

ARCHAEOLOGY AND TEXT: A HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SETTLEMENT OF ICELAND

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Resumen

Los avances tecnológicos en los métodos de datación de las últimas décadas han modificado la relación que se estableció entre la arqueología y los textos medievales islandeses hasta mediados del siglo XX: el foco ya no consiste en cotejar la información entre los textos medievales sino en realizar otro tipo de investigaciones que, si bien nos han permitido fechar el asentamiento de Islandia con mayor rigurosidad, también ofrecen información sobre la explotación de los recursos o el impacto medioambiental durante la colonización de Islandia en el siglo IX. Este artículo analizará dos fragmentos del *Landnámabók*, el libro del siglo XIII que describe la colonización de Islandia, con el objetivo de establecer un renovado diálogo entre los recientes descubrimientos arqueológicos acaecidos en la isla y las fuentes medievales escritas sobre Islandia.

Palabras clave: colonización de Islandia, historiografía medieval nórdica, arqueología medieval, *Landnámabók*

Abstract

The technological advances of the last decades in dating methods have modified the relationship between archaeology and medieval Icelandic texts that was commonplace until the middle of the twentieth century. The focus is no longer on comparing the information provided by medieval texts but on carrying out other types of research that have allowed a more accurate dating of the first settlement of Iceland, and have offered information on the exploitation of resources and environmental impact during the colonization of Iceland in the ninth century. In this article, I will analyse two fragments of the *Landnámabók*, the thirteenth-century book that describes the colonization of Iceland, with the aim of establishing a renewed dialogue between recent archaeological discoveries on the island and the medieval sources devoted to Iceland.

Key Words: settlement of Iceland, Old Norse historiography, medieval archaeology, *Landnámabók*

1. Early Archaeological Work on the Colonisation of Iceland

As Mónica Durán states in the only article on Icelandic archaeology that exists to date in the Spanish language: “La arqueología islandesa es una ciencia que abarca un periodo cultural relativamente corto y reciente y que se ha visto apoyada por una rica tradición literaria” [Icelandic archaeology is a science that spans a relatively short and recent cultural period and has been supported by a rich literary tradition] (DURÁN 2013: 18).¹ Durán points out the absence of archaeological remains prior to the so-called Viking Age and emphasises the role of the sagas in the preliminary focus of the excavations. Indeed, the close relationship between early archaeological excavations and medieval texts has marked a clear working trend in early Icelandic archaeology.

The texts on the settlement of Iceland date its beginning approximately between 870 and 930. Until the third part of the 20th century, Icelandic archaeology based its excavations on this time scale and the topographical descriptions of the Icelandic sagas. Archaeological discoveries were at the service of the texts as a means to illustrate the past described in them and as a tool to confirm what was preserved in the manuscripts (FRÍÐRIKSSON, VÉSTEINSSON 2003: 141).

Archaeological dating methods such as tephrochronology or radiocarbon dating have been used on Icelandic soil to date the beginning of the colonisation of the island and to cross-check the data with written sources. The *Landnámabók* (hereinafter *LB*) and the body of texts recounting the settlement of Iceland² serve as a guide for excavations, given that the topographical indications are very precise.

Here we will see how one of the most recent archaeological discoveries is evidence of a settlement in the east of the island that predates the first settler, Ingólfr Arnarson, in Reykjavík, as described in the *LB*.

2. Recent archaeological finds in Stöðvarfjörður

Stöðvarfjörður is an Icelandic town on the west coast of Iceland. In the vicinity of this municipality of less than 200 inhabitants, on the shores of the fjord with which it shares its name, the foundations of two Viking-era houses have recently been discovered.

¹ While the author comments on archaeological finds from the Viking Age, her article is mainly focused on the excavation of the modern period sites of the Bessastaðir building, the current official residence of the President of Iceland.

² Friðriksson signals three primary sources for the historical reconstruction of the settlement: the *Íslendingabók*, the *Landnámabók* and the Icelandic sagas (FRÍÐRIKSSON, VÉSTEINSSON 2003: 140).



Fig. 1 *Langhús* in Stöðvarfjörður. Photo/Friðrik Þór

The two *langhús* of Stöðvarfjörður were found by chance in 2003. Bjarni Einarsson, the archaeologist in charge of the excavation, claims that one of the two houses was built on the foundations of an even older one, the remains of which are found underneath the layer known as the “settlement layer”. This two-coloured pyroclastic layer –due to the basaltic and rhyolitic component– was deposited after a volcanic eruption in about 870, shortly before the first settlement in Iceland described in written sources. This is why this layer was called the “settlement layer” or the “*landnám* tephra layer” (THORARINSSON 1944).

