1

# History

## *Iceland from the Settlement to 1400 CE*

HAKI ANTONSSON

This overview of Iceland's medieval history and its most salient historiographical issues divides into three periods. The first covers the time from the country's settlement in the second half of the ninth century CE to 1096/7. This date marks the introduction of the so-called Tithe-law, which laid the foundation for the eventual emergence of the Icelandic Church as an institution. The beginning of the second period also approximately coincides with the appearance of Iceland's earliest written sources. Indeed, the earliest known text, Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* (Book of Icelanders, 1122x1133), is also the oldest Old Norse narrative in the Latin alphabet (or rather a modified version thereof). The second period extends to the end of the Icelandic Commonwealth in 1262/4, and the final phase brings us to the end of the fourteenth century.

Iceland rarely features in general studies of medieval European history. The country is, for instance, absent from Robert Bartlett's *The Making of Europe*, arguably the single most influential general interpretation of European medieval history to appear in the last half-century.[1] Iceland's absence from such surveys arises not only from its geographical marginality and relatively small population, but also from another factor, its lack of a central executive before the Norwegian crown assumed this authority in the wake of the Icelanders' agreement with the king in 1262/4.

Comparative history relies on identifying definable and continuous points of reference, and for this purpose the state – the city-state, the principality or the kingdom – serves as a primary constant. Around it revolve such key themes as the ideology of kingship or other rulership, the crafting of laws, the

1 Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (London, 1993).

relationship between Church and state and the expansion of governmental machinery. Iceland's lack of a central authority, for the better part of our whole period, makes it problematic to include in studies that focus on development and change (rather than on static social structures) from a broader comparative perspective. Still, as we shall see, recent studies in the medieval history of Iceland show an elevated awareness of the country's place within Europe in this period. In this respect, historical writings on medieval Iceland have followed a path similar to that of Old Norse literary study.

In medieval studies the boundaries between the disciplines of history and literature are often blurred, and this holds especially true for the field of Icelandic medieval history. A good example of this is how, from the 1980s onwards, the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders) came to be used as sources for the social history of the Icelandic Commonwealth. Here particularly the works of William Ian Miller and Jesse Byock have profoundly affected our understanding not only of Icelandic history, but also of the nature of these literary texts (see this volume, Chapter 4; the important field of Icelandic law is discussed in Chapter 26 and so will not be addressed here).

## From the Settlement Period to 1097

Although the Icelandic written corpus is both copious and varied in content, its composition is unevenly distributed across the medieval period. Thus there are no written Icelandic sources until Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* in 1122x1133.[2] Indeed, for this early period only one written source mentions Iceland for certain. This is Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen), composed around 1070, which touches only briefly on the country, most notably in relation to its Christianization.[3]

Some key source-categories for Viking Age Scandinavian history are limited with respect to Iceland. Runic inscriptions of any kind are few and of restricted historical value. This deprives us of historical witnesses to such key topics as family relations, inheritance practices and the transition from paganism to Christianity. For Norway, especially, skaldic poetry provides invaluable insights into religion and rulership ideology. Paradoxically, although largely composed by Icelandic skalds, the poetic corpus for this

2 *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, ÍF 1 (Reykjavík, 1968), pp. 3–28.
3 Adam of Bremen, *Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler (Hanover, 1917), Book 4, ch. 36, pp. 273–4.

earliest period, with the odd exception, reveals little about Icelandic society itself. Lastly, Iceland's numismatic evidence is miniscule compared with the riches of coinage from elsewhere in Scandinavia in the same period. This means that for our first phase we are reliant on the archaeological records and later Icelandic written sources.

Of the later written sources the most important one is the aforementioned *Íslendingabók*, a brief history which Ari Þorgilsson initially wrote for Iceland's two bishops (of the dioceses of Skálholt and Hólar). Regarding the settlement, the text highlights four main issues. Firstly, Ari specifies an exact date, 870 CE, which he then places within the context of Christian universal history. Secondly, *Íslendingabók* emphasizes the settlers' aristocratic and Norwegian origins. Thirdly, the text's brief discussion of the country's settlement depicts an orderly process which was spearheaded by a few families and completed within two generations (or sixty years). Lastly, *Íslendingabók* underlines the continuity of Iceland's history from the settlement down to Ari's own time. For instance, the major settlers referred to early in *Íslendingabók* are later shown to be direct ancestors of the early bishops who occupied the dioceses of Skálholt and Hólar.

Ari Þorgilsson's outline of Iceland's discovery and settlement was subsequently fleshed out in *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements), a text which survives in five redactions dating from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. An epilogue to one redaction, preserved in the early fourteenth-century *Hauksbók* manuscript, mentions that Ari Þorgilsson and Kolskeggr *inn vitri* (the Wise) were the first to record the settlement.[4] These two contemporaries probably gathered material which subsequent redactors expanded upon. In total, *Landnámabók* contains the names of about 400 initial settlers. It also records, in varying degrees of detail, around 300 individual settlements. Why *Landnámabók* came into being is impossible to separate from its complex preservation history. The establishing of land-claims, the desire to highlight the Icelanders' aristocratic origins or simply antiquarian interest in the past are all motives which played a part at different stages in the text's development.

Unsurprisingly, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* have loomed large in the study of Iceland's settlement. Indeed, the question of dating Iceland's settlement engages directly with Ari Þorgilsson's claim that this began in 870. Ari, however, somewhat undermines his own assertion with his reference to *papar*. These are Irish hermits who, he laconically seems to suggest, were

4 *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, pp. 395–6.

present when the Norse arrived and left the land, leaving sacred objects behind them. So far, no clear evidence of *papar* presence in Iceland has been unearthed. One interesting recent avenue of research involves man-made caves in southern Iceland which contain cross-carvings of apparently similar design to carvings found in Ireland and northern Britain.[5] The dating and nature of these carvings is, however, still uncertain.

The so-called 'settlement layer' is crucial for establishing settlement prior to the date Ari Þorgilsson pinpoints in *Íslendingabók*. This is a tephra ash-layer which emanated from a volcanic eruption of around 877 and covers the larger part of Iceland. To date, although there are some faint indications of human presence, the fact that no farmstead or burial site has been found below the tephra layer strongly suggests that Iceland's permanent settlement did not begin with full force until around the time identified in *Íslendingabók*.

