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Narrating History in Iceland: The Works of Ari Þorgilsson

Introduction

Ari Þorgilsson (c. 1067–1148) is among a handful of well-known Icelandic mediaeval historians. He is known especially for his brief treatise, *The Book of the Icelanders* (ON. *Íslendingabók*; hereafter referred to as *BOI*), an overview of the history of Iceland from around 870 to 1120 and a very important source for the early history of both Iceland and Norway. As *BOI* has often been used as a repository for important historical facts, the context in which it was composed is of some consequence.

One of the earliest prose compositions in Iceland, the 12th century *First Grammatical Treatise*, includes a description of works written in Icelandic, which had only recently been established as a Latin alphabet-based literary language. The works listed are: "*bæði lǫg ok áttvísi eða þýðingar helgar, eða svá þau in spakligu frœði, er Ari Þórgilsson hefir á bœkr sett af skynsamligu viti*" ("both laws and genealogies, or religious interpretations as well as the wise lore which Ari Þorgilsson has composed with a reasoned conception;" *First Grammatical Treatise*, p. 208). As indicated in this statement, in the early 12th century Ari Þorgilsson was a well-known author of several works. In more recent times, only one work has been generally attributed to Ari Þorgilsson, the aforementioned *BOI.* However, as evidenced by the *First Grammatical Treatise*, the book was only a part a larger oeuvre, recognized by Ari's contemporaries as such.

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Abstract: In this article, the author discusses the historical writings of Ari Þorgilsson, known as the author of The Book of the Icelanders (ON. *Íslendingabók*). It is demonstrated that Ari wrote not only on the history of Iceland, but also on the history of the world, on the history of Norway, and the history of the Breiðafjörðr region, and the status and purpose of The Book of Icelanders must necessarily be subject to re-evaluation. It was not a solitary work but a part of a larger corpus. Once this has been established, the contents of the Book of Icelanders can and should be re-examined.

Keywords: Medieval historiography, world view, *historia gentium*, barbarian history, his-tory of Iceland.

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The purpose of this article is to examine Ari Þorgilsson's historical writings in a broad context, focusing not only on *BOI* but also engaging with Ari's lesser-known works, including those which cannot be attributed to him with absolute certainty. Only by examining the entirety of Ari's presumed body of works, it is possible to appraise his work as a historian in the broadest possible context.

After having established *BOI* as an important source for the earliest history of Iceland, I will move on to writings on world history, which were probably created by Ari but previously have received scant attention from scholars. From there I will discuss Ari's importance as a source for the history of the earliest Norwegian kings and his influence on subsequent Norwegian historical writings. Finally, I will discuss Ari's possible contribution to the historiography of his home region of Breiðafjörðr, another neglected area of study. By examining all these writings together, it will be possible to make a general assessment of Ari Þorgilsson's oeuvre as a historian, and to compare him to other narrators of barbarian history (for the term, see Goffart 1988).

Ari Þorgilsson offers an important testimony not only to the earliest history of Iceland, but also to the birth of Icelandic mediaeval historiography. His works, whether they are preserved in their entirety or only in fragments, are important remnants of the early 12th century and offer a glimpse of the ideas, knowledge and thought-processes of a historian working in that period. This is one of the most important rationales for a further analysis.

The Book of Icelanders: Narrating Icelandic History

In the early 12th century Ari Þorgilsson composed *BOI*. In his prologue, Ari makes the following statement concerning the origin of the work:

> Íslendingabók gørða ek fyrst byskupum órum Þorláki ok Katli, ok sýndak bæði þeim ok Sæmundi presti. En með því at þeim líkaði svá at hafa eða þar viðr auka, þá skrifaða ek þessa of et sama far, fyr útan áttartǫlu ok konunga ævi, ok jókk því es mér varð síðan kunnara ok nú es gerr sagt á þessi en á þeiri (*Íslenzk fornrit* I, p. 3).
>
> (I made The Book of the Icelanders for our bishops, Þorlákr and Ketill, and I showed it both to them and to Sæmundr the priest. But according to what they wanted to keep in the book or add to it, I wrote this one in

> a similar manner, except for the genealogy and the lives of the kings, and added what I learned later and it is now related more explicitly in this version than the older one).[1]

From this evidence, it is apparent that Ari was encouraged in his work by the two bishops in Iceland at the time, Þorlákr Runólfsson of the Skálholt diocese and Ketill Þorsteinsson of the Hólar diocese, and also a third man who can be identified as the priest Sæmundr Sigfússon. The date of composition of the lost original version must have been sometime between 1122, when Ketill became bishop of Hólar, and 1133, when both Þorlákr and Sæmundr died. However, Ari might not have finished his final revision of the text until about or after 1134, for Guðmundr Þorgeirsson is the last lawspeaker mentioned and his term is listed as the twelve years from 1123 to 1134 (Íslenzk fornrit I, p. 23).[2] There is, therefore, a relatively brief period in time in which this work might have been composed.

BOI is the earliest continuous narrative history of Iceland and one of the earliest documentary sources for Icelandic history. Only the Adam of Bremen's *History of the Bishops of Hamburg* (Lat. *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*), composed in the 1070s, can be considered an earlier narrative source for the history of Iceland. However, it contains much less detail about Icelandic events and only occasionally deals with the history of Iceland. *BOI* is the only original source for most of its information. It has been described as a "foundation document", in which "every detail must count for a great deal" (Lindow 1997, p. 460). Its importance for the history of Iceland is, therefore, beyond doubt. Any study of Icelandic and Norwegian history in the 9th, 10th, or 11th century involves, to a greater or lesser degree, an evaluation of the significance of *BOI* as a historical source. Therefore, the context and circumstance of composition is worthy of further examination.