The documented volcanic eruptions allow to establish a detailed tephrochronology of the island. However, recent scientific developments over the last decade have led to a call for caution in the use of the “*landnám* tephra layer” to date sediments associated with archaeological excavations, as it is also necessary to carry out geochemical analyses to avoid dating errors (WASTEGÅRD et al. 2003: 277, 282).⁴ In fact, pollen analyses carried out in southern Iceland detect an increase in a type of grasses, characteristic of the settlement, which show that the date of colonisation may have been earlier than 870 AD (WASTEGÅRD et al. 2003: 277).⁵ The archaeological and palaeobotanical evidence gathered in the last decade has raised the debate about the veracity of the year of settlement stipulated in the written sources. But, at the same time, it has also provided additional information regarding the environmental consequences of the land occupation recorded in the written sources, which we will discuss in the last section of this article.

The enormous significance of the discovery of the foundations of the *langhús* in Stöðvarfjörður below the settlement layer lies in the fact that the present capital of Iceland is no longer the first

³ <https://icelandmag.is/article/new-archaeological-research-forces-historians-reconsider-story-icelands-settlement>, [2018/ 09/ 20]

⁴ In this paper, this team of researchers advocates the separate analysis of basaltic and rhyolitic tephra. The rhyolitic tephra has a more variable geochemistry and this allows us to further refine the timing of the different eruptions within the same volcanic system.

⁵ Details of this research can be found at EINARSSON 1963a, 1963b; HALLSDÓTTIR 1987, NORDAHL 1988.

place on the island to be inhabited.⁶ Einarsson shows in his research, using Carbon-14 dating, that the oldest house was built shortly before 800. This would mean that there was already a permanent settlement in the fjords of East Iceland before the first settler, Ingólfr Arnarson, arrived in Reykjavík. Moreover, Einarsson points out that the size of the houses in the fjord of Stöðvarfjörður –40 metres in length– is twice the size of the houses found at Reykjavík, which were built around 870 (EINARSSON 2016).

The farm in Stöðvarfjörður is not the only building that has been discovered recently, the ruins of a fishing village at Hafnir on the Reykjanes peninsula were also found in 2016.⁷ The oldest parts of the ruins have been dated to 770. This recent discovery shows a settlement almost a century before 874.⁸ From the construction and structure of the houses in Hafnir, it has been concluded that the settlers came from the Shetland Islands or Norway.

The “*landnám* tephra layer” has been identified in most parts of the island and has guided the dating of the earliest settlements. While early archaeological discoveries confirmed the time frame of Iceland’s settlement, recent finds have called into question other important issues, such as where the first settlers established themselves.

3. The devaluation of medieval sources as historical documents on Icelandic settlement

The *Íslendingabók* (hereinafter *ÍB*) –*Book of Icelanders*– was written around the 12th century by Ari Þorgilsson, and recounts in prose the most significant events in Icelandic history in ten chapters. The first chapter⁹ succinctly describes the settlement of Iceland and places it chronologically during the reign of Harald Fairhair (Haraldr inn hárfagri, c. 850-932). Ari Þorgilsson, also known as Ari the Wise (*Ari inn fróði*), dates the settlement’s origin to 871 and points to Ingólfr Arnarson as its first settler. The dating of the settlement does not coincide with the year 874 from the *LB*, and as described in the previous section, recent archaeological discoveries confirm the date given by Ari the Wise (VÉSTEINSSON 1997: 2).¹⁰ The devaluation of the *LB* as a historical source long

⁶ According to written sources, some Irish monks named *papar* were living on the island before the first Norwegian settlers arrived in the late 9th century. The references in the *Íslendingabók* and in the *Landnámabók* to these Christians whom the Northmen called *papar* may have been influenced by the 9th century work of the Irish monk Dicuil. His work describes the journeys of holy men across the North. According to GUÐMUDSSON 1997, Ari Þorgilsson, the author of the *ÍB*, interpreted that the territory through which they travelled and lived was Iceland, but without any hard evidence for this. In fact, there is no archaeological evidence for this earlier settlement.