Regional studies are key to deepening our understanding of Iceland's settlement. According to Orri Vésteinsson's and Thomas H. McGovern's studies of early farmsteads in Mývatnssveit in north-eastern Iceland, the settlement in this region took place with 'astounding speed' from around 870 onwards.[6] The authors hypothesize that the same pattern of rapid settlement is applicable to the country as a whole. This contribution, and the critiques subsequently made by other scholars in the same volume, offer a useful introduction to the principal methodological issues relating to the study of Iceland's settlement, one that demonstrates the variety of scientific disciplines involved: not only history and archaeology, but also geology, historical botany and population studies.

*Íslendingabók* is effectively our sole written source on the development of Icelandic society before the formal adoption of Christianity in 999/1000. Ari Þorgilsson, not surprisingly, is not interested in broader social or economic trends. His focus is on a quite specific matter, namely on how, following the period of settlement, the Icelanders adopted a countrywide system based on laws and legal measures. Ari Þorgilsson does not describe a system of governance that explains how power was acquired, executed and retained. His focus is on the laws which, so he relates, were imported from western Norway (*Gulaþingslög*) and subsequently modified to serve Icelandic needs. The institutional outline of this system involved the Alþing (General Assembly), which was held each year in early summer to the north of Lake

5 Kristján Ahronson, *Into the Ocean: Vikings, Irish, and Environmental Change in Iceland and the North* (Toronto, 2015).

6 Orri Vésteinsson and Thomas H. McGovern, 'The peopling of Iceland', *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 45:2 (2012), 206–18 (217).

Þingvellir, as one assembly for all of Iceland's quarters for West, North, East and South. Across Iceland there were also twelve regional spring assemblies or courts, three in each quarter apart from the Northern Quarter, which hosted four.

Further insights into Iceland's society in this earliest period again rely on archaeological evidence. The image emerging from excavated farmsteads and discovered artefacts is that of a materially poor society, at least in comparison with Norway.[7] Iceland's was a subsistence economy with a relatively limited circulation of luxury goods and other signs of prestige, such as larger dwellings or elaborate, high-status burials. Moreover, there were no towns or villages in medieval Iceland until the eighteenth century. Gásar, the principal port and trading place in northern Iceland, possessed 'proto-urban' characteristics with demarcated merchants' plots and a church. Unfortunately, excavations at Gásar and other trading places have revealed little about their extent and use prior to the thirteenth century.[8]

The *Íslendingasögur* depict a society engaged in pastoral farming, with fishing and hunting playing secondary roles. Broadly speaking, this depiction matches the historical reality of the medieval Icelandic economy. However, recent studies have highlighted economic activities in early Iceland that have left little trace in the later written records. In particular, there is growing interest in exploring how the first generations exploited Iceland's then-rich natural resources. For instance, walrus was probably abundant in the immediate post-settlement period, and this animal, unaccustomed to human presence, would have been easy prey. Walrus was a precious commodity, especially on account of its tusks, which appear in the archaeological records of northern Europe's major trading posts of this period. Walrus hide also offered excellent material for ship's ropes and cables, for which the lubricating oil derived from walrus (and whale) carcasses was also essential. Recent scientific research indicates that the walrus population was hunted to near extinction in this early phase. Walrus commodities were, however, exported from Greenland until at least the fourteenth century.[9] Indeed, it is easy to envisage how the pursuit of walrus would have encouraged Icelanders to

7 Orri Vésteinsson, 'Archaeology of economy and society', in Rory McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old-Norse Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 7–26 (13–18).

8 Karin M. Frei et al., 'Was it for walrus? Viking Age settlement and medieval walrus ivory trade in Iceland and Greenland', *World Archaeology*, 47:3 (2015), 439–66.

9 Chris Callow, 'Iceland's medieval coastal market places: Dögurðarnes in its economic, social and political context', in Jan Brendalsmo, Terje Gansum and Finn-Einar Eliassen (eds.), *Strandsteder, utvikinglingssteder og småbyer i vikingtid, middelalder og tidlig nytid (ca. 800–ca. 1800)* (Oslo, 2010), pp. 213–29.

settle in Greenland, a development which, according to *Íslendingabók*, took place in the latter part of the tenth century.

The *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók* relate the presence of Christians in Iceland before the country's official conversion in 999/1000. This seems likely to have been true, as many settlers would have originated from parts of the British Isles where the Norse had been in contact with Christianity for an extended period of time. On the other hand, the material evidence for Christian practices in Iceland before the early eleventh century is minimal. Neither Christian burials nor churches (or chapels) have been discovered, in contrast with the approximately 300 pagan burials which have been excavated. On the other hand, these burials are overwhelmingly inhumations rather than cremations, which contrasts with the generally more mixed burial practices elsewhere in Norse regions in the Viking Age.

The state of paganism in a newly settled land raises interesting questions. As recent scholarship has stressed, there was no uniformity in religious belief, ritual or custom in the Norse regions before Christianization.[10] Thus variations in pagan burial customs are evident even between geographically close regions. Nevertheless, an accepted feature of Norse paganism was its strong roots in the landscape. The association of the land with both ritual practice and supernatural identities extended back into time immemorial (see further this volume, Chapter 6). The Iceland of the early settlers would, of course, initially have been devoid of such deep-rooted religious associations. Could this have led to a weakened attachment to pre-Christian religion? Or, and perhaps this is more likely, might it have aggrandized the role of prominent farm-owners in maintaining and performing pagan cults? These are questions which only archaeological evidence can begin to answer.

By the end of the tenth century, judging by *Íslendingabók*, the country's elite was sufficiently powerful to bring about Iceland's official conversion to Christianity. The impetus for this turn, however, came from outside. *Íslendingabók* relates that King Óláfr Tryggvason sent to Iceland Þangbrandr, a German missionary who preached Christianity and is said to have converted many chieftains.[11] Ari Þorgilsson, however, mentions only three of these by name: Gizurr Teitsson, Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson and Hjalti Skeggjason. From these chieftains descended the powerful Haukdælir who held great influence over the Icelandic bishoprics from the first ordained bishop, Ísleifr Gizurarson of Skálholt (1056–80), until Ari's time and beyond.

10 See, for example, Terry Gunnell, 'Pantheon? What pantheon? Concepts of a family of gods in pre-Christian Scandinavian religions', *Scripta Islandica*, 66 (2015), 55–76.
11 *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, p. 14.

