



THE RELATION OF *LANDNÁMA* TO ICELANDIC FAMILY SAGAS

AUÐUR INGVARSDÓTTIR

INTRODUCTION, THE PRESERVED VERSIONS OF *LANDNÁMA* AND IDEAS ABOUT ITS FORMATION

Scholars have been pondering the formation of *Landnáma* for decades, trying to specify some reason for its making. Contemporary knowledge about the settlement was recorded in the first period of literacy in Iceland circa 1100.¹ The three still preserved versions from the Middle Ages are, however, much younger. Haukur Erlendsson, the writer of one version of *Landnáma* (Hb.) from 1306-1308, tells us who were the first to write about the settlement: “eptir því sem fróðir menn hafa skrifat, fyrst Ari prestur hinn fróði Þorgilsson ok Kolskeggr hinn vitri” (*Landnáma*, 395) (“according to what wise men have written, the first of these being the Priest Ari Thorgilsson the Learned, and Kolskeggr the Wise.”)² Ari and Kolskeggr lived in the 12th century and are therefore related to the oldest literary practice in Iceland. Haukur also informs us about his method of work, that he wrote “eptir þeirri bók, sem ritat hafði herra Sturla lögmaðr, hinn fróðasti maðr, ok eptir þeirri bók annarri, er ritat hafði Styrmir hinn fróði” (*Landnáma*, 395) (“following the one written by Sturla the Lawman, a most learned man, and also the other book, written by Styrmir the Learned”³). The *Landnáma* related to Sturla (Stb.) is still extant, but *Styrmisbók* is a lost version from ca 1200-1245. The third *Landnáma*-version is *Melabók*, which also dates from the Middle Ages and is only preserved in parts from the 14th century.

In Finnur Jónsson’s *Landnáma* edition from 1900, he introduced the well known idea about *Landnáma*’s formation, i.e. that it was built up from a various sources both written and oral. (Indledning, xlii) Finnur Jónsson considered the sagas to be rather respectable historical documents, and they were initially thought to be much older than they later were. There was no doubt in Finnur Jónsson’s mind the writer had used at least *Egil’s Saga*, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, *Þorskfirðinga Saga*, *Vatnsdæla Saga*, *Hrómundarþáttur*, *Reykðæla Saga*, *Þorsteins Saga hvíta* and an older version of *Flóamanna Saga*. According to Finnur Jónsson, the writers of *Landnáma* also used many lost sagas, e.g. the Saga about Kalman and his offspring; the Saga about Einar on Laugarbrekka and the Saga about Snæbjörn, Hallbjörn and Hallgerður.



(Indledning xliii, xlvii-li). Because the sagas were considered to be so old, most of them written before 1200 (Den oldnorske og oldislandske Litteraturs historie, 265), Finnur Jónsson didn't perceive it as a problem that they were used as sources for the author of the first *Landnáma*. Later the family sagas were estimated to be much younger, although scholars didn't change their views about the use of the sagas. Instead of considering the first writer of *Landnáma* to have used respectable historical facts from the old sagas, as Finnur Jónsson believed, scholars began to doubt these texts as being contributions from rather unreliable sources, chiefly from "sagas and other writings from the thirteenth century which were more or less fiction", as stated by Jakob Benediktsson (*Landnáma*. Some remarks on its value, 140). Is this known for certain? How can we distinguish additions from the real text?

SHORT AND LIMITED LIST OR A BOOK WITH A GREAT DEAL OF KNOWLEDGE IN NARRATIVE FORM

The extant versions of the *Landnáma* are not a short and limited list as scholars are sometimes inclined to believe. According to many Icelandic researchers, the structure of the oldest *Landnáma* was very organized and the text was brief and formal in style. It is certainly possible to point out passages in all versions of the *Landnáma* that agree with this description. It is possible to find some formula like passages resembling the following text, from the so-called Kolskeggur's part of *Landnáma*: "Þorsteinn kleggi nam fyrstr Húsavík ok bjó þar; hans son var Án, er Húsvíkingar eru frá komnir." (*Landnáma*, 203) "Thorstein Horse-Fly was the first settler of Husavik, and that's were he farmed. His son was An, from whom the people of Husavik are descended."⁴ Ari fróði had similar short passages about the settlers in his *Íslendingabók* and many scholars have stated that the typical *Landnáma* text must be written in such form. One scholar has given the following view of the main content of *Landnáma*, "en presentation av en landnamsman, hans förfäder, hur han förvärvar land och vilket land, på vilken gård han bott och en presentation av hans avkomlingar" (introduction of the settler and his ancestors, how he gets the land and how much land he gets, where he lived and an introduction of his offspring."⁵ (Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, *Studier i Landnámabók*, 108) Jón Jóhannesson excludes some text because it doesn't agree with his category of *Landnáma* text, it must be an input from Sturla because it "er alveg ofaukið í landnámssögu Íslands [...]" (*Gerðir Landnámabókar*, 95) ("is quite superfluous in the Icelandic settlement's history...").



