with mythology which, more or less by definition, deal with events set in illo tempore, at a time when the cosmos was created and subsequently ordered by the powerful beings who preceded those who live there now” (“Íslendingabók” 461).

Ísland”) (Íslendingabók 14). (“And at the time that he began to settle the land, it was fourteen or fifteen years before Christianity came here to Iceland”). *Sturlunga saga* presents events in a rather strict chronological order which oftentimes obscures causal connections between episodes. For instance, chapter nine of *Guðmundar saga dýra* begins with a man called Þorfinnr asking to marry Guðmundr’s niece, Ingibjörg. Guðmundr refuses because the couple were too closely related. This story is then interrupted by other episodes which happen next in time, and is abruptly resumed later on, when Þorfinnr visits Ingibjörg in Guðmundr’s tent and drags her away by force. Readers who do not have an excellent memory may have to flip back a few pages in order to re-read the beginning of the causal sequence.

Chronology is likewise one of the structuring principles of *Landnámabók*. The earliest explorers of Iceland – Naddoddr, Garðarr, Hrafna-Flóki, and Ingólfr – are presented in the first chapters of the work, before the settlement is recounted, and their order of appearance is based on the chronology of their explorations. Throughout the work, the different generations of any given family are presented in chronological order. This means, for instance, that Björn buna, father of Ketill flatnefr, Hrappr, and Helgi, must be mentioned before we hear about the land-claim of Þórðr skeggi, the son of Hrappr or those of any of Björn buna’s other descendants.

A concern for chronology is also demonstrated by the fact that the settlement is placed in a global temporal frame: we are told that all of the land-claims took place within sixty years and that this period began with the voyage of the first settler Ingólfr, which took place “Sumar þat... hafði Haraldr hárfagri verið tólf ár konungur at Nóregi; þá var liðit frá upphafi þessa heims sex þúsundir vetra ok sjau tigur ok þrír vetur, en frá holdgan dróttins átta hundruð [ára] ok sjau tigur ok fjögur ár” (Landnámabók 42). (“...the summer which... Harald Fair-Hair had been king of Norway for twelve years; that was 6073 years from the Beginning of the World, and 874 years from the Incarnation of our Lord” (Book 19-20).

“Two chronological systems dominated the yearly report entries in the chronicles of the High Middle Ages: the incarnation era and the registering of reigns and pontificates...” (Goetz 148). *Landnámabók* is not innovative in this respect: SH8 for example con-

ceptualises the time of the settlement in relation to the incarnation and to the reign of a king⁶. The choice of Haraldr hárfagri as the only political point of reference in this chronology reflects the importance that this king had in settlement narratives in general.⁷ The names of more rulers are mentioned, however, in the chronologies of S2 and H2, such as the pope, the kings of Russia, Sweden, Denmark, and England, and the earl of the Orkneys.

The land-claims of *Landnámabók*, which comprise the bulk of its subject matter, do not appear in chronological order, but rather in geographical order. The fact that geography – and not chronology – is the main structuring principle of *Landnámabók*, differentiates it from most other medieval “histories.” It takes the emphasis away from time and puts it on place instead. *Landnámabók* is not alone among medieval texts in being structured by geography; there is also for instance *Acallam na Senorach*, a 12th-century Irish work which follows Saint Patrick and the Fenian hero Cailte around the landscape of Ireland, bringing meaning to the landscape as they go by telling each other legends from various eras. *Acallam na Senorach*, however, makes no pretense at being a chronicle; it contains no specific dates or genealogies.

Presenting events in chronological order, as most medieval histories did, had the effect of constructing a concept of time as a linear sequence of events.⁸ Hugh of Saint-Victor recognised this and wrote: “In serie gestorum ordo temporis invenitur” (“You will find the order of time in the sequence of events”) (Goetz 144). Time was a part of creation, and one of the natural orders of earthly existence, so recounting events in chronological order was, for medieval writers, a way of reproducing reality. The eleventh century Italian chronicler Arnulf of Milan believed that this was the proper way to narrate history: “Legitimus narrationis ordo a superioribus ad inferiora descendit” (“The correct order of nar-

⁶ For the purpose of referring to specific chapters of *Landnámabók* in this work, “S” will represent *Sturlubók*, “H” will represent *Hauksbók*, and “M” will represent *Melabók*. SH8, for example, indicates chapter 8 of *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*.

⁷ The settlement accounts differ in the details of what kind of role Haraldr hárfagri played in the settlement, but just about every one draws one causal connection or another between the establishment of the Norwegian throne and the settlement of Iceland. See the section called “The Role of Haraldr hárfagri in *Landnámabók*” in Chapter 2 for a discussion of what this connection meant to the Icelanders and possible reasons why there were various different narrative traditions about it.

⁸ This is still a predominant conception of time but there are other ways of conceptualising it. See for example Aristotle’s *Physics*, where time is a measure of change.

rating descends from top to bottom”) (Goetz 144). *Landnámabók*, as we have seen, does not exactly disregard chronology, especially since all of the land-claims took place more or less simultaneously over a specified period of years and since the exact dates of each land-claim were probably unknown. Nevertheless, *Landnámabók* does not tell a linear narrative that moves forward in time, but is instead concerned with one era: the time of the origins of the local world as the medieval Icelanders knew it. In this particular way, it is more like an origin myth than a medieval chronicle.

***Landnámabók*'s Conception of Space**

The first thing that *Landnámabók* does is situate Iceland spatially within the larger world:

Svá segja vitrir menn, at ór Nóregi frá Staði sé sjau dægra sigling í vestr til Horns á Íslandi austanverðu, en frá Snæfellsnesi, þar er skemmst er, er fjögurra dægra haf í vestr til Grænlands. En svá er sagt, ef siglt er ór Björgyn rétt í vestr til Hvarfsins á Grænlandi, at þá mun siglt vera tylft fyrir sunnan Ísland. Frá Reykjanesi á sunnanverðu Íslandi er fimm dægra haf til Jölduhlaups á Írlandi í suðr; en frá Langanesi á norðanverðu Íslandi er fjögurra dægra haf norðr til Svalbarða... (Landnámabók 34)

(According to learned men it takes seven days to sail from Stad in Norway westwards to Horn on the east coast of Iceland, and from Snæfellsnes four days west across the ocean to Greenland by the shortest route. People say that if you sail from Bergen due west to Cape Farewell in Greenland, then you pass twelve leagues south of Iceland. From Reykjaness in south Iceland it takes five days to Slyne Head in Ireland, four days from Langaness in North Iceland northwards to Spitzbergen [Svalbarði]...) (Book 16)

Mention is made of what lies to the east, west, south, and north of Iceland; Iceland is thus placed in the centre of the compass in this passage. Contemporary readers have trouble identifying Svalbarði; Hermann Pálsson and Edwards suggest the possibility of Spitzbergen (16). Whatever it may be, it is probably a small island of limited prominence, but its mention is necessary in order to provide a north for the compass. The cardinal directions, as a

way of conceptualising space, were especially useful for navigation at sea. Since Iceland is an island which can only be reached or departed by sea, it is natural that sailing times and the cardinal directions defined its location in the world.

Arguably, a main intention of *Landnámabók* is to organise space and define places in Iceland itself. We have already seen how it has a spatial structure, since it “started in the far south, on the border between the eastern and southern quarters, and listed... primary settlements clockwise around the country” (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 145). In *Íslendingabók*, it is explained how Iceland was divided into four quarters. Each quarter is a political unit insofar as it has its own assemblies. Ari says that the quarters came about as the solution to a legal problem. However incidental and political Ari’s explanation may be, the quarters cannot be reduced to a purely political matter, but are also a way of conceptually integrating Iceland harmoniously into the cosmos, as we shall see.

Besides the first settler Ingólfr, Ari names four settlers, one for each quarter:

Hrollaugr, sonr Rognvalds jarls á Mœri, byggði austr á Síðu; þaðan eru Síðumenn komnir. Ketilbjörn Ketilssonr, maðr nórrœnn, byggði suðr at Mosfelli enu øfra; þaðan eru Mosfellingar komnir. Auðr, dóttir Ketils flatnefs, hersis nórcæns, byggði vestr í Breiðafirði; þaðan eru Breiðfirðingar komnir. Helgi enn magri, nórcœnn, sonr Eyvindar austmanns, byggði norðr í Eyjafirði; þaðan eru Eyfirðingar komnir. En þá es Ísland vas víða byggt orðit... (*Íslendingabók* 6).

(Hrollaugr the son of earl Rognvaldr of Mœri, settled to the east at Síða, from which come the people of Síðumenn. Ketilbjörn Ketilsson, a Norwegian, settled to the south as Mosfell inn efri, from which come the Mosfellingar. Auðr, daughter of the Norwegian chieftain Ketill flatnefr, settled to the west in Breiðafjörðr, from which come the Breiðfirðingar. Helgi inn magri, a Norwegian, the son of Eyvindr austmaðr, settled to the north in Eyjafjörðr, from which come the Eyfirðingar. And when Iceland had become widely settled...)

Each these four settlers is “the ancestor of a major family and of one of the native bishops that had served the country by Ari’s lifetime” (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 142).

Thus, Ari neatly “settles” all of the space in Iceland by listing one prominent figure to represent the settlement of each of its four primary components. *Landnámabók* follows *Íslendingabók* in stressing the four quarters as the primary division of Icelandic space: it is organised into four parts, each one describing the settlement of one quarter. There is a list of *gofgastir landnámsmenn* (“noblest settlers”) for each quarter, and the final list of all the *mestir hofðingjar* (“greatest chieftains”) of Iceland at the end of the settlement era is also divided into quarters.

The four quarters were based on and named for the four cardinal directions, even though they did not match the compass perfectly (Lindow, “Social” par. 5). Not only are the four directions a fundamental part of how Icelandic space is organised in *Landnámabók*, they are also part of how the earth itself is organised at the time of its creation in the *Gylfaginning*. The sons of Bor place the earth in the middle of Ginnungagap and then establish four dwarves, symbolic of the four directions, under the four corners of the earth. After looking at the role of the directions in these two texts and others, such as ones containing diagrams of Jerusalem,⁹ Lindow writes: “The burden of all this evidence, then, is that it takes the four directions to complete a space, be it cosmos or constructed space” (“Social” par. 10).

In this way, Iceland was keeping with the learned tradition of the rest of medieval Europe. As far back as “the writings of Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636), we find the idea that the universe is divided into four quarters. To Isidore the east quarter was associated with spring, the element air, and the qualities of moisture and heat; west with autumn, earth, dryness, and cold; north with winter, water, cold, and moisture; and south with summer, fire, dryness, and heat” (Tuan 96).¹⁰

Later authors followed suit: in his work *De Arca Noe Mystica* (c. 1128), Hugh of Saint Victor created a map of the world which emphasised “les harmonies numériques, en particulier sur le chiffre 4 qui, parce qu’il est divisible, représente tout ce qui est corporel, Hughes associe les 4 saisons, aux 4 points cardinaux, aux 4 qualités fondamentales... aux 4

⁹ E.g. *Hauksbók*, where the circular city is divided into quarters by two roads running through it’s centre along the east-west and north-south axes (*Hauksbók* 186; Lindow, “Social” par. 10).

¹⁰ See Isidore’s *Eymologiae* Book VII chapter 1, verses 3-8.

âges de la vie, aux sens...” (LeCoq 14). (“The numerical harmonies, especially the ones involving the number 4 which, because it is divisible, represents everything that is material. Hugh associates the four seasons to the the four cardinal directions, to the four fundamental qualities... to the four ages of life, to the senses...”).

The land-mass of the world, according to Isidore, was divided into three continents, with Europe and Africa each covering a perfect quarter of the world and Asia covering the northern two.¹¹ The learned prologue of the *Snorra Edda* more or less follows in the same tradition, except that in this case Asia is covering the eastern half of the world:

Veröldin var greind í þrjár hálfur. Frá suðri í vestr ok inn at Miðjarðarsjá, sá hlutr var kallaðr Affrica. Hinn syðri hlutr þeirar deildar er heitr ok brunninn af sólu. Annarr hlutr frá vestri ok til norðs ok inn til hafsins, er sá kallaðr Evropa eða Enea. Hinn nyrðri hlutr er þar kaldr svá at eigi vex gras ok eigi má byggja. Frá norðri ok um austrhálfur allt til suðrs, þat er kallat Asia. Í þeim hlut veraldar er öll fegrð ok prýði ok eign jarðar ávaxtar, gull ok gimsteinar. Þar er ok mið veröldin... þar er jörðin fegri ok betri öllum kostum en í öðrum stöðum... (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning* 4)

(The world was divided into three regions. From the south to west and in up to the Mediterranean sea, this part was called Africa. The southern part of this section is hot and burned up by the sun. The second part from west and to the north and in up to the sea, this is called Europe or Enea. The northern part there is cold so that vegetation does not grow and habitation is not impossible. From the north and over the eastern regions right to the south, that is called Asia. In that part of the world is all beauty and splendour and wealth of earthly produce, gold and jewels. The middle of the world is there too and... the earth there is more beautiful and better in all respects than in other places...) (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda* 2)

¹¹ Book XIV chapter 2, verses 1-2.