When Þangbrandr, having failed in his mission, informed Óláfr of the Icelanders' reluctance to accept Christianity, the king arrested all the prominent Icelanders he could find in Norway. Coming to the rescue, Gizurr Teitsson and his son-in-law Hjalti persuaded Óláfr to let them reverse the German's failure and convert their fellow countrymen. There follows Ari's famous description of the Alþing of 999/1000 CE, in which Christian and pagan factions confronted each other. Although violence seemed inevitable, Gizurr and Hjalti got Iceland's *lögmaðr* (law-speaker) to arbitrate between the opposing sides. The law-speaker decreed that Christianity should be taken into law and all Icelanders baptized. Ari notes a dispensation allowing pagans to sacrifice in secret, but adds that this dispensation was soon revoked.

The conversion to Christianity is the central episode in *Íslendingabók*. The formal change of religion is not depicted as a miraculous event, as is often the case in conversion narratives, but rather as the outcome of an essentially legal process (see further this volume, Chapter 26). This depiction of a rational and legalistic adoption of Christianity reflects the text's primary mission. Above all, *Íslendingabók* underlines the symbiosis between, on the one hand, Christianity and the Church (represented by the bishops) and, on the other hand, Iceland's peculiar institutional arrangement and history. The real wonder which Ari Þorgilsson wishes to convey is how the nascent Church emerged seamlessly from this process.

*Íslendingabók*'s description of the conversion may lead us to think that this process was somehow fundamentally different from what occurred in mainland Scandinavia in the period c. 950–1050. One might even conclude that the Icelanders adopted Christianity in a more consensual manner than their Norse counterparts. These would be mistaken assumptions. Everywhere in Scandinavia (and the wider Norse world) pressure from above *in some form or another* proved decisive in the abandonment of pagan practices and the formal adoption of Christianity. For the change of religion in Norway, of course, saga readers are familiar with the sometimes violent conversion methods applied by the Norwegian missionary kings, Óláfr Tryggvason (r. 995–1000) and Óláfr Haraldsson (r. 1015–28). But placed within a broader Scandinavian or Norse context the methods of these kings should be seen as standing at the other extreme of the 'pressure from above' spectrum. The general pattern, which is especially clear in Denmark and Sweden, involved local magnates leading the change of religion within their sphere of influence, albeit with the understanding that a failure to convert would bring down the king's wrath upon their heads. In essence, this is the process described in *Íslendingabók*, and it has some further support in the archaeological material.

The eleventh century in Iceland was, as in mainland Scandinavia, a somewhat paradoxical period. With Christianity came the skill of writing in the Latin alphabet. But although Christianity had become the dominant religion almost everywhere, contemporary written sources are still almost absent in this century. Nonetheless, in spite of this absence, one important process can be identified in Iceland with some clarity. This is the alacrity and assuredness with which outward forms of Christianity were adopted at the local level. In Iceland, changes in burial customs reveal this development. Pagan burials had been located in the wilderness or just outside the home-fields, whereas Christian burials are invariably found within the home-field's boundary. This transition in burial locations appears to have been swift and geographically homogeneous. In the early eleventh century, pagan burial practices disappear altogether.[12]

Further, the Christian cemeteries were attached to chapels which, as the archaeological records reveal, proliferated in the course of the eleventh century. According to one estimate, small churches were built on approximately every third farm in this early phase of the Christianization.[13] These were not 'communal churches', in the sense that they represented a common enterprise by the inhabitants of the region. Rather, they were established by individual farm-owners, who by erecting and maintaining a chapel or church solidified their authority within their circles of influence.

In eleventh-century Iceland, the upkeep of Christian practice must have depended to a considerable degree on foreign clergymen. Both *Íslendingabók* and *Hungrvaka* (Hunger-rouser), a brief history of the bishopric of Skálholt from the early thirteenth century, mention the presence of foreign missionary bishops in Iceland.[14] The Norwegian kings and archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen probably sent clergymen or missionary bishops both to gain information and to establish links with Iceland's elite. This is suggested by the presence in Iceland of figures such as the German Bjarnharðr, who was sent to the Norwegian court by Hamburg-Bremen in the 1040s and in the 1060s became bishop of Selja in Norway. In between these assignments, it is likely that this same Bjarnharðr resided in Iceland. Receiving Christian instruction and even

12 Benedikt Eyþórsson, 'History of the Icelandic Church 1000–1300: Status of research', in Helgi Þorláksson (ed.), *Church Centres: Church Centres in Iceland from the 11th to the 13th Century and Their Parallels in Other Countries* (Reykholt, 2005), pp. 19–69 (22–6).

13 Orri Vésteinsson, 'Local church organization and state formation in medieval Iceland', in Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir and Bergur Þorsteinsson (eds.), *The Buildings of Medieval Reykholt: The Wider Context* (Reykjavík, 2017), pp. 53–72 (56–7).

14 *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, pp. 18–19; *Biskupa sögur* II, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, ÍF 16 (Reykjavík, 2002), pp. 11–13.

ordination from such dignitaries linked prominent Icelanders with a prestigious foreign power which, in turn, was converted into spiritual and political advantages at home. Indeed, *Kristni saga*, from around the middle of the thirteenth century, claims that by the early twelfth century 'most men of high rank were educated and ordained priests, even though they were chieftains'.[15]

These contacts allowed members of the most prominent families to elevate their status still further by seeking education abroad. An early example involves Gizurr Teitsson, whom, as we have seen, Ari Þorgilsson represents as the effective leader of the Christian faction at the Alþing of 999/1000. *Hungrvaka* recounts that Gizurr escorted Ísleifr, his young son, to the Duchy of Saxony, where he received education in the abbey of Herford. In 1056 the Icelanders chose Ísleifr, then about 50 years old, to become their bishop. He received ordination from the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, allegedly following a papal blessing. Ísleifr resided at his family property, Skálholt, which his son and successor, Bishop Gizurr (1082–1118), also educated in Saxony, donated to the bishopric and made into a permanent episcopal centre.