BOI's historical account begins with the discovery and settlement of Iceland in 870. This can be categorized as institutional history since its main themes are the creation and evolution of the Icelandic Parliament,

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[1] All translations in the article are made by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

[2] The editor of the standard edition of *BOI*, Jakob Benediktsson, considers the reference to Guðmundr a later insertion (*Íslenzk fornrit* I, pp. xvii–xviii), but the main argument is that it "disrupts the natural flow of the narrative" (Ic. "*rýfur eðlilegt samhengi frásagnarinnar*") and the present author confesses to having no idea what this means. Indeed, if the information about Guðmundr is deemed to be an insertion, it then should be explained why a scribe (or Ari himself) would insert information about Guðmundr but omit the lawspeakers who succeeded him. See also, Einar Arnórsson 1942, p. 30.

the Christianization of Iceland, the establishment of the Icelandic Church, and the relationship between Iceland and Norway (see *Íslenzk fornrit* I, pp. 3–28, for the entire text). These themes reflect the interests of Ari Þorgilsson, who was simultaneously a cleric and a chieftain.

In *BOI,* there are several factual statements about events in Icelandic history which cannot be supported by any older texts. The first is the name of the first settler, Ingólfr, and the date of the original settlement in 869 or 870.[3] Ari importantly notes that, while Norwegians had first settled Iceland, it had already been discovered by Irish hermits who had spent some time there. Ari also traces the ancestral line of four settlers, one from each quarter, who were the ancestors of later Icelandic bishops. The settlement of Iceland is thus connected to the origin of the four quarters, which later formed the judicial units of the national parliament.

The next important event in *BOI* is the actual formation of this national parliament and the invention of the Icelandic law code, events dated to 930. Ari lists all the law-speakers of Iceland until his own time, using individual law-speaker's terms to form a major chronological framework for his historical narrative. The law-speaker, whose function it was to remember the laws and to recite them at parliament, was the only lay official in a society without any executive power. Ari also discusses the creation of the quarterly assemblies, along with their courts (ON. *fjórðungaþing*). This took place at the parliamentary meeting which he dates to the term of the law-speaker Þórarinn Ragabróðir (950–969). The last parliamentary development which Ari mentions is the foundation of the Fifth Court in which verdicts could be appealed, dating it to the term of the law-speaker Skapti Þóroddsson (1004–1030). Ari is our oldest and most reliable source for the history of the evolution of the Icelandic parliament and its institutions. This does not mean that his account is beyond criticism, only that it cannot be contested on the basis of other source material.

Finally, the Christianization of Iceland is the only event in *BOI* which can be compared against other sources, mainly that of Adam of Bremen. They share some similarities; both sources agree that Ísleifr Gizurarson was the first Icelander ordained as bishop and both mention many of the

[3] According to the chronological system used by Ari, the year began on 1 September. Therefore, the main events used to establish a system of dating in *BOI* actually occurred in 869, rather than 870 (the death of King Eadmund), and 999 rather than 1000 (the death of King Óláfr Tryggvason), according to the modern reckoning of time. See Ólafía Einarsdóttir 1964, pp. 107–26.

missionary bishops in Iceland. There are also discrepancies. Ari Þorgilsson dates Iceland's conversion to a parliamentary act of 999 and emphasizes the influence of King Óláfr Tryggvason of Norway. Adam of Bremen makes no mention of this event; rather, the Icelanders became Christians when the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen had sent Ísleifr to them, although they had always been Christian in spirit. Whereas Adam is often negative towards the Norwegian kings due to their opposition to the See of Hamburg-Bremen, Ari in turn makes no mention of the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. He makes no reference to the Archbishop's role in Ísleifr's ordination as the first Icelandic bishop, which is explicitly stated in the *History of the Bishops of Hamburg* (*Adam* III. 77, *Adam* IV. 36; see *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 430, 486; cf. Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*). Ari claims that Ísleifr was ordained during the time of Pope Leo IX (or Leo VII, according to Ari).[4] While he does not exactly state that Ísleifr was ordained by the Pope, the mention of his name and the omission of the Archbishop's might easily lead the reader to such a conclusion. Of course, we cannot determine how deliberate this omission is on Ari's part; nevertheless, it is fairly glaring and might also be evidence of a bias. If Adam is partisan to the archbishops and makes little of the Norwegian kings' role in Christianization, Ari, in turn emphasizes the role of Norwegian kings and, as it happens, makes no mention of the archbishops.

It can, therefore, be argued that the difference between Adam and Ari's emphasis concerning the Christianization of Iceland stems partly from their different attitudes towards the kings of Norway and the See of Hamburg-Bremen, respectively. One possible cause for this might be the changed circumstances of Iceland's position within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. When *BOI* was composed, Iceland was no longer subject to the See of Hamburg-Bremen, as it had been subject to the Archbishopric of Lund in Denmark since 1104. These later developments would have affected Ari Þorgilsson's perspective on Christianization. However, he does not mention the archbishops of Lund or any other ecclesiastical dignitaries, except the popes.

The introduction of the tithe at the Icelandic Parliament in 1096 or 1097 marks the culmination of *BOI*, and Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson's success in gathering support for the tithe was regarded by Ari as "a great

[4] Leo IX actually died in 1054, two years before the date Ari assigns to the accession of Ísleifr.

sign" (ON. *miklar jartegnir*). The novelty of this change, and its resulting effects on Icelandic society, did in fact merit the pre-eminence that Ari gave it in *BOI* (see Sverrir Jakobsson 2009, 2013; cf. Jón Jóhannesson 1974, 148–9). Ari also had access to eyewitness accounts of what happened at the parliament at this time. As he explains in *BOI*, he was a student and foster-son of Teitr Ísleifsson, the brother of Gizurr (on Gizurr and other early Icelandic bishops, see Ármann Jakobsson 2000; Ármann Jakobsson 2007). At this parliament, Gizurr Ísleifsson seems to have had two influential supporters. The first was the law-speaker Markús Skeggjason, who was an impassioned supporter of this reform, and the other was the priest Sæmundr Sigfússon who, like Gizurr, had studied abroad. According to Ari, it was Sæmundr who introduced the legislation about the tithe at the parliament, although he did not hold a formal office comparable to that of bishop or law-speaker.