The *Snorra Edda* paints a picture of what Dick Harrison would call “macro-space,” the way that the “geography” of the entire cosmos is imagined (2). By contrast, *Landnámabók* conceptualises “microspace... the empirically-known world, including areas we think of as being empirically known (even if we have not been there personally)” (Harrison 2). Harrison draws a contrast between the two types of space: macrospace is usually described far more imaginatively and fantastically than microspace (10). The *Snorra Edda* and *Landnámabók* are no exception to this rule. Yet, the basic principles used to divide space in the world as a whole in the *Snorra Edda* are the same as those that are used to divide the local world in *Landnámabók*, and the division of Iceland into quarters representing the cardinal directions makes Iceland into a kind of microcosm of the world as a whole. In *Landnámabók*, then, mythical space is informing how local space is conceptualised.

Landnámabók's Conception of Place

In *Space and Place*, one of the founding works of the discipline of human geography, Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes place from space this way:

Space is experienced directly as having room in which to move... movements are often directed toward, or repulsed by, objects and places. Hence space can variously be experienced as the relative location of objects or places, as the distances and expanses that separate or link places, and – more abstractly – as the area defined by a network of places... space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning... place is a pause in movement... the pause makes it possible for a locality to become the center of felt value. (12, 137-38)

In other words, Tuan defines places as static points in the space in which humans move around. Places become points by acquiring specific meanings to certain humans. To take a contemporary example, “a neighborhood is at first a confusion of images to the new resident; it is blurred space ‘out there.’ Learning to know the neighborhood requires the identification of significant localities [places], such as street corners and architectural landmarks” (Tuan 17).

The definition of places in *Landnámabók* is closely linked to the etymologies of place names. Proper names are, after all, a type of definition, and often in *Landnámabók*,

the same people and events which define a place also explain the origins of the name of that place. For example, Þorbrandr örrek lends his names to two places, one of which is the place where he built his hall: “Þorbrandr örrek... bjó á Þorbrandsstöðum ok lét þar gera eldhús svá mikit, at allir þeir menn, er þeim megin fóru, skyldu þar bera klyfjar í gegnum ok vera öllum matr heimill. Við hann er kennd Örreksheiðr upp frá Hökustöðum” (*Landnámabók* 234). (“Thorbrand Orrek... made his home at Thorbrandsstead where he built a hall so large that all those who travelled on that side of the river had to ride through it with their pack-horses, and everyone was welcome to eat there. Orreksmorr above Hokustead takes its name from him”) (*Book* 91).

Like this one, many of the etymologies in *Landnámabók* seem plausible, but some of them will certainly strike the contemporary reader as being fanciful, such as the ones in the following passage: “Eptir um várit fór Auðr í landaleit inn í Breiðafjörð ok lagsmenn hennar; þau átu dögurð fyrir norðan Breiðafjörð, þar er nú heitir Dögurðarnes. Síðan fóru þau inn eyjasund; þau lendu við nes þat, er Auðr tapaði kambi sínum; þat kallaði hon Kambsnes” (*Landnámabók* 139). (“In the spring Aud set out to look for land in Breidafjord, and her companions went with her. They took their breakfast towards the south of Breidafjord, at a place that’s now called Dogurdarness [“Breakfast Head”.] Then they sailed up past the islands in the sound and landed at a certain headland where Aud lost her comb, so she called it Kambnes [Head of the Comb]”) (*Book* 52).

There are no limits to what kinds of meanings can be attached to places, but certain themes are repeated in the ways that places are identified in *Landnámabók*. One of them is to identify a place as the site of a mortal encounter.¹² For example, “Þeir [the slaves who had killed Hjörleifr] urðu felmtsfullir, og hljóp sinn veg hverr. Ingólfr drap þá alla. Þar heitir Dufþaksskor, er hann lézk. Fleiri hljópu þeir fyrir berg, þar sem við þá er kennt síðan.

¹² Incidentally, this is a common occurrence in medieval Irish narratives as well. E.g. “Imsóe Cú Chulaind friu-som no eiscis a dá cend déc díb fá chétoir & sádis dá lia déc leó i talmain. Acus atbert cend cach fir díb bara líic & atbert cend ferchon Longsig no bara líic. Conid Cinnut Ferchon Longsig áit i fargab Ferchú Longsech a chend .i. Cennáit Ferchon” (*Táin* 69). (“Cú Chulainn fell upon them and forthwith struck off their twelve heads. And he put a head of each one of them on its stone and also put Ferchú Loingsech’s head on its stone. So that spot where Ferchú Loingsech left his head is called Cinnit Ferchon that is, Cennáit ferchon (the Headplace of Ferchú)”) (*Táin* 209). “The women put their faces to the ground and died of terror. Because of this, the hill is called the mound of the womenfolk.” (*Acallam na Senorach* 86).

Vestmannaeyjar heita þar síðan, er þrælarnir váru drepnir, því at þeir váru Vestmenn” (Landnámabók 44-45). (“The slaves were so frightened they scattered in all directions. In-golf killed every one of them. The place where Dufthak met his death is called Dufthaksskor. Many of the slaves jumped over a cliff that’s been called for them ever since, as have the islands where the slaves were killed, which were named Westmanna Islands since the men came from the West”) (Book 21). Another example of a place being named after people who died there is from the West quarter:

Þeir Snæbjörn kómu eptir þeim við hæðir þær, er nú heita Hallbjarnarvörður; þeir Hallbjörn fóru á hæðina ok vörðusk þaðan. Þar fellu þrír menn af Snæbirni ok báðir forunautar Hallbjarnar. Snæbjörn hjó þá fót af Hallbirni í ristarlið; þá hnekkti hann á ena syðri hæðina ok vá þar tvá menn af Snæbirni, ok þar fell Hallbjörn. Því eru þrjár vörður á þeiri hæðinni, en fimm á hinni. (Landnámabók 194)

(Snæbjörn and his men caught up with them at the hills which are now called Hallbjarnar Cairns. Hallbjorn and his men went up the hill and took their stand. Three of Snæbjorn’s men and both Hallbjorn’s companions were killed there. Then Snæbjorn sliced through Hallbjorn’s leg at the ankle, and Hallbjorn fell back as far as the southernmost hill and killed two of Snæbjorn’s men there before he was killed himself. That’s why there are three cairns on that hill, and five on the other.”) (Book 72-73)

This way of defining place echoes the *Snorra Edda*’s cosmogonic myth, wherein Óðinn and his brothers kill the giant Ymir and make the earth out of his body. In this myth, a place not only defined by its association with a killed person, but is quite literally made from him.

Although human deaths and remains are a repeated way a defining places in *Landnámabók*, the most common way that the work defines places is by naming the people who spent time at them. The majority of the places which are mentioned are associated with the name of an individual, who either landed there, lived there temporarily, or settled there. Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson suspect that, where traditions about settlers were lacking or unknown, settlers were often invented so that no place would be left undefined in

this way: “In some places there were many traditions and origin myths... In others there were no such traditions or the compiler did not have access to them. In those cases the compiler seems to have felt that he could not leave blanks. Instead, people had to be invented, normally based on the place-names, or borrowed from elsewhere... Most suspicious are those [sparsely narrated] examples where the settler has the same name as the area:...” (147). One of the examples they offer is S260, which introduces two new characters with no secondary names, simply saying: “Sveinungr nam Sveinungsvík, en Kolli Kollavík, en bjó þar hvárr, sem við er kennt síðan” (*Landnámabók* 286). (“Sveinungr claimed Sveinungsvík, and Kolli Kollavík, and they lived in the places which have been named for them since”).

Reginald Bloch argues that in medieval grammatical literature in general, “the prime model of linguistic derivation is that of paternity” (42) and that just as families have original ancestors, words are grounded “in an original moment of signification” (39).¹³ The popular medieval science of etymology traced words back through their changing significances to the supposed original one in the same way that genealogies traced families back through generations to their founding ancestors. The parallel between etymological relations among words and genealogical relations among family members is implicit in *Landnámabók*, where the etymological explanations of place names are nearly all linked to the names or deeds of family ancestors. To the minds of the compilers, both Icelandic places and Icelandic families were simultaneously founded during the settlement period.

***Landnámabók’s* Conception of Sacred Place**

In a noteworthy departure from *Landnámabók’s* usual formula of naming a settler, his land-claim, and his descendants, S24/H21 tells of a hermit who does not claim any land. *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* contain two rather different versions of his story, but they both agree that Ásólfur was a Christian who “vildi ekki eiga við heiðna menn, ok eigi vildi hann þiggja mat at þeim” (*Landnámabók* 62). (“He... would have nothing to do with the heathen. He wouldn’t even accept food from them”) (*Book* 26). He tried living on the outskirts of the

¹³ This way of thinking has persisted to some extent into contemporary times, and can be seen for example when we speak about “language families” or about words that are “related.”

land-claims of others, but was driven away several times. Wherever he lived, an abundance of fish would miraculously appear in a nearby river. Finally he was able to make a permanent home at Holmr in Akranes. According to *Sturlubók*, he is buried there and “stendr þar nú kirkja, sem leiði hans er, ok er hann enn helgasti maðr kallaðr” (*Landnámabók* 64). (“The present church stands on his grave and people now think of him as the holiest of men”) (*Book* 26). According to *Hauksbók*, the spirit of Ásólfur appeared to Halldórr, the man who owned the land at Holmr where he was buried, after which Halldórr “lét gera at tréskin ok setja yfir altari” for the bones of Ásólfur (“had a wooden shrine made, and set it over an altar”), and eventually built a church on the site as well (*Landnámabók* 65).

“The miracle of causing fish to appear and disappear from rivers, lakes, streams, and waterfalls at [one’s] convenience” is a hagiographical motif, as is of course being persecuted by heathens (Jesch 516). The reason that Holmr is sacred is because of the presence of the bones of Ásólfur, who is a saintly figure, though not one of Iceland’s two official saints. The sanctity of relics is of course a common feature of the cult of the saints in medieval Europe, and it is no surprise to see it informing the Icelandic understanding of sacred place.

The fact that Ásólfur’s story is included in *Landnámabók* is evidence that place definition is one of the main concerns of *Landnámabók*, one that is equal to or perhaps even greater than recording land-claims, which is what some would cite as its primary concern.¹⁴ Ásólfur is not a *landnámsmaðr*, but he provides a foundation legend for the church at Holmr, and in traveling from east to west across the country he leaves names for Ásólfsskáli enum austasta (where according to *Hauksbók* there was a church at the time of the compilation), Miðskáli, another Ásólfsskáli in the west, and a river called Írá.

Another example of a Christian sacred place in *Landnámabók* is Kirkjubær, the place where the papar had lived, and “eigi máttu þar heiðnir menn búa” (*Landnámabók* 324). (“No heathen was allowed to stay there”) (*Book* 123). One heathen tries to live there but he drops down dead. Here again, as in the case of Holmr, a place is sacred because of the sanctity of the people who are associated with it, which keeps in with the larger trend in

¹⁴ E.g. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1974. See the section called “*Landnámabók* and Land-Ownership, Land Administration” in chapter 3 for a critique of the idea that land-claims are the primary concern of the compilation.

Landnámabók of defining places in terms of the specific people who lived, died, or were buried at them.

Non-Christian sacred places are generally described in *Landnámabók* in terms of being held sacred by a particular individual or group. Framing the sanctity of a place in terms of someone's belief is making a statement about social reality rather than about sacred reality, and resembles the "etic" accounts of contemporary anthropological literature¹⁵. This perspective can be contrasted with the "emic" perspective of the believer(s), wherein the place in question is objectively sacred, either inherently or because it was made so by a higher power. Example of etic-type descriptions of non-Christian sacred space include the description of Auðr's heathen descendants: "Þar höfðu frændr hennar síðan átrúnað mikinn á hólana... trúðu þeir því, at þeir dæi í hólana..." (*Landnámabók* 139-140). ("Later her kinsmen worshipped these hills... they believed they would go into the hills when they died") (*Book* 52). Such descriptions enrich and define concepts of places in Iceland, without compromising *Landnámabók's* Christian stance on what sacred reality is.

