Íslendingabók and the book of the Icelandic sagas

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Summary

The reputation and importance of Ari hinn fróði in the development of the Icelandic literary corpus is evident and widely recognized, but nevertheless, the importance of Íslendingabók in the development of the Íslendingasögur has not been investigated in detailed.

Showing the importance of the narrative structure and fundamental argumentation of Ari Þorgilsson in the genesis of an Icelandic historical ethos that allowed Icelanders to recover, reshaped and made use of their pagan ancestry is important to understand the close relation that Icelanders kept with their past in the centuries following the conversion.

I´ll explore the way that Ari outlines his history of Iceland, as a Christian narrative. In Ari’s account, Iceland was first populated by Irish monks, the papar, but they left because they were unwilling to live among the heathen colonizers that come from Norway. The structure of Íslendingabók have similarities to Bede’s Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum, and follows Augustine of Hippo in the conception of Teleology, but also is very original in how historical argumentation is built. This historical argumentation was not built in isolation by Ari Þorgilsson, but was part of an intellectual movement in Iceland that elaborated histories, but nevertheless, all the evidence points to the fact that Ari was the first to ever write in vernacular Icelandic.

Thus, it will be investigated how Íslendingabók represents an emerging ethos in Icelandic scholar tradition, that re-appropriates the past as praise-worthy but looks forward to a Christian future. In Íslendingabók, Ari chose an array of historical events, that became in the Íslendingasögur creating a Christian narrative that, like the one of many Íslendigasögur, evolves from one pole towards the final resolution. Ari’s narrative gravitates around the Christian origins of the land, and its final rising of an independent Church in the land.

By doing this, Ari created a new cultural ethos in Iceland, that wrote in vernacular rather than Latin, and influenced the narrative structure of the sagas while also rising the indigenous narratives to an scholar production.
Foreword

Chip Robinson once told me that when J. S. Bach finished a piece of music, he used to write *Soli Deo Gloria* in the partiture. I will do the same, after all the blessings set upon me and declare that this work is not the product of my hands or my intellect, but only of my effort.

First and Foremost: I most say thanks to Mayita: till min mormor som gav mig berättelser och fjärilar

Secondly: To my Parents and siblings; undesearved blessings always, I hope this understanding toll brings you joy and make you proud of me, after all my failures.

What would be of me, without the guidance of Karl G. Johansson? Tack så mycket, for your patience and wisdom, and for your immense knowledge, but also for your support when I was lost in this path of writing.

To Haraldur Bernharðsson, “Awiliudo þus” John 11:41 en þakka þér kærlega, for being a great Forn Íslensku teacher, and a great teacher in general.

To sera Jakob in Reykjavík, that said the day I arrived to Reykjavík, that Iceland is the only country that was first Christian, he mentioned this in the Kirkjukaffi.

To Josh, that corrected my messy English and my obscure passages.

To my friends, that supported me and gave their company: To Victor, Chip, Sebas, Jaka, Embla, Eira, Ines, Clara, Bjorn, Kirsti, Viktória, Susanne, Marinne, Lucie, Kari, Alejo, Colin, Marika, Anja… and so many I owe great moments and joys, ideas and dreams.

*Soli Deo Honor et Gloria.*
# Table of contents

## Contents

Summary ........................................................................................................................................... V

Foreword ........................................................................................................................................... VI

Table of contents .............................................................................................................................. VII

1 Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 1

2 Writings of wise men and the Icelandic ethos. ........................................................................ 7

3 Genealogies, the common reckoning of time and a new Israel. ........................................... 21

4 Iceland: Kingless Paradise. ........................................................................................................ 37

5 Conclusion ................................................................................................................................... 43

List of sources and bibliography ................................................................................................. 45
1 Introduction

Ubi enim est thesaurus tuus, ibi est et cor tuum.

Lucerna corporis tui est oculus tuus.

Si oculus tuus fuerit simplex, totum corpus tuum lucidum erit.

Matthew 6:21-22

Íslendingabók and The Library of Babel.

In his famous short story, The Library of Babel, Jorge Luis Borges presents us with a universe conceived as an eternal library, filled with books, in which all the variations of the 25 characters that compose the books of this universe, could produce a book that is the formula and perfect compendium of all others.\(^1\) The relation of Íslendingabók or Libellus Islandorum by Ari hinn fróði with the rest of the Icelandic literary corpus, with especial attention to the Íslendingasögur, can be imagined to occupy a similar position with them, as the Ur-buch which Borges imagines has with the eternal library, in that Íslendingabók lends them its structure and language, and also sets the scenery in which most Íslendingasögur will be resolved.

A reading of Ari’s production in the context in which Íslendingabók was produced, just at the onset of Icelandic written culture, highlights both how greatly original it is, and how much it owes to the Christian education based on the classics and the Bible. In my opinion, the study of the deep and vast influence that Ari imprints on the Icelandic literary corpus, has been so far neglected, regardless of the attention given to it.

Despite the evidence of the status of Ari amongst the Icelanders in the middle ages, the only two extant manuscripts we have are from the 17th century, copies made by Jón Erlandsson for bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson, from one manuscript of the 13th century, and it is very probable that Jón Erlandsson thought that he was working with the manuscript of Ari himself, since he named his copies schedæ Ara preists froða. We can also verify to a certain degree that we have something that resembles greatly to the original manuscript that Jón used, following linguistic considerations, and external evidence such as citations attributed to Ari in some sagas that prove a relation between the manuscripts we have, with the original work of Ari.\(^2\)

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The edition prepared for Íslenzk Fornrit by Jakob Benediktsson will be used for this thesis, having in consideration the notes and the preface, since it not only is the standard edition, but allows an understanding of what the two copies contain. This edition also gives us information on the relation of Íslendingabók with other sagas and sources from the Icelandic corpus. The notes made by Jakob Benediktsson reflect many times the differences between the two manuscripts, and also the corrections carried out by Árni Magnússon to one of the manuscripts.³

Another important aspect that requires examination, comes from the source itself, since Ari produced two editions or versions of his work, but the manuscripts we have preserved only the second version, giving us only a small window to the first version thanks to quotes and descriptions of the work done by later writers, such as Snorri’s Heimskringla. This loss means, that we work with just a fraction of the work of Ari that influenced Icelanders in the development of the Íslendingasögur. Nevertheless, we seem to have retained most of Ari’s work, and enough information survives to give an idea of what was lost. It is not my idea, nor my interest, to enter the realm of speculation about the contents or presentation of the first version of Íslendingabók.

Beyond this, the authority of Ari is patent and widely represented in the Icelandic corpus. In the introduction to Heimskringla, Snorri Sturluson says that “Ari prestr inn fróði Þorgilsson, Gellissonar, ritaði fyrstr manna hér á landi at norrœnu máli frœði, bæði forna ok nýja. […] ok þýkkir mér hans sögn òll merkilíugust.” “The priest Ari the learned son of Þorgils Gellison, was the first that wrote of the men here on country in the Norse language knowledge both old and new… and seems to me all his account the most remarkable”⁴ Snorri is not the only one that praises Ari hinn fróði, for a multitude of sources reminds us that Ari not only was the first of the Icelanders to write a book in the vernacular, but that his intellectual production was also sagacious and related to the other vernacular productions in the first half of the 12th century: “bæði lög ok áttvifí eða þyðingar helgar eða íva þav hín þaklegv fræði er ari þorgilf í fon hefir a bókr fett af ðkynlæmsgv viti” “both the laws and the genealogies, or interpretations

of sacred writings, or also that sagacious (historical) lore that Ari Þorgilsson has recorded in books with such reasonable understanding as the First Grammarians states.

Although, trying to reconstruct what was lost is not the aim of this work, it is important to know that, the first version of Íslendingabók may have influenced greatly the Icelandic corpus, if my hypothesis is correct. Ari himself states at the beginning of his book “Íslendingabók gørða ek fyrr 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 áttartölö ok konunga ævi.” “I did Íslendingabók first for our bishops, Þorlákr and Ketill, and I show it both to them and to the priest Sæmundr. But because those things they liked to have it so or to expand them, I wrote this one about the same subject, without genealogies and the lives of kings.” Which means that the genealogies and lives of kings that belonged to the original were taken out by Ari when compiling the extant version. Snorri Sturluson, in his introduction to Heimskringla, gives us more information about Íslendingabók that must come from that first version: “Ari prestr inn fróði […] Hann ritaði, sem hann sjálfr segir, ævi Nóregskonunga eptir sögu Odds Kolssonar, […] en Oddr nam at Þorgeirr aframáskollr, þeim mann, er vitr var ok svá gamall, at hann bjó þá í Niðarnesi, er Hákon jarl inn réki var drepinn.” “The priest Ari the learned… he wrote, as he says himself, lives of the kings of Norway according to Oddr Kolsson’s saga… and Oddr learned from Þorgeirr aframáskollr, that man who was wise and so old, that he lived there in Niðarnes, when Hákon jarl the powerful was killed.” Snorri seems to be quoting the way that Ari explains some of his sources for the lives of kings and how Oddr Kolsson as well settled the authority of his own source; later he quotes him again in something we don’t find in Íslendingabók: “Svá segir Ari prestr Þorgilsson, at Hákon jarl væri þrettán vetr yfir fóðurelfð sinni í Þrándheimi, aðr Haraldr gráfelfdr fell, en sex vetr ina síðustu, er Haraldr gráfelfdr lifði, segir Ari, at Gunnhildarsynir ok Hákon bǫðusk, ok stukku ýmsir ór landi.” “So says the priest Ari Þorgilsson, that Hákon Jarl was thirteen winters over his patrimony in Þrándheim, before Haraldr grey-cloak fell, and the last six winters, that Haraldr grey-cloak lived, Ari says that the sons of Gunnhildr and Hákon fought each other and flee alternately from the land.” These quotes show that Ari was highly interested

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5 The First Grammatical Treatise, ed. Hreinn Benediktsson, (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Publications in Linguistics, 1972), 208, 209. From now on this source will be quoted as F.G.T the translation of the F. G. T always belongs to Hreinn Benediktsson.
6 Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 3.
7 Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla I, 6.
8 Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla I, 239.
in the Norwegian and Danish affairs, and that the extant version of his oeuvre hides greatly his interest in other affairs.