It is notable that the Icelandic elite looked to the German Salian Empire for education and exalted social ties. The most famous such case is that of Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056–1133), who, so Ari Þorgilsson tells us, 'came here to our country from Frakkland in the south, and then had himself ordained as a priest'.[16] 'Frakkland' in this context is most likely to mean a Salian region answering to 'Franken' in Germany today, one centred on the Middle Rhine. Ari, in his preface to *Íslendingabók*, reports that Sæmundr read the first draft, and later sources attribute to him a now-lost Latin chronicle on the Norwegian kings. Further, Sæmundr was an ancestor of the Oddaverjar family whose influence and prestige reached its zenith around the turn of the twelfth century into the thirteenth.

Markús Skeggjason (c. 1040–1107) was another member of Iceland's elite whose secular interests combined with matters ecclesiastical and intellectual. He held the post of law-speaker from 1084 until his death in 1107, and *Skáldatal* (The Catalogue of Poets) has him serving as court poet for the sons of the Danish king Sveinn Ástríðarson, Kings Knútr (r. 1080–6) and Eiríkr (r. 1095–1103). Markús's sole preserved poem, *Eiríksdrápa*, which he composed at the court of

15 See *Biskupa sögur* I, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and Peter Foote, 2 vols., ÍF 15 (Reykjavík, 2003), vol. II, p. 42.

16 *Íslendingabók, Kristni Saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie (London, 2006), p. 11; 'kom Sæmundr Sigfússonr sunnan af Frakklandi hingat til lands ok lét síðan vígjask til prests', *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, pp. 20–1.

King Niels (r. 1104–34) in memory of his recently deceased predecessor, King Eiríkr, gives a fascinating insight into the broad intellectual and geographical horizon of Iceland's elite at the beginning of the twelfth century.[17] The poem features the pope, the German and Greek emperors and the king of France, while foregrounding such topical issues as armed pilgrimage to the Holy Land and deadly conflict between Christians and pagans in the Baltic.

## 1096/7–1264

A guiding theme in Magnús Skeggjason's *Eiríksdrápa* is King Eiríkr's patronage of the Church. This involves building and supporting churches, as well as securing the establishment of the archbishopric of Lund in 1104, to which Iceland belonged until the founding of the archbishopric of Niðaróss in 1152. Back in Iceland in the year 1096/7, according to *Íslendingabók*, Markús Skeggjason joined with Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson and Sæmundr Sigfússon in successfully arguing for the introduction of the Tithe-law.[18] This was a property tax, calculated as a yearly payment of 1 per cent of total assets, to be levied on farm-owners of a certain wealth. The tithe was divided into four equal parts, of which one belonged to the bishop, another to the poor (to be distributed by the local *hreppr*, or commune), and the third and fourth to owners of the local churches (to be divided between church maintenance and upkeep of the priest(s)). As noted at the head of this chapter, the acceptance of the Tithe-law effectively laid the foundations for the Icelandic Church. This foundation was further strengthened in 1106 with the establishment of Iceland's second bishopric at Hólar, which served the Northern Quarter.

An important development of the early twelfth century was the founding of the so-called *staðir* (here translated as 'church centres'). Church centres were farms with an accompanying church that landowners had donated in their entirety. The church centres were exempt from paying tithe tax, and their holders collected two parts of the church tithe from the local community. It was customary, however, for the donor and his family to hold the property with the associated costs and benefits. Pious motives undoubtedly played a role in the founding of church centres, but they also brought prestige to their holders and could enhance their local influence. Throughout the twelfth century, but especially in the period c. 1120–70, magnates such as Sæmundr Sigfússon in Oddi dedicated their farms and adjacent churches to

17 Ed. Kari Ellen Gade, in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* (*SkP*) II, *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300*, ed. Gade (Turnhout, 2009), pp. 332–60.
18 *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók*, p. 22.

particular saints (and so to God) and thus established church centres. Usually less wealthy, but still numerous and important, were the so-called *Bændakirkjur* (Farmers' churches) where the founder donated less than the entirety of the farm to the church.[19]

The issue of who ultimately controlled the church centres – the donor and his descendants, or the Church as an institution – was the earliest Icelandic expression of a central theme in European medieval history, the Church's striving for greater independence from secular interference and domination. In this respect, the establishment of the archbishopric of Niðaróss in 1152 began a new chapter. The early archbishops upheld the tenets of the reforming Church, and in Iceland this brought the arrangement of church-ownership into the spotlight. The issue was addressed by Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson (1178–93) of Skálholt, who attempted to bring some of the major church centres in his diocese under direct episcopal control or, at least, to secure a formal recognition that they were Church property. Although the success of Þorlákr's campaign is difficult to assess, he seems to have diminished the desire to found new church centres by bringing the issue of future ownership into question.

The next major clash between episcopal authority and the secular elite occurred during the turbulent career of Bishop Guðmundr Arason of Hólar (1207–37). The bishop's main demand, which centred on ecclesiastical jurisdiction over wayward clerics, and his uncompromising personality united Iceland's most powerful chieftains against him. In 1208 matters came to a head at the Battle of Víðines, which led to the death of Kolbeinn Tumason, the most powerful chieftain in northern Iceland. Thereafter Guðmundr's hold on the bishopric of Hólar proved tenuous, and he resided in exile in Norway for a significant part of his episcopacy.

The cases of the two bishops, Þorlákr and Guðmundr, both illustrate how deeply entangled secular and religious interests were in this period. They also reflect an emerging division within the Icelandic elite between those occupied by secular pursuits and those in holy orders. As we have seen, the early phase of Iceland's Christianity saw members of the elite, such as Ari and Sæmundr, choosing to be ordained as priests. In 1190 the archbishop of Niðaróss sent a decree to Iceland which forbade chieftains to hold ecclesiastical offices while pursuing secular affairs. Thereafter such a dual role became less common. Members of the upper layers of the landowning class now had to choose between a career in holy orders and a life of secular affairs.

19 Benedikt Eyþórsson, 'History of the Icelandic Church', pp. 37–49.

One option was to join one of the eight monasteries founded in the period between the inauguration of Þingeyrar Abbey in 1133 and the end of the thirteenth century. Apart from the Benedictine foundations of Þingeyrar and Munkaþverá (also in northern Iceland), these houses were of the Augustinian order, and included two nunneries. The trend of endowing religious houses should be seen within the same context as the founding of church centres which, as mentioned, also began in the first half of the twelfth century. From the beginning, however, the monasteries enjoyed greater independence from their secular benefactors.