⁷ Let us remember that this is precisely the area where Flóki Vilgerðarson and his crew arrived.

⁸ <https://icelandmag.is/article/ivory-hunters-might-have-established-bases-iceland-decades-prior-permanent-settlement>, [2018/ 09/ 28]

⁹ This chapter, entitled «Frá Íslands byggð», is available in Old Norse (its original language) at BENEDIKTSSON 1986a: 4-6. A partial translation into Spanish of the *Íslendingabók* can be found in Gwyn Jones’ book (JONES 1988: 119-131), as well as the translation of some chapters of the *Landnámabók* (JONES 1988:133-179). This translation was undertaken by José Antonio Zabalbeascoa.

¹⁰ It should be noted that the *ÍB* was written more than two and a half centuries after the alleged beginning of the settlement. The significant time gap means that we have to cast some doubts on their testimony. As for the *LB*, the time gap is even larger, as the earliest surviving manuscript dates back to the 13th century.

predates the archaeological discoveries of the last few decades. The turning point in the treatment of medieval Icelandic texts promoted by the “Icelandic School”, formed at the beginning of the 20th century, results in a new appreciation of written sources from a literary point of view. This School urges the study of the sagas “as a literary product and not simply as a document or source of data in the service of history” (GARCÍA LÓPEZ 2015: 157). While the fall of the sagas as a historical source is successfully picked up by the Icelandic School, promoting their value as a fictional account, the impact on other types of texts such as the *LB* was negative. This is why “for the better part of this century the settlement of Iceland, the *landnám*, has received surprisingly limited attention from scholars, considering its significance for our understanding of the Viking Age and Icelandic history” (VÉSTEINSSON 1997: 2). The very structure of the *LB* prevented it from fitting into one side of the rigid fiction-reality axis that was beginning to arrange the written sources on Iceland’s past. We will see below what are the structural features of the *LB* that, on the one hand, attest to its resistance to being categorised as a historical document or fictional account, but on the other hand clearly embed it in the emerging written tradition of twelfth-century Iceland.

The Landnámabók and the Icelandic Written Tradition

The *LB* has been preserved to this day in five versions, three of which are medieval: *Sturlubók* (c.1275-80), *Hauksbók* (1306-8), *Melabók* (c. 1300) and two additional 17th-century versions, *Skarðsárbók* and *εν ελ. Þórðarbók* (BENEDIKTSSON 1969: 276).

The 399 sections in which the *LB* is divided into give an account of the more than 400 settlers arriving in Iceland. It contains a total of 3,500 proper names and more than 1,500 place names (BENEDIKTSSON 1969: 275). Most of the chapters list the ancestry and descendants of the settlers. Only occasionally, especially with the more famous settlers, is the listing of personal names accompanied by a brief history to illustrate an important moment in their lives. This essentially enumerative structure leads us to question the sense of a linear reading of a text such as this one, whose usual way of being read, or perhaps recited,¹¹ must have been similar to that of chronicles, annals or legal documents. The *LB* might have been consulted in many different ways but, of course, not necessarily in a linear way or in consecutive order.

The record of the names of the expeditionaries, together with the place where they settled, works not only as a historical account that sorts and explains the settlement in Iceland, but also as a

¹¹ I suggest recitation as one of the possible ways of transmission to be taken into account based on two expressions found in paragraph 171 of the *LB*: «Nú eru rituð landnám flest í Vestfirðingafjórðungi, eptir því sem fróðir menn hafa sagt. Má þat nú heyra, at þann fjórðung hefir mart stórmenni byggt, ok frá þeim eru margar göfugar ættir komnar, sem nú mátti heyra» (BENEDIKTSSON 1986b: 209) («Most settlements (landnám) have already been recorded in the western quadrant, according to what the wise men have said. It may now be heard that that quadrant has been inhabited by many important men, and from them have come many respectable and distinguished families, as may already have been heard»).

record that puts in writing the settlers' attachment to the land, justifying their ownership and usufruct:

It is quite reasonable to assume that many of these major estates owed their extensive landholdings and access to diverse and valuable resources to the fact that they were the first settlements in their respective areas. This is supported by the place-name evidence. (VÉSTEINSSON 1997: 8)

In addition to the *LB*'s strong emphasis on genealogical and geographical information, the concept of ownership, the articulation of a system of relations between the settler and the new land, and the management of the granting of land to newcomers are recurrent themes in the text.