Gizurr Ísleifsson and Sæmundr Sigfússon both belonged to a very small group of Icelanders who had studied abroad. Gizurr had studied in Saxony and Sæmundr in either France or in the Franconia region of The Holy Roman Empire, but it must be surmised that both had received a similar education, one common to the clerical elite of Western Europe. This education included Latin grammar and the works read by students in Europe, the classical curriculum. Through their foreign education, Gizurr and Sæmundr became innovators within a traditional society. The law-speaker Markús Skeggjason was also a man with foreign connections; he had presumably been in the service of foreign kings, and certainly composed skaldic poetry about King Eiríkr of Denmark (r. 1095–1103) and King Ingi of Sweden. This group of influential Icelanders had managed to persuade the rest of the farmers at the parliament to agree with their novel idea, thus creating a new organization: a territorial and hierarchical Icelandic Church.

Ari Þorgilsson was not only an enthusiastic supporter of the tithe, but also of the education in Latin language that Gizurr and Sæmundr had brought into Iceland. *BOI* is one of the earliest texts composed in Iceland that utilized the Latin alphabet, which was still a considerable novelty at that time. Completely bypassing the runic alphabet, Icelanders adopted Latin script, which was transformed to compensate for the complex Old Norse vocal system presented in *The First Grammatical Treatise*, written sometime in the first half of the 12th century (see *The First Grammatical Treatise*). Along with Ari, Sæmundr Sigfússon is an example of an Icelandic cleric who used this medium in historical and scientific texts, in contrast to Gizurr Ísleifsson, who was a charismatic

teacher of an earlier tradition, teaching the Christian faith to the general population both by word (i.e. preaching) and by example (i.e. his own moral conduct) (Lat. *verbo et exemplo*; for the transition between different methods of teaching in Medieval Europe, see Jaeger 1994).

This literary adaptation to a vernacular language had social and political repercussions. An early example of textualization was the recording of the law code into written form, as supervised by the chieftain Hafliði Másson, the son-in-law of Teitr Ísleifsson. This enterprise is praised in *BOI*, understandably, as Ari Þorgilsson and Hafliði Másson were connected through the close-knit family network of Gizurr Ísleifsson. The codification of the law should have rendered the office of the law-speaker obsolete: 13th century copies of the written law stipulate that if the law texts were not unanimous, the bishop's text should be regarded as the authoritative source (see *Grágás*, p. 463). Yet parliament continued to elect law-speakers, who then had to adapt to a changed role (see Gísli Sigurðsson 1994). In the late 12th and 13th centuries, highly literate men would have held this office, such as Gizurr Hallsson, Styrmir Kárason, Snorri Sturluson, Sturla Þórðarson and Ólafr Þórðarson hvítaskáld, who are all affiliated with major literary works.

This secular office was transferred into a clerical one; this seems like a shift in the balance of power from laymen to the Church, but it would not have appeared so to the leading members of early 12th century Icelandic society. On the contrary, it was not unusual for the same person to wield both secular and ecclesiastical authority. For instance, both Sæmundr Sigfússon and Ari Þorgilsson held both the role of priest and chieftain (ON. *goði*; see Einar Arnórsson 1942; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1948; Halldór Hermannsson 1932). In 1143, almost half of the chieftains in Iceland had also been consecrated as priests, according to a list very likely composed by Ari Þorgilsson himself, found in the manuscript GKS 1812, 4to (*Diplomatarium Islandicum* I, pp. 185–86; see Orri Vésteinsson 2000, pp. 182–94). This list contains the names of forty noble (ON. *kynbornir*) priests, ten from each quarter, and although not all were chieftains, a substantial portion of them seem to have been so. It is interesting to note that Ari himself was not on the list, but he is quoted as a source in its final sentence, which might be an indication that he was known as the author of the original copy.

A clerical education seems to have reinforced a chieftain's leadership of men in disputes at parliament. However, due to the lack of any executive power in Iceland, the chieftains also had to enforce the verdicts of the secular courts, which could only be done with the use of force. Evidently

the role of priest was not always radically different from the role of secular chieftain, although this was hardly in line with the general standpoint propounded by the Roman Catholic Church in this period. However, such attitudes are still evident in the early 13th century kings' sagas contained in *Morkinskinna*, where the Norwegian king claims that Gizurr Ísleifsson had the aptitude to be a bishop or a Viking (see *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIII, p. 289). Although coming from a later source, this anecdote might reflect 11th century attitudes concerning clerical statesmen such as Gizurr, as it reflects the more robust aspects of Christianity that can be associated with the earliest missions in Scandinavia and Northern Europe, in general. The clerical reformers of the late 11th and early 12th centuries would have been horrified, but their message of clerical pacifism had yet to gain ground in distant Iceland.

BOI is replete with evidence of clerical education. It bears witness to its author's "solid knowledge of foreign historiography" (Sverrir Tómasson 2006b, p. 79). Moreover, this knowledge is demonstrated even further by looking at a different type of text, which in fact may also have been composed by Ari Þorgilsson. Thus, a relatively little known text which has been connected to Ari must be included in our analysis.

The Ages of the World: Narrating World History

The 14th century manuscript AM 194, 8vo contains a brief synopsis of world history, known as the *Ages of the World* (ON. *Heimsaldrar*), evidently of very ancient provenance (see *Alfræði íslenzk* I, pp. 45–54). It is a chronological overview of the first five ages of man, as they are described briefly at the end of the text:

> Frá upphafi heims til burðar Krists er tallit at verið hafi v þúsundir vetra ok cc ok viii ok xx vetr. Í þeim fimm heimsǫldrum er hinn fyrsti frá upphafi heims til Nóa flóðs. Annar heims aldr frá flóði til Abrahams. Hinn þriði heims aldr frá Abraham til Davids. Hinn fjórði heims aldr frá David til herleiðingar hinnar miklo. Hinn fimmti heims aldr er frá herleiðingunni til burðar Krists. Hinn sétti heims aldr er frá burð várs herra Iesu Christi til dómsdags (*Alfræði íslenzk* I, pp. 53–54)
>
> (From the beginning of the world to the birth of Christ it is reckoned that there are 5228 winters. Of those Five Ages of the World, the First is from the beginning of the world to the flood of Noah. The Second Age of the World is from the flood to Abraham. The Third Age of the World is from

> Abraham to David. The Fourth Age of the World is from David to the Babylonian captivity. The Fifth Age of the World is from the captivity to the birth of Christ. The sixth age of the world is from the birth of our lord Jesus Christ to doomsday).