From Oddi, Reykholt, Þingeyrar Abbey, the two episcopal seats and a number of lower-profile or even unknown loci flowed the writings that underpin our knowledge of Iceland's history from the twelfth century to the Commonwealth's conclusion. Of these, the *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas) are the most significant. This is a varied textual corpus, but at its core stands the *Sturlunga saga* compilation from around 1300 (see this volume, Chapter 24). The *samtíðarsögur* have traditionally received more attention from historians than literary scholars, who tend to dwell on the more overtly fictional types of sagas, but with better understanding of the interrelationship between literary form and historical content this division has become much less pronounced.[20]

The *samtíðarsögur* tell of major and minor conflicts in Icelandic society from the late twelfth century to the end of the Commonwealth. More broadly, however, they relate a prolonged period of power consolidation led by individuals and extended families belonging to the upper stratum of Iceland's secular elite. A traditional way of thinking about this process is to consider it in terms of chieftaincies (*goðorð*) coming into progressively fewer hands. Indeed, already by the beginning of the thirteenth century a handful of families possessed most of Iceland's chieftaincies. The concentration of power accelerated during the period of strife in the thirteenth century sometimes referred to as the 'Age of the Sturlungs' (*Sturlungaöld*), c. 1220–64, and by the late 1250s all the *goðorð* were held by three individuals who, moreover, were beholden to the Norwegian king.

But what was a chieftaincy? Ari Þorgilsson does not directly refer to a system of chieftaincies, or indeed refer to *goðorð* as a unit of power of any kind. *Grágás*, a compilation of the laws of the Commonwealth, is more forthcoming. It explains that there should be nine chieftaincies in each

20 See, for instance, Úlfar Bragason, *Reykholt Revisited: Representing Snorri in Sturla Þórðarsson's Íslendinga saga* (Reykjavík, 2021).

Quarter, with the exception of the Northern Quarter, which hosted twelve in total.[21] The chieftains should preside over their local spring assemblies, and only they had a right to sit in the *Lögrétta*, the Alþing's law-giving body, and select jurors to serve cases.

The origins of the chieftaincies are obscure. Although the word *goði* is attested in Scandinavia, there is no evidence for a comparable system of chieftaincies such as developed in Iceland. One influential view supposes that their role originated in religious function, that is, that prominent early settlers initially derived authority from leading the local cult(s) that combined with other duties and responsibilities.[22] The apparent derivation of the word *goðar* from *goð* or *guð* (god(s)) may support this hypothesis. Considering the inevitably unusual context of pre-Christian religion in a newly settled land, as discussed above, it is easy to envisage how leadership in cultic matters would have been of enhanced importance in early Iceland.

The orderly picture of Iceland's constitutional arrangement as portrayed in *Grágás* and *Íslendingabók* has been questioned. Most notably, the number of named chieftaincies mentioned in the *Íslendingasögur* considerably exceeds the thirty-nine stipulated by *Grágás*. Through detailed analysis of both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *samtíðarsögur*, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson proposes a model of fifty to sixty chieftaincies until the mid eleventh century.[23] From then on until around the year 1220 the number of chieftaincies was reduced, and leading families such as the Haukdælir and Oddaverjar established territorial domains. This means that the power consolidation which took place in the Commonwealth's last phase denotes an acceleration of a long-standing trend rather than a novel development. In constructing this model, Jón Viðar treats the *Íslendingasögur* as sources for mapping development and change, rather than as essentially historically static blueprints of how the Commonwealth society of Iceland may have functioned. In his monumental study of chieftains and their chieftaincies published in 2004, Gunnar Karlsson argued that the system of thirty-six to thirty-nine chieftaincies did in fact reflect historical reality for most of the Commonwealth period, and moreover expressed scepticism about the usefulness of the *Íslendingasögur* as sources for political development.[24] But like Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Gunnar Karlsson mined the

21 *Grágás: Lagasafn íslenska þjóðveldisins*, ed. Gunnar Karlsson, Kristján Sveinsson and Mörður Árnason (Reykjavík, 1992), p. 461.
22 Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamenning: Staða og áhrif goðorðsmanna í Þjóðveldi Íslendinga* (Reykjavík, 2004), pp. 369–90.
23 Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans. Jean Lundskær-Nielsen (Odense, 1999), pp. 39–83.
24 Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamenning*, pp. 63–86.

sagas – both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *samtíðarsögur* – for all possible answers to central questions about the nature of the chieftaincies.

By the early thirteenth century a new class of political players had emerged on the scene, with much greater ambitions than holding chieftaincies in their localities. These men belonged to a handful of families or dynasties that had gained control over the chieftaincies in their extended regions. Of these the most prominent were the Sturlungar family in western Iceland and the Ásbirningar in the north-west. In the early phase of the *Sturlungaöld*, from about 1220 to the Battle of Örlygsstaðir in 1238, the conflicts were relatively low-key. They primarily involved the most ambitious members of the Sturlungar family – among them Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) and his nephew Sturla Sighvatsson (1199–1238) – jostling for power. To augment their chances the chief participants began to tie their ambitions to the Norwegian king, without however making serious and concerted attempts to bring Iceland under royal control.

With the death of Sturla at Örlygsstaðir and the killing of Snorri in 1241 (ostensibly by royal command) a new and more violent phase began. The main participants, such as Gizurr Þorvaldsson (1208–68) of the Haukdælir family and Þórðr *kakali* Sigvatsson (1210–56) and Þorgils *skarði* Böðvarsson (1225–58) of the Sturlungar family, aimed at countrywide dominance and for this purpose allied their political fortune to the king's cause. By the 1250s the regional conglomerations of chieftaincies had coalesced further into large dominions (*héraðsríki*) which have been referred to as 'proto-states'.[25] These dominions the king effectively bestowed on his Icelandic retainers, who nevertheless still had problems achieving his ultimate goal, either due to internal conflicts or the recalcitrance of local farmers.