That both the F. G. T. and Snorri present evidence that shows that Ari is the first writer in the vernacular makes Ari an interesting case to be studied, since he emerged as a vernacular writer of a subject that was considered intellectual and, for that reason, usually produced in Latin. Strikingly enough, the previous generation of writers wrote in Latin, so Ari was going against a tradition, that although recent in Iceland, was old in Christendom.\textsuperscript{9} For the first generation of Icelanders, writing in Latin was the natural choice; education in the middle ages was done in Latin, and although the runic script was in use since Iceland was settled, and there are runic interpolations and other evidence that prove that they kept the memory of these traditions,\textsuperscript{10} The runic script fits well for short and unambiguous aphorisms and inscriptions, but is also highly codified and the younger fuþark fits poorly with the language. And when the Latin Script came to Iceland, it came with its own history, traditions and, perhaps more importantly, was brought into the context of the Christianization, that equated language and truth in the context of tradition. Silent reading, the comprehension of both, the self and the spiritual realities of Christianity and finally, the understanding of complex arguments, came with the religion of the book, but came in Latin.\textsuperscript{11}

But when Ari wrote in the vernacular a book about Icelanders in the broader context of the Christian world, he became himself an authority on both historical lore (\textit{frœði}) and on the newly imported forms of administrating knowledge. Meulengracht Sørensen explains the definitions of \textit{frœði} thus: “Ordet \textit{frœði} bruges om historisk viden, uden at der forudsattes en strukturering af denne viden. Johan Fritzner oversætter I \textit{Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog} det feminine ord \textit{frœði} med ‘historisk Kundskab eller Efterretning’.”\textsuperscript{12} Ari also became recognized as a reference on the existential situation of Iceland among the Christendom; as Sverrir Jakobsson points out, when \textit{Íslendingabók} was composed, Iceland was no more under the See of Hamburg-Bremen but under the one of Lund since 1104; and his selection of the genealogies of kings, of the conversion story and of the portrait he paints of Óláfr Tryggvason contrast greatly with Adam of Bremen’s \textit{Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum} and

\textsuperscript{11} M. B. Parkes, “Reading, Copying and Interpreting a Text in the Early Middle Ages.” 91-102.
\textsuperscript{12} Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, \textit{Fortælling og ære. Studier i islændingesagaerne}, (Århus: Aarhus Universitetforlag, 1993) 36.
doubtlessly reflects Ari’s position in the Investiture Controversy and the internal struggles amongst three claimants to the throne after Magnús berfættr. That the Icelandic and Norwegian writers relied widely on Ari’s genealogies since the end of the 12th century attests to his authority and influence on the Icelandic corpus. \[13\]

Ari was born around the year 1068 in Breiðafjörður and lived his first years after the death of his father in Helgafell with his grandfather Gellir Þorkelsson, where he probably met Þórir Snorradóttir.\[14\] Snorri says that when Ari was seven, he was taken to Haukadalur to live with Hallr Þórarinsson for fourteen years, and there Teitr Ísleifssonr fostered him and helped in his education.\[15\] According to his own testimony he was acquainted with the most powerful men in Iceland, and his position as an intellectual authority seems to have been respected in his own time, since the first generation, the one that formed him as a priest and as a scholar, held him valuable enough to entrust him with a new version of his own œuvre.\[16\]

Of that first generation, the most renown is doubtlessly Sæmundr fróði Sigfússon. Not much is known about what he wrote, and certainly some of the attributions to Sæmundr were conveyed in an oral environment originally, but as Svend Ellehøj shows: “Men i andre tilfælde anvendes der præsensform ved henvisningerne, og her er det vanskeligt at opfatte dem som gældende andet end et skrift af Sæmundr.”\[17\] But it seems evident that he was greatly interested in the Norwegian affairs, since the renowned poem Nøregs konungatal, preserved in Flateyjarbók, says in the 40th stanza: “Nu hefir ek talt- tiu landreka- þa er huerr var- fra Haralldi.- inta ek sua- æfui þeirra- sem Sæmundr- sagdi hinn frøði.” \[18\] Now I have counted- ten land rulers- each who were- from Haraldr (descended). - I retold so- their lives- as Sæmundr-the wise said.”

And a fragment from Óláfs saga tryggvasonar by Oddr munk Snorrason:

Þessa þings getr Sæmundr prestr hinn fróði, er ágætr var at speki, ok mælti svá: “Á qōru ári ríkis Óláfs konungs Tryggvasonar samnaði hann saman mikit folk ok átti þing á Staði á Draseiði ok lét eigi af at boða mǫnnum réttu trú, fyr ræt þeir tóku skírn. Óláfr konungr hepti mjǫk rán ok stulði ok manndráp. Hann gaf ok góð lög fólkinu ok góðan sið.” Svá hefir Sæmundr ritat um Óláf konung í sinni bók.

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\[14\] Jakob Benediktsson, introduction to Íslendingabók-Landnámabók, V.


\[16\] Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 3. This will be expanded later in the first chapter.


\[18\] Nøregs konungatal quoted from: Svend Ellehøj, Ældste Norrøne Historieskrivning, 19.
Of this Assembly, mentions priest Sæmundr *the learned*, who was famously wise, and told so: “On the second year of rule of the king Óláfr Tryggvason, he gathered a great host and had an assembly on Staðr on Draseiðr and didn’t let the faith be proclaimed law to the men, before they were baptized. King Óláfr hinder much raiding and stealing and man killing. He gave good law to the people, and good traditions.” Thus has Sæmundr written about King Óláfr in his book.19

Apparently, for Sæmundr, Iceland was a rather peripheric environment, and due to his legendary education in either France or Franconia in the Holy Roman Empire, and, if we are to believe the legend, his reticence to return to Iceland, we can argue that his real interests lay near the center of the Christian world. He seemed also to have placed his alliance with the Danish king against the Emperor in the Investitures Controversy or with the Archdioceses of Hamburg-Bremen when the Archdiocese was established in Lund, modern day Sweden then Denmark.20

It can be argued that, when Ari wrote his book, he produced an incision from the mainstream intellectual culture, that would prove to be very influential and productive, since the tradition of writing sagas borrowed from *Íslendingabók* extensively either directly or indirectly; and used Ari as an authority quote when needed. This means that we require a proper reading of *Íslendingabók* to understand the historical dynamic that made Ari such an important figure in the Icelandic Corpus. Authors such as Anders Winroth have portrayed Ari as a rather secular writer;21 but it is my understanding that this is misleading and erroneous. Thus I will argue that a reading of *Íslendingabók* following the medieval tradition of reading in four ways—literal, allegorical or typological, tropological or moral, and finally anagogical—gives a better understanding of how the the works’s episodic structure and the connection of Icelandic history with a broader Christian history, allowed Ari and the Icelanders to integrate their world with that of Christendom, forming a new Icelandic *ethos* for their new, Christian, environment.

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2 Writings of wise men and the Icelandic ethos.

1. In *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, Bede relates a metaphor that one counselor gave to king Edwin about a sparrow that passes through a mead-hall on winter, having thus light and warm amongst the storm for just a while: “Ita haec uita hominum ad modicum apparat; quid autem sequatur, quidue praecesserit, prorsus ignoramus.” “So this life of man appears for a little while, but of what is to follow or what went before we know nothing at all.”22 This also illustrates a medieval problem about historicity and the media in which historical narratives were delivered. Bede writes these words in relation also to the heathen worldview that does not inform men of what went before them nor the darkness that lies ahead of them. It is fitting that the words are set in the mouth of someone still embedded in the pre-Christian religion and culture, because it also shows the difference between the oral media (orality) and written media (literacy) that corresponds to both traditions.

Although the problem of orality and literacy in Bede’s time and in Ari’s is not fully comparable, the way both of them approach their sources, both oral and written, demonstrates the tension between oral and written cultures. Also, Ari is indebted to Bede and thus, how Bede contends with the problem of literacy influenced Ari’s approach.23 It is important also to highlight that Ari partakes in a culture were the use of texts, and thus an investment in literacy, is on the rise, and that his endeavour when rescuing the fading memories of wise people has a limit in personal experience, that textual memory bypasses. Pernille Hermann explains this thus: “Only when memory is transferred from the individual to collectively shared forms, embedded in various media (orality, writing, picture), is it possible reach the past that lies beyond experience”.24 This is also reflected in the fact that Christianity, as the religion of the book, prompts in Iceland the writing of the first vernacular script of the laws, placed according

23 Jakob Benediktsson, introduction to *Íslendingabók-Landnámabók*, XXII.
to the oral recitation, and then read aloud, changing the power dynamics by the power of literacy and media.\textsuperscript{25}

In Bede, the differentiation of media is perceived by a preference for the written evidence and the use of Latin. As M. B. Parkes explains, for the cultures far from the Mediterranean world, the implementation of systematic writing came also as an independent form of expression, unrelated to vocalized speech both in form and authority.\textsuperscript{26} Although Bede preferred written media, he finds himself in a position where, to gain knowledge, he must rely on oral accounts. In his introduction he says: “Ut autem in his, quae scripsi, uel tibi, uel ceteris auditoribus siue lectoribus huius historiae occasionem dubitandi subtraham, quibus haec maxime auctoribus didicerim, breuiter intimare curabo.” “But to the end that I may remove all occasion of doubting what I have written, both from yourself and other readers or hearers of this history, I will take care briefly to show you from what authors I chiefly learned the same.”\textsuperscript{27} and then quotes his sources saying that they were delivered by letter or by speech as with Nothelm: “siue litteris mandata, siue ipsius Nothelmi uiua voce referenda, transmisit.” “Transmitted... either in writing, or by word of mouth of the same Nothelm,”\textsuperscript{28} Ari also enumerates his sources and discusses their authority:

– at ætlun ok tølu þeira Teits fóstra mínis, þess manns es ek kunna spakastan, sonar Ísleifs byskups, ok Þorkels fðurbróður mínis Gellissonar, es langt munði fram, ok bóriðar Snorradóttur góða, es baði vas margspók ok óljúgróð, – es Ívarr Ragnarssonr loðbrókar lét drepa Eadmund enn helga Englakonung […] at þvi es ritit es í sögu hans.

– according to the opinion and reckoning of my foster father Teitr, that man who I know to be the wisest, son of bishop Ísleifr; and of Þorkell, my paternal uncle, son of Gellir, who could remember a long time back; and of Þóríðr daughter of Snorri góði, who was both very wise and truthful, – when Ívarr son of Ragnarr loðbrók had killed the holy Eadmund, king of the Angles... as is written in his saga.\textsuperscript{29}

The problem of orality-literacy and the lack of texts that detailed the history of Iceland prior to Íslendingabók, gave form to the system in which Ari relates external texts to the oral

\textsuperscript{25} Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, “Legal Culture and Historical Memory in medieval and Early Modern Iceland.” in Minni and Muninn, 217-221.
\textsuperscript{26} M. B. Parkes, “Reading, Copying and Interpreting a Text in the Early Middle Ages.” 94.
\textsuperscript{27} Bede, Historia Ecclesistica, location 69-78 and 107-117.
\textsuperscript{28} Bede, Historia Ecclesistica, location 82-83 and 120.
\textsuperscript{29} Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 4.
traditions as Ole Bruhn states: “Men grunden skal navnlig søges i det forhold, at islændingene så relativt kort tid efter øenes bebyggelse begyndte at skrive om deres samfunds indretning, […] Havde de ikke gjort det, ville Islands historie formodentlig have set helt anderledes ud i dag.” As the use of Yngvi Tyrkjakonung (king of the turks) in the genealogy at the end of Íslendingabók and of the dates of reigns and deaths of foreign kings and pontiffs betrays, Ari was using textual sources – i.e. Bede and Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum– to validate also the temporal superstructure that englobes the oral traditions. Thus, Ari links the lives of the lawspeakers (lögsgumanna ævi) –an oral dispositive of reckoning time– with the Christian reckoning of time. Sverrir Jakobsson demonstrates that Ari was interested in the history of the world, following the work attributed of late to Ari, Heimsaldrar –that uses a similar chronological system– and his interests in regional, Icelandic and Nordic narratives, as that settles Iceland in the history of the world.

As Brian Stock reminds us, medieval documentation can evidence portions of the preliterate-oral traditions, in which the presence of writings was not indicative of literacy by itself. We can suppose that in Iceland this was the case at the time when Ari wrote Íslendingabók, if we follow the evidence of chapter X, that says that the law was written and modified at the farm of Hafliótt Másson and later read aloud for the people to acclaim the laws they agreed with, and reject the others, an event happening in the years 1117-1118. This accounts to the perseverance of a traditional way of keeping both memory and order, as Jan Assmann shows: “The system of communication therefore has to develop an external area where communications and information – of cultural importance – can be processed through forms of coding, storage and retrieval.” That system of communication is not eradicated by the mere fact of adding a new technology to keep memory, as literacy is, but negotiates with oral traditions as the promulgation of the law in Alþingi in the case of the law, or the genealogies (áttartala) of Icelanders to reckon time and relations; thus Judy Quinn says: “(lögsgumannatal) is basic to the structure of Ari’s Íslendingabók, although he also uses the Christian chronological system in his history.”