The philologist Stefán Karlsson has argued that the text's original author was probably Ari Þorgilsson (see Stefán Karlsson 1969). This can be deduced both from similarities in this text's vocabulary to that of *BOI's* and its list of priests, as well from the chronological system used both by *Heimsaldrar* and *BOI* but by few other texts. Although this conclusion has not been contested, the impact of this discovery on our perception of Ari as a historiographer has so far been very slight. It does, however, alter our conclusions about the context in which *BOI* was composed. It seems to have been a part of a larger historiography projected by Ari Þorgilsson. This broadened context merits a historiographical comparison of the two texts.

The *Ages of the World* is a brief text in which world history is divided into six eras based upon Judeo-Christian history, in line with a tradition popularized in the Latin West by S. Augustine and his disciple Orosius. The main outline is based upon episodes from the Old Testament interspersed with the occasional episodes related to other historical cultures. The information in these episodes generally is comparable to texts such as *Chronica Minora* by Isidore of Seville (c. 570–636) and *De temporum ratione* by the Venerable Bede (673–735). Although exact textual parallels are neither found nor expected, the information provided corresponds. The use of Bede's work is not surprising, as it has been demonstrated that Ari based the chronology in *BOI* on Bede's work (see Ólafía Einarsdóttir 1964, pp. 93–106). The information found in this text is thus of an ancient provenance and not shaped by the ideological currents of early 12th century Europe.

In the *Ages of the World* some interesting insights can be gained concerning 12th century Icelandic knowledge of ancient history. In the Second Age of the World there are references to Zoroaster, here described as King of the Bactrians as well as a sage, and also to the rise of the Kingdom of the Scythians or "the Kingdom of Sweden" (ON. *Svíþjóðar ríki*), as it is referred to in this text. The Third Age mentions the Trojan War and the Fourth Age references to the foundation of Rome. Apart from such brief interpolations, the narrative is basically a very condensed version of the Old Testament. The description of the Fifth Age is different from the first four, it is devoted to the great historical empires: the Persians, Alexander the Great, the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman

Empire. The narrative ends with the Pax Romana begun by Augustus and with the birth of Jesus Christ. Nothing is written about the history of the world during the Sixth Age. Emphasis is placed on establishing the chronology of world history, in the manner of the chronicles of Bede and other similar Christian historians.

In and of itself, there is nothing remarkable about the *Ages of the World*, a laconic text replete with material that can also be found in most other world histories of Medieval European cultures. A few decades later during the second half of the 12th century, a similar but more elaborate text was composed in Iceland, usually called *World History* (ON. *Veraldar saga*). In the context of Ari Þorgilsson's other works, however, it is interesting to compare works such as the *Ages of the World* with *BOI*. In *BOI*, Ari attempts to place Iceland and its history within a larger context, of which the *Ages of the World* forms the outline. This was a Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman history hybrid context which formed a master narrative against which all other historical narratives would be measured. By writing *BOI*, Ari Þorgilsson was putting his people onto the stage of world history, but he also narrated that historical outline in *The Ages of the World*. Ari was probably not the only early 12th century author to write such a work; it has been argued that references to a lost work by Sæmundr the Priest show that it must also have come from such a work (see Sverrir Tómasson 2006a).

It was very natural that a writer such as Ari would want to write an outline of world history in the early 12th century. In one sense, it falls within the general international focus of Ari's writing, his use of the Latin alphabet, and his decision to construct *BOI* in the style of a medieval chronicle. The connection is even more clear if we take into account Ari's interest in using a chronology that is intimately connected with speculation on the age of the world in general. The purpose was to set "a divine and a natural standard for the long periods in human history" (Borst 1993, p. 39). In addition, events of world history could easily be connected to one's own personal history, as demonstrated in the genealogy in *BOI*, which connects "Yngvi, king of the Turks" (ON. *Yngvi Tyrkjakonungr*) to Ari himself. Since the mention of King Yngvi in *BOI* is brief, it is far from clear who these Turks are, much less if they can be equated with the Seljuk Turks who had established sultanates in Asia Minor from 1071 onward. Nevertheless, in works of history from the early 13th century, the ancestors of the Scandinavian nobility were depicted as originating from Asia Minor. Their story takes the shape of a euhemeristic tale of the origin of the kings of Norway, where they appear

as descendants of Óðinn who had emigrated to the North from Byzantium or the Near East. In the prologue to Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, these emigrants from Asia Minor are said to be descendants of the Trojans (for a more thorough discussion of this *topos*, see Sverrir Jakobsson 2007).

By focusing on *BOI* at the cost of the *Ages of the World* we get misleading ideas about the identity of a 12th century Icelandic historian like Ari Þorgilsson. Ari was by no means a proto-nationalist interested only in Icelandic history. On the contrary, it was important to him both to fit the history of Iceland into the framework of world history and to establish Iceland within the Christian world, with its own history of conversion, much as Bede had done in England, as well as providing his own version of that framework of world history. This vision of Ari can be glimpsed in *BOI,* but it really comes to the fore in the *Ages of the World*, an important text in its own right. Because of this text, and later texts of similar kind, Zoroaster, Alexander the Great and the Roman emperors were now known to an Icelandic audience; works about Alexander and the Romans (*Alexanders saga* and *Rómverja saga*) indeed became a part of the Icelandic historical narratives as much as the stories about the first Icelandic settlers and the Norwegian kings.

An examination of the *Ages of the World* thus reinforces Ari Þorgilsson's view of Iceland as part of the grander scheme of history, an Augustinian view of the six ages of world history, which can also be glimpsed in *BOI*. Although it is not surprising to see a mediaeval cleric holding this view, its appearance in the works that can be attributed to Ari demonstrates that Icelandic historiography was from the outset part of the universal, Roman-Catholic world view in which this structure of world history was embedded. Ari Þorgilsson belonged to the first generation of literate Icelanders, who not only introduced a new medium of historiography, but also a new world view to go along with it.