It is impossible to ignore the obvious literary connections between *Landnáma* and the Icelandic family sagas. There is no doubt that *Landnáma* influenced the sagas in a number of ways. Most of them mention the settlement period and some of the settlers, and sometimes there are quite distinctive similarities between *Landnáma* and the sagas. It is certain that some of the saga writers had some version of *Landnáma* before them, and took from it what they needed. No one will deny the excessive *Landnáma* extracts in Flóamanna Saga, Bárðar Saga or Grettis Saga. One of these even refers to *Landnáma*, “Síðan bjuggust þeir bræðr út til Íslands, sem segir í Landnámabók” (Flóamanna saga, 237) (“Then the brother set out for Iceland as is stated in the Book of Settlement”⁶). The question which then arises about *Landnáma* is whether some of the *Landnáma* writers used the sagas. In my opinion it is more reasonable to observe these narratives as original in *Landnáma*, but not as extracts from sagas.

All preserved versions of *Landnáma* include numerous of narratives that do not fit into the settlement’s history, passages about a quarrel and a slaying or some noteworthy evidence, so why are scholars so inclined to look at *Landnáma* rather as a brief list? Perhaps this has something to do with the practical attitude of our time - it could not be practical to make such an enormous, relatively confusing and unorganized book as the Sturlubóks and Hauksbóks versions are. One scholar made, for example, the following comment, “Ritöld var þá að hefjast og menn hafa tæplega stundað skriftir að nauðsynjalausu.” (Einar G. Pétursson, Efling kirkjuvaldisins, 197) (“In the beginning of the age of literacy it is not to be expected that men were writing some unnecessary text.”) One really cannot take this for granted; why should the first known writers like Ari fróði be so eager to write a short text? Why should Sturla and Haukur later on wish to make *Landnáma* full of impractical narratives about some famous people in the past, especially when the same text in a quite more extensive form was preserved in writing in the sagas?

THE HYPOTHETICAL X-LANDNÁMA

Now I would like to discuss the hypothetical-X-*Landnáma*. Do we really know what the oldest *Landnáma* text looks like? Can we point out some typical text that must originate from the old X-*Landnáma*? I am a historian and most interested in historical facts, and for that reason I have been preoccupied with *Landnáma*’s value as a historical source. Icelandic researcher Jakob Benediktsson has said that for one searching for facts in *Landnáma*, it was inevitable to “try to ascertain how far back it is possible to trace each passage, or in other words, how much of the



text can be shown to be derived from the oldest version.” (*Landnáma*. Some remarks on its value, 137-138). The question which then arises is, how can we determine the oldest text? What criteria do we use to decide the age of these different passages? A great deal of *Landnáma*’s text has been excluded as rather unimportant input from sagas and other writings from the thirteenth century, which are “more or less fictitious” How can we skip some text as unimportant input? What criteria do we use for this division?

BJÖRN M. ÓLSENS INFLUENCE

Björn M Ólsen wrote a number of articles about *Landnáma*’s relations to the family sagas, and his main conclusion was to declare one version of *Landnáma*, Melabók, as the most primal version. Björn M. Ólsen argued for Melabók’s uniqueness because, among other things, it didn’t have the enormous extracts from the sagas which the other versions of *Landnáma* were supposed to have. Björn M. Ólsen was convinced of Melabók’s originality, although there are few real arguments for his view.⁷ In his research, his main purpose was to establish this theory. His arguments are often quite impulsive, because he is so eager to prove its correctness. In fact, he often used Melabók as a criteria for the oldest text, for example if some passage isn’t in Melabók then it couldn’t be from the old *Landnáma* text, and therefore had to be an input from other sources. The following comment describes Björn M. Ólsen’s method of work.

Helgidvis har vi her både Mb. (k. 36) og Hb. (k. 95) til sammenligning, og da disse ikke med et eneste ord omtaler retstrætten, er det klart, at notitsen om den i Stb. Er en senere interpolation, som ikke stammer fra den oprindelige Landn.-tekst. (*Landnáma og Laxdæla*, 203)

[Fortunately we preserve here both Mb. (ch. 36) and Hb. (ch. 95) to make a comparison, and because these do not mention the lawsuit with as much as one word, it’s clear that this notice about it in Stb. is later input that does not originate from the original Landn. text.]