***Landnámabók's* Conception of Territory**

In the *Snorra Edda's* cosmogonic myth, the sons of Bor offer the outer edges of the earth to families of giants to settle: "hon [the earth] er kringlótt útan, ok þar útan um liggr hinn djúpi sjár, ok með þeiri sjávar ströndu gáfu þeir lond til bygðar iotna ættum" (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning* 12). ("It is circular round the edge, and around it lies the deep sea, and along the shore of this sea they gave lands to live in [or settle] to the races of giants") (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda* 8). They then build a stronghold around the earth proper, which is named Miðgarðr ("central dwelling"). Finally, they build a hall from which they govern the world. Similarly, in *Landnámabók*, important settlers make land claims, build farms to live in and to be the seats of their power, and allow secondary settlers to settle elsewhere on their land claims. Skallagrímr, for example, "nam land útan frá Selalóni ok

¹⁵ "The neologisms "emic" and "etic," which were derived from an analogy with the terms "phonemic" and "phonetic," were coined by the linguist anthropologist Kenneth Pike (1954). He suggests that there are two perspectives that can be employed in the study of a society's cultural system, just as there are two perspectives that can be used in the study of a language's sound system. In both cases, it is possible to take the point of view of either the insider or the outsider... Emic constructs are accounts... expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories that are regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the members of the culture under study... Etic constructs are accounts... expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes that are regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers" (Lett 381-382).

et efra til Borgarhrauns og suðr allt til Hafnarfjalla, herað allt svá vítt sem vatnföll deila til sjóvar. Hann reisti bæ hjá vík þeiri, er kista Kveld-Úlfs kom á land, ok kallaði at Borg... Síðan skipaði hann heraðit sínum félagum, ok þar námu margir menn síðan land með hans ráði” (Landnámabók 71). (“[He] took possession of all the land from Selalon in the west, north to Borgarhraun and south to Hafnarfell, using the rivers to mark his landclaim right down to the sea. He built a farm near the creek where Kveld-Ulf’s coffin had come ashore, and called it Borg... After that he granted land to his companions, and later plenty of others came to settle on his territory with his approval”) (Book 28). These others, such as Óleifr hjalti and Ketill blundr, settle inland on the territory, and on its edges.

The reality in thirteenth century Iceland was that “large regions like Eyjafjörður and Borgarfjörður were coming under the control of single chieftains” (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 149). These chieftains relied on others to administrate the farms and lands which were in their spheres of influence. In *Sturlu saga*, for example, the *goði* Hvamm-Sturla acquires some land and a farm called Heinaberg and from a *bóndi* called Birningr, in exchange for protecting him and helping him with a threatening conflict (Byock 179). After the two men make this agreement, Birningr comes to live on Hvamm-Sturla’s farm, but his wife and son remain behind at Heinaberg in order to run the household.

All three of these scenarios (the *Snorra Edda*, *Landnámabók*, and the political reality of the time of their composition) have primary power-holders controlling a territory, while secondary power-holders live in the territory with them. We can conclude that generally, in the worldview of the thirteenth century Icelanders, territory was delineated by a collection of quasi-autonomous subordinates who in some way relied upon a primary power.

Genealogy as the Main Principle of Origin

In “The Development of Old Norse Textual Worlds,” Clunies Ross explains how the desire of Icelandic families to articulate their defining characteristics and to secure a kind of inherited nobility informed Old Norse-Icelandic works from all kinds of genres. One of her main premises is that “genealogy was one of the fundamental models for the development

of Old Icelandic prose writing (aside from genres or motifs that were closely modeled on ecclesiastical literature)” (377). In the case of *Landnámabók*, the importance of genealogy to the cosmology of the text is hard to overstate. It spans and structures many of the basic cosmological principles, such as time and place. We have seen, for instance, how *Landnámabók* frequently reaches from the settlement period into the original audience’s present via genealogies, and thus creates a sense of time as a progression of generations. We have also seen how many places are often associated with figures from particular lineages, whose names were given to these places. The association of places with families, of course, had political ramifications. However, genealogy cannot be reduced to being only a political matter in medieval Iceland, as we shall presently see.

Generation is the main origin principle in the *Snorra Edda*’s cosmogonic myth. Just about everything in the cosmos, from mankind in general to the seasons of the year is given a genealogy. For example, night and day are a mother and son: “Nǫrfi eða Narfi hét jǫtunn er bygði í Jǫtunheimum. Hann átti dóttur er Nótt hét. Hon var svört ok dökk sem hon átti ætt til... Síðarst átti hana Dellingr, var hann Ása ættar. Var þeira son Dagr... Þá tók Alfǫðr Nótt ok Dag son hennar ok gaf þeim tvá hesta ok tvær kerrur ok setti þau upp á himin at þau skulu ríða... umhverfis jörðina” (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning* 13). (“Norfi or Narfi was the name of a giant who lived in Giantland. He had a daughter called Night. She was black and dark in accordance with her ancestry... Her last husband was Delling, he was of the race of the Æsir. Their son was day... Then All-father took Night and her son Day and gave them two horses and two chariots and set them up in the sky so that they have to ride around the earth...” (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda* 14). The reproduction of humans was used by Snorri as the model for the origin of more or less everything. Consequently, genealogical relations between gods, norns, dwarves, and various cosmic phenomena were laid out. Whether or not Snorri’s older sources for Norse mythology were structured genealogically is less relevant than the fact that, in the thirteenth century, he decided that it would be appropriate to tell a cosmogonic myth in genealogical terms.

The biblical myth of the origins of mankind is also marked by generation, and more specifically, patrilineal generation: “As recounted in Genesis, God creates man (Adam) from whom alone woman (Eve) derives. This patrilineal generation, of course, is repeated in the regeneration of mankind through the creation of the (new) man Christ, this time explicitly designated as a Son to God, also explicitly designated as God the Father. Genealogical histories are thus, from a structural point of view, narrative mimeses of the creation of life itself” (Spiegel 109).

Like the histories that Spiegel has in mind, *Landnámabók* contains a mass of genealogies. Almost each settler’s ancestry and descendants are listed. It explains the origins of the local world by making genealogies that went back to the settlement, just as the *Snorra Edda* and the Bible explained the origins of the world as a whole by making genealogies of primordial times. We can conclude that in thirteenth century Iceland, genealogy was seen as a fundamental process in the workings of the universe as a whole, in that it was the main principle of origin.

Chapter 2: Landnámabók as a Political Myth

Another socially-constructed reality with which *Landnámabók* interacted was power structures. A variety of political concepts, opinions, and aspirations had informed the material which made its way into the compilation. For this reason, *Landnámabók* is certainly not apolitical. However, it is probably not as politically calculated as has been previously suggested.

The Role of King Haraldr háfagri in *Landnámabók*

The historicity of King Haraldr háfagri, as we know him from chronicles and sagas, has been called in question by Sverrir Jakobsson. He argues that “no contemporary sources throw any light on the existence or actions of such a king,” and that we cannot accept thirteenth century traditions concerning a supposed ninth century king as historically reliable (“Erindringen” 230). Taking my cue from the impossibility of knowing much about the ninth century Haraldr, I shall bracket the question of his historical status and focus instead on what he meant as a mythical and literary figure of the thirteenth century.

The tradition concerning Haraldr’s role in the settlement is not uniform, although all sources agree that Iceland was settled during his reign. According to *Íslendingabók*, he had some control over the immigration; the story in which he figures serves the purpose of explaining the origins of a traveling tax in Norway called *landaurar*. This story is based on a similarity between the name of the tax and the word for depopulation (*landauðn*): “En þá varð fõr manna mikil mjõk út hingat ýr Norvegi, til þess unz konungrinn Haraldr bannaði, af því at hónum þótti landauðn nema. Þá sættusk þeir á þat, at hverr maðr skyldi gjalda konungi fimm aura, sá es eigi væri frá því skiliðr ok þaðan fœri hingat” (*Íslendingabók* 5-6). (“And then too many people were coming here out of Norway, until king Haraldr banned it, because he thought the land would be depopulated. Then they reached this agreement – that every person should pay the king five *aura*, who was not exempted and who came to here from there”). The *Hauksbók Landnámabók* also contains a passage implying that Haraldr had some control over the settlement: he establishes rules on how land should be claimed.

By contrast, in *Haralds saga hárfagra*, the settlement of Iceland is explained as the result of it being a destination for political refugees from Haraldr’s reign:

“Eptir orrostu þessa [Hafrsfjörðr] fekk Haraldr konungr enga mótstöðu í Noregi. Váru þá fallnir allir inir mestu fjándmenn hans; en sumir flýðir ór landi, ok var þat allmikill mannfjöldi, því at þá byggðusk stór eyðilönd. Þá byggðusk Jamtaland ok Helsingjaland, ok var þó áðr hvárt tveggja nökkut byggt af Norðmönnum. Í þeim ófriði, er Haraldr konungr gekk til lands í Nóregi, þá fundusk ok byggðusk útlönd: Færeyjar ok Ísland.” (Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla 118)

(After that battle [Hafrsfjörðr] King Harald was not any more withstood in Norway, for then all his worst foes had fallen and other had fled from the land and they were a great number, and at that time great wastelands were peopled. then were Jämtland and Helsingeland inhabited, but they had both been patially settled before by Norsemen. Amid all the unrest, when Harald was seeking to subdue all the land of Norway, the Faroes and Iceland, lands out beyond the sea, were found and settled.) (Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla, or the Lives of the Norse Kings 57)

Landnámabók contains a mixture of these two traditions, the one wherein Haraldr has authority over emigrants to Iceland and the one wherein emigrants are escaping from him. A few settlers leave Norway with the *ráð* (permission or council) of King Haraldr, such as Þórólfr fasthaldi, Ingimundr enn gamli, Hrollaugr Rognvaldsson, and Uni enn danski. This last man is sent by Haraldr to conquer Iceland on his behalf. He fails in his mission and is killed, but not before begetting a son and becoming an ancestor of some Icelanders. On the other hand, about two dozen of the settlers in *Landnámabók* leave Norway and come to Iceland because of their enmity with Haraldr hárfagi. Some of them, such as Práendr mjöksiglandi, Onundr tréfótr and Hallvarðr súgandi, have to flee because they fought against Haraldr in the battle of Hafrsfjörðr, as the refugees in the passage from *Heimskringla* above did. Others refuse to pay tribute to him or have disputes with his men and wind up killing them. About a half a dozen of the settlers are simply said to have come to Iceland “fyrir ofríki Haralds” (“because of Haraldr’s oppression”).

It is important to remember that the majority of the settlement accounts in *Landnámabók* do not mention Haraldr. A number of the settlers do not even come from

Norway. Nevertheless, a causal connection between Haraldr's rise to power and people settling in Iceland is repeated enough times to make it into a prominent motif. We shall now join Boulhosa in wondering how this came to be so: "If the tradition which places Haraldr inn hárfagri's oppression as the main cause of the settlement of Iceland was a conscious recreation, a possible 'version' which thirteenth and fourteenth-century Icelanders could happily accept as true, it is worth searching for reasons why this version could have been accepted as such" (173).

Icelanders and Kingship

One possible reason for the connection between the settlement of Iceland and the story of Haraldr hárfagri's rise to power is that it helps to explain and justify a fact which was potentially embarrassing to Icelanders, that "Iceland, alone of the European states, had neither kings nor hereditary aristocracy... outsiders might infer that Iceland, because it lacked an institutionalised governing class, also lacked a pedigree..." (Clunies Ross, "Development" 375).

Despite not having a king until the second part of the thirteenth century, Icelanders were interested in the institution and took part in it; some of them became the retainers of kings, particularly the Norwegian one, and kings had long been a choice topic in saga writing. In the late *konungasögur* such as *Knýtlinga saga* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, we find that thirteenth century Icelanders were involved in the discussion about the nature of kingship, the role of kings, and the difference between good and bad kings. To appreciate how the Icelanders' kinglessness could be pose an ideological problem which required justification, we must consider the reasons why "apart from the church, kingship was perhaps the most important social institution of the Middle Ages" (Ármann Jakobsson 388).

Kingship, at this time, was generally seen as an office which was sanctioned by God for the purpose of administering justice, upholding the law, supporting the church, and keeping the peace; in a nutshell, keeping temporal matters running smoothly and ethically (Renna 265-66). It is around this time that Thomas Aquinas wrote *De Regno* and argued that the king's "primary function is to lead subjects to natural virtue by the use of right reason. From there, the clergy will provide the necessary grace and spiritual assistance to complete the requirements for salvation" (Renna 266).