The First of his Kin: Narrating Norwegian History

In his prologue to *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson states his great debt to Ari Þorgilsson as an authority on the Norwegian kings:

> Ari prestr inn fróði Þorgilsson, Gellissonar, ritaði fyrstr manna hér á landi at norrœnu máli frœði, bæði forna ok nýja. […] Hann ritaði, sem hann sjálfr segir, ævi Noregskonunga eptir sǫgu Odds Kolssonar, Hallssonar af

> Síðu, en Oddr nam at Þorgeiri afráðskolli, þeim manni, er vitr var ok svá gamall, at hann bjó þá í Niðarnesi, er Hákon jarl inn ríki var drepinn (*Íslenzk fornrit* 26, pp. 5–6)
>
> (Ari Priest the Learned son of Þorgils, son of Gellir, was the first in this country to compose works of learning in the Norse tongue, both ancient and new lore […] He wrote, according to his own claim, about the lives of the Norwegian kings recited by Oddr son of Kollr, son of Hallr af Síðu, but Oddr had learned from Þorgeir afráðskollr, who was both a wise man and so old, that he lived in Niðarnes when Earl Hákon the Powerful was slain.)

In modern scholarship, this tale has been regarded as a topos, intended to induce trust in Snorri's own text (see Sverrir Tómasson 1975). Yet, there is a kernel of truth in Snorri's statement, as Ari Þorgilsson can be credited as the source for the framework for the royal Norwegian historiography which was used in most of the later kings' sagas, including *Heimskringla*. Ari is often quoted as an authority for the chronology of the earliest Norwegian kings in younger sagas (see Einar Arnórsson 1942, pp. 60–61; Hermann Pálsson 1970, pp. 125–37). Some of this information must stem from a source that has now been lost, as it is not found in *BOI*. However, even if we limit our inquiry to the information found in *BOI*, it turns out that it is the earliest known source for much of the "facts" about the earliest Norwegian kings wich are ubiquitous in later narrative sources, including their genealogies, that are often very different from the material to be found in earlier works. Ari's role as a narrator of Norwegian history, therefore, is a very important one.

Ari begins his narrative by stating that Iceland was settled in 869 or 870, in the time of King Haraldr hárfagri (Harald Finehair) who was "the first of his kin to be the sole ruler of the whole of Norway" (ON. *es fyrstr varð þess kyns einn konungr at ǫllum Norvegi*). Concerning this Haraldr, who is not mentioned in any earlier written source, Ari offers the following information: He is said to have been the son of Hálfdan svarti (Halfdan the Black) and ultimately descended from a line of the kings of Sweden that went back to Yngvi, king of the Turks. As mentioned before, Ari himself could also trace his ancestry to this lineage. According to *BOI*, Haraldr was a king for 70 years and died at the age of 80; he was 16 years old when the settler Ingólfr first journeyed to Iceland (for further discussion on the historicity of Haraldr, see Sverrir Jakobsson 2002). To prevent the depopulation of Norway during this settlement period, Haraldr levied a tax on emigrants from Norway, which during Ari's lifetime came to be known as the landing fee (ON. *landaurar*). (*Íslenzk fornrit* I, pp. 3–6, 9). Apart from this detail, all the

other information Ari provides concerning Haraldr is either genealogical or chronological.

Contemporary sources applied the epithet *hárfagri* to the 11th century King Haraldr who invaded England in 1066, called *harðráði* in later Old Norse sources (see Jesch 1996).[5] In Ari's narrative the epithet *hárfagri* was no longer associated with that well-known king, but was used for an ancient and exceptionally long-lived ruler from the 9th century who was associated with the settlement of Iceland. The only source other than Ari which references an early Norwegian king called Haraldr is also a late source. William of Malmesbury (c. 1090–1143) mentions "a certain Harold, king of the Norwegians" (Lat. Haroldus quidam, rex Noricorum) who had sent a golden ship with a purple sail to King Æthelstan of England (r. 924–939). This Harold, however, is not referred to as Haraldr hárfagri, as William, following the custom of some other English historians, reserved the former epithet for the 11th century Haraldr (*Willelmi Malmesbiriensis monachi De gestis regum Anglorum*, pp. 149, 281, 318–19).

Ari's statement, that Haraldr hárfagri was the first of his kin to rule Norway, is no passing remark within the text, as Ari then proceeds to trace the genealogies of three Norwegian kings back to Haraldr. In every instance Ari's genealogy diverges from that of Adam of Bremen's work on the Archbishops of Hamburg. In fact, this is the greatest discrepancy between the two works, which generally covers similar information about events and developments, such as the foundation of the Church in Iceland.

The first king whose lineage Ari traces back to Haraldr is Óláfr Tryggvason, who is not depicted as semi-pagan or a magician as he is in Adam of Bremen's account. On the contrary, Óláfr is credited with initiating the Christianization of Norway and Iceland, as he was also credited in many later Old Norse texts. Ari traces the ancestry of Óláfr to Tryggvi, son of Óláfr, son of Haraldr hárfagri, in a straight patrilineal

[5] It might be argued, and indeed often has been, that skaldic verses are older contemporary sources for this epithet, but they are in fact only found embedded in much later prose narratives, such as the 13th century king's sagas. The only reason that they are thought to apply to a 9th century king rather than an 11th century king is that the 13th century king's saga authors, who were also influenced by the works and interpretation of Ari Þorgilsson, placed them in this context. Thus they are not an independent attestation to the existence of this epithet in the 9th century, rather than the 10th or 11th centuries. For a further discussion on skaldic poetry and its common misuse and use as historical evidence, see Krag 1991, pp. 99–143; Sverrir Jakobsson 2002, Jesch 2004; Lund 2006; Malmros 2006; Ghosh 2011, pp. 25–109; Myrvoll 2014.

descent. This contrasts with Adam of Bremen, who indicates that Óláfr was the grandson of a previous ruler, Earl Hákon (*Adam* II. 34, 36; *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 268, 272)

St. Olaf, known in this text as Olaf the stout (ON. Ólafr enn digri), is also traced back to Haraldr hárfagri, as he is said to be the son of Haraldr, son of Guðrǫðr, son of Bjǫrn, son of Haraldr hárfagri. Instead of St. Olaf being the son of Oláfr Tryggvason, which is the information given by Adam of Bremen (*Adam* II. 51; *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 290), Ari's depicts St. Olaf as a distant relative of Oláfr Tryggvason, with Haraldr hárfagri being the common ancestor.