Identifying the underlying causes of the power consolidation has been a notable feature in Icelandic historiography of the Commonwealth period. Understandably, historians have focused on new developments that may have accelerated this process. For instance, could the Tithe-law and the associated emergence of the church centres have played a part in this development? The church centres' tax-free status, it has been argued, made them desirable and profitable possessions which ambitious chieftains sought to collect.[26] This interpretation presupposes a relatively stable system of decentralized governance which was undermined by the introduction of a foreign element into the body politic, namely the Christian Church (the other foreign element pulling in the same direction being the covetous Norwegian king). Yet although control

25 Sverrir Jakobsson, 'The process of state-formation in medieval Iceland', *Viator*, 40:2 (2009), 151–70.

26 See, for example, Björn Þorsteinsson, *Íslensk miðaldasaga* (Reykjavík, 1980), pp. 92–9.

of church centres may have helped to concentrate power into fewer hands, this competition can hardly have been the sole or even primary underlying cause of Iceland's consolidation of power. For one thing, the economic benefits of the church centres must be offset against the cost they brought to their owners. It is likely, however, that the introduction of the Tithe-law allowed the most prominent players in each region – the keepers of the church centres – to consolidate and expand their authority through routes not previously possible.

Recent scholarship has shifted towards highlighting ideological factors in the power consolidation process. In this respect, the ideas of Sverrir Jakobsson are particularly interesting.[27] He highlights the aforementioned decree of 1190 in which the archbishop of Niðaróss forbade men in holy orders from engaging in secular affairs. This, he argues, created a rift within the Icelandic elite that compelled its members to choose between ecclesiastical and secular careers. Consequently, certain families began to focus more intently on the political sphere, which resulted in accelerating power consolidation. But with increasing power came increased responsibility, and so, Sverrir Jakobsson suggests, the new class of territorial lords justified their rule by connecting with the familiar trope that it was a Christian ruler's duty to maintain peace within his dominion. Accordingly, extending personal power came to be seen as a virtue rather than a vice. Further legitimacy was accrued by accepting courtly status and a mandate from the Norwegian king. Beginning with Snorri Sturluson in 1218–20, leading Icelandic chieftains now paid homage to the Norwegian king and in return received status and titles at his court.

There are some signs that the leading chieftains adopted both practical and ideological elements associated with foreign types of rulership. Members of this exclusive class established a permanent retinue, patronized literary activity and, as just noted, assumed overall responsibility for maintaining peace in their domain. They could not, however, operate without the support of Iceland's landowning class, which, although not holding chieftaincies, or even belonging to the major families, still wielded economic and social power at the grassroots level. Exploring the dynamics between the regional chieftains and the local magnates is thus an important topic in the study of the late Commonwealth.

Earlier writings on the termination of the Commonwealth not surprisingly focused on the significance of 1262/4 in Iceland's history. Integral to the call for nationhood, limited home-rule (1874), independence (1918) and eventual

27 Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Process of state-formation'.

full separation from the Danish crown (1944) was the notion that the end of the Commonwealth equated to a loss of independence. Recent scholarship has challenged this binary model, which presupposes a sharp break in 1262/4. The relevant studies highlight the complicated relationship between Iceland and Norway, which extended way back to Iceland's settlement.[28] After all, according to Ari Þorgilsson, the country's early laws were based on regional Norwegian laws. Further, legal distinctions between Icelanders and Norwegians were not so clear-cut during the Commonwealth period. Thus the so-called *Óláfslög*, preserved in the *Konungsbók* version of *Grágás* and likely dating back to the eleventh century, stipulate the mutual rights of Icelanders and Norwegians in each other's countries.

Although a separate Icelandic identity had emerged by the eleventh century (and probably earlier), these studies highlight how this identity existed in a complex and dynamic relationship with Norway and its royal authority. The establishment of the archbishopric of Niðaróss in 1152 is also important in this respect, as it brought the fledgling Icelandic Church firmly into the Norwegian sphere of influence. Lastly, as literary scholars have long emphasized, the ambiguous relationship between Icelanders and their principal 'homeland' features as a central theme in a number of the *Íslendingasögur* and especially, of course, the *konungasögur* (kings' sagas).

## 1262/4–1400

The so-called *Gizurrarsáttmáli* (alternatively referred to as *Gamli Sáttmáli*, the 'Old Covenant') was agreed between the Icelanders and King Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–63), and stipulated mutual rights and duties. The Icelanders recognized their status as the king's tax-paying subjects, while he guaranteed transport and trade to and from Iceland. But it was the introduction of a new law-code – *Járnsíða*, in 1271–4, superseded by *Jónsbók* in 1281 – that heralded a fundamental change in Iceland's governance. Most importantly, the ultimate legislative and judicial power now no longer resided with the *Lögrétta* and local assemblies. Both powers were in the king's hands, although, crucially, the Icelanders could influence amendments and new laws. Iceland therefore retained a separate legal status from Norway and its other dominions.

28 See, for instance, Ann-Marie Long, *Iceland's Relationship with Norway c. 870–c. 1100: Memory, History and Identity* (Leiden, 2017).

The changes (with one minor exception) outlawed private litigation and feud. Royal power monopolized prosecution of secular cases and the carrying out of judicial sentences, such as executions. These developments did not mean that the old ways ended overnight. The (admittedly limited) saga evidence and the annals (see below) of the fourteenth century refer to disputes, sometimes bloody, involving members of both Iceland's secular and ecclesiastical elite. One can only guess what effect this change in law may have had upon Icelandic readers of the sagas, in which feuds are carried out with a quite different set of rules.

When in 1302, early in the reign of Hákon Magnússon (1299–1319), the Icelanders renewed the covenant with the king, they stipulated that royal offices in Iceland should be occupied by scions of those families that had previously possessed the chieftaincies. This set the tone for the rest of the fourteenth century (and beyond), in which a restricted circle of Icelanders derived wealth and influence from royal patronage.

The new governmental system slowly took shape as it adapted to shifting circumstances. This considered, the following broad outline applies to the best part of the fourteenth century. At the top of the administrative pyramid stood the *hirðstjóri* (plu. *hirðstjórar*). This was a direct royal appointment which was occasionally shared between two office-holders and usually lasted only for a few years. The formal duties of the *hirðstjórar* were manifold, but essentially they served as the king's direct representatives in Iceland with overall responsibility for the country's administration. The majority of the fourteenth-century *hirðstjórar* were Icelanders. More fundamental to the day-to-day running of the country were the *sýslumenn* (sheriffs) who received administrative, tax-collecting, prosecutorial and punitive authority within specified regions (which were based on the old quarter divisions). The linchpins of the judicial system were the two lawmen (*lögmenn*) who presided over the *Lögrétta* at the Alþing as well as their respective law-courts, one for the Northern and Western Quarters and the other for the Southern and the Eastern Quarters. Thus the old *Lögrétta* and the office of the law-speaker survived in a modified form. *Hirðstjórar*, *sýslumenn* and *lögmenn* were appointed by the king, and so they formed a part of the court or royal retinue (*hirð*).