It was recognised that not all kings fulfilled this role. It was an ideal, not a description of reality. Nevertheless, the fact that Iceland did not to have any king at all made it seem, to some, that they were missing an essential part of divine leadership and of good social order. *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, for instance, can be read as an argument in favour of a king as a means to mitigating violence and war, problems which were apparently intensifying in Iceland at the time (Ármann Jakobsson 398). In this saga, the Cardinal Vihljálmr “kallaði vsannlikt at land þat [Iceland] þiónaði ecki vndir eínn-hvern konung sem öll önnur í veröldinni” (*Hákonar* 144). (“Called it improper that that land (Iceland) did not serve under a king, like all other lands in the world.”) We can also consider the *speculum* called *Konungs skuggsjá*, from Norway, which describes the supposedly dire consequences of kinglessness by portraying a situation in which a land loses its king and is divided into the realms of petty lords and kings:

...þá má það ríki kalla hömlu barða eða auðnar óðal... Því að þeir smákonungar, er þá hafa sundur slitið ríki, þá slíta þeir þegar í jafnmarga staði ástundan fólksins þess, er byggir landið... Því næst hyggur hver þeirra að sínu ríki og fjölmenni eða auðæfum... og þykist þá hver þeirra oflítið hafa... En eftir það tekur hver þessara höfðingja að draga til sinnar fêhirzlu þann auð, er minnst er ríkisbót í. Það er öfund... og tekur þá frændsemi að spillast. Og er þar þá ætlaður óþurtamaður, sem fyrr var kallaður vin og frændi, og býr því næst hver um grun við annan... Því næst rennur upp ófriðarávöxtur, vex ágirnd og ójafnaður, dirfast menn í manndrápum og ágjarnlegum ránum eða stuldum... og þyrma menn engum hlutum, því að hvervetna þess er eitt fólk er skipt í marga staði með höfþingja ástundarn, enda verða þeir sundþykkir, þá dirfist þegar alþýðan eftir sínum girndum og brigða þá alhugað öllum síðum landsins... og ef í nokkurum stað eigu þeir sjálfir málum, þá treysta fól hinn heimska, svo að hann skal ríkastur vera í þeirra viður skipti, en hinn réttláti og hinn spaki verður afsviptur sínum hlut... Ní mátt þú ætla, ef það land frjálsist með Guðs miskun og kann síðan að koma undir einvaldskonung, hversu siðgott fólk eða nytsamlegt ríki það mun þá vera... (*Konungs* 103-107)

(...that realm must be called a rudderless ship or a decayed estate... For the petty kings, having rent the realm asunder, will quickly divide the loyalty of the people who inhabit the land... thereupon each will begin to survey his realm as to population and wealth, and... each will feel that he has too little.. After that these lords will begin to treasure those riches that are of the least profit to the kingdom, namely envy... soon the love of kinship begins to decay; he who was earlier called friend and relative is now looked upon as an evil-doer, for soon each one begins to be suspicious of the others... before long the seeds of hostility begin to sprout, avarice and iniquity flourish, and men grow bold in man-slaying, high-handed robbery, and theft... nothing is now spared, for when the people are divided into many factions through loyalty to different chiefs, and these fall out, the masses will rashly pursue their desires and the morals of the nation go to ruin... And if such men have disputes to settle anywhere, the wicked will support the foolish one, so that he may prevail in the controversy; thus the upright and the peaceful are robbed of their dues... Now you can imagine how highly moral such the people will be come, if such a nation is saved by God's grace and again brought under the rule of a single monarch...") (King's 198-203)

Interestingly, *Egils saga* turns this scenario on its head. *Ófriðr* comes as a result of the rise of an *einvaldskonungr* ("absolute king"), not as the result of his fall. People are killed and displaced, people are – in the eyes of some protagonists – "þrælkat ok áþját," ("enslaved and oppressed"), and nothing good comes of Þórolfr Kveldúlfsson's decision to become a king's man (Egils 8, Egil's 23). "The new centralized kingship which is born with Haraldr inn hárfagri disturbs the harmony based upon traditional structures" (Boulhosa 166). The emigrants to Iceland thus are not portrayed as a stray, struggling group of people in need of a king. Rather, they are in Iceland to lead and recreate an ancient order which predated *einvaldskonungdómr*.

While *Landnámabók* contains the story of Kveldúlf's emigration, it leaves out much of the anti-monarchal ideology that accompanies it in *Egils saga*. Even so, the presence of a number of accounts in *Landnámabók* featuring settlers who – like Kveldúlf – come to Iceland in order to preserve their ancestral status and *óðul* simultaneously explains

and justifies the singular relationship of Icelanders to kingship. The problem of these settlers is not with kingship as such, as much as it is with the fact that, due to circumstances, it is impossible for them to safeguard their honour and position now that Haraldr has established his kingdom. For example, Geirmundr heljarskinn, a king in Rogaland, is forced to go to Iceland because his land is confiscated by King Haraldr in his absence: “Hann [Haraldr] hafði þá lagt undir sik allt Rogaland og tekit þar marga menn af óðulum sínum. Sá þá Geirmundur öngvan annan sinn kost en ráðask brutt, því at hann fekk þar öngvar sœmðir” (*Landnámabók* 152). (“He [Haraldr] had conquered the whole of Rogaland and driven a good many farmers from their estates. Geirmund realized he had no choice but to emigrate, because he had no standing there any more...”) (*Book* 57).

Traditions about high-born men such as Geirmundr coming to Iceland in order to preserve their rightful status shows that despite not having a monarch, Iceland at least has an authentic noble class to govern it. It is important to remember that in the middle ages, nobles were generally believed to be especially fit to govern: “Hagiographers and chroniclers... assumed that the well-born possessed inherently superior physical and moral qualities which destined them to positions of leadership” (Evergates 152).

These traditions may also have served as a precedent when Icelanders were negotiating rights for themselves in Norway, both before and during the process of becoming subjects of the Norwegian throne, since, in a manner of speaking, the traditions equated Icelanders with Norwegian landholders. *Óláfsloq*, a section of *Grágás*, does indeed specify that “Íslendingar eigo at hava haldz rétt i noregi” (“Icelanders are to have the right to personal compensation of a *höldr* in Norway”) (Boulhosa 80). The same text grants them other special rights such as “privileged use of timber and water in Norway, and the immunity of their legitimate property in Norway” (Boulhosa 85).

The accounts of settlers who come to Iceland with the blessing of King Haraldr, on the other hand, and the story in *Hauksbók* wherein Haraldr inaugurates a system to control the claiming of land, are perhaps a reflection of the fact that Icelanders did not consider themselves to be completely divorced from the Norwegian throne and that some of them, who supported subjection to it (whether before or after this subjection actually took place)

wanted to conceptualise Iceland as a place which had been controlled by it from the beginning.

***Landnámabók* and Land Ownership, Land Administration**

If the *samtíðarsögur* and *Íslendingarsögur* are any indication of social reality, then property rights were a great source of contention in Iceland during the thirteenth century and earlier. A popular understanding of the main motivation behind the compilation of *Landnámabók* is that it was intended to legitimise the land-holdings of powerful families. This view was developed by Sveinbjörn Rafnsson in *Studier i Landnámabók* (1974). It is summarised in Else Roesdahl's *The Vikings* (1988), where it says that “the real purpose of this book [*Landnámabók*] was probably to establish a register of the landed properties and to support the land claims of the families who were in power in the twelfth century” (267).

Sveinbjörn Rafnsson's argument rests partly on material in *Grágás*, which says that “there was no limit to how far back in time one could demand witnessed legal acquisition of an owner of an object or land” (231). Sveinbjörn Rafnsson infers that “these regulations show how important it must have been for the landowning families to have their first legal acquisition of the land confirmed and codified. The result of this need has been the origin of *landnámsmenn* and a country-wide list of them, in other words, a *Landnámabók*” (231).

This theory concerns the so-called “original” *Landnámabók* which, because of a citation in *Hauksbók*, is believed to have been compiled by Ari fróði and Kolskeggr hinn vitri. This hypothetical original *Landnámabók* really only concerns my purposes here insofar as it may have helped to shape the existing versions of *Landnámabók*. These existing versions would not have served very well as a comprehensive list of the original claimants of land in Iceland. Even though they cover more or less all of the inhabitable parts of the island, “there are a number of cases where a region is accounted for by a settler who subsequently left for another place” (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 146). For instance, in S289 and H250, Loðmundr enn gamli temporarily settles in and gives his name to Loðmundarfjörðr, but then “hears that his high-seat pillars had washed ashore in the south

so he transferred his settlement across half the country leaving Loðmundarfjörður vacant... stories of this kind would have been of little use to thirteenth century land-owners in Loðmundarfjörður...” (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 146). Unless, that is, Loðmundarfjörður and Loðmundarhvammr were both in the ownership of the same family, but what is far more likely is that they are both linked to this man in *Landnámabók* because of their names. This case suggests that somewhere along the line, compilers were just as interested, if not more interested, in “providing a history for the Icelandic landscape” than in strengthening land-claims (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 146).

There is a lot of other material as well in existing versions of *Landnámabók* which is not explicable in terms of powerful parties wanting to strengthen their claims to land, such as anecdotes from sagas, and etiological legends explaining how particular features of the landscape came to be.¹⁶ Because of this material, these versions cannot be reduced to being a simple register of land-claims intended for political and legal purposes. Furthermore, *Landnámabók* is rather undetailed and obscure when it comes to the boundaries of the land-claims. For instance, “Sólvi hét maðr, er nam land milli Hellis ok Hraunhafnar” (“A man called Solvi took possession of land between Hellir and Hraunhaven”) does not tell us much about where his territory specifically began and ended (*Landnámabók* 104, *Book* 40). Finally, if *Landnámabók* was intended for legal purposes then it would be strange that there are only three surviving copies of it, whereas the law code *Jónsbók*, for example, has some 260 copies (Fix 346).

Even so, the insight that the concept of *landnámsmenn* itself (meaning “settlers” but also literally “land-claimants”) may have come about in response to legal questions of property rights remains valuable. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson’s work also helps us to understand

¹⁶ E.g. S289/H250, wherein a conflict between two sorcerers who are each trying to engulf the other’s farm with water explains how Jökulsá came to be where it is now, and S28/H56 where this legend explains the origins of a lava field: “Þórir... kóm út síð um kveld ok sá, at maðr røri útan í Kaldárós á járnþokkva, mikill ok illiligr, ok gekk þar upp til bæjar þess, er í Hripi hét, ok gróf þar í stöðushliði; en um nóttina kom þar upp jarðeldr, ok brann þá Borgarhraun. Þar var bærinn, sem nú er borgin” (*Landnámabók* 98). (“Thorir... went outside one evening and saw a huge evil-looking man come rowing into Kald River Estuary in a great iron boat, walk up to a farm called Hrip and start digging at the gate of the sheep pen. During the night there was an eruption there, and that’s how the lava field at Borg started. The farm stood where the mountain is now”) (*Book* 38).

what may be a politically informed aspect of the arrangement of *Landnámabók*: the vast, overarching land-claims that certain *landnámsmenn* make.

These *landnámsmenn*, such as Ingólfr, Skallagrímr, Helgi magri, Auðr en djúpauðga, Hrollaugr Rögvaldsson, and Ketill hængur, make huge land-claims and then advise others in making secondary land-claims within them. Since the settlers came to Iceland in groups, it makes sense that they would initially keep these groups intact, continue to cooperate with one another, and continue to report to the leaders. *Egils saga* shows specifically how such a system would work, when Skallagrímr scatters establishments for his men all over his land-claim in a way that allows him to delegate various agricultural tasks to them:

Hann lét gera bæ á Álptanesi ok átti þar bú annat, lét þaðan sækja útróðra ok selveiðar ok eggver, er þá váru gnóg fong þau öll... Skalla-Grímur hafði ok menn sína uppi við laxárnar til veiða; Odd einbúa setti hann við Gljúfrá at gæta þar laxveiðar... En er fram gekk mjök kvikfé Skalla-Gríms, þá gekk féit upp til fjalla allt á sumrum; hann fann mikinn mun á, at þat fé varð betra og feitara, er á heiðum gekk... Síðan lét Skalla-Grímr gera bæ uppi við fjallit og átti þar bú; lét þar varðveita sauðfé sitt; þat bú varðveitti Griss, ok er við hann kennd Grísartunga. (*Egils* 75-76)

He [Skallagrímr] built and ran an other farm at Alftaness and from there his men went out fishing and seal-hunting, and collecting the eggs of wild fowl, for there was plenty of every thing... Skallagrim also had his men go up the rivers looking for salmon, and settled Odd the Lone-Dweller at the Gljufur River to look after the salmon-fishing... As Skallagrim's livestock grew in number, the animals started making for the mountains in the summer. He found a big difference in the livestock, which was much better and fatter... As a result, Skallagrim had a farm built near the mountains and ran it as a sheep farm. A man called Gris was in charge of it, and Grisartongue is named after him. (*Egil's* 75-76)

Such an approach would still work with a more modest claim than the one Skallagrímr made. The sheer enormousness of the primary land-claims in *Landnámabók* may be

historically accurate, or it may be a reconstruction on the part of 13th-century scholars: “Perhaps the political need to view these regions as single units led the later compilers to envision an original unity which was being restored” (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteins-son 149). There is some evidence of this, at least, in the case of Borgarfjörður:

Skallagrímur is said to have claimed the whole Hvíta river basin... [but] if only settle-ments [that are otherwise said to be] occupied on Skallagrímur’s orders or advice are considered, his claim appears much smaller... Sturla clearly follows *Egils saga* which has an almost identical passage about Skallagrímur’s landclaim. If Snorri Sturluson (the leading chieftain and nearly uncontested ruler of Borgarfjörður) was the author of *Egils saga*, as many scholars now believe, it is easy to see that it was in his interest to suggest original unity of the region. (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteins-son 149)

I do not mean that the great land-claims of *Landnámabók* were necessarily political propaganda of a conscious, calculated nature (although that remains a possibility). Given the fact that medieval historiography was influenced by biblical exegesis, and therefore by the sense that early events resemble later ones, the original regional powers of certain settlers could have been seen by historians as a logical precursor for the contemporary situation. In medieval chronicles, the rise and fall of powers was generally seen as a continuity wherein previous kingdoms and regencies, for all of their particularities, were still “types” for current ones (Goetz 154). In an era when tradition had great authority, there would have been felt a compelling intellectual “necessity to find in the past the means to explain and legitimize every deviation from tradition” and to set historical precedents for new political developments, since “history, the record of political tradition, determined the parameters of political activity” (Spiegel 85). This means that, with their vast primary land-claims, the compilers of *Landnámabók* might have been trying to intellectually come to terms with or set a precedent for the great regional, executive-style power which in their time was being assumed and aspired to by the *stórgoðar*.