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33 Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 23-24.
This transition from oral to written culture gives way to a new form of cultural memory. Assmann says that cultural memory is a sphere where “tradition, awareness of history, myth in action, and self-definition” combine constantly through history by diverse factors “including those brought about by the evolution of media technology.”  

Whereas Augustine only knows what time is when no one asks, the past only exists as long as there are references to it. The introduction of written culture also brings new and diverse relations with the past; the oral culture tends to have a regional component that shrouds far away events, through geography as well as in time, while the written culture assumes a familiarity with the culture imprinted through the letters.

The influence of written culture and the familiarity with literary sources, allows Ari to relate historical events across time and space in ways that could not be seen on an oral horizon, that is condemned to privilege the local or portray foreign affairs in such a guise. This relation can be seen when he discusses the dates and events related to the conversion story:

Þenna atburð sagði Teitr oss at því, es kristni kom á Ísland. En Óláf Tryggvason fell et sama sumar at sögu Sæmundar prests. Þá barðisk hann víð Svein Haraldsson Danakonung ok Óláf enn senska, Eiriksson at Uppsölum Sviakonungs, ok Eirik, es síðan jarl at Norvegi, Hákonarson. Þat vas þremr tegum vetra ens annars hundraðs eptir dráp Eadmundar, en þúsundi eptir burð Krists at alþýðu tali.

Such event said to us Teitr of it, when Christianity came to Iceland. And Óláf Tryggvason fell the same summer by a report of priest Sæmundr. Then he was fighting against the Danish king Sveinn Haraldsson and Óláf the Swedish, son of the Swedish king Eiríkr by Uppsala, and of Eiríkr Hákonarson, later Jarl in Norway. That was three decades of winters in the second hundred after the killing of Eadmund, and one thousand after the birth of Christ by the popular count.

It seems possible that this reflects Ari’s interest in placing Iceland in the universal history, as Sverrir Jakobsson says, and this is supported by Svend Ellehøj’s investigation on Sæmundr as a historical writer when he says: “Derimod må det anes for tvivlsomt, om Sæmundr var nået frem til at beregne absolutte årstal. [...] men den absolutte datering til året 1000 e. Kr. dækkes

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36 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 10.
38 Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 17-18.
This means that Ari must have been the one that dated, through the relation of different events, the adoption of Christianity to the year 999/1000. If we have in mind the brief synopsis called *Heimsaldrar* found in AM 194, 8vo and attributed to Ari by Stefán Karlsson, it is evident that Ari was interested in putting together a Christian history of the world. And as Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir reminds us, medieval historicity is shaped through the teleology of history, as the history of mankind’s salvation.41

Sæmundr, who according to the sources created the first known Icelandic historical book, in Latin, was educated on the continent. His book seems to have related the lives of ten kings from Haraldr hárfagri and seems to have been composed when he returned from abroad. The tradition of historical writing has been traced to have been introduced in Iceland in the second half of the decade of 1070 by Ann-Marie Long; this first historical composition by Sæmundr was composed circa the decade of 1080, at the onset of Icelandic writing. Ari wrote the first book in the vernacular between Ketill’s ordination as bishop of Hólar in 1122, and 1133–1134 according to Sverrir Jakobsson’s disagreement against the late insertion argument when Sæmundr and Þorlákr died, with a possible relation to the Oddaverjar and their claims to have a relation with Norwegian affairs. But a relation to the Haukadælir and their affairs in Breiðabólstaður, cannot be ruled out: having in mind the codification of laws with Haflíði in 1117-1118, with the novel homicide sections and the later addition of the Christian Law c.1122-33, showing that, due to the influence of the Haukadælir, around the time when Ari wrote, the written culture was growing and expanding.44

It is symptomatic of the change of paradigms that Ari doesn’t address the problem of orality; it seems that for him, the value of an oral authority is equal to a written account, given that the oral authority is wise, truthful and able to remember a long time back.45 Adam of Bremen understood the importance of bringing the oral memory into writing fully, as he complains that history is not fixed through writing, and Arnulf from Milan deemed as a pity the lack of judicious records, and set his task to establish such records. No doubt Icelanders

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42 Sverrir Jakobsson, “Iceland, Norway and the World”, 77.
43 Oddaverjar and Haukadælir are the names of two powerful clans of Iceland, the first one centered in Oddi Rangárvellir; the Haukadælir had their strongholds in Haukadalur.
45 Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 4.
recognized poetry and the memorization of laws as cultural depositaries. Nevertheless, the writing of the laws and Ari himself, point to the recognition of a newly acquired preference for written culture, based both on the Christian tradition and on the evidence of the limits of human experience that cannot get to “þeira es váru fyrir várt minni” “those who were before our memory”.

For the generation of Christian scholars in Iceland that came before Ari, this meant a cultural shift, and to a certain degree, a rejection of their own peripheric situation in favor of a more continental tradition. Ari is immersed in both traditions. He seems in this regard to follow, maybe due to first hand knowledge, the English tradition of writing in their own language and recording pieces of their own pre-Christian tradition, for we must remember that, after the decline of the church institutions in the late eighth and ninth centuries in Anglo-Saxon England, the tenth century saw a weakening of education and production of manuscripts. The inspiration taken from the Cluniac Reform and from Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, shaped in the mind of the forces behind the Benedictine Reforms, Archbishops Dunstan of Canterbury, Oswald of York, Æthelwold of Winchester and King Edgar, the idea that the first centuries of the Church in England were dominated by monasteries, where knowledge and righteousness were taught and men were made virtuous, so that the whole land profited from this endeavor. Nevertheless, the task that the reformers took upon themselves changed England and reshaped its identity, drawing the Anglo-Saxon culture closer to the Continental identity of the medieval period. But Icelandic identity was still a work in construction.

2. J. R. R. Tolkien in his study about *Beowulf* investigates how the native pre-Christian traditions of the poet, learned probably in an oral environment, become transformed and revaluated through the Christian upbringing and education. The author of *Beowulf* had a historicity of his own, evidenced in his casting of the theme in heathen times avoiding at the same time the presence of the anachronistic interference of the new faith in the old times despite guiding the teleological reshaping of the monsters but not going so far as to making them allegories of evil. This is of certain interest to understanding Ari’s historicity.

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47 Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 22.
If compared to Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* and Adam of Bremen’s *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, the introduction to *Íslendingabók* lacks the formal stress on religious themes and theological reasons to justify his endeavour. Bede says: “Quod ipsum tu quoque uigilantissime deprehendens, historiam memoratam in notitiam tibi simul et eis, quibus te regendis diuina praefecit auctoritas, ob generalis curam salutis latius propalari desideras.” “And as you have carefully marked this, you are desirous that the said history should be more fully made known to yourself, and to those over whom the Divine Authority has appointed you governor, from your great regard to the common good.”\(^{50}\) Similarly Adam of Bremen says: “And behold, there came to mind the many achievements of your predecessors. Their deeds, of which I had read and heard from time to time, appeared to be worth relating both because of their own importance and because of the exigencies of this church.”\(^{51}\) But Ari just claims that he made *Íslendingabók* for the bishops, and that “ok jókk því es méðvarð síðan kunnara ok nú es gerr sagt á þessi en á þeiri.” “I added on this which to me became known afterwards and now is more fully said on this one than on the other.”\(^{52}\)

Another important evidence is found in the defense of the oeuvre by these authors. Bede says: “Lectoremque suppliciter obsecro, ut, siqua in his, quae scripsimus, alter quam se ueritas habet, posita reppererit, non hoc nobis imputet, qui, quod uera lex historiae est, simpliciter ea, quae fama uulgante collegimus, ad instructionem posteritatis litteris mandare studuimus.” “And I humbly entreat the reader, that if he shall find in these our writings anything not delivered according to the truth, he will not lay the blame of it on me, for, as the true rule of history requires, withholding nothing, I have laboured to commit to writing such things as I could gather from common report, for the instruction of posterity.”\(^{53}\) Ari defends his work by saying “En hvatki es missagt es í frœdum þessum, þá es skylt at hafa þat heldr, es sannara reynisk.” “And whatsoever which is wrongly accounted here in these histories, then its right to have rather that, which prove itself truest.”\(^{54}\) He is partaking in an understanding of historical truth that reveals the possibility of revision, that was new in the north, as Meulengracht Sørensen says: “Synsmåden er i norrøn sammehæng ny, selv om opfordringen er en velkendt middelaldertopos”.\(^{55}\) The defense is a *topos* in medieval writing, with roots in Classical

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\(^{50}\) Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, location 76-77 and 115-167.


\(^{52}\) Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 22.

\(^{53}\) Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, location 102-104 and 142-145.

\(^{54}\) Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 3.

\(^{55}\) Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, 36-37.
antiquity, but nevertheless, this leads us to a conception of historicity beyond the established official canons of political history as just a narrative that supports the power, although in its structure is linked to both religious, cultural and political power.\textsuperscript{57}

The term \textit{frøði} used by Ari to refer to his writings means some kind of knowledge about the past. The semantic field is related to both the concepts of \textit{saga}, discussed later, and to acquaintance with lore and tradition as explained by Meulengracht Sørensen:

Det enslydende neutrumsord forklares med den i det væsentlige samme, men i sin brug mere omfattende betydning: ‘Kunskab, hvad en maa vide for at være fróðr’ […] I kristen tid bruges ordene \textit{fræði} og \textit{fróðr} fortsat neutralt om kundskaber; men desuden får det tidligt i det tolvte århundrede den specielle betydning af kristen kateketisk lærdom i udtryk som \textit{kristin fræði, heilǫg fræði}. […] Brugt i forbindelse med \textit{forn} 'fra gamle dage', får \textit{fræði} senest i det tolvte århundrede en betydning af ikke blot hedensk trolddom, men kundskaber fra og om oldtiden i det hele taget.\textsuperscript{58}

When Snorri explains that Ari “ritaði fyrstr manna hér á landi at norrœnu máli frœði, bæði forna ok nýja.” “was the first of the men here on the land that wrote in the Norse language knowledge, both old and new.”\textsuperscript{59} he is asserting the authority held by Ari as an authority in historical lore of two different kinds. Judy Quinn states that this reflects the combination of both old-native and new-Latin traditions of knowing the world.\textsuperscript{60} It can also be accounted to the reputation of Ari as an authority on ancient and contemporary \textit{fræði} that the phrasing of \textit{Íslendingabók} as a source brings to mind the Gospel of Matthew whence Jesus says (Matthew 13:52) “Ait illis: Ideo omnis scriba doctus in regno caelorum, similis est homini patrifamilias, qui profert de thesauro suo nova et vetera.” “He said unto them: Therefore every scribe instructed in the kingdom of heaven, is like to a man that is a householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure new things and old.”\textsuperscript{61} I think that the relation between the biblical phrasing and Snorri’s description is not casual, and reflects the union between the written culture and the Christian faith on one side and on the other side the understanding of the heathen past as worthy under the teleological historicity.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{56} Margaret Clunies Ross, \textit{A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics}, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005) 75 n 7.
\textsuperscript{58} Meulengracht Sørensen, \textit{Fortælling og ære}, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{59} Snorri Sturluson, \textit{Heimskringla I}, 5.
\textsuperscript{60} Judy Quinn, “From orality to literacy in medieval Iceland.”, 49.
\textsuperscript{61} Holy bible in Latin language with Douay-Rheims English Translation, Matthew Chapter 13:52.
\textsuperscript{62} Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, “Prose of Christian Instruction.”, 342-343.
In the conception of frœði there was on display a set of values that might have been like that one present in the word literatus in the rest of Christendom since classic antiquity, and that was separating the educated from the uneducated exponentially by 1100.\(^63\) This might also account for the distinction between fróði (learned), as someone educated in the new Christian culture and thus in Latin as Ari and Sæmundr certainly were, and vitri (wise) as someone not considered an authority in Latin culture, as can be seen in Hauksbók “[n]ú er yfir farit um landnám þau, er verit hafa á Íslandi, eptir því sem fróðir menn hafa skrifat, fyrst Ari prestr hinn fróði Þorgilsson ok Kolskeggr hinn vitri.” “now it is over the relation of those settlements which have happened in Iceland, according to it as wise men have written, first Ari Þorgilsson the learned and Kolskeggr the wise.”\(^64\) Bu it could also be a variation as the Hungrvaka shows: “Sæmundr prestr í Odda er bæði var forvitri ok lærðr allra manna bezt” “priest Sæmundr from Oddi who was both very wise and best educated of all men.”\(^65\)