The same applies to King Haraldr Sigurðarson. *BOI* does not mention him being St. Olaf's brother, which is how he is introduced in both the Anglo-Saxon annals and in Adam of Bremen's narrative (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition* 6. MS D, pp. 67–68; *Adam* III, 13; *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 340); Ari only records the male line, in which Harald is listed as the son of Sigurðr, son of Hálfdan, son of Sigurðr hrísi, son of Haraldr hárfagri (*Íslenzk fornrit* I, pp. 14, 19, 20). Again, a distant relative seems to have succeeded to the Norwegian throne, with Haraldr hárfagri being the only common ancestor. In later kings' sagas, the author offers a synthesis of Ari and Adam's statements by claiming that Olaf and Harald were half-brothers. There is, however, no evidence to support that this was also Ari's view.

Therefore, in Ari's narrative we have three separate lineages of Norwegian kings, all of whom were patrilineally descended from an early common ancestor, in stark contrast to the view of either the Anglo-Saxon annalists or Adam of Bremen. These annalists describe the Norwegian crown as passing from father to son, or in one case, to a brother. It is difficult to ascertain when these views developed, or whether they held any significance for the kings contesting the Norwegian throne in the 11th century (see Krag 1989; Helgi Skúli Kjartansson 2006). What is clear, however, is that there is no mention of such a genealogy in any text older than *BOI*.

What are the implications of the royal genealogies for which *BOI* is the oldest source? One notable difference between these genealogies and the evidence gained from the 11th century sources is the fact that Haraldr Sigurðarson's claim to the throne of Norway no longer rested on his status as the brother of St. Olaf (for this earlier view, see Hoffmann 1976, pp. 64–65). Instead, Haraldr was a claimant because of his direct patrilineal descent from the 9th century King Haraldr, who happened to share the same epithet that Haraldr had in the Anglo-Saxon sources. In fact,

the genealogy found in *BOI* demonstrates that the claim of King Haraldr rested on the same foundation as that of Oláfr Tryggvason and St. Olaf. This genealogy of the Norwegian kings was a convenient one for Haraldr Sigurðarson and his descendants, who still ruled Norway at the time of the composition of *BOI*.

At the time of Ari's final composition of *BOI* in the 1130s, three descendants of King Magnús berfættr (Magnus Bare-legs, d. 1103) were fighting for the kingdom of Norway. One of the causes of this internal strife seems to have been that the right to royal succession was not limited to just a few individuals; at any one time, there could be many individual pretenders with an equal claim to the throne. Not only could any sons of a king make a claim, but also all men who descended patrilineally from a king. Ari's *BOI* is embedded in this system, as the three different patrilineal royal lines are traced from King Haraldr hárfagri, all with an equal right to the throne of Norway.

Ari Þorgilsson's genealogy of the Norwegian kings was widely accepted in the 12th century. There are three other narrative histories of Norway which were probably composed in the last quarter of the 12th century. These are the *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* by the monk Theodoricus (ON. Þórir or Þjóðrekr), *Historia Norwegiae*, and *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sǫgum*, both by unknown authors. These three works were influential for later, more extensive historical narratives, as the basic outline of succession and chronology of individual kings was established in these synoptic histories. All three accounts hold in common the assumption of the basic outline of the Norwegian royal genealogy offered by Ari Þorgilsson, in contrast to the testimony of older works, such as the *History of the Bishops of Hamburg* by Adam of Bremen. It has been argued that they were all heavily influenced by *BOI,* in addition to other works by Ari Þorgilsson and Sæmundr Sigfússon that have since been lost (see Ellehøj 1965; Krag 1991). Theodoricus' *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* actually begins by noting the great education of the Icelanders and their ancient poetry (see Johnsen 1939; Hanssen 1945, 1949; Bjarni Guðnason 1977; Bagge 1989). There are many similarities between Theodoricus' account of the Norwegians and that of Ari Þorgilsson, such as the identity of the first settler of Iceland and the reference to the presence of Irish monks before the settlement. Although Theodoricus may have relied mostly on oral witnesses, the main exception is a list of Norwegian kings, to whom he refers at one point in the narrative (*Monumenta Historica Norvegicae*, p. 8–9, 44; on the origin of this list, see Ellehøj 1965, pp. 182–96, 266–76).

It seems evident that Theodoricus' genealogy was the same one which can be found in *BOI*.

It should be noted that Ari Þorgilsson was not only an authority on Norwegian kings, but also on Danish ones. He is also the first historian to mention the Danish king Ragnar Loðbrók (shaggy-breeches) by this epithet (see Rowe 2012, pp. 164–65), although some earlier sources mention several 9th century Viking leaders called Ragnar (Rowe 2012, pp. 157–58). Ragnar and his sons are also included in genealogies used by Ari at the end of his narratives. He was thus apparently an authority on ancient Danish history, no less than Norwegian history. However, Ari indicates no further interest in the kings of Denmark, in contrast to his great interest in Norwegian kings.

As it turns out, *BOI* is the oldest extant narrative source for many aspects of Norwegian history, including King Haraldr hárfagri and the genealogies traced from him to three later Norwegian kings and the view of Óláfr Tryggvason as the apostle of Norway and Iceland. It seems to have been an influential source for the Norwegian royal biographies that were later composed in the 12th century. Ari Þorgilsson's importance as a source for the history of the Norwegian kingdom is, however, due to his interest in the Norwegian kings and their influence on the history of Iceland. He saw their benign influence at work during Iceland's settlement and later Christianization, continuing through the later reigns of St. Olaf and Haraldr Sigurðarson. Whereas there is no place for the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen in *BOI*, the kings of Norway seem to be omnipresent.

Therfore, Ari Þorgilsson emerges not only as an authority on the history of Iceland but also on world history and the history of Norwegian kings. One further aspect of his oeuvre remains to be explored, that of regional, or local, history. As with Ari's work concerning world history and the history of Norwegian kings, the interaction between the information offered by *BOI* and by those sources which must have been now lost is of great importance. This will now be examined further.