The Role of Nobility in *Landnámabók*

The primary settlers are not identical to the group of *göfgastir landnámsmenn* (“noblest settlers”) listed in the conclusion to each quarter. This group contains the primary settlers *and* a number of others with far smaller land-claims. This shows that the connection between “göfgi” (“nobility”) and land-ownership was not perfectly straightforward, and raises the question of what significance the repeated mention of noble settlers has in *Landnámabók*.

Clunies Ross suggests that early Icelandic genealogies, including those which made their way into *Landnámabók*, were “probably developed as the history of a prominent lineage, especially one that had established its claim to a specific (often named) territory, like Breiðafjörður, for example” (“Development” 376). This idea resembles the theories of several scholars of medieval genealogy who focus on its social role in places such as Ireland (Ó Corráin 1985), and especially France (Duby 1979, Bloch 1983). Duby, for example, explains that before the rise of genealogical consciousness and literature in France, the power of the aristocracy relied on “moins les ‘ancestres’ que les ‘proches’ par lesquels ils pouvaient s’approcher des sources de la puissance, c’est-à-dire du roi, du duc, ou du chef locale. Il attendait tout de ce *senior*... il était un bénéficiaire; il n’était pas un héritier” (Duby 164). (“...not so much on ancestors as on affiliates, by whom they could come close to the source of power, which was the king, the duke, or the local chieftain. One owed everything to this *senior*... one was a beneficiary, not an inheritor”). Once the aristocracy gained significant autonomy in relation to these kings and princes, however, they began to emulate the kingly legitimation to power and property, the right of inheritance (Duby 165). They claimed that they were the descendants of kings and princes themselves, and that their land was bequeathed to them by “l’ancêtre fondateur, qui se trouve à l’origine de toute la puissance... de la race” (“the founding ancestor, who is at the origin of all the power... of the race”) (Duby 165).

The social reality of Iceland, however, was not identical to that of France, and it is not safe to automatically assume that the genealogies in *Landnámabók* played the same social role as the ones we find in French texts. Úlfar Bragason points out that “regulations on vengeance, compensation, inheritance, marriage, and custody of children” such as those in

Grágás are based on cognatic kindreds rather than on lineages as such, and deduces from this that “the Icelandic kinship system was... mainly based upon kindreds” (312). The sagas portray a world in which authority, obligations, and transfer of property were based as much on *vinfengi* (“friendship”), the *þingmaðr-góði* relationship, and a variety of family and marital relationships as they were on lineages.¹⁷ Even so, there is evidence that a genealogical consciousness similar to that of France and other societies was developing. For example, a number of genealogies “look further back than legal requirements made necessary; they trace descent back to famous settlers or ancient kings and heroes” (Úlfar Bragason 312).

Another sign of continental-style genealogical consciousness was the fact that “there were several dominant families which were identified with certain properties and were known under a definite family name, such as Haukdælir, Oddaverjar, and Sturlungar” (Úlfar Bragason 312). The first of these two families were named for the places which were seen as the bases of their power and the latter for a male ancestor. The Haukdælir could trace a lineage Ketilbjörn enn gamli, who in *Landnámabók* takes possession of a rather large area below and including Haukdalur (which he allots to a late settler, Þórbrandr Þórbjörnsson). Ketilbjörn is counted among the *göfgastir landnámsmenn* of the southern quarter. Here, then, is an example of a noble family name which is associated in literature with a specific geographic location and a founding ancestor, which is reason to agree with Úlfar Bragason that “there was... a clear contact between the ideas of Icelandic chieftains and the continental model, a move toward the lineage system of kinship... The chieftains had learned from their acquaintance with the Kings of Norway and their courtiers, and were beginning to see themselves as heirs to power appertaining to family” (320).

In this “continental” model, the power of a noble identity sometimes transcended specific legal claims to specific lands. The noble identity was linked to the privilege of owning land in general, and with the fitness to have wide authority (Evergates 147). The fact that so many of the *landnámsmenn* are from noble families, and even royal families,

¹⁷ See Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1992 to read about how *vinfengi* played out in society, and chapter 8 (“Farmers Under Duress”) in Byock 1988 for examples of how *goðar* could gain property from their *þingmenn*.

can be understood in this light.¹⁸ With these noble genealogies, descendants of the various *landnámsmenn* were probably claiming that they were the type of people who were born to own land and to administrate.

In a number of stories, settlers throw something overboard, frequently the high-seat pillars of their temples, and settle wherever it comes to shore (E.g. Þórhaddr enn gamli in S297/H258, Þórðr skeggi in S307, and Hrollaugr Rögvaldsson in S310/H270). In the high-seat pillars motif, the transference of the settlers' high-seat pillars from Norway to Iceland symbolically emphasised the continuous line of power and lands which some Icelanders believed they had inherited from their ancestors.

It has been noted that the three surviving medieval versions of *Landnámabók* each contain a marked amount of material about different, particular families. *Melabók* is so-called because it contains more than forty mentions of Melamenn, a family who were based in Melar during the early fourteenth century (Jakob Benediktsson, “Landnámabók” 139). It is therefore common to presume that it was compiled by a member of this family, such as Snorri Markússon, to whose father and mother the genealogical lines are frequently traced down (Jakob Benediktsson, “Landnámabók” 139). In *Hauksbók*, Haukr Erlendsson traces his own ancestry “no less than three times back to the Irish king Kjarval” (Jakob Benediktsson, “Landnámabók” 290). *Hauksbók* also demonstrates a special interest in the Irish connections of settlers, which may have had to do with his pride in his Irish ancestry and the wish to increase the plausibility of his genealogy by emphasising the role of the Irish in the settlement of Iceland. *Sturlubók* draws thirteen genealogical lines to the Sturlunga family patriarch Sturla Þórðarson in Hvammr or to his wife Guðný Bøðvarsdóttir (Gudbrand Vigfusson and Powell 640). The emphasis on the families involved with the copies should come as no surprise, since a lot of lore about these families would have been readily available. The three different copies show how compilers incorporated an understanding of their own families into the world that *Landnámabók* builds.

¹⁸ E.g. Hrafn enn heimski, who is descended from a Danish King (S338/H), Auðr en djúpauðga who is the widow of the king of Dublin, and Auðun stoti, who comes to Iceland with his wife Mýrún, daughter of the king of Ireland (S83/H71).

***Landnámabók* and the Self-Concept of Icelanders**

In addition to (or instead of) stressing the role of genealogy in domestic politics, some commentators stress that defining the illustrious origins of Icelanders to the rest of the world was a main motivation behind the development of the genealogical lore which made its way into *Landnámabók*. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, for example, support this argument with a passage from *Pórðarbók*, a 17th century copy of *Landnámabók*: “Þat er margra manna mál, at þat se óskyldr fróðleikr at rita landnám. En vér þykjumsk heldr svara kunna útlendum monnum, þá er þeir bregða oss því, at vér séim komnir af þrælum eða illmennum, ef vér vítum víst vórar kynferðir sannar...” (*Landnámabók* 336). (“People often say that writing about the settlement is irrelevant learning, but we think that we can better meet the criteria of foreigners when they accuse us of being descended from slaves or scoundrels, if we know for certain the truth about our ancestry”) (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 6). Clunies Ross writes about how this concern could very well have dated back to the middle ages:¹⁹ “In the context of medieval European society generally, it would not have been surprising for foreigners to suggest that Iceland had been founded by slaves and scoundrels, for its original status as a Viking colony must have been known and the active role of Vikings in the slave trade would have been recognised...” (“Development” 375).

The genealogies in *Landnámabók* do indeed begin the process of drawing Icelanders into the wider European conceptual tradition of nobility, when they tell how many settlers were already noblemen before they came to Iceland. In a time when the legitimacy of a high social status was largely based on its antiquity, Icelandic families eventually felt that it was not enough to claim to have become leaders and landowners since having arrived in their own country. “It is thus that Icelandic genealogies go back not only to Norse gods but also to the Trojans, as well as tracing the line of the Trojan kings back through Greek gods to Noah and Adam. They [Icelanders] have as noble an ancestry as anyone in Europe” (Faulkes 124). This self-concept would have provided Icelanders with legitimacy, pride, and confidence when they visited foreign lands and foreign courts.

¹⁹ Hermann Pálsson and Edwards would like to attribute the *Pórðarbók* passage to **Styrmisbók*, a lost early thirteenth century version.

Interestingly, during the 20th century, *Landnámabók* took on new life as a political myth, and once again became the foundation of the self-concept of Icelanders in an international context. This time, the settlers who came to Iceland because of their animosity with Haraldr hárfagri were interpreted as independent freedom-seekers, and these qualities were used to define the Icelandic nation during its ultimately successful attempts at gaining independence (Sverrir Jakobsson, “Myter” 597). A book aimed at Americans from 1947 contains a variation of this interpretation: “In the battle of Hafursfjord he [Haraldr] had broken the power of nobility and the petty kings, but he had not broken their spirit, and rather than bow to his victory, many sought freedom in exile... this commonwealth differed from most other states in that it... was deliberately established by the agreement of independent groups of men who were seeking to attain the common ends of justice and order. Thus, when Athelstan the Victorious of England was fighting Scots and Northumbrians, when Henry the Fowler was repelling the Magyars... the people of Iceland, with deliberate intent and without bloodshed created for themselves a republic” (Vilhjálmur Stefánsson 2-6). This interpretation of *Landnámabók* is a good example of how a myth can take on new meanings over time and thus remain a world-building narrative in a new social world. It does, however, fall outside of the medieval scope of my analysis.

3. Landnámabók as a Religious Myth

Some episodes in *Landnámabók* link the settlement with supernatural powers, or are suggestive of the workings of such powers. In addition, the tradition of biblical exegesis, and the idea that God had his hand in history, affected the way that *Landnámabók* understood its material. Keeping in mind that I am defining myth as narratives which help people in “world-building”, we can see that religious narratives are myths by definition, so long as they are believed, since the supernatural powers postulated by religion are a part of socially constructed reality. (Or at least, within the confines of this work, I shall assume that they do not exist independently but are part of the reality which people build for themselves).