It is important as well to remember now that there is a difference between the content of oral tradition and that of written culture as the word saga can be related to both traditions: when Ari says “Svá sagði Þorkell oss Gellisson.” “So said to us Þorkell Gellison”\(^66\) what matters the most in an oral account is the content and not the form, since even poetry in an oral account has an aspect of performance and the stanzas become mobile units. But the written culture is built on the idea of preserving the form sometimes even at the expense of the content. In this context what Meulengracht Sørensen says becomes relevant: “Skriften gjorde den store enkeltkomposition mulig, og nu blev entalsformen saga betegnelsen for den længere prosafortælling med flere hovedpersoner eller flere sammenkædede eller sammenflettede begivenhedsforløb i en større skriftlig komposition.”\(^67\)

Medieval historicity is then linked deeply with the Christian identity. And this identity was grounded in a special history that was alien to the European Christendom, since it has its roots on the history of Israel. This brings into question the presence of a diverse, non-Christian history and set of traditions. As Tolkien reminds us about Beowulf, the poem played a role in the debate about “shall we or shall we not consign the heathen ancestors to perdition? What good will it do posterity to read the battles of Hector? Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?”\(^68\) Ari


\(^{64}\) Landnámabók, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk forrit vol. 1, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka forritafélag, 1986), 395. Read also page CVI on Jakob Benediktsson’s introduction for a different version of the passage.

\(^{65}\) Hungrvaka, ed. Ásdis Egilsdóttir, Íslenzk forrit vol. XVI: Biskupa Sögur, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka forritafélag, 2002), 16.

\(^{66}\) Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 6.

\(^{67}\) Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, 50.

\(^{68}\) Tolkien,“Beowulf: The Monsters and The Critics.”, 74. The last question was formulated by Alcuin in 797.
played a role for Iceland by answering these questions when he wrote about the history of Iceland in relation with the rest of Christendom, since the introduction of texts in the understanding could help articulate their understanding of their identity, as Brian Stock says: “if common agreement obviates the need for texts, disagreement or misunderstanding can make them indispensable.”

A reading of Ari’s work evidences a typological comprehension as central to the composition of Íslendingabók. Brian Stock reminds us that “When major issues regarding the culture heritage arose, it was men’s conception of the past, not the past in an objective sense, which largely shaped the nature of the responses. In the medieval mind, as in ours, whether the record was preserved orally or in writing was of critical importance.” And in the center of the discussion about written records and identity comes the Christian teleology, that shaped the medieval historicity that Ari partakes to bring an Icelandic ethos.

Historicity is not a simple concept, as stated by Herbert Marcuse “Historicity signifies the meaning we intend when we say of something that it is ‘historical.’” Since historicity meant a comprehension of the historical events in an typological way, as Richard Green have investigated for 14th and 15th century England, the concept of truth before 1300 seems to be more tightly connected with concepts like “integrity” or “honesty”; in 12th century Iceland, and later, the ambiguity about the many concepts related to the concept of truth can also be evidenced in the relation of ethics and identity in the narrative structures.

As these narrative structures are indebted to both native and common Christian traditions, it will be easier to analyse first the origins of the Christian understanding that gave form to Ari’s historicity, and later show the distinctive features of Ari’s sense of historicity. As said above, medieval historicity is shaped through the teleology of history, as the history of mankind’s salvation. St Augustine envisioned a teleological background for Christianity through the exegesis of the bible, arguing that history had Christ in the center and, through the six ages of the world everything was part of the plan of God leading to salvation. Heimsaldrar,
the text attributed to Ari, divides the ages of the world in six, and states that “I þeim fim heims òlddrum er hinn fyrsti fra upphafi heims til Noa flods.[…] Hinn setti heims alldr er fra burd vars herra Iesu-christi til doms-dags.” “Of those Five Ages of the World, the first is from the beginning of the world to the flood of Noah… The sixth age of the world is from the birth of our lord Jesus Christ to doomsday”77 In this, Ari is following the tradition of the Church since Saint Augustine’s *De civitate Dei contra paganos* states that the affairs of kingdoms and lands are not due to fortuity, nor the will of men or inexorable fate, but due to God’s providence, that sustains and has set in motion the creation with such a grand plan, that His victory at the end of times is unstoppable.78

The medieval sense of historicity is then related to this teleological interpretation, that derives from the biblical exegesis. Since the biblical exegesis is situated at the center of both the biblical interpretation and the interpretation of history, the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ, the events of the Old Testament and the history before the presence of the True Faith was read under the aforementioned four ways of reading, that was taught throughout the Middle Ages with this rhyme “Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, / Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.” “Literal (understanding) teaches the deeds, what to believe allegory, / Moral (understanding) what to do, where we go anagogy.”79 Nevertheless, about the 1200’s –so that if the influence was scarce over Ari and Iceland when *Íslendingabók* was written, the readers of Ari in the 1300’s were influenced by it– was a renaissance of the idea of preeminence of the literal interpretation as the one that produces the others. This idea intended to organize a system of interpretation that was not completely arbitrary from the point of view of the reader.80 When St Thomas Aquinas explains the ways of reading, he collects what the the church fathers said in these terms:

Augustine says that the *Old Testament has a fourfold division: according to history, etiology, analogy and allegory. […]* Gregory says: *Holy scripture by the manner of its speech transcends every science, because in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery.* I answer that, The author of holy scripture is God, in whose power it is to

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signify his meaning, not by words only (as man also can do) but by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it. For as the apostle says (Heb. x. 1) the Old Law is a figure of the New Law and Dionysius says *The New Law itself is a figure of future glory*. Again, in the New Law, whatever our Head has done is a type of what we ought to do. Therefore, so far as the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law, there is the allegorical sense; so far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are types of what we ought to do, there is the moral sense. But so far as they signify what relates to eternal glory, there is the anagogical sense. Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of holy scripture is God, it is not unfitting, as Augustine says, if even according to the literal sense one word in holy scripture should have several senses. 

If we follow these guidelines, it is safe to assume that Ari, educated in a religious environment and acquainted with a teleological understanding both of Scriptures and history, would embrace in his understanding of history both of the world and of Iceland, a typological comprehension as central to the history of Iceland. As Jan Assmann says: “Any people that sees itself as a unit unlike other peoples, imagines itself somehow to be chosen.” And the presence of the *papar*, Irish monks that left behind religious artifacts, prefigures the adoption of Christianity, that was destined to take to its completion the Icelandic endeavor.

This sense of being chosen was shared with all the Christendom, but *Íslendingabók* played a role in giving Icelanders a new Christian *ethos* that allowed them to recover their native *heathen* traditions. *Ethos* is a Greek word that means *character* and is the base word for the

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82 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 17.
The word ethics after Aristotle. Ethos can be understood as a setting of beliefs, ideals and values that determines a society or individual disposition and behaviors. In this sense Ari creates a new historicity for Iceland, that would become fundamental for the identity of Icelanders and their approach to their ethos in the historical perspective that the saga tradition reflects. The teleological idea presented by Augustine, that through the will and providence of God, heathen nations could develop themselves through few virtuous men that would guide the land towards the City of God (The Kingdom of Heavens), by building rightful institutions and understandings. But in this view, God also uses vices such as vanity for His ulterior purpose of salvation.

It is under these intellectual and narrative guidelines, that the history of Icelanders gives, through a new ethos, a new identity to Icelanders, that defined them, under the Christian historical and teleological understanding of the world, as chosen people and undertook the task of compiling their narrative traditions to preserve what they thought were the old traditions of Scandinavians made anew. Íslendingabók is important then, because it allowed Icelanders to create a highly original written tradition. Melengracht Sørensen states: “I det norrøne skriftkultur fik ordet saga nye betydninger. [...] Saga betegner nu det skriftlige værk. Sådan bruges det som nævnt allrede i Íslendingabók.” We must not look down on this achievement; as Brian Stock reminds us: “unlike the age of print, when secular letters rivalled theology as a vehicle for the discussion of values, the period before 1200 was inadequately provided with a lay reading public and literary genres flexible enough for expressing the full range and depth of its emotional life.”

I hope that the discussion on these pages and the following sections –that will discuss first the literal and the allegorical interpretations, and secondly the tropological and the anagogical interpretations related to Íslendingabók, in order to analyse the intellectual impact of Ari on the Icelandic Corpus– will contribute to answer or alleviate one problem that one faces with this corpus. Ole Bruhn states:

Hvad den traditionelle historiker normal har som sit givne udgangspunkt, nemlig adgangen til skriftlige kilder, forvandles til Islands tilfælde til et historisk forhold og et historisk problem I sig selv: Den islandske

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85 Augustine, The City of God, 212-51.
86 Meulengracht Sørensen, Fortælling og ære, 50.
87 Brian Stock, The Implications of Literacy, 7.
middelalderoverlevering er så relativt stor og så massivt historiekabende, at dens art og baggrunden for dens opkomst kræver en nærmere analyse.88

88 Ole Bruhn, Tekstualisering, 155.
3 Genealogies, the common reckoning of time and a new Israel.

1. As discussed above, Íslendingabók was composed as a historical composition. At the time of the composition, the intellectual understanding of the Bible and history was gravitating towards prioritizing the literal understanding, as the base from which the other meanings arise. This might influence the fact that the disposition of the book reveals a composition that, instead of a linear narrative, explains episodes of the history of Iceland as distinct units. The relation of these units as a narrative will be discussed in the numerals 3 and 4 of this section, and now it will only be said that the units form distinctive trends at the beginning of the book that collide at the end in a single description of the history of Iceland. If we watch the division of chapters that Ari provides, it can be seen, that the disposition of the book follows an episodic structure, that privileges certain trends over others. The chapters are divided thus: I The settlement of Iceland; II The main settlers and the foundation of the law; III The establishment of Alþingi in Þingvellir; IV The Icelandic calendar; V The division of Iceland into Quarters after some battles; VI About the settlement of Grønland; VII The conversion story; VIII An account of the foreign bishops from the heathen times to about 1066; IX A short life of bishop Ísleifr and X the life of Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson together with an account of the final changes in law at the time of Ari.89

As we can see, the narrative prioritizes the nature of the law, the rise of the institutions and, as will be explored in more detail later, the role of the original settlers and their families in the instruction of Iceland as a whole, but this selection keeps the narrative structure, not turning it into a chronicle. As Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir has pointed out for a later period in Iceland – around 1250 to 1319 – Icelanders seemed to have preferred the narrative accounts of the Bible.90 This might explain why the composers of the sagas –mainly of the Íslendingasögur and Konungasögur–, albeit the difference in style, scope and delivery, were overtly concerned with certain dimension of historical veracity in their accounts, while stressing the narrative aspect that characterizes the genres.91 But for Íslendingabók, the structure comes from an

89 Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 4.
90 Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, “Prose of Christian Instruction.”, 344-347.
adaptation of narrative structures that were imported with Christianity from Europe, as Sverrir Tómasson explains:

Ekki er ástæða til að rengja þau orð Snorra að Ari fróði hafi fyrstur manna ritað fræði á norrænu máli. En í Íslendingabók má sjá að hann hefur orðið fyrir áhrifum frá evrópskum sagnariturum og niðurröðun efnisins er ekki frábrugðin því sem gerist í evrópskum ritum frá sama tíma.