Smith claims that the *LB* manipulates historical and genealogical traditions to legitimise the powerful families of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. A consistent and unitary image of the settlement is forged in the text, and therefore the spatial planning is crucial.

The initial distribution of the territory of Iceland into four quadrants, derived from the division stated in the *ÍB*, is also behind the arrangement of the text into four parts: starting with the western quadrant, and then clockwise through the northern quadrant, the eastern quadrant, and finally the southern quadrant. This quadrant distribution is derived from Ari Þorgilsson's *ÍB*, which the author of the *LB* takes as a model, but from which it also differs in a number of ways that are closely related to the written tradition, as we shall see below.

The oral sources used for the drafting of the *LB* are mentioned in the body of the text itself, but expressions referring to the use of written sources are much more common. These referential turns of phrase are also frequent in the *ÍB*, where the sources used for its composition are listed. We note that in the case of the *ÍB* the sources are mainly of an oral nature and are centred on the testimony of Teitr, an adoptive father of Ari, who is described as the wisest man in the world.¹² The reason why Ari the Wise continually refers to his adoptive father's account is hinted at in the warning in the prologue: "whatever is wrongly reported in this history, one is duty bound to accept what proves to be more true".¹³ Such warnings were very common in medieval texts (BENEDIKTSSON 1986a: xxvii). Ari insists on a couple of occasions that Teitr is present at the events described. The account will be true or plausible insofar as it is based on the testimony of a wise person who —preferably— witnessed the events. The *LB*, while continuing the narrative style of the *ÍB*, presents some differences in the references to sources. First, the *LB* introduces references to written sources, books or sagas. Two types of expressions are observed when referring to the sources from which the information is extracted:

¹² Similar expressions to «svá sagði Teitr oss» («so Teitr told us») are recurrent in the text: BENEDIKTSSON 1986a: 4, 7, 15, 17, 18. All excerpts have been translated into Spanish from Old Norse by the author of the article.

¹³ «En hvatki es missagt es í frøðum þessum, þá es skylt at hafa þat heldr, es sannara reynisk» BENEDIKTSSON 1986a: 3.

- Reference to an earlier text: «sem fyrr er ritat»¹⁴ (as previously written)
- Reference to something said by a wise man: «svá segja fróðir / vitrir menn»¹⁵ (as the learned/ wise men say)

In these expressions, we can observe the use of the verb *segja* (“say”) to refer to oral sources and the verb *ríta* or *rita* (“write”) to refer to written sources. There is also a difference in the use of verb tense: past tense to introduce the written sources and present tense for the oral sources.

Moreover, in the *ÍB*, the oral testimony is identified by name and surname, whereas in the *LB*, the references are vague and impersonal, simply repeating: «as previously written» without identifying the writings and names of the sages to which reference is made. In some cases, it is indicated that it was written as part of a saga «sem ritat er í sögu hans»¹⁶ and only on a few occasions does it identify the name of one of the wise men: «Svá sagði Sæmundr prest inn fróði» (BENEDIKTSSON 1986b: 34). Sæmundr Sigfússon, better known as Sæmundr inn fróði (1056-1133) was a powerful Icelandic scholar, author of historical works, to whom was erroneously attributed the authorship of the Eddic poems contained in the *Codex Regius*, GkS 2365 4° (MEGAARD 2003). Unfortunately, no text by this prestigious and renowned scholar has survived.

Another of the written references that appear in the *LB* is Bede the Venerable, an eighth-century English monk who links the island named “Thile” with Iceland. What the *LB* later relates about the island matches the classical accounts of this remote island that the English monk must have had access to in order to come to the conclusion that “Thile” was Iceland.

The earliest classical accounts of the island’s existence date back to the Greek explorer Pytheas of Massalia. Around 400 BC he recounts in his text *Description of the Ocean* his arrival to a land he called *Thule*. His book disappeared after the fire in the library of Alexandria, but authors such as Pliny, in his *Natural History* or Strabo, in his *Geographica* recount the adventures of the daring geographer:

Concerning Thule, our historical information is still more uncertain, on account of its outside position; for Thule, of all the countries that are named, is set farthest north. But that the things which Pytheas has told about Thule, as well as the other places in that part of the world, have indeed been fabricated by him, we have clear evidence from the districts that are known to us,

¹⁴ The expression «sem fyrr er ritat» is the most repeated (BENEDIKTSSON 1986b: 85, 197, 223, 228, 242, 307, 312, 332, 334, 374, 393). We also find the following versions of the same expression: «at því er ritat er» (31), «sem ritat er» (87, 228), «sem áðr var ritat» (183, 307).

