8 (d) The Norse island communities of the Western Ocean

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The area from Ireland and the Irish Sea in the south-west to Greenland in the north-west saw an extensive expansion of Norse settlement in the ninth and tenth centuries (cf. Chapter 5). Cultural contacts across the sea between Norway and the British Isles may have begun much earlier. On the basis of archaeological evidence it has been suggested that they had been established already in the Migration Period and that there were connections between Norway and Orkney in the seventh and eighth centuries.[1] The earliest known Viking raids on the coasts of Britain and Ireland towards the end of the eighth century suggest that by then there were at least Norse pirate settlements in the Northern and Western Isles and a few Norse grave finds in the islands may possibly be older than 800. However, it appears that the westward expansion of settlement from Norway did not assume larger proportions until the mid-ninth century.

The number of emigrants in the following period was sufficient to establish largely Norse communities as far south as Ireland and the Isle of Man, while from Orkney northwards the Norse settlers achieved complete dominance. Here, and in the Hebrides too, they found natural conditions very like those with which they were familiar from the coastal districts of western Norway, the homeland of most of the settlers. But the opportunities for varying combinations of agriculture, animal husbandry, fowling, fishing, and hunting were in

1 J. Hines, *The Scandinavian Character of Anglian England in the pre-Viking Period* (*BAR British Series*, 124, Oxford, 1984); J. Hines, 'The Scandinavian character of Anglian England: an update', in M. O. H. Carver (ed.), *The Age of Sutton Hoo* (Woodbridge, 1992); B. Myhre, 'The beginning of the Viking Age: Some current archaeological problems', in A. Faulkes and R. Perkins (eds.), *Viking Revaluations* (London, 1993), pp. 182–216; J. Hines, 'Tidlig kontakt over Nordsjøen og de bakenforliggende årsaker', in J. F. Krøger and H.-F. Naley (eds.), *Nordsjøen: Handel, religion og politikk* (*Karmøyseminaret*, 1994 og 1995, Karmøy kommune, 1996), pp. 18–30; B. Weber, 'Handel mellom Norge og Orknøyene før norrøn bosetning?', ibid., pp. 31–40.

general probably better than in the Norwegian Vestlandet, where the reserves of new land to exploit were by then restricted.

Everywhere the emigrants were soon organised in social units, some of them of considerable territorial extent. These communities all had powerful chieftains and public assemblies called *things*, features that were rooted in the political structure and legal traditions of the homeland.

Settlements in the south-west

In Orkney and the northern part of the Scottish mainland there is good arable land, and both areas attracted an early and extensive Norse settlement in which the cultivation of grain prevailed.[2] In Shetland the land was poorer and the damp climate made grain-growing difficult, so that animal husbandry and fishing were relatively more important there. Orkney and Shetland became a springboard for further expansion.

Further south, Norse farmers settled in the Hebrides (ON *Suðreyjar*, 'the southern islands'). A dense pattern of Norse farms was established but the Norse settlers hardly supplanted the earlier Celtic population to the same degree as they did in the Northern Isles. There was probably Celtic influence on the Norse population from the start, with intermarriage from the ninth century. Scholars disagree on the extent of Norse settlement in the Isle of Man and the relations there between Celts and Norse. Traditionally, social and political conditions in the island have been represented as more typically Norse than anywhere else south of Orkney. There is little doubt that the island attracted a fairly dense Norse settlement in the Viking Age, but the limited evidence available also suggests a degree of Celtic continuity in the Norse period.

Our knowledge of social and political conditions in the Norse communities from Shetland to Ireland is incomplete and uncertain but the settlements may roughly be divided into three cultural zones. In the north there was relatively dense agricultural settlement in the fertile islands of Orkney and the northern part of the Scottish mainland. Orkney was an earldom that also

2 For the following, see F. T. Wainwright, *The Northern Isles* (London, 1962); A. Fenton and H. Pálsson (eds.), *The Northern and Western Isles in the Viking World* (Edinburgh, 1984); B. E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester, 1987); P. Holm, 'Ireland, Norse in', in Ph. Pulsiano (ed.), *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia* (New York, 1993), pp. 323–5; N. Bjørgo, 'Norge, Norden og Europa (til ca. 1240)', in N. Bjørgo, Ø. Rian and A. Kaartvedt, *Norsk utenrikspolitikks historie*, I (Oslo, 1995), pp. 19–45; D. G. E. Williams, *Land Assessment and Military Organisation in the Norse Settlements in Scotland, c. 900–1200 AD* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 1996).

came to comprise Caithness and Sutherland on the mainland and Shetland to the north. In the south the Viking communities of Ireland and the Isle of Man were characterised by a warrior and trading culture. The Hebrides formed a third zone between the others, combining features of both. In general, social structure was more aristocratic in the north than in the south, but kingdoms or earldoms and military organisations were established throughout the whole area.