Landnám Rituals

In *Landnámabók*, the very act of *landnám* appears to have a religious dimension, since settlers are portrayed using a variety of rituals in order to establish their territory, including carrying fire around it (S347), erecting a wooden pole (S194/H161), shooting a burning arrow (S98/H166), and leading a young heifer around it (H276) (Clunies Ross, “Land” 178). In 1928, Dag Strömbäck proposed that these rituals were magical practices intended to make “the *landvættir*, as the ruling spirits of the land, well disposed to the human intruders in their domain, to pacify them before depriving them of their territory and authority” (Clunies Ross, “Land” 177). Clunies Ross, however, is skeptical of the idea that the *landvættir* ever owned the land. She believes that the *landnám* rituals were not aimed at *landvættir* but rather at humans, and were primarily intended to “assert the dominance of one individual over other possible human claimants to a piece of land, thus securing the territory by the symbolical means of showing one’s dominance over other men rather than through actual physical aggression” (“Land” 178). She supports her argument with a passage from *Hauksbók* which gives a practical explanation for one of the rituals: “Þeim mǫnnum, er síðar kómu út, þóttu hinir numit hafa of víða land, er fyrri kómu, en á þat sætti Haraldr konungr þá hinn hárfagri, at engi skyldi víðara nema en hann mætti eldi yfir fara á degi með skipverjum sínum” (*Landnámabók* 337). (“The men that came out later thought that they that had first come out had taken in settlement too much land. But King Harold Fairhair made peace between them on these terms, that no man should take in settlement

more land than he and his shipmates could carry fire round in one day”) (Gudbrand Vigfusson and Powell 200). Putting a limit on how much a settler could claim would help to placate rivals, and fire would be visible at a distance to any eye-witnesses that might be around (Clunies Ross, “Land” 179).

Given the fact that the settlers in *Landnámabók* are portrayed doing *landnám* rituals even in areas where there are no close neighbours to see them (e.g. Einarr Þorgeirsson in S257/H221), it is hard to discount the idea that the supernatural was believed to have played a role in them. Furthermore, several of the rituals are explicitly said to *helga* (“hallow”) the land-claim, a word with religious connotations.²⁰ The passage in *Hauksbók* which says that King Haraldr instituted the fire-carrying ritual as a standard way of regulating disputes between competing potential landowners could be a genuine memory, or it could be a rationalization of this ritual on behalf of a compiler who did not understand its original religious significance. Presuming that there was a religious aspect to the rituals does not imply that they had no meaning to potential human rivals; religion is a social enterprise and many religious or magical rituals which are nominatively aimed at supernatural beings also have the effect of communicating something to other humans.

Interpreting the precise nuances of the original meaning of the land-claiming rituals is speculative. We shall never know for certain whether they involved particular gods, the *landvættir*, or neither. What interests me here is not what they may have meant to the original settlers, but rather what they meant to the compilers of *Landnámabók*, which might be something quite different. The meanings of the *landnám* rituals are not explicitly described in *Landnámabók*, but certain parallels between the Christian ones and the pagan ones in the compilation can help us to interpret them, as we shall see in a later section (“Divination and Destiny in *Landnámabók*,” from pages 50-55 of this work).

The Influence of Biblical Exegesis on Historiography

The social world that the compilers of *Landnámabók* lived in gave them a particular understanding of how history works. Since the settlement was a historical event, this understanding affected the way that they recounted it. One of the important influences on histori-

²⁰ Even Clunies Ross admits that “it is highly probable that these rituals were at least residually associated with various of the Norse gods” (“Land” 178).

ography in the middle ages was the tradition of biblical exegesis. This tradition was based on what writings were available from ‘church fathers,’ such as Origen, Jerome, Augustine, and Ambrose. Some of these writings contained the idea that biblical passages could have multiple layers of meaning, both literal and figurative.²¹ This meant that without denying that any scriptural events were literally true, patristical exegetes found that some were symbolic of spiritual truths, or prefigurations of other events in God’s plan. This way of thinking goes back to the scriptures themselves. For example, Jesus says in Matthew 12:40 that his death and resurrection were prefigured by Jonas’ stay in a fish’s stomach: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Holy Bible: New International Version).

Some medieval authors expanded the typological exegetical technique from biblical events to historical events in general:

A view of historical reality born of biblical study led medieval historians to think that the meaning of history may lie hidden under the literal facts... In Hebrew history the Fathers found veiled... prefigurations of New Testament persons and events. To Christian historians this suggested a way to put non-biblical materials into biblical perspective... respect for the *invisibilia Dei* was a bulwark of the historian’s piety... even though his narrative might not get past the visible things of man. (Ray 260)

Bede, who is cited in *Landnámabók*’s opening chapter, was one of the historians who made explicit figural comparisons between historical events and earlier biblical ones. For example, in his *Historiam Ecclesiasticam Gentis Anglorum*, he compares Saul to King Aedilfrid:

His temporibus regno Nordanhymbrorum praefuit rex fortissimus et gloriae cupidissimus Aedilfrid, qui plus omnibus Anglorum primatibus gentem uastauit Brettonum; ita ut Sauli quondam regi Israeliticae gentis comparandus uideretur, excepto dumtaxat hoc, quod diuinae erat religionis ignarus. Nemo enim in tribunis, nemo in regibus

²¹ E.g. Origen’s *De Principiis*, Book iv, chapter 11: “Each one, then, ought to describe in his own mind, in a threefold manner, the understanding of the divine letters,—that is, in order that all the more simple individuals may be edified, so to speak, by the very body of Scripture; for such we term that common and historical sense: while, if some have commenced to make considerable progress, and are able to see something more (than that), they may be edified by the very soul of Scripture. Those, again, who are perfect... may be edified by the spiritual law itself, which has a shadow of good things to come, as if by the Spirit” (Fathers 359).

plures eorum terras, exterminatis uel subiugatis indigenis, aut tributarias genti Anglorum, aut habita biles fecit. Cui merito poterat illud, quod benedicens filium patriarcha in personam Saulis dicebat, aptari: ‘Benjamin lupus rapax, mane comedet praedam et uespere diuidet spolia.’ (Bede, Bedae Opera 71)

(At this time, Ethelfrid, a most worthy king, and ambitious of glory, governed the kingdom of the Northumbrians, and ravaged the Britons more than all the great men of the English, insomuch that he might be compared to Saul, once king of the Israelites, excepting only this, that he was ignorant of the true religion. For he conquered more territories from the Britons, either making them tributary, or driving the inhabitants clean out, and planting English in their places, than any other king or tribune. To him might justly be applied the saying of the patriarch blessing his son in the person of Saul, "Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf; in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil.") (Bede, Ecclesiastical 58).

For an example of explicit historical typology in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, we can turn to Oddr Snorrasson’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, where “Óláfr Tryggvason is compared with John the Baptist... because he was the forerunner (*fyrirrennari*) of St. Óláfr Haraldsson, just as John was the forerunner of Christ” (Weber 126). In such typological thinking, similarities between biblical events and more recent ones were seen as more than merely incidental:

When the chroniclers drew analogies between their rulers and David, Alexander, Constantine, or Charlemagne, they were not merely ascribing a particular list of attributes to their subject. They were affirming a positive... relationship between what a David or Constantine had done and the deeds of a the ‘new David.’ The record of the past was seen as having a relation to the present that was more than prescriptive, if less than what we would consider as scientifically causal. In this way the past not only explains the present, it exercises an indirect influence over contemporary events... Typological thinking sets up a complex field of influences which ties past and present, present and future into one essentially prophetic mode of analyzing history. (Spiegel 92-93)

Early Christians in *Landnámabók* as a Type

Landnámabók does not make any explicit comparisons between the deeds of the settlers and biblical accounts, or between the settlement and other historical events that came before or after it. Nevertheless, the possibility of implicit typological thinking remains. For instance, the description of pre-settlement Iceland which appears in *Íslendingabók* (and *Landnámabók*), as a land inhabited by *papar* (Irish monks) and “skógr milli fjalls ok fjöru” (“wooded from the mountains to the sea”), could be a prefiguration of the official adoption of Christianity in Iceland later on, a “precedent that would be more fully, and somewhat differently, realized in a later age” (*Landnámabók* 36, Sayers 133).²² As Lindow puts it, “The first settlers, who were pagan by necessity, came to a land that was fertile with now vanished forests and had already been inhabited by men made holy in the religion the new society was ultimately to adopt” (“*Íslendingabók*” 456).²³

Like the *papar*, some of the *landnámsmenn* found in *Landnámabók* are Christians. In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, these same individuals are explicitly interpreted as a prefiguration of Iceland’s conversion to Christianity:

En fyrir því er her ritað af nokkurum land nams mönnum at þat syniz eigi vviðr kvæmiligt at geta i þessi frasögn nokkurra þeira manna. er her hafa truat a sannan guþ fyrr en kristnin var lög tekín a Islandi ok segja huerrar ættar þeir menn hafa uerit. sva sem þat se fyrir boðan eðr til rvðning þess híns fagnadar fulla vm skiptis sem eptir ferr at alt landz folkit sneriz fra fiandans villv til sannz drottins þionosto. sva at æ siþan hefir kristinn domr halldiz. ok friofaz en alldregi eyðz... (*Óláfs* 268)

(We here write of some of the original settlers, feeling that it will not be regarded as unbecoming to this story to speak of the Icelanders who believed in the true God before Christianity was established by law and to tell from what families they sprung. For as forerunners, they prepared the way of that most happy change that next oc-

²² If the *papar* are being used as types in the context of *Landnámabók*, it does not necessarily mean that they did not actually exist. I do not mean to make an argument either for or against the factuality of this or any other element of the narrative which might be interpreted typologically. As always, I am bracketing the question of historical facticity.

²³ Clunies Ross has the same idea in “Land-Taking and Myth Making,” p 174.

curred, when the land so completely turned away from the delusion of the Fiend to the service of the true God, that the Christian faith has since stood firm and steadfast, and never lost ground). (Saga of King Olaf 166)

Landnámabók is not as explicit as *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* about the typological significance of the early Christian settlers, but it does show a special interest in them. The very last chapter of the book consists of a list of them:

Svá segja vitrir menn, að nokkurir landnámsmenn hafi skírðir verit, þeir er byggt hafa Ísland, flestir þeir, er kómu vestan um haf. Er til þess nefndr Helgi magri ok Ørlygr enn gamli, Helgi bjóla, Jorundur kristni, Auðr djúpauðga, Ketill enn fíflski ok enn fleiri menn, er kómu vestan um haf, ok heldu þeir sumir vel kristni til dauðadags. En þat gekk óvíða í ættir, því at synir þeira sumra reistu hof ok blótuðu, en land var alheiðit nær hundraði vetra. (Landnámabók 396)

(According to well-informed people some of the settlers of Iceland were baptized, mostly those who came from the British Isles. These are specially mentioned: Helgi the Lean, Orlyg the Old, Helgi Bjolan, Jorund the Christian, Aud the Deep-minded, Ketil the Foolish, and a number of others who came from the west. Some of them kept up their faith until they died, but in most families this didn't last, for the sons of some built temples and made sacrifices, and Iceland was completely pagan for about 120 years.) (Book 147)

A direct relation between various chapters of *Landnámabók* and the section about early Icelandic Christians in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* has been postulated by Jón Jóhannesson (1941) and Ólafur Halldórsson (1982) due to the wide extent of verbal similarities between these texts (Jesch 518). *Landnámabók's* redaction of the material has a more neutral, less pious tone, with no mention of Satan or the trueness of the Christian faith. Even so, the highlighting of the faith of Christian settlers throughout the text and the choice to end the entire compilation with a focus on them does suggest that *Landnámabók* has preserved a sense of their typological significance. Unlike *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, *Landnámabók* is not particularly interested in the Christian settlers as religious or

morally edifying figures, but it is at least interested in how they fit in, typologically, with Iceland's wider history.

If it seems unlikely that so much of the material in *Landnámabók* would be anticipating the conversion of Iceland, an event beyond the scope of its time-frame, then it is important to keep in mind that *Landnámabók* was intended to be a chronicle dealing with the history of Iceland, and that the conversion was probably – to medieval scholars – the single most important event in Iceland's history, corresponding on a micro, local scale to the beginning of the sixth age of the world in the Augustinian scheme of salvation history.²⁴ Its importance to the history of Iceland is reflected by the fact that it is the focal point of *Íslendingabók*, a general history of Iceland. Further evidence that at least one compiler had the conversion in mind as he was working on *Landnámabók* is that *Hauksbók* has *Kristni Saga* following immediately after *Landnámabók*.

Other Possible Instances of Historical Typology in *Landnámabók*

It has been noted that the story of Hrafna-Flóki's voyage to Iceland in S5/H5 resembles the story of Noah's ark in Genesis chapter 8 (e.g. Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 17, Jakob Benediktsson's footnote in *Landnámabók* 36). The resemblances are not strong enough to conclude for certain that they were intended rather than coincidental, but they are nevertheless appreciable. The fact that both Noah and Flóki send birds off from their vessels is not terribly significant, since this was a common method of navigation for in ancient times. However, Noah's series of three doves, each which comes closer to finding land than the last, can be compared to Flóki's three ravens, one of which flies to the stern, one of which flies straight up and back down, and one of which flies forward and leads the sailors to land.