Later he estimated Melabók to be spotless and free from references to many sagas, for example Egil’s Saga and Eyrbyggja Saga, and for that reason saw Melabók as a more original version. Björn M. Ólsen declares, for example, that some chapters in Sturlubók and Hauksbók do not originate from the old *Landnáma* because Melabók is different, “kan ikke have hørt til den oprindelige Landnámatekst, da de ikke står i Mb.” (cannot be the original *Landnáma* text because it is not in Mb.”) (*Landnáma og Eyrbyggja s*, 107.) In other words, if Melabók and



the other versions differ, Melabók is always right. In Björn M. Ólsens articles about *Landnáma*'s relations to other sagas, he argues in the same way. He tries to prove the correctness of his theory and argues that the Sturlubók/Hauksbók version must rely on Eyrbyggja, for example, because the saga gives better explanations and is more extensive in its text. The only example Björn M. Ólsen refers to in this case is rather dubious and very difficult to translate, because it is a play on words, but I will attempt. *Landnáma* and Eyrbyggja mention a settler who is called Þórólfur and his nickname is Mostarskegg(i). His nickname means 'one who lives on the island Mostur',⁸ but the word skegg (in dative form skeggi) in Mostarskeggi also has the meaning beard and in Eyrbyggja there is an extra comment about Þórólfur's enormous beard, which is probably an amusing "afterthought explanation" from the storyteller who compiled Eyrbyggja Saga, rather than a convincing explanation of the nickname, as suggested by Björn M. Ólsen (*Landnáma og Eyrbyggja*, 109 footnote). It is then impossible to use this comment in Eyrbyggja saga as proof for more original text. In other cases where there are differences in Eyrbyggja Saga and the Sturlubók/Hauksbók version, the Sturlubók/Hauksbóks writer allegedly used rather inaccurate extracts or some better and older version of the saga or even changed it deliberately, as Björn M Ólsen explains ("Landnáma og Eyrbyggja", 84, 85, 90)

It is quite obvious that Björn M. Ólsen's research will not be accepted as sufficient proof of the influence of Eyrbyggjas Saga on *Landnáma*.

JÓN JÓHANNESSENS CONTRIBUTION; CRITICAL DISCUSSION

Jón Jóhannesson inherited this view from Björn M. Ólsen but believed that it was Sturla Þórðarson (rather than some unknown writer of the Sturlubók/Hauksbók version as stated by B.M.Ó.) that had made some enormous changes in his version of *Landnáma*, with many modifications and additions. He assumes Sturla's use of at least 10 still extant sagas; including Egil's Saga, Hænsna-Þóris Saga, Eyrbyggja Saga and Vatnsdæla Saga and also a large number of sagas written in old versions and various sagas that have since been lost. (Gerðir Landnámabókar, 56). This method of work has been questioned and regarded as a dubious honour for Sturla. In an introduction to Egil's Saga, Sigurður Nordal considers Sturla's working methods and speaks of his defective judgement about historical sources (Formáli, 1938, xii). Some scholars refuse to blame Sturla for this inaccurate sense of truth and emphasize, as does Theodore M. Andersson, that if Sturla Þórðarson had "considered the



sagas to be constructions dependent on *Landnáma* or pure fictions, he would not have used them to revise a tradition which he knew to date from shortly after 1100.” (The problem of Icelandic saga origins, 93). According to Jón Jóhannesson and Jakob Benediktsson, the other two authors of *Landnáma* used the same method, although not as excessively as Sturla. Haukur Erlendsson is purposed to have independently added the so-called Kræklinga Saga and a lost episode about Ásólfur into his version of *Landnáma*, e.g. from Laxdæla Saga, Eyrbyggja Saga, Ólaf’s Saga Tryggvasonar, Gautrek’s Saga, as well as from a large number of lost sagas. And Haukur is judged in the following way: “Hauki hefur hætt til að draga hæpnar ályktanir og frásagnir þær, sem eru eftir hann sjálfan, en ekki teknar upp úr öðrum ritum, eru ekki vel til þess fallnar, að vekja traust á honum sem heimildarmanni.” (Gerðir Landnámabókar, 207) (“Haukur has been inclined to rush to dubious conclusions and the narratives made by himself, but not derived from written sources, do not made him reliable as a source”). Or as Jakob Benediktsson later judged Sturla and Haukur, “Neither of them was very critical of his sources” (*Landnáma*. Some remarks on its value, 140) In fact, there are few chapters which could not have been derived from Haukur’s *Landnáma* manuscripts Sturlubók and Styrmisbók. There is no proof for this method of work, and it is quite possible that the majority of the assumed addition in Hauksbók derives from Styrmisbók, as Haukur himself stated:”hafði ek þat ór hvárri, sem framar greindi, en mikill þorri var þat, er þær sögðu eins báðar [...]” (*Landnáma*, 397). Because the three *Landnámas* from the Middle Ages must have the same origin, Jón Jóhannesson took it for granted that Melabók was an earlier version, his conclusion thus had to be that the other two were changing their writings. Not even the unknown Melaman is innocent, as he is alleged to have inserted narratives in his rather brief version of *Landnáma* from Vatnsdæla Saga and a lost saga which has been called Esphælinga Saga. (Jakob Benediktsson, Formáli 1968, lxxvii-lxxviii, lxxxvii). All preserved versions of *Landnáma* thus include a number of historical narratives. Do we absolutely have to assume that the editor of the original version of *Landnáma* had to be so purposeful in his choice of content? Is it probable that Sturla used stories of his contemporaries such as Eyrbyggja in his *Landnáma* work? From where did the writer of Eyrbyggja obtain his sources about the past? According to some scholars, the author of Eyrbyggja used some ancient version of *Landnáma*. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson Formáli 1935, xiv-xviii, and even Björn M. Ólsen, *Landnáma* and Eyrbyggja, 88). How is it then possible to separate the ancient text of *Landnáma* from a different and less important origin? In Björn M. Ólsen’s mind it was quite easy: in each case