During the Viking Age there was a complex hierarchy of kings in Ireland, none of whom was recognised as king of all Ireland despite the persistent and violent attempts of some to gain supremacy. The leaders of the Scandinavian settlers were also called kings by the Irish. They too fought each other. They also fought the Irish, sometimes in alliance with Irish kings; such alliances were already being made before the middle of the ninth century. In 853 a new Viking army, led by Olaf, arrived in Dublin and, according to a contemporary Irish annal, 'the foreigners in Ireland submitted to him and he received tribute from the Irish'. He is described as the son of the king of *Laithlind*. The original meaning of that name is uncertain. It has been supposed to be part of Norway, possibly Rogaland, but was more probably a part of the Hebrides that had been conquered by Scandinavians.

From 856 to 873 Olaf ruled Dublin jointly with Ivar who is widely believed to have been a leader of the Vikings who seized York in 866. After that the authority of the Dublin kings rapidly and dramatically fluctuated and in 902 the Irish conquered Dublin and expelled the Vikings. Some settled in the Isle of Man, the Wirral, and south Lancashire, others continued to raid Scotland.

From 914 a new generation of Vikings began to establish themselves in Ireland, led by Ivar's grandsons. Their main Irish stronghold was again Dublin where the Norse kings were acclaimed at the *thing*, Thingmote, of the town. They had the political ambitions to create a power axis from Dublin to York and achieved control of York from 919 to 927 and intermittently between 939 and 952.

The Viking kingdom of Dublin was based on control of strategic points but never with a firm hold on a large territory. After heavy defeats in the 940s Dublin and its allied camps were reduced to a subordinate role in the internal Irish power struggle. From 980 Dublin had to accept the overlordship of the Irish king of Tara, to whom the ambitious Norse ruler Sigtrygg Silk-beard (989–1036) had to pay tribute. Sigtrygg tried to gain independence by allying himself, time and again, with the kingdom of Leinster and was the probable architect of the coalition of Leinster and the Orkney earldom that lost the

epic battle of Clontarf near Dublin in 1014. Sigtrygg saved himself and his kingdom from total defeat by staying away from the battle but Dublin was now irrevocably reduced to a minor power.

Nevertheless, by the eleventh century Dublin, like other Scandinavian bases in Ireland, was an expanding urban community with a flourishing trade across the Irish Sea to such ports as Chester and Bristol. It was also an important port of call for traders and others travelling between Scandinavia and western France and the Mediterranean. It was relatively wealthy and thus a potential resource for Irish kings in their competition for power. In the words of an Irish historian: 'The Irish provincial king who could milk Dublin, Waterford or Limerick for tribute was far more powerful than his peers who extorted allegiance from 20 tribal kings.' From 1052 Dublin was held by Irish kings, except for an interlude between 1091 and 1094, when the Norse king of Man and the Hebrides held it subject to an Irish overlord.

The Orkney earldom may have begun in the late ninth century. The main source for its history is *Orkneyinga saga* from around 1200. Here and in other Norse-Icelandic sagas and chronicles the first earls are said to have been members of the powerful Norwegian family of the earls of Møre in northern Vestlandet. At first they controlled Orkney and perhaps Shetland, and soon turned their territorial ambitions towards the Scottish mainland and the Hebrides. Earl Sigurd *digri* ('the Stout'), who fell in the battle of Clontarf in 1014, made conquests on the mainland and tried to extend his dominion via the Hebrides to Ireland. He married a daughter of the Scottish king, Malcolm II, and under their son, Earl Thorfinn the Mighty (d. by 1065), the earldom reached the zenith of its power.