¹⁵ The expression «svá segja vitrir / fróðir menn» is the most used (BENEDIKTSSON 1986b: 32, 132, 155, 396). It is rarely used in the past tense: «eptir því sem fróðir menn hafa sagt» (209), «eptir því sem vitrir ok fróðir menn hafa sagt» (209, 334).

¹⁶ BENEDIKTSSON, 1986b, 51. These are some of the sagas: «af því gerðisk Þorskfirðinga saga» (154), «þar af gerðisk saga Ísfirðinga» (190), «Þaðan af gerðisk saga Böðmóðs gerpis ok Grímólfs» (198).

for in most cases he has falsified them, as I have already said before, and hence he is obviously more false concerning the districts which have been placed outside the inhabited world.¹⁷ And yet, if judged by the science of the celestial phenomena and by mathematical theory, he might possibly seem to have made adequate use of the facts as regards the people who live close to the frozen zone, when he says that, of the animals and domesticated fruits, there is an utter dearth of some and a scarcity of the others, and that the people live on millet and other herbs, and on fruits and roots; and where there are grain and honey, the people get their beverage, also, from them. As for the grain, he says,—since they have no pure sunshine— they pound it out in large storehouses, after first gathering in the ears thither; for the threshing floors become useless because of this lack of sunshine and because of the rains. (STRABO 1917: Book IV, pp. 261,263)

Pytheas expedition dates from between 330 and 320 BC. He set out from present-day Cadiz and travelled along the French coast to Britain and further north to the Shetland Isles. Strabo's accusations against the Greek expeditionary are most likely due to the fact that Roman propaganda presented Julius Caesar as the first to reach Britain. Strabo, a contemporary of Augustus, accuses Pytheas of lying, in turn fabricating a narrative in the service of Roman domination..

While Strabo's criticisms help us to understand the political tensions of the time, the account – although contested– provides descriptions of the northernmost parts of the known world at the time. What Pytheas says about the island he calls *Thule* is that it “is a six days' sail north of Britain” (STRABO 1917: Book I, p. 233) which perfectly agrees with the description in the prologue of the *LB*: «at ligi sex dœgra sigling í norðr frá Bretlandi» (BENEDIKTSSON 1986b: 31).

The arrival of the classical texts in *Thule* is reported by the medieval Icelandic compilers who, following in their footsteps, include the *LB* in the written tradition and confirm the parallelism between *Thule* and Iceland. Interestingly, this is a parallel still unresolved in 16th-century cartography, where *Thule* is depicted as a mysterious island on the fringes of the world, a hyperborean northern region, situated even *beyond the north*. In the first depiction of the Northern Territories in the *Carta Marina* by Olaus Magnus Iceland and *Thule* appear as two different islands.

¹⁷ Strabo insists on the discrediting of Pythias already in his first book: «For not only has the man who tells about Thule, Pytheas, been found, upon scrutiny, to be an arch-falsifier, but the men who have been to Britain and Ierne (Ireland) do not mention Thule, though they speak of other islands, small ones, about Britain» (STRABO 1917: BOOK I, pp. 235-236). In Book II, Strabo once again brands Pythias a liar and a charlatan.



Fig. 2 *Carta marina* by Olaus Magnus, 1572¹⁸

4. The *landnám* – the land occupation

Many accounts of settlers arriving in Iceland begin with their departure, usually from Norway, to embark on a Viking expedition. According to the *LB*, the region of origin is usually western and south-western Norway (VÉSTEINSSON 1997: 4). Expressions such as “to go a-viking” (*fara í viking*) and “looting” (*herja*) a territory are quite common. Looting generally takes place in Scotland –in the Hebrides or in the Shetlands– in the British Isles, and in Ireland, from where it was very common to seize slaves or to marry Irish women. Expeditions to the east are also reported: í Austrveg, in the Baltic Sea. And so, this settlers arrived in Iceland with the plunder from these expeditions, which also included slaves.