when the Melabók version corresponds to the text in Eyrbyggja Saga, this is because “Eyrb. her har benyttet en gammel Landnámatekst, som i det væsentlige stemte med Mb.”(Landnáma.og Eyrbyggja, 88) (Eyrb. has in this case used an old *Landnáma* text, which chiefly corresponds to Mb.) Jón Jóhannesson’s theory about the versions of *Landnáma* is built on Björn M. Ólsen’s studies about the sagas’ relations to *Landnáma*. He argues in a similar way that the Sturlubók and Hauksbók versions must, based on the information in Melabók, be secondary. This opinion is still very widely accepted in the field.⁹ Although few opponents have appeared, Jónas Kristjánsson, for example, has criticized Björn M. Ólsen’s results concerning *Landnáma*’s relations to Hænsna-Þóris Saga. He rejects the common ideas about Sturla’s uncritical use of sources. According to Jónas Kristjánsson’s study, the saga writer used some version of *Landnáma*, either Sturlubók or a closely related version.” (*Landnáma* and Hænsna-Þóris saga, 148). Instead of thinking of *Landnáma* as a short and definite list in the beginning with gradual accumulation of material, the opposite could quite well be true, i.e. the gradual reduction of the material. Perhaps the Melaman, the writer of the shortest and most record-like version of *Landnáma*, was interested in a more practical use of the Landnámabók.

CONCLUSIONS

There is in fact no proof for the old *Landnáma*’s brevity and its lack of historical narratives. Scholars have argued for its “gradual swelling,” but the opposite may quite likely have been the case.

My conclusion is that there is no satisfying proof of Sturla’s uncritical method of work, and these assumed extracts from the sagas could easily originate from Sturla’s ancient text of *Landnáma*. The same applies to Haukur Erlendsson’s work; it is quite possible that the majority of his assumed additions are indeed from his two *Landnáma* books, Sturlubók and Styrmisbók. Even the extant part of Melabók contains similar narratives, although in shorter form. It cannot be proven that Melabók (or some hypothetical image of *X-Landnáma*) is a prototype for the original version or of the content of the ancient *Landnáma*. If this hypothetical *X-Landnáma* is set aside and the real texts are reviewed, it is obvious that *Landnáma* is a historical collection rather than a short and practical list. Narratives about persons and dramatic events from the past are therefore quite natural in the context of *Landnáma*, and are not later additions. Melabók’s shorter form may indeed refer to its



compilers' plan to make it more practical, and “modernize” it for his generation in the 14th century. If this is the case, *Landnáma*'s value as a historical source should be reviewed and the so-called “additions” from the sagas should be granted the status of real history.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion about the dating of *Landnáma*, see Jakob Benediktsson 1968, Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1974.

² Translated Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, *The Book of Settlements* 4; Other arguments for Ari's and Kolskeggr's connections with the first *Landnáma* see Jakob Benediktsson 1968: cvi-cxx.

³ Translated Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, *The Book of Settlements*: 4.

⁴ Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, *The Book of Settlements*: 115.

⁵ My translation, if not otherwise stated.

⁶ Viðar Hreinsson, 1997: 274.

⁷ See for detailed discussion Auður Ingvarsdóttir, 2003 (forthcoming).

⁸ See Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 1935: footnote in *Eyrbyggja* 6. and Fritzner, 1896: 299.

⁹ See for ex. *Íslensk bókmenntasaga I*: 301-305; Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 2001: 14-16.

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