Earl Sigurd had conquered Caithness and Sutherland and Thorfinn ruled the two provinces as a fief from his royal grandfather. Thus originated 'the dual earldom', with earls who held their mainland possessions as vassals of the Scottish king and in the Northern Isles were subordinate to the Norwegian crown. Thorfinn also appears to have exerted control over the western seaboard of Scotland and the Western Isles, and he is supposed to have raided Ireland and England. As the founder of the Orkney bishopric his ambition was probably, like that of the early Christian kings of Scandinavia, to rule by a combination of political and ecclesiastical authority. At that time the Norse population of his territories had been Christian for at least two hundred years. The early bishops of Orkney were consecrated by the archbishops of York or Hamburg-Bremen.

The earldom had a markedly aristocratic and military character. The earl was surrounded by the warrior élite of Orkney, chieftains or magnates called

gæðingar ('good men') in *Orkneyinga saga*. They were his counsellors, commanded his warships, and apparently had judicial and administrative functions in the local districts where they owned land. From the twelfth century some of them were also granted land by the earls in return for military service. Their position was similar to that of the contemporary *lendir menn* of Norway (Chapter 8(c)). Like the Scandinavian kings the earl also had his *hirð* or retinue that functioned as a court in peacetime and in war as the earl's bodyguard and the core of his fighting force.

The earldom's early economy must to a large extent have been based on war, pillage and tribute. But the earls also possessed extensive landed estates and acquired the right to collect dues from the population of the earldom. An old administrative division of Orkney into ouncelands (ON *eyrisl*ǫ*nd*, sing. *eyrisland*) must have originated as a means of assessing such dues. There are traces too of the ounceland system in Shetland and along the northern and western coast of Scotland. It may go back to the days of Earl Sigurd the Stout, whereas the subdivision of ouncelands into pennylands must be younger, possibly from the days of Earl Thorfinn the Mighty. There is some evidence to suggest that the two systems, neither of them known in Norway, were in part superimposed on pre-Norse land divisions. Traditionally they have been associated with a *leidang* organisation of Norwegian type but it is doubtful whether such an organisation ever functioned in Orkney. The offensive warfare and plundering raids of the early earldom was probably mostly carried out by the earls, their chieftains and their personal followings, and the earls may also have had the main responsibility for defence, possibly supported by taxation of land and a general levy of fighting men.

Orkney was a legal community of its own, probably influenced by the legal customs of the Gulathing law province of Vestlandet. Late medieval sources show that Orkney, with Caithness, was divided into administrative and judicial quarters (ON *fjórðungar*, sing. *fjórðungr)* that each sent nine *roithmen* (ON *ráðmenn*, councillors) to the common *lawthing*. These thirty-six formed the *l*ǫ*grétta*, the judging body. The assembly was headed by a lawman (ON *l*ǫ*gmaðr*). The local courts or *things* of Orkney were probably under the earl's control at an early date, and the main assembly came to be his court, attended by the *gæðingar*. There are few place-names in Orkney and Caithness containing the element *thing* and no other evidence for a hierarchy of assemblies as in Norway and Iceland. The earl's dominant authority in legal and judicial matters may have hindered the development of a strong *thing* system.

According to *Orkneyinga saga* the earls from the start held the Northern Isles under the overlordship of the Norwegian king, but before the days of King

Olaf Haraldsson and Earl Thorfinn the Mighty there is little to support this tradition. Thorfinn apparently found it to his advantage to acknowledge the Norwegian king as his overlord. For a ruler of his ability and power the dual earldom must have opened the possibility of playing off one overlord against another. But the position between Norway and Scotland became increasingly difficult as the kings of the two countries expanded their territorial power; they could exploit the custom of succession by which sons of earls and their descendants could lay claim to one-third or half of the earldom. After the death of Earl Sigurd the Stout in 1014 this frequently led to the partition of the earldom and consequently to rivalry and open fighting among co-rulers and pretenders. Those who sought Norwegian or Scottish support had to pay for it by submission.