Although the chieftaincies were dissolved, other administrative elements survived into the post-Commonwealth period, most notably the so-called *hreppr* (plu. *hreppar*) or 'commune' which, according to *Grágás*, should comprise at least twenty property-owning farmers. The Commonwealth laws prescribe the role of the *hreppar*, and of those the most important relate to

mutual assistance given by farmers to each other, and the commune's responsibility for the poor. In the post-Commonwealth period the *hreppar*'s main focus was on the latter task. The origins of the communes are obscure, and they have left little trace in the literary corpus. Their emergence has, however, been linked with the introduction of the Tithe-law in 1096/7, which, as we have seen, gave one-quarter to the poor – a task which *Grágás* assigns to the communes. Although there are no obvious Scandinavian or Norse parallels to the *hreppar*, their broader function corresponds to a certain degree with those associated with medieval guilds.[29] The new laws for Iceland integrated the *hreppar* into royal administration, where they served as the lowest level of governance while enjoying a considerable degree of independence. The charitable role of the *hreppar* sets Iceland somewhat apart in medieval Europe, in which elsewhere this function was commonly executed by the parish.

In recent historiography there has been a trend towards placing the Norwegian 'empire' of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries within a broader European context, and towards examining the parallel developments of the centre and its constituent parts. These studies emphasize a transnational perspective, whereby the development of individual domains is examined in terms of their own political, economic and social conditions, in a manner which in turn facilitates a broader comparative approach.[30]

Developments in foreign political centres – most importantly at the Norwegian court and the archbishopric of Niðaróss – were of great significance to Iceland's evolution in the period 1262/4 to 1400. One influential factor was the entangled dynastic politics of the Scandinavian royal houses. Thus, when Hákon Magnússon died without a male heir in 1319, he was succeeded by his 3-year-old nephew, Magnús Eiríksson (1316–74), who also ascended to the Swedish throne. In this way, Norway and its tributary lands came into a dynastic union with Sweden. The complex political scene which King Magnús, whose minority ended in 1331, had to negotiate within Scandinavia inevitably drew his attention away from Iceland's affairs, at least compared with the more proactive approach towards Iceland pursued by his predecessors.[31] Also important in this context is the Black Death's

29 Grégory Cattaneo, 'Réflexion sur *les hreppar*: Les communautés d'habitants de l'Islande médiévale', *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, 57 (2014), 113–31 (128–31).

30 See, for instance, Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl, *The Incorporation and Integration of the King's Tributary Lands into the Norwegian Realm c. 1195–1397* (Leiden, 2011).

31 For a good overview in English on this process, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'The making of a "skattland": Iceland 1247–1450', in Steinar Imsen (ed.), *Rex Insularum: The King of Norway and his 'Skattlands' as a Political System c. 1260–c. 1450* (Bergen, 2014), pp. 181–225.

devastating effect on Norway, especially the aristocracy, which severely weakened the kingdom's standing within Scandinavia, particularly in relation to Denmark. In 1380, through King Óláfr Hákonsson (d. 1387), Norway came into personal union with Denmark, and in 1397–8, through further dynastic manoeuvre, Óláfr's mother, Margarét, became effectively the ruler of all three Scandinavian crowns, ushering in the Kalmar Union (1397–1512).

The fourteenth century is marked by Iceland's secular elite accumulating landed wealth on an unprecedented scale. This elite had less need than its forerunners in the Commonwealth to maintain followers by lavish gift-giving and other drains on its resources. Its wealth, augmented and protected by royal patronage, could now be invested to a greater degree in land and the cultivation of elite pursuits such as supporting literary production. Indeed, a notable recent approach in late medieval Icelandic studies highlights how the interests and concerns of this class are reflected in the literary corpus of this period, including the native *riddarasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* (see this volume, Chapters 21 and 9).[32] Is it possible, for instance, to observe a shift in literary taste in this period from sagas that highlight honour and shame towards sagas that express aristocratic and courtly values?

Ecclesiastical values are clearly expressed in the voluminous fourteenth-century Old Norse corpus on the lives of St Thomas Becket and Guðmundr Arason. In 1315 Guðmundr's remains were translated at Hólar and a concerted, yet unsuccessful, effort seems to have been made to secure papal approval of his sanctity. This process, and the intense literary focus on these two episcopal champions of *libertas ecclesiae*, underlines the increasing power and self-identity of the Icelandic Church.

Foundations for this development were laid in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. In 1275 Bishop Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt had the Icelandic Alþing accept a new ecclesiastical law-code, pending its acceptance by the archbishop of Niðaróss and the Norwegian king. This replaced the Christian law-section, which in the twelfth century had been incorporated into the Commonwealth's laws. Árni's new law-code not only defined the relations between the secular and the Church, but also presented the Church as an independent institution and the cornerstone of Icelandic society.

Of both practical and symbolic significance was the law-code's claim to the Church's ultimate ownership over all churches and their assets. Laymen were only to manage and accrue benefit from churches if the bishop had consented

32 For an illuminating discussion of this trend, see Helgi Þorláksson, 'Aristocrats between kings and tax-paying farmers: Iceland c. 1280 to c. 1450. Political culture, the political actors and the evidence of the sagas', in Imsen (ed.), *Rex Insularum*, pp. 265–303.

to such an arrangement. This revived the issue of the ownership of *staðir*, church centres, which apparently had occupied Þorlákr Þórhallsson a century or so earlier. There followed a protracted conflict between the Church, spearheaded by Árni Þorláksson, and members of the Icelandic secular elite. Finally, the disputing parties placed the issue into royal arbitration. The conflict was resolved in 1296/7 with the Treaty of Ögvaldsnes, which stipulated the Church's full ownership of the church centres. Laymen, however, should possess farms of which the Church owned a half part or less (the so-called Farmers' churches).