There is no reason to dispute those words from Snorri, that Ari fróði have been the first of the men to write in the Norse language. But in Íslendingabók one might see that he had become influenced by European historical writing and the classification of the contents does not differ from what was done in European writing from that time.92

As a first step, the relation of chronological traditions, their impact on Ari’s narrative, and how he represents historical actors will all be analysed. Then I will explore how the narrative of the conversion story becomes prominent in the Icelandic narratives, and how it is Ari’s selection that leads the trend of the narrative in most sagas. I will also explore the backbone structure of the narrative, in order to disclose the line of thought that underlies the historical method of Ari and his importance as a historian.

1.1. If compared to Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum or Historia Norwegiae,93 Íslendingabók seems to lack any kind of stress on the supernatural and the divine. There are no references to the grace of God as the hand behind the events; and the only account that has a component that could be considered on first sight as supernatural, is in chapter IV when Icelanders find out that summer recedes towards spring, so that what they counted as summer was happening during spring. Ari then writes the story, of how Icelanders fixed their calendar as follows:

En maðr hét Þorsteinn surtr, hann vas breiðfirzkr, […] Hann dreymði þat, at hygðisk vesa at lögbergi, þá es þar vas fjölmennt, ok vaka, en hann hugði alla men aðra sofa. En síðan hugðisk hann sofa, en hann hugði þá alla aðra vakna. Þann draum réð Ósýfr Helgasonr, móður-faðir Gellis Þorkelssonar,
And a man called Þorsteinn surtr (black), he was from breiðafjörður… He dreamt this: that he thought he was at the Law-rock when there was a multitude and he was awake, but the others were sleeping. But afterwards he imagined he fell sleep, but it seemed to him that then all the others woke up. Ósýfr Helgasonr interpreted the dream, he was the maternal grandfather of Gellir Þorkelssonr.\textsuperscript{94}

The rest of the narrative relates how Þorsteinn, after hearing Ósýfr say that his proposal would be heard and accepted, presented an amendment to the calendar, that fixed the recession of the summer, and thus explains the particularities of the Icelandic calendar.\textsuperscript{95}

Two important aspects are present in the narrative, as the quote above makes clear. The first one is the relation Christianity has with time as Christianity relies on a strict calendar, and the second aspect is that Ari is relating his own familiar and regional history to this narrative, as he was from Breiðafjörður; Ósýfr was his ancestor, and Ari makes the relation clear when he mentions his grandfather Gellir Þorkelsson, that appears in the genealogy at the end of Íslendingabók: “Gellir, faðir þeira Þorkells, es fóður Brands, ok Þorgils, fóður mínns, en ek heitik Ari.” “Gellir, their father, of Þorkell, father of Brandr, and of Þorgils, my father, and I am called Ari.”\textsuperscript{96}

It is important to recognize that this relation to his own family is not the only family relation highlighted in Íslendingabók since the selection that Ari makes of historical moments relates to important families in his environment: the four settlers mentioned as the prominent settlers in the second chapter, are also the forefathers of the Icelandic bishops; the establishment of the Alþingi and the law, division of Iceland into quarters, relate the lógsögumaðr (lawspeaker) Hrafn Hœngssonr to Oddi; the chapter on Grønland plays both to make Iceland less peripheric, and gives also the opportunity of showing the importance of Icelanders in expanding Christianity, since Snorri Þorfinnsson is one of the ancestors of Bishop Þorlákr Runólfssson.\textsuperscript{97}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[94] Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 9-10.
\item[95] Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 10-11.
\item[96] Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 28.
\item[97] Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 6, 26-27, 8, 11-14.
\end{footnotes}
his environment; a preference for the historical events related to his region of origin, and a stress on the importance of the families of those around him and his own, in the historical narrative.\(^98\)

As has already been said, Icelanders kept track of their history, by using the *lǫsǫgumannatal* (list of Lawmen). Ari explains to us how he compiled and organized this information in the last chapter:

Markús Skeggiasonr hafði lǫgsógu næstr Sighvati […] At hans sögu es skrifuð ðæs allra lǫgsógumanna á bók þessi, þeira es váru fyrir várt minni, en hónum sagði Þórarinn bróðir hans ok Skeggi faðir þeira […] til þeira ævi, es fyrir hans minni váru, at því es Bjarni enn spaki hafði sagt, föðurfaðir þeira, es munði Þórarin lǫgsógumann ok sex aðra síðan.

Markús Skeggiason had the lawspeaking after Sighvatr… according to his account is written the lives of all lawspeakers on this book, of those who were before our memory, and to him was said by his brother Þórarinn and their father Skeggi… about the lives of the lawspeakers, who were before his memory, as Bjarni *the wise* had said, their grandfather, who remembered Þórarinn lawspeaker and six others before.\(^99\)

This method of reckoning is used in conjunction with others, such as the reckoning of the times of kings, that although native, had been used as well in the rest of the Christendom, as can be seen by how Bede describes a form of dating: “qui anno ab Urbe condita DCXCIII, ante uero incarnationis dominicae tempus anno LXmo,” “who, in the year 693 after the foundation of Rome, but the sixtieth year before the Incarnation of our Lord.”\(^100\) These different ways of reckoning time allowed Ari to situate the historical events in Iceland, but it also pressed forward certain ideas that were obscured by the tradition. This relates to the identity of individuals, that Ari confuses in certain moments, as the famous example about Pope Leo IX that Ari calls Pope Leo *septimus*.\(^101\) But it also appears in different understandings of historical figures

Sverrir Jakobsson also shows how the representation of characters made by Ari influenced the perception of them from a historical perspective. He says that “Óláfr Tryggvason, who is not depicted as semi-pagan or magician as he is in Adam of Bremen’s account. On the contrary, Óláfr is credited with initiating the Christianization of Norway and

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\(^{99}\) Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslingingabók*, 22.

\(^{100}\) Bede, *Historia Ecclesistica*, location 887-888 and 904-905.

\(^{101}\) Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslingingabók*, 21.
Iceland, as he was also credited in many later Old Norse texts.”

102 This representation seems to be an Icelandic tradition recovered by Sæmundr, as Sven Ellehøj shows:

Det er nu bemærkelsesværdigt, at Snorri Sturluson i Den særskilte saga om Olaf den Hellige omtaler Olaf Tryggvasons faldt i nøje overensstemmelse med Ari: Olafr Tryggva son... fell i orrostu suðr fire Vindlandi. þa bardiz hann við Svein Harallz son Dana konung... oc við Olaf Eirics son Svía konung. oc við Eirik iarll Haconar son. [Óláfr Tryggvason fell in battle south of Vandlandi, then he was battling with the Danish king Sveinn Haraldsson... and with the Swedish king Óláfr Eíriksson, and with Jarl Eírikr Hákonarson.] Det kann ikke antages, at Snorri støtter sig på Aris udsagn i denne forbindelse, thi som det vil fremgå af den videre undersøgelse synes denne at have stedfæstet Olaf Tryggvasons faldt til farvandet ved Sjælland. Den rimeligste forklaring på overensstemmelsen må derfor være, at såvel Snorri som Ari gengiver Sæmunds værk, og ved antagelse af, at Ari benytter en sriftlig kilde på dette sted, finder også den i sammenhængen overflødige omtale af Olafs modstandere en tilfredsstillende forklaring.

103 As we have seen before, Snorri Sturluson uses most of his prologue in defending his sources and establishing his chronology. He declares, in relation with the ancient poems and verses (fornum kvæðum eða soguljóðum) that he uses as sources, that “En er Haraldr inn hárfagri var konungr í Nóregi, þá byggðisk Ísland.” “And when Harald inn hárfagri (the fair-haired) was king in Norway, then Iceland was settled.”

104 Nevertheless, the oldest account we have of the settlement at the times of Haraldr is Íslendingabók, and it seems likely that Snorri is taking this information from Ari. Although we must be wary since it is very probable that Snorri used the earlier version of Íslendingabók, the text he was following certainly resembles the extant Íslendingabók, that says “Ísland byggði fyrst ýr Norvegi á dǫgum Haralds ens hárfagra […] es Ívarr […] lét drepa Eadmund […] en þat vas sjau tegum vetra ens niunda hundraðs eptir burð Krists” “Iceland was settled first from Norway on days of Haraldr inn hárfagri…. when Ívar… killed Eadmund… and that was 870 after the birth of Christ.”

Then

103 Svend Ellehøj, Ældste Nortyne Historieskrivning, 19. The quote is from: Den store saga om Olav den hellige I, p 33 according to Ellehøj, the translation inserted into brackets doesn’t belong to the text, is mine.
104 Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla I, 5.
105 Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla I, 4.
106 Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 4. it actually says: „seven decades of winters into the nine hundreds“. 25
Ari dates the settlement, and in doing so he relates his internal sources to the Christian reckoning of time, and he sets the settlement to a probable chronological date, according to what we now know of the settlement, based on the archeological evidence.\textsuperscript{107}

But as in the case for Óláfr Tryggvason, the dating doesn’t tell us much about the reality of Haraldr inn hárfragri. Sverrir Jakobsson reminds us again, that we should be careful, as he points out about Íslendingabók: “it turns out that it is the earliest known source for much of the “facts” about the earliest Norwegian kings which are ubiquitous in later narrative sources, including their genealogies”.\textsuperscript{108} There is an important exception that shows that Ari could have been influenced by Sæmundr in his historical composition of the kings of Norway. Sven Ellehøj argues that Fagrskinna has a relation with Nóregs konungatal as follows:

\begin{quote}
Af de ti landsstyrere, som nedstammede fra Harald Hårfa
gri, er Magnus

den Gode den sidste. Så langt, dvs. til 1047, har Sæmunds fremstilling altså
strakt sig, men næppe heller længere. Det kan ikke godt antages, at digteren
skulle have underkendt en eventuel beretning om den følgende konger fra
Sæmunds hånd, allermindst i et hyldestdigt til Sæmunds sønnesøn. Den
første konge, der nævnes I digtet, er Halfdan Svarte, Harald Hårfagers fader,
og med ham må da også Sæmunds værk antages at have begyndt. […]
Navnlig Fagrskinna har i denne forbindelse interesse, thi som Gjessing først
har påvist, finder Nóregs konunga tal strofe for strofe en parallel i dette
værk. Der kan ikke være tvivl om, at Sæmunds bog har været af afgørende
betydning for Fagrskinnas forfatter; den udgør selve skelettet i hans
fremstillings første del.\textsuperscript{109}

Nevertheless, as seen above, Ari is the one responsible for dating the historical events related to the settlement, the Christianization of Iceland and the organization of the Alþingi. The use of poetry as a source can be seen in Ari, that uses Ynglingatal, a poetical genealogy of the ancestors of Haraldr hárfragri by Þjóðólfur inn fróði ór Hvinni, to trace the ancestors of Haraldr inn hárfragri and of his own family clan.\textsuperscript{110} It is important to remember the relation with power of this poem, as Ferguson says: “This genealogical link back to divinity was important because it legitimized the claims to power of the Scandinavian kings who ruled in later,
historical times.”  

Despite this political dimension, we must bear in mind, as Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson reminds us in his introduction to Heimskringla that: “Ari fróði og Snorri Sturluson hafa báðir gert ráð fyrir, að Ynglingatal hefði söguleg sannindi að geyma.” “Ari the learned and Snorri Sturluson have both assumed, that Ynglingatal had in store historical truth.”  