The political situation in the Hebrides was characterised by the rivalry of petty kings and chieftains as in Ireland. The Norwegian kings must have entertained hopes of increasing their influence over the Western Isles through the Orkney earls, but such hopes were lost with the death of Earl Thorfinn in about 1065. A joint kingdom of the Isles became more effective in the following years; it was ruled from the Isle of Man and we have seen that it controlled Dublin for a brief period. In the years 1098–9 and 1102–3 King Magnus Bareleg of Norway led two large-scale military expeditions west over the sea. His plan was obviously to unite Orkney, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man under his own son Sigurd as king, in close alliance with Dublin, the strongest Irish power centre. Norwegian supremacy over the Norse island communities from Man to Shetland was now asserted, and in 1098 the Scottish king expressly recognised Man and the Hebrides as Norwegian territory. But Magnus was killed in Ireland in 1103 and the internal power struggle soon flared up again in the Western Isles. The overlordship of the Norwegian king over the Isles was at least formally strengthened by Magnus' expeditions and the joint kingdom was tied more closely to Norway. But Norwegian supremacy was dependent on the need among the rival kings and chieftains for Norwegian support, and was never stable.

Little is known about the legal and administrative system of the Hebrides. At a later date the Council of the Isles met on Eilean na Comhairle ('council island') in Islay in the southern Hebrides. This was also where the Lord of the Isles was later acclaimed and had his seat. There may have been several other meeting places for lesser assemblies in the islands, as indicated by the few place-names containing the element of *thing*.

Of all the areas in the British Isles settled by the Norse the Isle of Man had what appears to have been the most clearly structured medieval land divisions.

The island was divided in two, the topographically natural units of Northside and Southside, each of them subdivided into three *sheadings*, which in turn contained two or three parishes. The parishes were subdivided into *treens*, and these were further divided into quarterlands. This has traditionally been regarded, not least by Norwegian scholars, as a social and political organisation derived from Norway. But given the indications of Celtic continuity in the Norse period and Man's geographic situation in the middle of the Irish Sea, exposed to influences and inroads from England, Scotland and Ireland, this is hardly a plausible view. There is some evidence to suggest that the quarterlands, *treens* and *sheadings* were pre-Norse land divisions that were adopted by the Norse and partly renamed in the Norse period. Thus the six *sheadings* may owe their name to ON *séttungr* (a sixth), and the *treen* may represent a superimposition of the Orkney ounceland assessment onto older land units, possibly for the sake of tribute in the days of Earl Sigurd the Stout. The division into parishes may go back to the reign of Olaf I, king of Man and the Isles (1103–54), who had been brought up in Anglo-Norman England and reformed the Church on Man.

A more originally Norse innovation was the *thing* for Man and the Isles that later met at Tynwald ('*thing*-field') Hill each year on 5 July, the old St John's Day. Laws for Man were not valid until they had been proclaimed there, and this was also where new kings were acclaimed and peace meetings held between contenders to the throne.

In the north, Shetland was ruled by the Orkney earls until 1195 when the archipelago was put directly under the Norwegian crown. Shetland's *thing* met at Tingwall and the law court probably had its seat on Tingholm ('*thing* holm' or 'islet') in Tingwall loch. Place-names such as Delting, Sandsting and Aithsting apparently indicate local *thing*-gatherings but it is possible that such assemblies only developed after Shetland was put directly under the Norwegian crown.

Colonisation in the north-west

Føroyar (ON *Færeyjar*, 'sheep islands') are first described by the Irish cleric Dicuil in about 825.[3] He had heard of this group of islands, which he does not name, from an Irish priest who had been there. The islands were separated

3 J. J. Tierney (ed.), 'Dicuili Liber de mensura orbis terrae', *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, 6 (Dublin, 1967), pp. 11–33.

from each other by narrow sounds and had an abundance of seabirds and sheep. Irish hermits had lived there for about a hundred years but had now left because of Norse bandits.

Pollen analysis has indicated settlement in the islands as early as about AD 600; at that time oats were cultivated and there were vegetational changes due to the grazing of sheep. So far the early botanical settlement traces have not been corroborated by archaeological finds and it is an open question whether they should be attributed to the hermits mentioned by Dicuil or to a more extensive immigration. There is at present no archaeological evidence for permanent settlement in Føroyar before about 900 when barley began to be cultivated. Evidently the Norse colonisation of the islands was then under way. Later saga evidence suggests that it may have started in the early ninth century, but an earlier date cannot be excluded.[4]

The Viking Age colonisation of Iceland (*Ísland*) was led by chieftains and well-to-do farmers from western Norway and the British Isles. In the later Icelandic narratives it is invariably referred to as *landnám*, 'land-taking' or 'land claim'. Major sources such as *Íslendingabók* ('Book of Icelanders'), written by Ari *fróði* ('the Wise') in about 1130, and *Landnámabók*, probably from about the same time but only preserved in later versions, report that settlement began in about 870. Since these works were not written until 250 years later they should not be taken at face value. Nevertheless, their accounts of the *landnám* have in the main been accepted in modern historiography.