For the sake of seeing where it will lead us, let us assume for now that at some point in the development of *Landnámabók*, someone intended for the story of Hrafna-Flóki to evoke Noah's Ark. What would be the logic behind this evocation? In oral tradition, when an episode in a story resembles a well-known motif, it makes the story easier to re-

²⁴ Augustine's six ages of the world were part of his understanding of God's orderly plan for history, and were "founded on the notion that the unfolding of human history is foreshadowed in the work of the six days of the Creation followed by a seventh day of rest" (Markus 18). The sixth age began by "the preaching of the Gospel and the coming of Jesus Christ" (Markus 18). For more information on this topic see Markus (1970), pages 17-21, or the entry entitled "Historiography, Western European," in the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (1999), edited by Strayer.

member, and oral tradition might be the medium where the parallels between the two stories came to be. In the learned, literary context of *Landnámabók*, the compiler or audience might think about common or well-known theological interpretations of the story of Noah's Ark; for example, ideas about the symbolism of ravens and doves as found in the writings of Jerome: "But as soon as the foul bird of wickedness is driven away, the dove of the Holy Spirit comes to Noah as it came afterwards to Christ in the Jordan, and, carrying in its beak a branch betokening restoration and light, brings tidings of peace to the whole world" (Jerome 145). The "foul bird of wickedness" refers to the raven which Noah sends out before sending out a dove three times. Flóki does not send out any doves, only their symbolic opposite according to Jerome – ravens.²⁵

After reaching dry land and holding a ritual sacrifice, as Flóki did before leaving dry land, Noah becomes – in the words of Genesis 9 – a "husbandman" and plants a vineyard. Flóki, by contrast, neglects agriculture. Because he and his men spend their time fishing and do not plant any wheat, all of their livestock dies when winter comes. A final inversion between the two stories happens when Flóki leaves Iceland,²⁶ whereas Noah establishes himself and becomes the ancestor of the inhabitants of all lands through his three sons Shem, Japheth, and Ham, whose descendants medieval sources, including *Hauksbók*, believed had settled and populated the three continents – Europe, Asia, and Africa, respectively: "Synir Noa voro .iij. þeir skiftu ollum heímí með ser hvar kyn hvers þeira skilldi byggja" (*Hauksbók* 164). ("Noah had three sons. They divided the whole world between themselves, deciding where their kindred should settle"). In various ways, then, Hrafna-Flóki is an inverse Noah. While giving a nod to the story of how the world as a whole was settled, the story of Hrafna-Flóki anticipates the fact that the local world will be settled differently, by a number of prominent families rather than by one great ancestor.

²⁵ An Icelandic audience would also have associated ravens, of course, with the pagan religion, because of their links with Óðinn.

²⁶ Flóki returns to settle in Iceland later, in S210/H177, a strange move for someone who "had nothing good to say about the land" but small discrepancies like these are to be expected in a compilation of many different sources (*Book* 18).

In addition to the Bible, Greek myth is also evoked in *Landnámabók*. In one episode, a mermaid tells Grímr that his son shall settle and claim land where his horse sinks down under the weight of her load:

Þau Bergdís ok Þórir fóru um várit ór Grímsey ok... þá gekk Skálm [the horse] fyrir ok lagðisk aldri... um sumarið eftir snöru þau suður. Þá gekk enn Skálm fyrir, þar til er þau kómu af heiðum suður til Borgarfjarðar, þar sem sandmelar tveir rauðir stóðu fyrir; þar lagðist Skálm niðr undir klyfjum undir enum ytra melnum. Þar nam Þórir land fyrir sunnan Gnúpá til Kaldár fyrir neðan Knappadal milli fjalls ok fjöru. Hann bjó at Rauðamel enum ytra. Hann var höfðingi mikill. (*Landnámabók* 96-98)

(“In the spring Bergdis and Thorir travelled from Grims Isle... Skalm went ahead of them but never lay down... when they set out the following summer they headed south. Skalm was still in the lead, and coming down from the moor into Borgarfjord District, just as they reached two red-coloured sand-dunes, Skalm lay down under her load beside the westernmost dune. So Thorir took possession of the land...”) (*Book* 38)

This story resembles the myth of Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, who was directed by an oracle to settle wherever a cow stopped running (Hermann Pálsson 26). It also resembles the *Aeneid*, in which another supernatural water being – the river deity Tiber – prophesises to Aeneas that he shall found a city where he finds a prostrate white cow who has just given birth (Hermann Pálsson 27). Both of these these myths “still survive in early Icelandic translations,” namely *Stjórn* and *Breta sögur* in *Hauksbók* (Hermann Pálsson 26-27). The fact that the story of Grímr’s settlement is told in a way that brings to mind these two earlier events transforms his land-claim from a specific event into an already defined type, a part of the ordered unfolding of time.

The Pre-Determined Future in Medieval Icelandic Literature

The story of Grímr is one of a number of stories in *Landnámabók* about prophecies and auguries that foretell that someone will settle in Iceland or in a particular place in Iceland.

Since the future cannot be divined with certainty unless it is already determined, these stories raise the question of what role concepts about the future being somehow pre-determined play in the world of *Landnámabók*. Concepts such as these are expressed in *Landnámabók* by the nouns *skop*, (verb form *skapa*), *qrlög*, and *forlög* (verb form *leggja*).

The pre-Christian Icelanders had a sense of fate, and there is a lot of evidence for this in a variety of works, including sagas, eddic poetry, and skaldic poetry. One of a host of examples is in *Helga Kviða Hundingsbana in fyrri 2*:

Nótt varð í bæ
 nornir qvómo
 þær er qðlingi
 aldr af scópo
 þann báðo fylki
 frægstan verða
 oc buðlunga
 beztan þiccia (Edda 130)

(“Night fell on the place, the norns came/ those who were to shape fate for the prince;/ they said the prince should be most famous/ and that he’d be thought the best of warriors”) (Poetic 114). Ideas about fate are frequently expressed in connection with death, and certain words, such as *mjqtuðr*, *aldrlag* and *skapadægr*, refer specifically to one’s fated death.

The Christian philosophical tradition, of course, brought with it the concept of providence, with all of its nuances and different theoretical understandings. Augustine believed that God was present and active in all of history by virtue of his omnipresence: “quae praeterierunt et quae praeteribunt, nec abirent nec venirent nisi te operante et manente” (Augustine, Augustine’s 7.15.21). (“All spaces of times, both those which have passed and those which shall pass, neither go nor come, but through Thee, working and abiding”) (Augustine, Confessions 50). For him, providence worked through the order of nature (*providentia naturalis*) and through the acts of the wills of people (*providentia voluntaria*) (Markus 87). Thinkers of the middle ages, such as Maimonides and Thomas of Aquinas reinterpreted providence in various ways (Vannier 1269). The latter, for instance, defines

providentia in teleological terms and sees it primarily as a consequence of divine omniscience: “...necesse est quod ratio ordinis rerum in finem in mente divina praeexistat. Ratio autem ordinandorum in finem, proprie providentia est” (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica 153b). (“..it is necessary that the type of the order of things towards their end should pre-exist in the divine mind: and the type of things ordered towards an end is, properly speaking, providence”) (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica 129).

We have little direct access to pre-Christian Icelandic thought, since most of what we can guess about it comes from works which were written much later, and even the poems which presumably date from this time may have been altered since then. Therefore scholars who try to contrast “pagan fate” with “Christian providence” in Old Norse-Icelandic texts inevitably run into speculative territory. There are other reasons for their difficulties as well, namely the aforementioned complexity and diversity of the *providentia* tradition, and the fact that ideas about the future being pre-determined probably evolved slowly and gradually in Iceland, with lots of overlap between old and new paradigms. A couple of generalizations are nevertheless probably safe to make. The first is that God was the creator and master of providence, whereas Óðinn, Þórr and the other pagan gods had been subject to their fates, as we see in *Völuspá*’s description of *ragnarök* (Simek 79). The second is that while history was ultimately redemptive in the Christian view, this had not necessarily been so in the pre-Christian worldview.

The corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic literature itself does not appear to be overly concerned with making a distinction between Christian and non-Christian understandings of the pre-determined future. The word *forlög*, for example, is used in both Christian and pagan contexts. On the one hand it is put in the mouth of the devout Christian Þorgils of *Flóamanna saga*: “sagði hann [Þorgils], at þat stæði ekki fyrir ferð hans, þótt hún væri sjúk, –‘má vera at hér sé hennar forlög’” (“Flóamanna” 277). (“He said it would not stand in the way of his journey, even though she had fallen ill. ‘It may be that her destiny lies here’” (“Saga of the People of Floi” 289). It is also, on the other hand, put in the mouth of Ragnarr loðbrók in a stanza about the norns:

...forlögum fylgjum,
fár gengr of sköp norna (“Krákumál” 439)

“I follow my destiny/ Few are able to escape the decrees of the norms.”)

The Cleasby-Vigfusson dictionary hypothesises that *forlǫg* has Christian connotations whereas other words with similar meaning do not: “the word [forlag/forlǫg] is not very freq. in old writers, and chiefly occurs in Sagas such as Vd., Flóam. S... but rare in genuine heathen Sagas; the very word conveys some Christian notion; örlög and sköp are solely heathen...” (Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson 164). If the word *forlǫg* does have Christian origins, the fact that some medieval texts used it in non-Christian contexts may indicate that some medieval authors did not see much difference between their current understanding of the pre-determined future and what they thought pagans had believed. Perhaps they saw the concept of fate as part of what pagans had understood more or less correctly about the nature and workings of the universe. As we shall see in the next section, *Landnámabók* is among the texts which conflate fate and providence.

Divination and Destiny in *Landnámabók*

It was his *forlǫg* that Ingólfr, the first settler of Iceland, was trying to divine when he performed the ritual which convinced him to immigrate to Iceland: “Þenna vetr fekk Ingólfr at blóti miklu ok leitaði sér heilla um forlǫg sín” (*Landnámabók* 42). (“Ingólfr held a great sacrifice to see what the future had in store for him”) (*Book* 19). His foster-brother Hjörleifr, on the other hand, “vildi aldri blóta” (“would never sacrifice”) (*Landnámabók* 42). As he approaches Iceland in his ship, Ingólfr throws the high-seat pillars from his temple overboard, “til heilla” (“hoping for a good omen”) and says that he will settle where they come to land (*Landnámabók* 42, *Book* 20). Hjörleifr does not follow suit. In the end, Ingólfr successfully makes a large land-claim and establishes a stable settlement, but Hjörleifr is killed by his own slaves during a revolt. When Ingólfr finds out about this he says “Lítit lagðisk hér fyrir góðan dreng, er þrælur skyldu at bana verða, ok sé ek svá hverjum verða, ef eigi vill blóta” (*Landnámabók* 44). (“It’s a sad end for a warrior, to be killed by slaves; but in my experience this is what always happens to people who won’t hold sacrifices”) (*Book* 20). The audience of the story is left inclined to make the same conclusion (Clunies Ross, “Land” 170).

In reference to the “apparent Christian acceptance of the importance of certain kinds of auguries” that this episode and others seem to imply, Clunies Ross argues that there was a “distinction Christians felt able to make between auguries carried out with and without the influence of sorcery and demons” (“Land” 171). To support this argument, she shows that this distinction is made in Ælfric’s homily *De auguriis*. Very interestingly, the example that Ælfric gives of a non-demonic augury is “what the Icelanders called *landnám*”: a man allotting himself pastures when land is being divided (Clunies Ross, “Land” 171). This, Ælfric calls *wissung* (“direction”), rather than sorcery, which is inherently idolatrous (Clunies Ross, “Land” 171). Clunies Ross points out that Ingólfr’s ritual practices could fit into the former category because they “are never linked to specific pagan gods...” (“Land 171). Because she considers Ingólfr to be the “paradigmatic” settler, she concludes that the auguries and *landnám* rituals used by all of the *landnámsmenn* “could be seen as *wissung*, without the necessary involvement of devils or pagan gods...” (“Land” 171). However, it is difficult to reconcile this argument with the existence of other settlers who do the same as Ingólfr except that they do explicitly invoke specific pagan gods. For example, Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, a “blótmaðr mikill” (“great sacrificer”) and a devotee of Þórr throws his high-seat pillars overboard, and “þar [the high-seat pillars] var skorinn á Þórr. Hann mælti svá fyrir, at Þórr skyldi þar á land koma, sem hann vildi, at Þórólfr byggði; hét hann því at helga Þórr allt landnám sitt ok kenna við hann” (Landnámabók 124). (“They had an image of Thor carved on them. Thorolf declared that Thor would come ashore where he wanted Thorolf to make his home, and he promised to dedicate his entire land-claim to Thor and call it after him.”) (Book 45).