And also that we read Old Norse poetry under the light of Ari’s account, as Sverrir Jakobsson argues about the identity of the king that Ari situates at the time of the settlement of Iceland, that carries the epithet hárfragr, but that was applied to Haraldr harðráði in earlier, contemporary sources:

It might be argued, and indeed often has been, that skaldic verses are older contemporary sources for this epithet, but they are in fact 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.

This also shows that Ari was relating written sources that allowed him to both euhemerize Yngvi and relate him to the Asian Turks.

By mentioning this, I am not implying that Ari lied or invented a historical figure, since the relation of the oral transmission of poetry, actualizes the contents of the accounts when the intellectual and axiological worlds are performed under new environments. Claus Krag, in his analysis of Ynglingatal, concludes that it reflects a Christian understanding of the world (Interpretatio Christiana), as the euhemeristic representation of gods is a common interpretation of pre-Christian deities, in a newly Christian environment; thus, Ari is using a poem under the assumption that it is older based on the identity of king Haraldr inn hárfragr, but never questions the identity of king Haraldr, fundamental in his understanding of both the genealogies and of historical events. It is as probable that there was indeed a king Haraldr at the time of the settlement, as William of Malmesbury refers to a certain king of Norway called

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113 Sverrir Jakobsson, “Iceland, Norway and the World”, 87 n 5.
Harold that sent presents to king Æthelstan. But the true, historical identity of that Haraldr is veiled to us by Ari’s account. As discussed above, the oral culture tends to have a regional component that shrouds in darkness far away events, through geography as well as in time. This is a possible explanation for the interpolation of characters, although it can not be ruled out that both rulers share the epithet.

2. Ari built the extant version of Íslendingabók on certain treads or units. The units are thematic concepts that guide the narrative from the beginning until the end; and can be summarized thus: the importance of the law, the relation between families and historical events, the development of the institutions and the relation between Iceland and other lands. For the sake of clarity and space, these units and its relationship with other narratives, will be seen in two of the episodes chosen by Ari: the fifth chapter about the division of Iceland into Quarters and chapter seven on the Conversion Story.

Hœnsa-Póris saga is a late 13th century saga. It involves a dispute over a raid done to Hœnsa-Pórir that leads to a conflict in the Alþingi. Chapter V of Íslendingabók deals with the dispute between Þórðr gellir and Tungu-Oddr over the burning of Þorkell son of Blund-Ketill. In Hœnsa-Póris saga, the core of the dispute remains the same, but here Blund-Ketill is the one that is burned and not Þorkell. Despite this difference, I’ll argue here, what mattered for Ari was the relation between Þórðr gellir and the units related before, and that the selection of this historical episode, due to the weight of Ari in the Icelandic Corpus, allows the composition of a saga as an expansion of how Ari presents the narrative.

Ari sets the narrative of how Iceland developed the institution of the Quarters, by stating that it was due to a dispute between “Þórðar gellis, sonar Óleifs felinans ýr Breiðafirði, ok Odds, þess es kallaðr vas Tungu-Oddr;” “Þórðr gellir, son of Óleifr feilan from Breiðafjǫðr, and Oddr, the one who was called Tungu-Oddr.” The people involved in the incident are related both to Breiðafjörður and to him, as he was from this area, and Þórðr gellir was his ancestor, and he names him as his ancestor in the genealogy at the end of Íslendingabók. Þórðr is presented in a rather different fashion in the saga, around the middle of the saga, after Hœnsa-Pórir

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119 Sián Grønli, introduction to Íslendingabók: Kristni Saga, ed. Anthony Faulkes and Alison Finlay, Viking Society for Northern Research text series vol. XVIII (London: Viking Society for Northern Research series, 2006), XI.
120 Ari Porgilsson, Íslendingabók, 11.
121 Ari Porgilsson, Íslendingabók, 28.
instigates Þorvaldr Tungu-Oddsson into burning Blund-Ketill –Þorkell Blund-Ketilsson according to Ari, and just in relation to Gunnarr Hilfarson. Ari only states that Þórir gellir was the leader on the legal prosecution, because Hersteinn Þorkelsson married Þórunn, the niece of Þórir by his sister Helga and Gunnarr Hilfarson. In Hœnsa-Þóris saga this is elaborated, giving a reason for Þórir’s handling of the case: “Ok er þeir Þórir gellir koma á Gunnarstaði, er Herteinn sjúkr ok má eigi fara til þings; selr hann nú þórum í hendr sakarnar.” “And when Þórir and his men come, Hersteinn is sick and cannot go to the Þing; now he handed the case into others care.”

But this is clearly an elaboration made for the saga “Hersteinn mun þegar í upphafi hafa selt Þórði sökina í hendur […] þetta er og auðsætt af frásögn Ara: Má af þessum orðum ráða, að Þórir hefur verið orðinn höfðingi að sökinni, þegar ádur en hann sótti málið í heraði, eins og líka eðilegast var.” “Hersteinn would have handed the case straight at the beginning to Þórir… This is evident from Ari’s narrative: It may be said that Þórir has been the chief of the charge, even before he attended the case in the district, as was also the most natural thing.”

Both narratives then follow what happens, and Ari develops further how these happenings affected the development of the law in Iceland, but I will follow now only the description of what also appears in the saga:

En þeir váru sóttir á þingi því es vas í Borgafirði í þeim stað, es síðan es kallat Þingnes. Þat váru þá log, at vígsakar skyldi sökja á því þingi, es næst vas vettvangi. En þeir þróðusk þar, ok mátí þingit eigi heyrjask at logum. Þar fell Þórolfr refr, bróðir Álfs í Dölum, ýr liði Þórðar gellis. En síðan fóru sakarnar til allþings, ok þróðusk þeir þá enn. Þá fellu men ýr liði Odds, enda varð sekr hann Hœnsa-Þórir ok dreipinn síðan ok þeir ða es at bredunum váru. Þá talði Þórir gellir þólu umb at lögbergi, hvé illa mönnum gegndi at fara í ókunn þing at sökja of vig eða harma sín, ok talði, hvat hónum varð þyr, áðr hann máttí því máli til laga koma, ok kvað ýmsavandræði mónu verða, ef réðisk bætr á. Þá vas landinu skipt í fjórðunga, […] Svá sagði oss Ulfheðinn Gunnarssonr lögsgóumaðr.

And they were prosecuted in the assembly which was in Borgafjörður in that place, which since has been called Þingnes. That was then law, that for a

123 Hœnsa-Þóris saga, 38 n 1.
case of homicide, it should be prosecuted in that assembly, which was the nearest to place of the assault. But they fought each other there, and it was not possible for the assembly to be conducted by the law. There fell slain Þórólfur refr, brother of Álfr in the dales, from the company of Þórðr gellir. And afterwards the suits went to the Alþingi, and they then fought each other there again. Then fell men from Oddr’s company, and happened as a conclusion, that he, Hœnsa-Þórir, was outlawed and killed later, and most who were at the burning. Then Þórðr gellir gave a speech over the law-rock, about how badly suited it was for the men to go to unknown assemblies to prosecute over killings or their sorrows; and recounted, what had hindered him, before he was able to have that case to be settled by law, and declared that difficulties would present alternately, if amendments were not set forward. Then the land was arranged into Quarters… So said to us lawspeaker Úlfheðinn Gunnarsson.\(^\text{124}\)

The narrative in *Haensa-Póris saga* says that the first battle happened before Hersteinn handed the case to Þóðr thus: “Þá sjá þeir mannferð mikla fyrir sunnan ána; er þar Tungu-Oddr ok nær fjögrur hundruð manna; […] slær nú í bardaga, ok verða þegar áverkar; fellu fjórir men af Þórði. Þar fell Þórólfur refr,” “Then they see a great meeting of men in the south front of the river: there is Tungu-Oddr and almost four hundred men… now strikes a battle, and injuries happened straight away; four of Þórðr’s men fell. There fell Þórólfur refr.”\(^\text{125}\) The second battle is described similarly: “Nú er sén ferð Tungu-Odds; […] þeir Þórðr verja þingit, ok slær þá þegar í bardaga; […] þar fellu sex men af Oddi,” “Now the company of Tungu-Oddr is seen… Those with Þórðr enclosed the assembly, and strikes then immediately into a battle… there fell six of Oddr’s men.”\(^\text{126}\)

The rest of Ari’s chapter, including Þóðr’s speech, was inserted into many manuscripts of *Haensa-Póris saga*, but let this suffice to prove how *Íslendingabók* casts a shadow over so many sagas, exemplified here by *Haensa-Póris*, which preferred the information found in *Íslendingabók* over other sources; the genealogies presented by Ari diverge from those of Adam of Bremen, when he traces the kings to Haraldr hárfagri, and the genealogies of the settlers of

\(^{124}\) Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 12.

\(^{125}\) *Haensa-Póris saga*, 36.

\(^{126}\) *Haensa-Póris saga*, 38. Watch 39 n 1 for Ari’s insertion.
Breiðafjörður tend to reflect Ari’s historical comprehension, as evidenced in *Landnámabók* (*Sturlubók*), *Laxdœla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*.  

3. The magnitude of the achievement that embedding Icelandic history on the common reckoning meant, cannot be overstated. So far, it can be concluded that Ari is the one that brought together both chronologies, and in doing so, established the year 1000 as the year of the conversion story. The reasons for the selection of the episode are evident in a Christian environment, but the description bears a remarkable popularity in the *Íslendingasögur* and other narratives.  

One aspect I will investigate in this section is the allegorical reading of *Íslendingabók*. As Thomas Aquinas says: “Therefore, so far as the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law, there is the allegorical sense;” and under this light, I will argue that from the allegorical sense blossoms the teleological understanding of history, and as such, the historicity of *Íslendingabók* is embedded in it. From a Christian perspective, the Gospels invite the believer to understand in an allegorical way, as when Jesus explains the meaning of the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:3-23).  

In this environment, certain information becomes relevant in both a literal, and allegorical way. Bearing in mind that Ari asserts as truthful what he describes in the book, the understanding of the historical events also unveils the teleological dimension of the narrative under a Christian worldview that allowed Ari to select the units, details and meanings that lead the composition of *Íslendingabók*. For a better understanding about this point, it might be helpful to understand Tolkien’s philosophy of the myth: J.R.R. Tolkien believed that myths were expressions of the truth, since when humans unveil the truth through narratives, they express the divine through the images and poetics of human mind; but for Tolkien, the Incarnation story is a myth related by the Christian God through the factuality of the world; hence, men express the truth through language and metaphors, but God reveals the Truth through the Incarnation as a historical fact, and thus, all human history partakes in the narrative of God.  

The Conversion Story in Ari follows the same pattern. It does not, however, starts with the arrival of missionaries or the pressure of king Óláfr Tryggvason of turning Iceland into a Christian land. Ari starts the history of Iceland, by explaining when Iceland was settled, and how the first settler, Ingólfur, arrives to Iceland and the continues:  

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Í þann tíð vas Ísland víði vaxit á miðli fjalls ok fjǫru. Dá váru hér menn kristnir, þeir es Norðmenn kalla papa, en þeir fóru síðan á braut, af því at þeir vildu eigi vesa hér við heiðna menn, ok létu eptir bœkr írskar ok bjöllur ok bagla; af því mátti skilja, at þeir váru menn írskir.