As mentioned above, most of the time the *LB* simply lists the settlers arriving on the island, where they settled, and who their descendants were, but occasionally, the act of taking possession

¹⁸ This is the second edition of the *Carta Marina* by Olaus Magnus published in 1572 (see the map legend). This map was drawn by the Swedish historian and antiquarian in Rome around 1530. Iceland is shown in the upper left corner, and an island named Thule is drawn between *Fare* (the present-day Faroe Islands) and *Orcades* (corresponding to the Orkney Islands). England is depicted in the lower left corner. <http://www.kb.se/samlingarna/digitala/kartor/carta-marina/> [2018/ 09/ 20]

of the land is explained in detail. Next, we will describe two settlements that are relevant due to their significance for the *landnám* and how two new research lines derived from archaeological work (the exploitation of resources¹⁹ and the location of early settlements) contribute to their understanding.

Flóki Vilgerðarson and the three ravens: the exploitation of resources

The fifth section of the *LB* gives a detailed account of the expedition of the renowned Viking Flóki Vilgerðarson (BENEDIKTSSON 1986b: 37-38). He left Norway for the Shetland Islands, where his daughter Geirhildr drowns in waters that have since become known as “Geirhildr’s Lake” (*Geirhildarvatn*), currently Gurlsta loch. Flóki continues his journey in a westerly direction aiming to reach an island which at the time was known as the Isle of Garðarr, named after Garðarr Svávarsson, a Swedish explorer who had travelled there before (BENEDIKTSSON 1986b: 34-35)

Flóki takes three ravens with him on the boat. When he releases the first one, it flies back from the stern. The second, on the other hand, flies upwards and swoops back to the ship. The third raven flies forward towards the bow and that was the direction in which they found the island. It is because of this episode that he was nicknamed “Hrafna-Flóki”: Raven-Flóki.

Flóki and his crew arrive at Horn, in the south-west of the island, and sail around Reykjanes. After that, they settle in Breiðafjörðr, a fish-filled fjord on the east coast, and devoted so much time to fishing that they forgot to cut hay for the cattle, which starved to death during the winter. In spring, Flóki climbed a high mountain and saw in the distance drifting ice in a fjord: “And that is why he named that territory Iceland, and that is its name until today.”²⁰

In this fragment Flóki embodies the figure of the father who names the island. This episode is a recurrent element in the *LB*. It is also very common to name places after the name of the explorer who led the expedition, thus establishing who discovered the area, who first inhabited it and who holds the property rights over it, a question that legitimises the right of use of the territory by the settler and his descendants.

Naming after a geographical feature of the area that is going to be inhabited gives us information about the characteristics of the terrain in the period of settlement. The name can describe permanent features that can still be observed today, such as Breiðafjörðr (“wide fjord”), or Hólar (“hills, hillocks”), but also resources available on the island at that moment, such as Grund

¹⁹ Resource exploitation and the environmental impact of settlement are popular topics in recent research studies. Among these, we highlight the work of archaeologist Thomas H. McGovern (see bibliography)..

²⁰ «Þá gekk Flóki upp á fjall eitt hátt ok sá norðr yfir fjöllin fjörð fullan af hafisum; því kölluðu þeir landit Ísland, sem þat hefir síðan heitit» (BENEDIKTSSON 1986b: 38).

(“green plains or prairies”), Keldur (“spring”) or Mýri²¹ (“marsh”). Iceland was covered with trees during the period of settlement. Archaeobotanical studies show that the forests –mainly birch– were destroyed in the decades after 870 (McGUIRE 2006: 16, VÉSTEINSSON 1997: 6). The reasons why the settlers exploited the forests were mainly: for building material, for grazing cattle, and for crops. Wood was also used as fuel, and a pattern has been identified linking the exploitation of forests in regions where there were deposits of limonite or iron.

The most common crop was hay for winter feed for cattle. This was also a cause of deforestation and soil erosion. The records in the *LB* describe the many problems Flóki and the early settlers had to face in order to feed the livestock before the practice of growing hay became widespread (VÉSTEINSSON 1997: 7).