It has been claimed that Norse settlement started at the end of the sixth century or, at the latest, in the seventh century.[5] This hypothesis is mainly based on ^{14}C dates of material found in archaeological excavations on Vestmannaeyjar off the south coast of Iceland, where early settlement could be expected. The dated material was found under the volcanic 'Settlement Layer' (tephra), traditionally assumed to derive from an eruption in about 900 or possibly somewhat earlier. This assumption has now been confirmed by analysis of cores drilled in the Greenland ice which dates the Settlement Layer fairly accurately to AD 871 ($\pm$ 2).[6] Doubt has also been raised about the reliability

4 H. J. Debes, 'Færøerne og Norge: En tusindårig forbindelses begyndelse, forløb og afslutning', *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 74 (Oslo, 1995), pp. 22–33.

5 See 'The early settlements of Iceland: Discussions', *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 24:1 (1991), pp. 1–33. The discussions are based on M. Hermanns-Auðardóttir, 'Islands tidiga bosättning' (doctoral thesis, Umeå, 1989), a condensation of which is given on pp. 1–9.

6 'Express Letter: Ash layers from Iceland and the Greenland GRIP ice core correlated with oceanic and land sediments', *EPSL, Earth and Planetary Science Letters*, 135 (1995), pp. 149–55.

of the ^{14}C method, due to the possible effect of volcanic carbon dioxide on the apparent age of samples dated by this method.[7] Consequently, the dating of traces of the earliest settlement to the sixth or seventh centuries, to which considerable international attention has been drawn, can now be rejected. The earliest habitation remnants that have so far been excavated in Iceland, in Reykjavík in 1971–3, were found underneath the Settlement Layer and must therefore be somewhat older than 870. But that does not seriously weaken the validity of the traditional dating of the Icelandic *landnám*.

The Norse colonisation of Iceland was an extension of the Viking settlements in the British Isles and Føroyar. According to *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*, Irish hermits, *papar*, had lived in Iceland for a while before the Norse settlement. This is corroborated by Dicuil who believed Iceland to be the *Thule* that classical geographers had heard of in the extreme north. According to Ari the *papar* left Iceland on the arrival of the Norse settlers; they did not want to live among heathens. Their presence in Iceland may go back to the early eighth century when Bede mentions Thule.

Most of the Norse settlers came directly from western Norway, though some evidently sailed from the Norse settlements in the British Isles, some of them with Celtic slaves. The question of the Celtic element in the Icelandic population has been controversial. Modern Icelandic blood types suggest a much closer affinity with the Celts than with the Norwegians; Icelanders and Irish today have in common a higher frequency of the O blood group than Norwegians. However, recent research indicates that severe smallpox (variola) epidemics in Iceland have reduced the proportion of A and AB groups in the ABO-system and that this may be the reason why the proportion of O-group people in Iceland is larger than that in Norway, which has not been so badly affected by smallpox since the late fifteenth century.[8] If this is correct, the blood groups of modern Icelanders can no longer be used as evidence for the ancestry of the Viking Age settlers.

In medieval Icelandic historiography settlers are frequently said to have left Norway in order to escape the tyranny of King Harald Finehair. His rule from the end of the ninth century to about 932 may well have contributed to the increasing emigration from Norway to Iceland in that period, but it cannot have had anything to do with the earliest Norse *landnám* in Iceland. There were obviously other reasons for the later colonisation of Iceland than political unrest in Norway. As mentioned above, the relatively restricted reserves of new

7 H. Sigurðsson, 'Comment on the early settlement of Iceland', *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 24:1 (1991), pp. 21–2.

