The Earliest Historiographers

Sæmundr inn fróði and Ari inn fróði

The founder of the school at Oddi, Sæmundr Sigfússon inn fróði (the Learned) (1056–1133), was the earliest historiographer of Iceland. He wrote a Latin Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings; it is now lost but was used by subsequent writers, such as the poet who eulogized Sæmundr’s grandson in Noregskonungatal (List of the Norwegian Kings).

But the man who was to become the father of Icelandic history, writing in his native tongue, was Ari Þorgílsson inn fróði (the Learned) (1067/8–1148). He was a priest-chieftain from the West but had been educated at Haukadalr by Teitr Íslæfsson, son of the first Icelandic bishop. In the twenties of the twelfth century Ari wrote Islendingabók or Libellus Islandorum (the Book of the Icelanders), for the bishops then in office, perhaps to serve as a historical introduction to their new Code of Church Law. But only a revised second edition has come down to us.

The first part of Ari’s revised book deals with the highlights of early Icelandic history: the settlement, four of the chief settlers, early legislature, the establishment of the Althing, and the division of the country into quarters. The settlement of Greenland (and Vinland) was another important event to be mentioned, but though a chapter on a calendar reform in the tenth century seems curious to us it was important to the churchmen of the time and it fits in completely with Ari’s great preoccupation with chronology, for in his Islendingabók he laid the foundation not only of Icelandic chronology (list of lawspeakers) but apparently of Norwegian as well (the omitted list of kings). Recent scholarship has tended to throw doubt on his chronology, but most medieval writers, notably Snorri, followed it and praised him highly for his sagacity and accuracy. The latter part of Ari’s book deals with church history: the introduction of Christianity, a list of foreign bishops, and
lives of the two native bishops: Ísléifr, father of Ari's teacher Teitr, and Gizurr, his personal friend.

Ari's book, as preserved, is a severely concise history of Iceland, but not dry as dust. Ari can tell a story, quote a ditty or a speech if the spirit moves him. The work is thoroughly documented. Ari was careful to mention his informants and tell where they had their knowledge from. In dating the finding of Greenland, he cites his uncle and claims that the latter had the information from a man who himself accompanied Eiríkr inn rauði (Eric the Red) out there. Listing of sources had, of course, been a commonplace among historians since Bede, but few seem to have taken the siting of truth as seriously as the "Father of Icelandic history." And with his implied and explicit motto, "nothing but the truth," he set a fashion among the writers of the twelfth century. The popular and entertaining fornaldar sögur (comparable to Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae) had to wait a century and a half before they were thought fit for the parchment.

Before we can appraise Ari's influence, we must cast a glance at his lost works. In the preface to the second edition of Islendingabók he says: "I wrote this one covering the same ground, with the exclusion of the genealogies (áttartala) and the lives of kings (konungaævi)."

Later writers often referred to Ari for details in the kings' sagas, especially in matters of chronology. And Snorri devoted most of his preface to Heimskringla to telling what Ari wrote and why he (Snorri) thought it so important. Snorri may have been referring to the konungaævi in the older Islendingabók, if we assume that this was a list of kings with their respective years of reign. The other possibility would be that Ari actually wrote a separate work on the kings. Scholars have not been able to decide the question. In either case Ari's critical acumen set a very important standard for all following writers of the kings' sagas.

Landnámabók (Book of the settlements)

What happened to Ari's omitted genealogies (áttartala)? Interest in genealogical lore (átvísí, mannfræði) was always intense in Iceland, and we know that in Ari's time it was not only assiduously studied, but also put to writing. The sagas always leaned heavily upon genealogy, but the chief repository of such lore relating to the period before 1100 was Landnámabók. It is a work enumerating about 400 noble settlers, with their claims of land, their farmsteads, often their origins in the
old country, and always their descendants in the new. Scholars who
think Ari wrote nothing but the two Islendingabøk agree that his
genealogies must have found their way into the Landnámabók. Others
attribute that unique work to Ari himself, following the testimony of
Haukr Erlendsson, Lawman, who wrote his version of Landnámabók
ca. 1330–34. Says Haukr:

"Now the settlements in Iceland have been covered according to the
writings of learned men, first Priest Ari the Learned son of Þorgils and
Kolskeggr the Wise. But this book I, Haukr Erlendsson, wrote after the
book written [ca. 1260–80] by Sturla Þórdarson, Lawman, a most
learned man, and after another book written [ca. 1225] by Styrmir
[ca. 1170–1245] the Learned; I took from each book whatever it had
more than the other, but to a great extent they contained the same
matter."

This clear statement of Haukr has never been in dispute except as
far as it concerns Ari, because Sturla does not mention him in his version.
But all preserved versions of Landnámabók agree that Kolskeggr inn
fróði (the Learned) "dictated" part of the work. That part shows
marks of special authorship, being sketchier than the rest. But since Ari
and Kolskeggr were contemporaries, it seems most likely that Ari was
the chief author and Kolskeggr his collaborator.

Why did Ari write Landnámabók? No one knows. It would clarify
matters if we knew that Ari had been traversing a good deal of Iceland,
say, in the retinue of Bishop Gizurr when he was organizing the parishes
of his young church (H. Hermannsson). For Landnámabók is far more
than a genealogical work; it is above all a historical topography of Ice­
land so astoundingly minute and correct that it is difficult to account for
such a work unless the author travelled widely in collecting the materials
for it. That he also collected information at the Althing is likely enough.
Kolskeggr's dictation covered the remote Eastern Quarter.

But Landnámabók is even more than genealogy and historical topog­
raphy. It also abounds in excellent thumbnail sketches of character and
dramatic incidents. It seems obvious that many of the family sagas are
here, in extract or in a nutshell.

William the Conqueror had his Doomsday Book compiled for the
advanced political purpose of pressing the last penny in taxation from
his subjects. But even if Landnámabók was connected indirectly with
the organization of the early Church, it is impossible to discover behind
it any motives except great family pride and avid interest in knowledge.
It is, indeed, a unique work and a fitting monument for the nation that
produced it.
At this point we can better appraise Ari's influence. With the ecclesiastical history in *Islendingabók* he inspired the saner bishops' sagas after 1200; with his list of kings in the lost *Islendingabók*, he set the pattern for the kings' sagas; and with his *Landnámabók* he set the stage and provided matter for many of the family sagas (*Islendinga sögur*) of the thirteenth century.

It remains to sketch the subsequent history of *Landnámabók*. Styrmir wrote his version after 1222, probably stimulated by Snorri; his purpose was, partly, to meet the slander of foreigners (Norwegians) regarding the origin of Icelanders.

After the middle of the thirteenth century (1260–80?) Sturla Þórðarson wrote an enlarged and recast version of the book to serve as an introduction to his history of Iceland. Ari's and Styrmir's books had started at the border between the Eastern and the Southern Quarters, proceeding clockwise around the island. Sturla started by telling about the discovery of Iceland and the first settlement of Ingólfr Arnarson—in the middle of the Southern Quarter. He also composed *Kristni saga*, a history of the conversion, to bridge the gap between *Landnámabók* and the historical sagas of the *Sturlunga* collection. Though Haukr Erlendsson, as already stated, used *Styrmisbók* as well as *Sturlubók*, he followed the arrangement of the latter and kept *Kristni saga* as a continuation. Since both Ari's original and *Styrmisbók* are lost, we would be at a loss to know the original arrangement of *Landnámabók* but for the fact that it is preserved in the so-called *Melabók* (ca. 1300), although it is now only a fragment.