"As related by Ari the Learned": Narrating Local History

In the *Hauksbók* version of *The Book of Settlements* (ON. *Landnámabók*), composed by the lawman Haukr Erlendsson in the 1300s, Ari Þorgilsson is named as one of the first people to write about the settlement of Iceland, or as is stated in the epilogue:

> Nú er yfir farit um landnám þau, er verit hafa á Íslandi, eptir því sem fróðir men hafa skrifat, fyrst Ari prestr hinn fróði Þorgilsson ok Kolskeggr hinn vitri. (*Íslenzk fornrit* I, p. 395)
>
> (Now the settlements have been covered, as they had been made in Iceland, according to that which wise men have written, first Father Ari the Learned, son of Þorgils, and Kolskeggr the wise.)

Whether this work consisted of an entire earlier version of *The Book of Settlements,* or only in part, cannot be established on the basis of Haukr's narrative. However, Ari is quoted as a source for certain facts in several narratives, which might stem from his writings on the settlement. In *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ari is quoted as the source for the events of the death of Þorsteinn the Red in Scotland and information about his children (*Íslenzk fornrit* IV, p. 12; *Íslenzk fornrit* V, p. 7). According to the sagas' genealogies, Þorsteinn was the son of the settler Auðr djúpúðga (the Deep-Minded), who is mentioned in *BOI* and who was also the ancestor of Ari Þorgilsson. It can thus be surmised that during the time that *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* were composed there existed a narrative about some settlers from the region of Breiðafjörðr that was attributed to Ari. In the early chapters of *BOI*, there are several references to people from that region. One was Þorsteinn the Black (ON. Þorsteinn surtr), the inventor of a new system of dating and the grandson of Þorsteinn the Red. Another was Ósvífr Helgason, credited with interpreting the dream of Þorsteinn, the grandfather of Gellir Þorkelsson who himself was the grandfather of Ari Þorgilsson. Þórðr gellir, a great-grandfather of Gellir Þorkelsson, is said to have initiated the system of quarterly tribunals. The constitutional history of Iceland thus seems intrinsically bound up with the history of this particular family. Finally, Eiríkr the Red, credited as the discoverer of Greenland, is stated as coming from the Breiðafjörðr region (*Íslenzk fornrit* I, pp. 13–14). In Ari's genealogy listed in *BOI*, he gives his family name as that of "Breiðfirðingar" (*Íslenzk fornrit* I, pp. 26–28). It can thus be conjectured

that Ari had some personal interest in the history of the region of Breiðafjörðr, and furthermore, in the history of his own family.

In the manuscript AM 445 b, 4to (= *Melabók*), there is a genealogy of Snorri the Chieftain, which corresponds to the material attributed to Ari in *Laxdæla saga* (*Íslenzk fornrit* IV, pp. 182–83). It can thus be surmised that Ari is the author of this genealogy. Snorri lived at Helgafell, a farm that later came into the family of Ari, as it is where his grandfather, Gellir Þorkelsson, lived. According to *BOI*, Ari grew up with his grandfather at Helgafell. Ari knew Þuríðr, the daughter of Snorri the Chieftain, and quotes her as an authoritative source in *BOI* (*Íslenzk fornrit* I, p. 4). It is evident that Ari was interested in Snorri and his ancestors, and he may have been an authoritative source on the history of the chieftains at Helgafell (see for instance *Íslenzk fornrit* V. p. 226; *Íslenzk fornri*t XII, p. 286), as well as his own ancestors in the region of Dalir. In *The Book of Settlements*, the chieftains at Reykjanes also appear among the most prominent settlers in the region, although they are not connected to any particular family saga. Ari Þorgilsson also descended from that line through his grandmother Valgerðr, who was the daughter of the chieftain Þorgils Arason. Ari is a possible source for all these details, although admittedly not the only one.

However, apart from this textual evidence, there is also circumstantial evidence that there existed a narrative about the earliest settler families of the Breiðafjörðr region that must have been connected to Ari, or at least a close relative of his. According to the 13th century version (*Sturlubók*) of *The Book of Settlements*, *Laxdœla saga*, and *Eyrbyggja saga*, the region's most prominent settler families were all related and connected through the family of Ari Þorgilsson. As it happens, these settlers' descendants became the most influential family in the Breiðafjörðr region in the early 12th century, which included the chieftains Ari Þorgilsson and Þorgils Oddason. In contrast, the ancestors of the Sturlungar, the most influential family in the region from the late 12th century and early 13th century, are not prominent in these narratives. Therefore, it seems likely that the genealogies of the region's settlers were established before the rise of the Sturlungar and reflect the dominant historical consciousness of Ari Þorgilsson and his contemporaries. The relationship of this historical account to 9th and 10th century people and events is another matter; what can be said with certainty is that it was a version of history that suited Ari and the most powerful people in the region around 1100. This neither negates nor reinforces its value as a source for an earlier age, but it does place the creation of this particular historical work into a new context.

Another important historiographical context should be noted, as it is possibly connected to the creation of Ari's narrative history of the settlement in Breiðafjörðr. In the earliest Icelandic annals, there is material that goes back to the 12th century, some of which seems to be connected to the region of Breiðafjörðr (see Barði Guðmundsson 1936; Einar Arnórsson 1942, pp. 51–55; Hermann Pálsson 1967, pp. 10–12). The dates of the birth and death of Þorkell Eyjólfsson, Ari's great-grandfather, are listed in these annals, as are those of Ari himself. This suggests that someone close to his family composed the original annal, perhaps Ari himself, which would be consistent with his reputation as an authority on chronology. It would, therefore, seem that much of what was known about the earliest history of the Breiðafjörðr region in the 12th and 13th centuries can be traced back to Ari, or someone very close to him. Among the deaths recorded in this proto-annal is that of Þuríðr Snorradóttir, whom Ari used as a source for *BOI*. The oral lore of people like Þuríðr was now being written down by people like Ari, and in the process, it became an established account of the past.