8 S. Aðalsteinsson, 'Blóðflokkar og menning Íslendinga', *Saga*, 30 (1992), pp. 221–43.

land to be exploited in Vestlandet may have been a significant factor. It has been suggested that emigration to Iceland from the Western and Northern Isles was a result of population pressure, even overpopulation, at the end of the ninth century. As the possibilities of settling in Føroyar were already then restricted by the relative scarcity of habitable areas it was natural for people in search of land to go on to Iceland. Moreover, the defeats suffered by the Vikings in Ireland in the second half of the ninth century, culminating in their expulsion from Dublin in 902, may explain why some of them chose to emigrate to Iceland.

Greenland was settled from Iceland at the end of the tenth century under the leadership of Eiríkr *rauði* ('the Red'). Although Iceland was by then quite extensively settled, population pressure was hardly the main reason for this migration; rather, it was that people hoped for better conditions further west. The belief that the grass was 'greener on the other side of the sea' was reflected in the name given to the country, *Grænland*. The same motive had undoubtedly been significant in the earlier settlements of Iceland, Føroyar and the British Isles. Two Icelandic communities were established at the southwestern seaboard of Greenland: the Eastern Settlement (*Eystribygð*) and the Western Settlement (*Vestribygð*).

Shortly after the initial settlement of Greenland seafarers from Iceland and Greenland landed on the coasts of North America. They came to *Helluland*, probably Baffin Island with its barren rocks and glaciers, *Markland*, probably Labrador, a forest landscape in contrast to Greenland and Iceland, and *Vínland*, recently identified as Newfoundland, where traces of a Norse settlement site have been found.[9]

Vínland is a mysterious name and its meaning is disputed.[10] It is first recorded about 1075 by Adam of Bremen who explained it by claiming that wild vines grew there, bearing excellent wine. According to Adam there was also an abundance of corn which had not been sown. This is apparently a description of a mythical paradise and far from trustworthy. The critical Ari, who used Adam's work, left out the paradisiac elements, but they were included in *Eiríks saga rauða*, probably written in about 1200. They are also found in the description of the abundant riches of *Vínland* in *Grænlendinga saga*, probably from about 1200, together with a more credible report that there was also grassland so abundant that cattle would not need winter fodder.

9 A. S. Ingstad, *The Norse Discovery of America*, 1 (Oslo, 1977); H. Ingstad, *The Norse Discovery of America*, 2 (Oslo, 1985); A. S. and H. Ingstad, *Oppdagelsen av det nye landet* (Oslo, 1996).

10 For the following, I am indebted to E. Lönnroth, 'The Vinland problem', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 21 (1996), pp. 39–47.

The names *Helluland, Markland* and *Vínland* are all 'saga-names', not real place-names. The name-giving of the early Norwegians, Icelanders and Greenlanders was functional, *eptir landkostum* in the words of *Grænlendinga saga*, i.e. based on the features of the land deemed characteristic and important by the name-givers. The excavators of the site at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland took it for granted that ON *vin*, 'pasture' or 'grassland', was the original first element of the saga name *Vínland* and concluded that they had found that land.

It is not clear whether the site at L'Anse aux Meadows was a permanent settlement or just a base for further voyages, as no houses for cattle or sheep and no graves have as yet been found. Although there is no indication that *vin* was used in the sense of 'pasture' or 'grassland' in Iceland, whence Greenland was settled, it is a common element in place-names not only in Norway but also in Shetland and Orkney. The word may have been familiar to travelling Icelandic merchants such as Bjarni Herjolfsson, who according to *Grænlendinga saga* was driven by wind and weather to *Vínland*. It seems more satisfactory, then, to explain the paradisiac land of the sagas as an original *Vinland*, with a short *i* and meaning 'pasture-land' or 'grassland', rather than *Vínland*, with a long *í* and meaning 'wine-land'. In Old Icelandic the difference between short *i* and long *í* was primarily one of length and not of quality,[11] and in the Old Icelandic manuscripts *vin* and *vín* were both regularly written in the same way, as *vin*. Linguistically it is thus possible that an original *Vinland* could become the mythical *Vínland* of the sagas.[12]

The voyages to North America were the limit of the westward Norse colonisation of the Viking Age, but there was no permanent Norse settlement in the new land. The distance exceeded the limits that contemporary shipbuilding technology, impressive though it was, imposed for regular contact. Moreover, there were conflicts with the native Algonquian Indian and Inuit population of the region, the *skrælingjar* of the sagas. According to Icelandic annals, Bishop Eiríkr of Greenland sailed to find Vinland in 1121, which suggests that there was no longer any contact with that land, but that it was believed that a Norse population might possibly still survive there.