At that time was Iceland covered with wood between the mountains and of the fjords. Then were here Christian men, those which the Norsemen call *papar*, but they went afterwards away, because they didn’t want to be here along with heathen men, and left behind Irish books and bells and croziers; because of that could be understand that they were Irish men.130

The elaboration of the narrative is thus linking the Icelandic traditions and the Christian teleology. It can be argued thus, that the presence of the *papar*, Irish monks that left behind religious artifacts, prefigures the adoption of Christianity that was everlastingly pre-ordeined to take to its completion the Icelandic endeavor.131 This is why, in my opinion, the final chapter of *Íslendingabók* deals with the appointment of Gizurr as bishop in Skálaholt, the creation of the bishopric of Hólar, the introduction of the tithe law and the writing of the law in the years 1117-18,132 all fundamental Icelandic endeavors in their construction of a new, Christian ethos, that Ari understood as product of the divine providence foreshadowed in the presence of the *papar* and by allowing Icelanders to claim the land and rule it with the law.

This means that, for Ari, the information regarding the presence of the *papar* foreshadows the adoption of Christianity. As we have seen above, the allegorical sense understands history as a narrative displayed by God and also, in the biblical exegesis, as how the Old Testament foreshadows the New Testament, or in other words, how the events, stories, prophesies and poetical expressions are fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ. This means that Ari and medieval historians tend to understand the historical events as both under the relation of the Bible, and under the idea that Christianization was somehow unavoidable, making one of the tasks of the historian compiling and organizing how the history leads towards salvation. This can also be seen in the previously quoted *Heimsaldrar* that establishes that the sixth age is how history will unfold, from the birth of Christ to the doomsday, but before, all the world would be converted.133

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130 Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 5.
4. The allegorical reading also reveals two other aspects that are fundamental to the Conversion Story; the relation of first settlers and the role of the law in the shaping of the land. The second chapter identifies four settlers and their settlements seats: Hrollaugr in Síða, Auðr Ketilsdóttir in Breiðafjörður, Helgi inn magri Eyvindsson in Eyjafjörður and Ketilbjörn Ketilsisson at Mosfell. This chapter also describes how Úlfþótr brings the law from Norway into Iceland and how Grímr geitskôr travelled around the land collecting money and spreading the law.134

These four settlers are the ancestors of important historical characters in Íslandabók: Ketilbjörn is the ancestor of Gizurr inn hvíti and his son bishop Íslefr, father in turn of bishop Gizurr. Hrollaugr was the ancestor of one of the champions of the conversion, Hallr á Síðu, great-great grandfather of the first bishop of Hólar, Jón. Auðr is related to Þórðr gellir, and he is the ancestor of bishop Þorlákr and of Ari himself and Helgi inn magri was ancestor of bishop Ketill.135

The importance of the law is central in the Conversion narrative and reflects a Christian understanding of the nature and role of law in a society. The book of Leviticus says:

Custodite legitima mea atque judicia, et non faciatis ex omnibus abominationibus istis, tam indigena quam colonus qui peregrinantur apud vos. […] Cavete ergo ne et vos similiter evomat, cum paria feceritis, sicut evomuit gentem, quae fuit ante vos.

Keep ye my ordinances and my judgments, and do not any of these abominations: neither any of your own nation, nor any stranger that sojourneth among you… Beware then, lest in like manner, it vomit you also out, if you do the like things, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.136

And Icelanders hold the law as the governing principle of the land. When Úlfþótr brings the laws, the settlement of the land is over, and thus the conquering of the promised land by the Israelites and the writing of the law is brought into mind, as after the conquest of the land, when Joshua is about to die: “Scripsit quoque omnia verba haec in volumine legis Domini: et tuli lapidem pergrandem, posuitque eum subter quercum, quae erat in sanctuario Domini.” “And he wrote all these things in the volume of the law of the Lord: and he took a great stone, and set it

134 Ari Þorgilsson, Islendingabók, 6-7.
135 Ari Þorgilsson, Islendingabók, 26-27.
136 Holy bible, Leviticus Chapter 18:26,28.
under the oak that was in the sanctuary of the Lord.”\textsuperscript{137} And although these examples are also part of the tropological reading, they structure the allegorical reading, that guides Ari and the later readers in the comprehension of the Conversion Story as the account of the writing of the laws reveals “Et fyrsta sumar, es Bergþórr sagði lǫg upp, vas nýmæli þat gört, at lǫg ór skyldi skrifa á bók at Hafliða Mássonar of vetrinn eptir at sógu ok umbráði þeira Bergþórs ok annarra spakra manna, […] þá vas Gizurr byskup óþingfœrr af sótt” “The first summer, when Bergþórr proclaimed law, this new law was established, that our law should be written on a book at Hafiði’s Másson’s over the winter after the report and supervision of those, Bergþórr and other wise men,… then was bishop Gizurr unable to go to the Alþingi from illness”.\textsuperscript{138}

Despite the origin of the law, delivered orally, the law is presented as being adapted and emended a series of times starting when Úlfljótr brings the law from Gúlaþing, under the advice of Þorliefr inn spaki, and in Íslendingabók finalizing with the codification of the law under the supervision of the bishops, in the years 1117-18. This transition is important in the understanding of the law by Ari since, as Brian Stock explains: “First, the custom became immobilized in the text; once written down, it could be modified only by a new redaction. Secondly the custom, if recorded, was assumed to have existed in that form for all time;”\textsuperscript{139}

The conversion story then gravitates from these allegoric principles, and that accounts for the preeminence of Hallr á Síðu, Hjalti Skeggjason and Gizurr inn hvíti, that lead the Christian party that proclaims Christianity in the Alþingi. They are all descendants of the aforementioned settlers or related to the growing clergy in Iceland in later times.\textsuperscript{140}

The preeminence of the law also highlights the Christian understanding of the episode that makes in Ari’s account Iceland Christian. After a dispute, where both heathen and Christian people discuss in the Alþingi and decides to create each one their own law and community, the Christian party asks Hallr á Síðu –descendent of Hrollaugr and ancestor in accord of the bishop of Hólar Jón– to proclaim a law for them. Hallr deflects that responsibility to the lǫgsǫgumaðr (lawspeaker) Þorgeirr. Ari says that although he was pagan he took upon himself this task and lay under a cloak for an entire day.\textsuperscript{141} Some have speculated a magical or mystical practice that

\textsuperscript{137} Holy bible, Book of Josue Chapter: 24:26.  
\textsuperscript{138} Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 23-24.  
\textsuperscript{139} Brian Stock, The Implications of Literacy, 56, 57-59, 80.  
\textsuperscript{140} Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 14.  
\textsuperscript{141} Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók, 16.
explains why the heathen party accepted this arrangement, but can also be read that Ari understands this, as Theodoricus Monachus does, as due to divine intervention.

The fundamentality of the law is stressed in the Bible as seen above in Leviticus as well as in the Gospels where Jesus says: “Si diligitis me, mandata mea servate.” “If you love me, keep my commandments.” This is expressed as well in the narrative under an allegorical reading. When lawspeaker Þorgeirr went out of under his cloak he called people declaring that:

\[\text{at hónum þótti þá komit hag manna í ónýtt efni, ef men skyldi eigi hafa allir lög ein á landi hér, ok talði fyrir mǫnnum á marga vega, at þat skyldi eigi láta verða, […] at þat mundi at því ósætti verða, es visa ván vas, at þær barsmiðir gørðisk á miðli manna, es landit eyddisk af. […] “En nú þykkir mér þat ráð,” kvað hann, “at vér látim ok eigi þá ráða, es mest vilja í gegn gangask, ok miðlum svá mál á miðli þeira, at hvárittveggju hafi nakkvat sins más, ok hǫfum allir ein lög ok einn síð. Þat mon verða satt, es vér slítum í sundr lǫgin, at vér monum slíta ok fríðinn.”}"

That to him seemed that the affairs of men had come into an unbearable state, if not all men were to have one law here on the land, and dissuade the men on many ways, that this should not be let to come to pass, … that this would bring near such disagreements to happen, which are shown to be expected, that these thrashings when done amongst men, are to desolate the land… “And now seems to me that plan,” he declared, “that we presented and that we don’t let those rule, who want the most to go against each other, and to mediate so an agreement between them, that each side have some of their demands, and have all one law and one faith. This will become true, when we tear the law asunder, that we will tear also the peace.”

The narrative of the sagas, where a seemingly meaningless event foreshadows later developments, partakes of this understanding of the historicity and teleology and might be influenced by how Ari displays the four units expressed before, that come to a unity at some

144 *Holy bible*, Gospel according to Saint John, chapter: 14:15.
145 Ari Porgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 17.
point of the story. In *Brennu-Njáls saga* for example, the eyes of Hallgerðr foreshadow the
doom of Gunnarr á Hliðarenda.\(^\text{146}\)

But more specifically, *Kristni Saga* and *Brennu-Njáls Saga* expand on the narrative,
adding details to the bone given by Ari as the famous narrative of the journey of Þangbrandr in
*Brennu-Njáls saga* where the killings and trials of Þangbrandr are explained in detail.\(^\text{147}\) The
narrative is simple in *Íslendingabók* and keeps the focus on the exportation of the faith through
the institutions. Conflict is portraited at the center of the narrative, but it is confined to the
religious-ideological dimension. This shows an allegorical relation that appears strongly on the
tropological understanding: an understanding of Iceland as a new Israel. This view is present
also in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* and will be explored in the next section in more detail.


\(^{147}\) *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 255-269.
4 Iceland: Kingless Paradise.

1. Íslendingabók has been examined as a myth by John Lindow, arguing that the reference to both kings, one Christian –Saint Eadmund of Anglia– and one pagan –Haraldr hárfragr–, with the Christian reckoning of time AD, entwines the narrative in the mythical mode of thinking.148 As the tropological sense of reading draws on the sense of repetition, the idea of a fractal reality is inbuded in this sense, and as such partakes in what has been identified as mythological thinking. This can also explain the resilience of the pre-Christian notions in the Icelandic culture.149

The presence of the papar in Íslendingabók is used later in the Icelandic Corpus often and meaningfully as can be seen from the first page of Landnámabók that retells the presence of the Irish monks in Iceland, that they identify as Thule.150 As Pernille Hermann states, Íslendingabók presents a continuum between the heathen history, and the Christian one.151

This understanding the tropological presence of the Irish papar and the consecration of the land that their presence brings along, is in itself a myth, regardless of the factuality of the historical reality behind it, and we can now remember what Tolkien says about the poet of Beowulf, and how his poem attempted to answer the question of what to do with the heathen ancestors in a newly Christian enviroment. As I have proposed above, one of the interests of Ari in Íslendingabók, is to create an Icelandic ethos: this ethos needed a myth of origin that gave an answer to that question, showing at the same time, that Icelanders were not forgotten in the divine plan. This ethos gave them a way of understanding both their role as a society and as a historical continuum with their ancestors and institutions that although imperfect as they were, have been refined through history.

It might be important now, to draw attention to the fact that, as Guðrún Nordal points out about Íslendinga saga, the historical moment when the sagas started to be written did not display a fully Christian system of values, as the ethics of manliness and the feuding of the previous era are common ground. This is because in this society, the Christian faith and its

150 Landnámabók, 31.
system of values are not fully integrated in the social fabric, and there is no distinction between social fabric and ethics in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Iceland.\textsuperscript{152}

As we can see, the narrative prioritizes the nature of the law as the element that lead Icelanders to Christianity and is present at the very beginning of the narrative. When the 	extit{papar} leave the land, they are preferring the law of God over living with the heathen population, but it is also expressed in the ban that king Haraldr imposes on settling Iceland, and the tax that allow it: “Þá sættusk þeir á þat, at hverr maðr skylði gjalda konungi fimm aura, sá es eigi væri frá því skiliðr ok þaðan færi hingat. [...] en þar galzk stundum meira en stundum minna, unz Óláfr enn digri gørði skýrt, at hverr maðr skylði gjalda konungi half mǫrk” “Then they settle on that, that each man should pay to the king five ounces of silver, that man who were not from that exempted and would travel from there (Norway) hither.”\textsuperscript{153}

More over, as explained above, Icelanders didn’t institute a monarchy or any other structure with permanent positions of power that arbitrated the affairs of the people, except the law, that ruled supreme. This preeminence of the law certainly must have seemed remarkable to Ari, and probably guided his understanding of how the importance of the law and the sense of justice, as can be extrapolated from the example of Þórdór gellir, lead Icelanders to enter into the history of salvation. If the attributed work \textit{Heimsaldrar} was really written by Ari then he was very much aware that from Moses to king David, only the law given by God ruled supreme over the Israelites: “Honum gaf gud lơg þau, er Moyses lơg heita.” “To him gave God those laws, which are called Moses-laws.”\textsuperscript{154} But even if it is not, this probably was common knowledge in the clergy all around the Christian world.