With this settlement, the bishops of Skálholt and Hólar gained control over a significant part of Iceland's landed wealth, and this, within a relatively short period of time, established the Church as a rich, powerful and independent institution. Assessing the wealth of the Church as an institution as well as individual churches is facilitated by a type of source with few if any contemporary parallels. These are the so-called *máldagar* (singular: *máldagi*), which are documents that enumerate the property and possessions held by ecclesiastical foundations of any kind. The earliest such inventories date to the late twelfth century, but they become numerous and more systematically produced in the post-Commonwealth period. The *máldagar* have been used to illuminate various aspects of Icelandic medieval society, including in a seminal study of the cult of saints.[33]

The Church's landed wealth allowed bishops to weave a web of patronage with benefices given to selected members of the clergy. Interestingly, however, the Church's gain did not have a lasting deleterious impact on the secular landed elite. Thus, a parallel ecclesiastical elite developed alongside the landowning secular aristocracy, although members of both were usually drawn from the same familial pool. Currently a focus on the formation and development of elite identity, whether secular or ecclesiastical, features prominently in the study of fourteenth-century Iceland.[34]

*Árna saga biskups*, a biography of Bishop Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt (1269–98), is the principal narrative source for Iceland's history in the 1270s and 1280s. *Lárentíus saga biskups*, a biography of Lárentíus Kálfsson (1324–31), covers the period until the bishop of Hólar's death in 1331. These individual *samtíðarsögur* of the post-Commonwealth period have attracted limited attention other than as sources for Icelandic history. Thus, at the time of writing,

33 Margaret Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland: Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400* (Brussels, 1994).

34 See Erika Sigurdson, *The Church in Fourteenth-Century Iceland: The Formation of an Elite Clerical Identity* (Leiden, 2016).

there is no English translation of *Árna saga*, and the single one of *Lárentíus saga* dates to 1890. However, as in the case of the more celebrated *samtíðarsögur*, which treat the period c. 1180–1262, the literary construction of these last *Biskupa sögur* (bishops' sagas) has attracted closer attention.[35]

A shared feature of these sagas is their frequent use of annals. The composition of annals proliferates in the fourteenth century, and in fact they constitute our main narrative source for its second half. In line with research into the *samtíðarsögur*, scholars have sought to examine the Icelandic annals as products of their time and place rather than as unproblematic conveyors of facts.[36]

Annals also constitute our primary written source for trade between Iceland and the outside world in the fourteenth century. For this period, and indeed for the medieval period as a whole, assessing the nature and extent of Iceland's trade is problematic. The *Íslendingasögur* refer frequently to characters travelling and trading with relative ease. This is likely to be an idealized or wishful picture; the situation in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was undoubtedly very different. References to trades and traders in the *samtíðarsögur* and annals indicate that sailing and trading largely depended on Norwegian traders, and this is confirmed by Icelanders' requests in covenants that the kings should guarantee the yearly arrival of six ships.

It would be incorrect to conclude that this situation depressed Iceland's latent potential to trade with the outside world. Iceland in the period covered in this chapter was essentially a self-sufficient society with imports largely limited to luxury goods and items for ecclesiastical observance. Home-spun cloth (*vaðmál*) and other wool products were the primary articles of export. However, in the course of the fourteenth century (and probably somewhat earlier), Norwegian merchants begin to ship Icelandic *skreið* (stockfish), with Bergen serving as the principal entrepot. How this affected Iceland's internal economy and social structure is still a matter of debate.[37]

There is a consensus, however, that tenancy became far more common in the course of the fourteenth century. This trend paralleled the growing wealth of the Church and the landowning class, which meant fewer

35 Haki Antonsson, '*Árna saga biskups* as literature and history', *JEGP*, 116:3 (2017), 261–85, and Fulvio Ferrari, 'La *Lárentíus saga biskups* nel sistema letterario antico nordico', in Carla Falluomini (ed.), *XVI Seminario avanzato in filologia germanica: Intorno alle saghe norrene* (Alessandria, 2014), pp. 3–24; see also this volume, Chapter 18.

36 Patricia Pires Boulhosa, 'Of fish and ships in medieval Iceland', in Steinar Imsen (ed.), The Norwegian Domination and the Norse World c. 1100–c. 1400 (Trondheim, 2010), pp. 175–97.

37 Orri Vésteinsson, 'Commercial fishing and the political economy of medieval Iceland', in James H. Barrett and David C. Orton (eds.), *Cod and Herring: The Archaeology and History of Medieval Sea Fishing* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 71–9.

independent farmers, with the associated increase in social and economic dependency.[38] From a broader perspective, assessing the prevalence of tenancy – whether renting land or cattle (or both) – is one of the most important, yet thorniest, issues of medieval Icelandic history. Certainly, the *Íslendingasögur* – which feature farmers operating on a relatively equal playing field – give a distorted picture of the social conditions during the saga age, let alone at the time of their writing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It has even been argued that a substantial manorial system was in place as far back as the settlement period.[39]

The study of landholding necessarily crosses the (inevitably somewhat arbitrary) chronological division of this short survey of Iceland's medieval history and some of its more notable historiographical trends. The same principle applies to studies that explore the worldview and mental outlook of medieval Icelanders. Identifying patterns of social thought and behaviour is, of course, a distinguishing feature of the 'legal-anthropological school' in the study of Commonwealth society. Important recent studies have, however, looked beyond honour, shame and dispute resolution to illuminate less explored topics, such as the Icelanders' perceptions of their own identity and place in the world, and changing laws and attitudes towards sex and marriage, as well as the role of landscape in the preservation of historical memory.[40] These studies have in common a flexible, and often imaginative, use of literary sources combined with a sensitivity for development and change, and for Iceland's place within a broader European context.

38 Sverrir Jakobsson, 'From reciprocity to manorialism: On the peasant mode of production in medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 38:3 (2013), 273–95.

39 A manor is defined here as a 'group of farms (not necessarily adjacent), of which the biggest controlled the others'; Árni Daníel Júlíusson, 'Signs of power: Manorial demesnes in medieval Iceland', *VMS*, 6 (2010), 1–29 (3).

40 Chris Callow, *Landscape, Tradition and Power in Medieval Iceland: Dalir and the Eyjafjörður Region c. 870–c. 1265* (Leiden, 2020); Haraldur Hreinsson, *Force of Words: A Cultural History of Christianity and Politics in Medieval Iceland (11th–13th Centuries)* (Leiden, 2021); Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin: Heimsmynd Íslendinga 1100–1400* (Reykjavík, 2005); Long, *Iceland's Relationship with Norway*.