There is less evidence about Ari's works concerning his mother's family in the Eastern fjords of Iceland, but 13th century versions of *The Book of Settlements* reveal that Ari was descended from the settler Hrollaugr Rögnvaldsson and the chieftain Síðu-Hallr, through his mother Guðríðr (*Íslenzk fornrit* I, p. 318). It is, therefore, not surprising that Hrollaugr is listed in *BOI* as the chief settler in the Eastern Quarter (ON. *Austfirðingafjórðungr*) and that Síðu-Hallr is depicted as one of the leaders of the Christian faction at parliament in 999 (*Íslenzk fornrit* I, pp. 6, 14, 16, 26). Ari is not quoted as reference concerning any settlers in the Eastern Quarter, either in *The Book of Settlements* or in individual sagas. However, there are some dates concerning events connected with his maternal family, which can be found in the oldest entries of the Icelandic annals (see Einar Arnórsson 1942, pp. 53–54).

There is no way of knowing the contents of Ari Þorgilsson's works concerning the settlement of Iceland. However, evidence clearly suggests that he wrote about the history of Breiðafjörðr from the earliest decades of settlement and up to the time of Snorri the Chieftain. Considering what we know about Ari's methodology, this lost source for *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and later versions of *The Book of Settlements* would have been rather concise, probably a genealogical outline of the lives of the chieftains in that region. The more literary narratives of the family sagas need not stem from Ari, but some information in these narratives might have come from his original, more concise narrative. The

specifics about that lost work will remain unknown. It is said in *Laxdœla saga* that Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir became an anchoress at Helgafell (*Íslenzk fornrit* V, pp. 228–29). Is it possible that this information was derived from her great-grandson, Ari Þorgilsson? It is quite possible, but cannot be proven. Regardless, it is apparent that *BOI* must to be examined in the context of Ari's writings on regional history.

Because of the prominence of his own kinsfolk and of people from the region of Breiðafjörðr in *BOI*, Ari Þorgilsson's work on regional and Icelandic history can hardly be examined separately, as this is a prominence that Ari himself emphasizes rather than downplaying it. In both the material which can be traced to his regional history and the episodes connected with Breiðfirðingar in *BOI*, Ari's ancestors and other acquaintances, such as Þuríðr Snorradóttir, are his most important sources and seem to play leading roles in his narratives. One of the Ari's motivations in his historical writings must surely have been to affirm the importance of his kinsmen and friends as important actors on various stages, both the regional setting of Breiðafjörðr and the national one of the parliament.

Conclusion: A Personal and Public History

A work of mediaeval history is not just a storehouse of facts to be utilized by modern historians irrespective of the context in which it was written. As Walter Goffart and many other modern historians have demonstrated, it is important to examine mediaeval historians in terms of the circumstances of their lives, the individuality of their works, and the critical writings each has caused. Their opinions and literary talents should be taken just as seriously as the information that they convey.

As it has been established that Ari Þorgilsson not only wrote on the history of Iceland, but also on the history of the world, of Norway, and of the Breiðafjörðr region, the status and purpose of *BOI* must, therefore, be subject to re-evaluation. It was not a solitary work, but rather part of a larger corpus. Once this has been established, the contents of *BOI* can, and should be, re-examined, as follows.

Throughout *BOI*, Ari Þorgilsson demonstrates a concern for world history and the relationship of Iceland to larger world events. Ari includes the death of Pope Gregory I in 604 as a chronological milestone, although it holds no direct connection to later events in Iceland. He

traces his own ancestry back to a mythological "King of the Turks," demonstrating that his line extends not only to Norway, and Sweden before that, but also can be traced to emigrants from Asia Minor. This is the same view which is later evidenced in *Hauksbók*, where the settlement of Scandinavia and Iceland is used to establish connections with Asia, rather than other parts of Europe (see Sverrir Jakobsson 2007). Where Ari recorded Bishop Gizurr's death, he also mentions the deaths of the Byzantine Emperor and of the King and Patriarch of Jerusalem, thus connecting events in Iceland to the larger narrative of the First Crusade. The dating of the settlement of Iceland is also connected to a foreign event, the death of King Eadmund in 869. Eadmund's slayer, Ívarr, is introduced as the son of Ragnar loðbrók, connecting world history to the legendary history of Scandinavia (on the development of the story of Ragnar loðbrók, see McTurk 1991; Rowe 2012).

The engagement of the text with the kings of Norway is not coincidental, as they are depicted as important agents of change in the narrative in *BOI*. Haraldr Finehair is not only linked chronologically to the settlement of Iceland, he plays an important role by introducing the *landaurar*-tax in order to stem the migration of Norwegians to Iceland.[6] Óláfr Tryggvason instigates the Christianization of Iceland, in contrast to the narrative found in the *History of the Bishops of Hamburg*. Óláfr Haraldsson (ON. Óláfr helgi, Eng. St. Olaf) and Haraldr Sigurðarson are also connected to important events in Iceland, such as the building of a church at Þingvellir. In contrast, the influence of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen is ignored in this narrative, as previously mentioned. Therefore, Ari Þorgilsson seems to take sides in the great issue of the early 12th century: the opposition between royal authority and clerical office. This can be connected to his own situation as a cleric who simultaneously wielded secular power as a chieftain.

Ari Þorgilsson's interest in the region of Breiðafjörðr is evident through the way he connected the people of this region to most of the important events which had occurred in Iceland in the 10th century: the invention of quarterly tribunals, the introduction of a new calendar system, and the settlement of Greenland. Although the settler Auðr djúpúðga's lineage is first introduced in connection to the ancestry of a later bishop, she also turns out to be the ancestor of Ari himself. *BOI* is, therefore, not only a

[6] Some 13th-century Icelandic sources, however, depict Haraldr hárfagri as having indirect influence on the settlement through his oppressive rule, a view which is nowhere to be found in *BOI*. See Kreutzer 1994.

history of medieval European institutions, it is also the personal history of an Icelandic family, Ari's family.

Our view of the earliest history of Iceland and Norway is still, to a large extent, that which was delineated by Ari Þorgilsson in the early decades of the 12th century. It is thus important to realize that Ari had his own interests and his own agenda in writing history such as this. His view on local and international affairs coloured his depiction of the earliest history of Iceland, a portrayal that remains as influential in the 21st century as it was in the 12th century.

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