The tropological reading of \textit{Íslendingabók} relates this way, the lack of a king and the supremacy of the law, in both Iceland and Israel. As Þorgeirr says that “hónum þótti þá komit hag manna í ònýtt efni, ef men skylði eigi hafa allir lǫg ein á landi hér,” “to him seemed that the affairs of men had come into an unbearable state, if not all men were to have one law here on the land.”\textsuperscript{155} This has some parallels with the idea expressed by God to the prophet Samuel when the Israelites demand a king in order to be as the other lands:

\textsuperscript{153}Ari Porgísson, \textit{Íslendingabók}, 5-6.
\textsuperscript{154}Alfræði íslenzk., 50. Mi translation.
\textsuperscript{155}Ari Porgísson, \textit{Íslendingabók}, 17.
non enim te abjecerunt, sed me, ne regnem super eos. Juxta omnia opera
sua, quae fecerunt a die qua eduxi eos de Aegypto usque ad diem hanc: sicut
dereliquerunt me, et servierunt diis alienis, sic faciunt etiam tibi.

For they have not rejected thee, but me, that I should not reign over them.
According to all their works, they have done from the day that I brought
them out of Egypt until this day: as they have forsaken me, and served
strange gods, so do they also unto thee.\textsuperscript{156}

So that in the tropological reading, the supremacy of the law over the people means that
they have chosen God as their true and unique ruler. But this is a surprising interpretation. As
*Kirkjudagsmál* reveals: the ideal in lands where kings ruled, was that the king were to be an
image and an interventor of the real king: God.\textsuperscript{157} Many philosophers and fathers of the church
used the figures of king David and king Solomon from the Bible to portray the king not only as
the individual appointed as *primus inter pares* to rule in God’s name the realm, but also as the
*pater familias* that should guard the kingdom and the subjects, especially in the spiritual
aspect,\textsuperscript{158} and the Benedictine communities represented by Oddr Snorrrason *munk* and
Gunnlaugr Leifsson supported this view, whereas the twelfth century tradition related to the
Bishops of Skálholt and Hólar, and Ari, supported the supremacy of the law.

This idea is highly influential, and we can feel the importance of Ari’s idea in many
sagas, but as an example, *Brennu-Njáls Saga* insists in many places on the fundamentality of
the law, and the idea of the supremacy of the law is expressed by Njáll when he says: “því at
með lǫgum skal land várt byggja, en með ólǫgum eyða.” “because with the law shall be our
land built, but with unlawfulness deserted.”\textsuperscript{159}

This tropological reading is influential also in that, it allows the saga writers to choose
some of the historical moments to represent various themes at once. That could perhaps explain
why *Brennu-Njál saga* expands its narrative, keeping, among many other historical events
related there, the formation of the fifth court in a different fashion, and the Conversion Story
almost exactly following Ari.

2. The last interpretation is the anagogical that relates the historical events to the future
of the world and the Kingdom of Heavens. It seems that Ari thought Iceland was consecrated

\textsuperscript{156} *Holy bible in Latin language with Douay-Rheims English Translation*, 1 Samuel Chapter 8:7-8.
\textsuperscript{157} *The Icelandic Homily Book*: perg. 15 4°, ed. Andrea de Leeuw van Weenen, (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna
Magnússonar, 1993) 45r-45v.
\textsuperscript{158} Paul J. E.Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings: Peace, Power and the Early Medieval Political Imagination*, (Oxford:
\textsuperscript{159} *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 172.
by the presence of the *papar*, but also from the organization of the institutions that enable Icelanders to keep the land in order and to establish the Christian faith. This idea that the heathen people, although far from God, keep a natural knowledge that guides them is also reflected in the introduction of Snorri’s Edda:

So happened, that they lost God’s name, and over the wide world were not to be found that man, who could discern his Creator. But none the less God granted them earthly gifts, riches and happiness, which they would need to be in the world, He also shared with them wisdom, so that they could gain understanding of all the earthly things and all the causes, those which they might see of the sky or of the earth… Because of this they understood so, that the earth was quick and had life of some kind, and they knew, that she was wonderfully old in ages to reckon and mighty in nature… from such likenings of things they supposed, that there must be some ruler of the heavenly bodies, that who must control their courses at his own will, and that He must be very powerful and mighty.\(^{160}\)

Two things can be said to represent, thus, the Kingdom of Heavens in the narrative of *Íslendingabók*. As we have seen in the tropological reading, the presence of a king was important according to many thinkers; the king was figure of either king David or king Solomon, and they are also tropologies of Christ. Thus, where the king acts in such a fashion that leads the land to a more peaceful state, it is representing also the expected glory after doomsday. The second thing is the very disposition of Iceland under the law in Alþingi and Skálaholt as centers of the land. This means that the bishop *in persona Christi* and the law are

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dwelling in the center of the land as God in the Book of Revelations (Revelations Chapter 21: 3.)

The main actor of the narrative is king Óláfr Tryggvason from the first way of reading the Kingdom of Heavens, that sends the first missionaries to convert Iceland, He is acting thus like a figure of Christ. He also acts in the likeness of Christ when he withholds his wrath and sends a new delegation to convert Iceland. The passage is relevant, since at the beginning of the chapter is declared: “Óláfr rex Tryggvasonr, Óláfssonar, Haraldssonar ens hárfragra, kom kristni i Norveg ok á Ísland.” “King Óláfr son of Tryggvi, son of Óláfr, son of Haraldr inn hárfragri, brought Christianity in Norway and into Iceland.” And the chapter is finished with the definitive dating, that is articulated with the death of Óláfr Tryggvason: “En Óláfr Tryggvason fell et sama sumar at sögu Sæmundar prests.” “And Óláfr Tryggvason fell the same summer by a report of priest Sæmundr.”

That Óláfr Tryggvason acts here like a figure of Christ both in authority baptizing the Icelanders and then sacrificing himself in battle can also indicate the victory of Christ at the end of times, victory that from a Christian perspective already happened at the moment of the Crucifixion.

The later writers such as Theodoricus Monachus strengthen the position of Saint Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway, by making Óláfr Tryggvason not a figure of Christ but a figure of the cousin of Jesus, John the Baptist. Theodoricus says that: “And when he had made all of them accept baptism, he made his way inland, to Upplönd. There he came upon Óláfr, who was then a little boy of three, […] According to some, the king had him and his mother baptized then and there”. He then says that he has read in History of the Normans that Saint Óláfr was baptized in Normandy. Nevertheless, the simple mention of the encounter helps to propagate this idea. These ideas and relations with the kings of Norway would prove to become increasingly strong, shifting the idea in the writers of sagas and of Icelanders from the supremacy of the law to the remarks of William of Sabina about the lack of a king in Iceland, as narrated by Sturla Þórðarson.

Finally, this way of reading their own history was fundamental for Icelanders when they were trying to understand their own identity amidst the Christian World and their own

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161 Ari Porgilsson, Íslendingabók, 8-9, 23.
162 Ari Porgilsson, Íslendingabók, 14.
163 Ari Porgilsson, Íslendingabók, 17-18.
164 Theodoricus Monachus, Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings, 17.
periphery. In this way, Íslendingabók proves fundamental once again in the discussion of an Icelandic ethos.
5 Conclusion

Íslendingabók by Ari fróði Þorgilsson is a fundamental book for the Icelandic corpus. The influence of his book is patent in various details found in the sagas, as the chronological dates that Ari established are used and sometimes even preferred. I think I have demonstrated the likelihood of this assumption, having in mind that what we know of Sæmundr as a writer indicates that although he was very interested in writing about the history of the Norwegian and Danish kings, as Sven Ellehøj has demonstrated, he followed just the chronology of the kings. Ari does the same in the extant version we have of Íslendingabók, but he correlates the genealogies of kings and of lawspeakers to chronologies external to the Scandinavian reckonings, introducing in this manner Iceland and Scandinavia into the history of the world. This account, in part due to the fame and influence of Ari in the Icelandic literary corpus, allowed Icelanders to produce historical writings that relate the native ways of reckoning time as the genealogies, with the rest of the Christian history thus situating the events in the grand narrative of world history.

This excersise of writing a history of Iceland created an incision in the written traditions. The two written traditions have multiple relations in between, but it is important to recognize that Íslendingabók established certain milestones for later writers and, as discussed in the first chapter, the increasing tradition of writing and reading demands a corroboration of the information in texts. If many of the facts that Ari delivered are repeated over and over in the sagas, the explanation must be found in the medieval tradition of referring to authorities and previous compositions. Ari influence is also evidence of the shift from an oral tradition to a written tradition in Iceland.

Admittedly, Ari must be considered a good historian, but we ought to read it in the context in which he wrote, in order to understand his proposal. For this reason, I tried to read him using the four medieval ways of reading and understanding a text. The literal mode of understanding shows that Íslendingabók presents a certain bias that favors the families of the bishops, and Ari’s own family. It is hard to discern if that bias was intentional or if Ari just priviledged these historical trends due to the nature of his sources, that tend to be individual members of these social spheres.

This historical understanding is built from an allegorical perspective that guides the selection of historical moments from Ari’s part. The historicity of Íslendingabók is built with a
teleological understanding of the world, that although novel in Iceland, was old in Christendom. Ari is also learned in the 11th and 12th century understanding of hermeneutics that prioritizes the literal way of reading and develops from that on to the other three. This can account for the way in which Íslendingabók was written, that if compared to Historia ecclesiastica or Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum it is evident that Íslendingabók hides the references to supernatural realities. This does not mean that those are not present, as the allegorical way of reading demonstrated, but accounts for the fact that some scholars have found Íslendingabók to be a secular production.

Ari builds his historical narrative using four different units, that although apparently separated at the beginning of the book, come together by the end. This is evidenced by the writing of the law in the winter of 1117-1118. This narrative device influenced the narrative structure of the sagas, and the historical selection made by Ari became the backbone over which many of the saga writers displayed their accounts. It is my hope that this comprehension helps us to understand not only the relation between Íslendingabók and the Íslendingasögur, but also to understand what kind of historicity is portrayed in these texts.

The allegorical, tropological and anagogical readings of Íslendingabók highlight Ari’s answer to the question of what a Christian community ought to do with the traditions and memories of their heathen ancestors: Ari proposes a continuum under the rule of law, and a deepening of the understanding of their historical situation. This is important, because it might be useful to understand the role of the ethical structure of the sagas, since what is at stake in Ari’s narrative, is his contribution to create a new Icelandic ethos, that was influential in the saga tradition.

Finally, I want to stress again the fact that Ari must be read in the wider context of the Christian world, but that does not take away another fact: he is a rarity, writing in the vernacular so early, and imprinting a good understanding of the history of the world, that proves that he was everything but ignorant of the conventions in the rest of the Christendom. This begs the question of why Ari wrote in the vernacular; and although that was a question I tried to answer, the more I tried, the more questions arose from this.
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