*Ingólfr Arnarson and the *ǫndvegissúlur*:²² the location of the first settlements*

From the sixth chapter onwards, the *LB* tells the story Ingólfr and Hjörleifr, two brothers who, after sharing many plunderings, decide to set sail to settle in Iceland. Ingólfr sets out on this journey because, after making a great sacrifice, he knew that it was his destiny to travel to Iceland. Hjörleifr, on the other hand, never wanted to make sacrifices to the gods. The following summer, the blood brothers set out to settle on the island. The text also adds the exact date on which they set out on their journey: during the summer when Harald Fairhair had already been king of Norway for twelve years, i.e. «6073 years since the beginning of the world, and 874 years since the incarnation of Our Lord».²³ The brothers sailed together until they approached land and then separated. As soon as Ingólfr sighted land, he threw overboard his *ǫndvegissúlur* (high-seat pillars) and he stated he would settle where the pillars drifted ashore. Hjörleifr, on the other hand, drifted westwards and ran out of water along the way. He took up land at a place in the south of the island known as Hjörleifshöfði, and was killed there by his own slaves, who fled to the Vestmannaeyjar after that.

Ingólfr, as predicted, settled where the pillars had come ashore, in Reykjavík. The text claims, as does the *ÍB*, that «Ingólfr was the most famous of the settlers, because he arrived in these lands when they were still uninhabited, and was the first to colonise the country. The other settlers followed on his footsteps».²⁴

²¹ *Mýri* is the term in modern Icelandic. The medieval term is *mýrr*.

²² The *ǫndvegissúlur* (high-seat pillars) were two richly carved wooden pillars located on either side of the *ǫndvegi* or high-seat, where the head of the house sat.

²³ «Sumar þat, er þeir Ingólfr fóru til at byggja Ísland, hafði Haraldr hárfagri verit tólf ár konungr at Noregi; þá var liðit frá upphafi þessa heims sex þúsundir vetra og sjau tigur ok þrír vetr, en frá holdgan dróttins átta hundruð (ára) ok sjau tigur ok fjögur ár» (BENEDIKTSSON 1986b: 42).

²⁴ «Ingólfr var frægast allra landnámsmanna, því at hann kom hér at óbyggðu landi ok byggði fyrstr landit; gerðu þat aðrir landnámsmenn eptir hans dæmum» (BENEDIKTSSON 1986b: 46).

The tragic consequences of not making sacrifices to the gods can be gleaned from the story of the two brothers. Ingólfr embodies the ideal explorer, zealous of pagan customs and therefore fortunate. However, Ingólfr's settlement was established not only by pagans, but also Christians.²⁵ One of the first conclusions derived from the analysis of settlement patterns is that early settlers chose sites along the coast:

The written sources tell us that the Vikings settled where their high-seat pillars came ashore, establishing large claims and distributing land to their own followers. (...) It is generally accepted that the first settlers chose sites located along the coasts; however a recent collaborative study including Orri Vésteinsson, has suggested that some inland sites were also settled earlier than previously suspected (McGUIRE 2006: 12)

The exploitation and erosion of the land described in the previous section led many settlers to abandon their farms and search for new land in the interior of the island. The temporary nature of the farms that were built is considered to be part of the phenomenon called "Skallagrim effect" (McGUIRE 2006: 13), a settlement pattern in which the settler moves his farm depending on the resources available on the land. The name of this phenomenon is based on what is described in chapter 29 of the *Egil Skallagrimsson's saga*:

Skallagrim was a great shipbuilder and there was no lack of driftwood west of Myrar. He had a farmstead built on Alftanes and ran another farm there, and rowed out from it to catch fish and cull seals and gather eggs, all of which were there in great abundance. [...] Whales beached, too, in great numbers, and there was wildlife for the taking at this hunting post; the animals were not used to men and would never flee. [...] He later moved his home to Munadarnes, a better place for catching salmon. (ÓSKARSDÓTTIR 2004: 144, 145)²⁶

5. Conclusions

Archaeological discoveries at Stöðvarfjörður and in the south of the island, together with recent dating methods, offer new insights into the colonisation of Iceland beyond the date of the beginning of settlement and the place of origin of the settlers. While the detail with which the settlements are described and the accuracy of the place names mentioned in the *Landnámabók* have guided archaeologists in their excavations, the interest in the exploitation of the resources and the adaptation of the settlers to the terrain allows for a new reading of the written sources in the light of the results obtained recently.

²⁵ See JESCH 1985 for more information about the early Christians who settled in *Landnámabók*. 1974. With an introduction by Jakob Benediktsson. Icelandic Manuscripts, Series in folio, 3. Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar (facsimile edition) Iceland.

²⁶ TN. ÓSKARSDÓTTIR, Svanhildur, 2004. *Egil's Saga*. London: Penguin Books

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