One version or another of *De auguriis* was definitely known by at least one of our compilers, Haukr Erlendsson, who includes a loosely translated Old Norse-Icelandic version of it in the section of *Hauksbók* now known as “Heimslýsing ok helgifræði.” Strangely, Clunies Ross does not address the *Hauksbók* adaptation of *De Auguriis* or even mention its existence. It is noteworthy that this version of the text leaves out the passage which explains the distinction between demonic and non-demonic sorcery (although this does not necessarily mean that the translator disagreed with it).

I do in fact agree with Clunies Ross' conclusion that all the auguries used by the settlers are not considered demonic in *Landnámabók*, but rather than use *De Auguriis* and the lack of explicit paganism in Ingólfr's story to argue this point, I find it more convincing to use the fact that the Christian settlers also use ritual techniques to discover their destinies, and ones which despite using Christian symbolism, are very similar to those that the pagans use. An example is Örlygr Hrappsson, an Irishman who goes to Iceland after asking for guidance from his mentor, the bishop Patrekr. Patrekr foresees the place where Örlygr is destined to settle and describes it to him. He also gives him church timber, a bell, a planerium, and consecrated earth from Ireland, all of which Örlygr is to use to build a church at this spot. This resembles how other settlers brought their high-seat pillars from Norway with which to build their new temples. In the *Hauksbók* version of the story, the church bell falls overboard and sinks to the bottom of the ocean. Miraculously, however, Örlygr and his company find it at the place where they go to shore. This is reminiscent of how Ingimundr enn gamli's Freyr statuette inexplicably appears at his future settlement site, after a *völva* foresees this site and tells him about it.

Another example of a Christian who uses auguries similar to those of the pagan settlers is Illugi Halldórsson, who is given the task of collecting timber for a church after his father is visited by the spirit of the saintly man Ásólf. “En er hann fór út apr... þá náði hann eigi fyrir stýrimönnum at taka land þar er hann vildi. Þá bar hann fyrir borð kirkjuviðinn allan ok það þar koma, sem Ásólf vildi...” (*Landnámabók* 65). “As he was coming back... he was not able by reason of the mates, to land where he wished. So he cast overboard the church timber, and bade it go where Asolf wished...” (Gudbrand Vigfusson and Powell 34). This incident resembles the high-seat pillar motif so obviously that Dag Strömbäck called it “den gamla hedniska seden i kristen stöpning” (“the ancient heathen ritual in Christian clothing”) (138).

Besides rituals that are intended to help one decide where to settle, there are also ones which are for claiming that land for one's self, as we have previously seen in the section called “*Landnám* Rituals in *Landnámabók*” (pages 38-39). These *landnám* rituals come in both Christian and pagan varieties, and once again, there are similarities between them. For example, the Christian settler Helgi enn magri “gerði eld mikinn við hvern vatsós ok

helgaði sér svá allt herað” (*Landnámabók* 252). (“...built fires at every estuary to hallow his land-claim”) (*Book* 96). Fire is also used by the pagan religious leader Jǫrundr goði, who walks around his land-claim carrying it in order to hallow the land for a temple (S347). The cross which Einarr Þorgeirsson erects to hallow and claim his land in S257/H221 is reminiscent of the birch pole which Hrosskell erects to claim his in S194/H161.

The fact that the auguries and *landnám* rituals of pagan settlers and Christian settlers alike follow the same basic paradigms suggests that in *Landnámabók*, the pagan settlers were guided by God just as the Christian ones were, despite the fact that they did not address their rituals to him and were ignorant of the fact that He was the one responding to these rituals. Just as the pagan religious devotion of Ingólfr is rewarded, the pagan auguries of Þórólfr and others are effective in showing what is destined to come about. It is therefore likely that the compilers considered all of the land-claiming and divination techniques used during the settlement to have ultimately revealed God’s providence.

The analogy between pagan and Christian divination techniques may seem strange at first, since in its adaption of *De Auguriis*, *Hauksbók* claims that “Eigi skolu cristnir menn spyrja galdra menn... Þo at þeir kunni nokot frá segja sua sem eftir gengr. Firir því at þeir hafa spaer fengit af diofuls villu. Djofull er allz til marguis oc flygr oc fer yfir alt. Oc verðr margr vis. oc segir sínum spekingum oc galdra mennum slict af sem hann reðr”, (“Christian people should not consult sorcerers... even though some of them can tell something about what is to come, because they have received their foresight by the devil’s will. The devil is clever and flies and travels everywhere, and becomes very knowledgeable. He tells his fortune-tellers and sorcerers some of what he learns”) (*Hauksbók* 167). However, many of the settlers were not “kristnir menn” and were – through no fault of their own – unaware that there was a more true religion with better ways of meeting their needs.

Pagans are the theme of another one of Ælfric’s sermons, which is called “Vm þat huaðan otru hofst” in *Hauksbók* but is known elsewhere as *De falsis deis* (*Hauksbók* 156). The surviving Old English versions are harsh in their evaluation of pre-Christian Norsemen: “Ac hi mithon tocnawan, gif hi cuðan þæt gescéad, þæt se is ána God þe hi ealle gesceop, us mannum to bryce, for his micclan godnýsse” (*Lombardi* 6). (“But they could have

known, if they had been able to make that distinction, that there is one God who created them all [all natural phenomena] to help us men, out of his great goodness” (Lombardi 6). *Hauksbók*, however, says the exact opposite: “En þeir mattu þat eigi uita ef þeir vildi at þui hyggja at sa er einn guð er þat alt skop monnum til hjalpar” (*Hauksbók* 158). (“But they could not know, if they wanted in this condition to understand that there is one God who created all that to help men...”) (Lombardi 7). The fact that the *Hauksbók* version of the sermon differs from the Old English version in a way that makes it more lenient towards the pagans of predominantly non-Christian times, excusing them somewhat for their ignorance, is consistent with how the pagan settlers in *Landnámabók* are not presented as being guilty of using sorcery. It would appear that God responded to their rituals rather than allowing demons to do so.

The idea that the settlement was the divine destiny of many of the settlers would have had political ramifications, which is perhaps the reason why indications of divinely or supernaturally sanctioned land-claims were so common in the foundation myths which were collected for *Landnámabók*. Generally, in continental medieval genealogical narratives, aristocratic families are presented as “a linear series of... figures at whose source the name of the father (*pater*) fuses with that of the land... The founding moment of a family, situated in a mythical time beyond memory, is synonymous with attachment to land...” (Bloch 79-80). The medieval Icelanders were well-aware that their lands had been uninhabited before the 800s, and that they could therefore not claim to have had ancestors living on them for very long. Deprived of the chance to say that their lands and their families had been established from “time beyond memory,” they could at least say that God had always planned for their ancestors to settle on their lands.

In religious narratives such as *Landnámabók*, socially-constructed worlds are frequently, in the words of Peter Berger, “lifted above... human, historical contingencies. They become inevitable, because they are taken for granted not only by men but by the gods” or by God (37). Because God is orchestrating the settlement, the world that *Landnámabók* constructs is one of ontological certainty, which locates Iceland in an ultimately meaningful cosmic order.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Landnámabók was intended to be history. This is clear from its overall tone and terse narrative economy, as well as from the fact that it appears in *Hauksbók*, which is an ambitious encyclopedic project containing a lot of historical and scholarly lore. We can assume that, like any work of history, *Landnámabók* approaches its material in a way that would seem relevant and interesting to its contemporaries. It should therefore come as no surprise that *Landnámabók* has an interest in explaining how Iceland's current state of affairs has come to be. As a work dealing with the period during which Iceland had its origins, it is in a special position to do so.

Because of its focus on Iceland's earliest period and because of all its etiological content, *Landnámabók* resembles an origin myth. More specifically, it resembles a small-scale cosmogonic myth, because it tells how the entire local world came to be. Anthropologists are generally agreed that cosmogonic myths are often a good place to discover the cosmological principles of the culture being studied (Bolle 101). Conceptualising *Landnámabók* in this way and comparing it to other cosmogonic myths reveals the principles which underlay the general worldview of the medieval Icelandic literary tradition, a worldview which *Landnámabók* would have reinforced.²⁷

A lot of these cosmological principles were common all over medieval Europe. For example, to a limited extent, *Landnámabók* respects the medieval European convention of presenting historical events in chronological order. This convention creates a sense of time as a sequence of "events" which can be placed in relation to one another in a linear sequence. *Landnámabók* does not present the individual land-claims in chronological order. This gives them quasi-mythical sense of timelessness and also moves the emphasis to their location in space. Space, in *Landnámabók*, is organised by the four cardinal directions. The structure of *Landnámabók*, like the space in Iceland itself, is divided into four quarters which are each named for one of the cardinal directions. In this way, Iceland is made into a

²⁷ It is important to keep in mind that the literary tradition was the undertaking of the aristocracy and that their worldview may have differed in some ways from the worldviews of other Icelanders.

microcosm of the universe as a whole, which medieval scholars tended to believe was divided into four quarters, each with its own properties (Tuan 96).

Within the space in Iceland, *Landnámabók* presents a great number of places. These places are primarily defined by the people who either died at, lived at, or passed through them. Sacred places were defined in a similar way, by being associated with people, people who had achieved holiness. The circumstances under which places received their names is a great interest to the compilers of *Landnámabók*, which reflects a common belief in the middle ages that the etymologies of words reveal something about the essence of the things being referred to by the words (Bloch 39).

Similarities between the way that territory is portrayed in the *Gylfaginning*, in *Sturlunga saga*, and in *Landnámabók*, highlight the fact that territory, in keeping with the anthropocentric understanding of place, was understood in Iceland as a collection of people, associated with the places within the territory, who rely on a primary power. With its distinction between primary and secondary settlers. *Landnámabók* explains how this kind of arrangement came to be in Iceland.

Another aspect of *Landnámabók*'s etiological orientation is that people who lived at the time of the compilation have their origins traced through genealogies leading back to the *landnám*. The fact that medieval Icelanders thought about origins in terms of genealogical lines was reinforced by the Bible's account of the first inhabitants of the world and can also be seen in how the *Gylfaginning* assigns genealogies to primordial mythical beings.

With these principles as the foundation of its world, *Landnámabók* also builds a particular social order. Again with an eye towards explaining the present state of affairs, it paints a portrait of the role of King Haraldr hárfagri in the settlement, and in this way explains and justifies the fact that due to historical circumstances, Iceland was kingless for a period. Here *Landnámabók* takes on a political dimension, since the idea that Haraldr's tyranny forces people to go elsewhere in order to maintain the status and privileges to which they were entitled by birth casts the Icelanders as the peers of Norwegian land-owners, which would have been useful during their negotiations with the Norwegian throne. Another aspect of *Landnámabók* which would have related to the contemporary political situa-

tion was the idea that there were originally leaders with very wide authority in Iceland, since this would have set a precedent for the power which some *stórgoðar* had achieved.

Landnámabók's wealth of genealogical lore emphasised the noble origins of the settlers. In addition to giving individual families a noble identity and all of the local social ramifications that would have accompanied it, this emphasis would also would have incorporated the leading Icelandic class as a whole into the wider European tradition of noble identity, linking them to the leading classes of other lands and providing them with a concept of themselves as legitimate power-holders.

Another widespread European tradition that *Landnámabók* shows some evidence of following is a typological perspective on history. This perspective gives a more visible role to God in the world that it builds. The fact that, for example, *Landnámabók* may understand early Icelandic Christians as a foreshadowing of Iceland's eventual conversion to Christianity by law would mean that God has a specific plan for Iceland which He sometimes partially reveals.

The fact that the settlement was divinely pre-ordained plays out in the fact that many of the settlers perform divinatory rituals which guide them to their place of settlement. Some of these settlers were explicitly invoking pagan powers with these rituals, but the compilation seems accepting of this and provides Christian analogues, suggesting that providence is guiding pagans and Christians alike to their destinies. By incorporating God into the settlement in this way, *Landnámabók* solidified the local world that it had built, making it part of the divine order.

In explaining the local world, *Landnámabók* could not help but to create and reinforce its own version of it, characterised by all of the ideas and social constructions I have discussed in this work, even if this was not its primary intent: "In one way, historical study is pure scholarship, needing no explanation. It is a natural expressions of human curiosity, and it is vital to the mental health of social groups as memory is to the individual. But, like memory, historiography is a transforming and creative activity, not merely a direct recording of past phenomena" (Whaley 175).

Unlike a lot of medieval chronicles, which deal with specific individuals such as Óláfr Tryggvason, for example, origin myths generally attempt to explain the world in grand, overarching terms. The *Gylfaginning*, for example, explains everything from the succession of seasons to the workings of fate. What gives *Landnámabók* a mythical quality is the fact that the world which it builds is quite comprehensive. It is solidly founded on quite discernible fundamental concepts. It gives meaning to a huge number of places and people in Iceland. It defines Icelanders to themselves, and it situates them in relation to the Norwegian king, to the rest of Europe, to their lands, and to God.

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