11 Hr. Benediktsson, 'The wovel system of Icelandic: a survey of its history', *Word*, 15 (1959), pp. 282–312; Hr. Benediktsson, 'Islandsk språk', in F. Hødnebø (ed.), *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* (Oslo, 1962), cols. 486–93.

12 I am indebted to Professors Hreinn Benediktsson of the University of Iceland and Odd Einar Haugen and Oddvar Nes of the University of Bergen for their help in discussing the linguistic aspect of the Vinland question, which I have treated in detail in Stefánsson, 'Vínland or Vinland?', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 23 (1998), pp. 139–52.

The emergence of political units in the north-west

Our knowledge of political, legal and administrative conditions in Føroyar and Greenland is fragmentary. More is known about Iceland thanks to later historical narratives and law texts, though much is also unclear in the earliest period.

The community of Føroyar appears to have been dominated by chieftains and large landowners, and probably formed a separate legal entity with its own political and administrative institutions quite early. Legislative, executive and judicial powers came to be administered by an *althing* or public assembly which met at Tinganes in Tórshavn. It was presided over by a 'lawman' or law-speaker with a group of judges at his side. Norwegian influence was strong in the islands and by the 1180s, at the latest, they were subject to the Norwegian crown.

In the thirteenth century the two Norse settlements of Greenland comprised about 300 farms with a population of between 1,800 and 2,100. They constituted a separate legal unit with its own laws and a *thing* right up to 1261, when the Norse Greenlanders placed themselves under the Norwegian crown. The *thing* met at *Garðar* in the Eastern Settlement, which was also the seat of the bishop of Greenland from 1124, but a possibly older *thing*-site has been excavated at Brattahlíð , the farm of Eiríkr the Red. The Western Settlement must also have had its *thing*-site, but it has not been identified by archaeologists. Probably the bishop of Garðar gradually became the real authority in secular as well as religious matters.

The Icelandic settlements were from the beginning run by chieftains who saw themselves as first among equals. Most of them seem to have arrived as leaders of the crews of one or two ships of settlers and to have claimed possession of vast areas, which would give them social status well above that of most people. From the outset there may have been as many as fifty to sixty *goðar* (sing. *goði*), as the chieftains were called. They were lords of men, not of territory.[13]

We know nothing about relations between the independent groups of settlers or what kind of communities they established at first. However, as settlement progressed and covered more and more of the habitable land, some form of social and political organisation was needed. From their homelands

13 For this and the following, see J. V. Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* (Odense, 1999). An English survey of Icelandic medieval conditions is given in B. and P. Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800–1500* (*The Nordic Series*, 17, Minneapolis, 1993). Cf. also M. Stefánsson, 'Iceland', in *Medieval Scandinavia* (n. 2), pp. 311–19, including a bibliography.

the settlers were familiar with laws and the *thing*-institution. According to later tradition *thing*-meetings were held after about 900.

In about 930 a public assembly for the whole of Iceland, the *Althing* (OI *Alþingi*), was established at Thingvellir in the south-west interior, a place that had good communications with other parts of the country. Power was now, apparently by peaceful negotiations, legally distributed among the chieftains, with no central authority, reflecting the need for peace and order when no individual or family had sufficient resources to control the whole country. This development may also have been influenced by the social and political organisation with which the settlers were familiar in their homelands.

In spite of its decentralised character the political and legal structure sustained by the *Althing* made Iceland, to some extent, a political unit already in the tenth century. In modern foreign historiography this unit is commonly referred to as the 'Free State'. Icelandic historians usually call it *þjóðveldi* ('people's dominion') which has given rise to the term 'Old Icelandic Commonwealth'. None of these terms is adequate for a political organisation that was predominantly oligarchic.

In so far as Iceland was united it was a community of laws. There was no central state power or executive authority. The only common secular official was the *lǫgsǫgumaðr*, the law-speaker, who was chairman of the *Althing*, but had no authority or administrative function beyond the annual summer session. During this session it was his duty to declare the rules for the meeting, to recite one-third of the law annually in the course of his three years' term of office, and to interpret the law when necessary. The office of law-speaker persisted until 1271 but was particularly important and influential before the laws began to be written down in 1117/18. The legal code that was made then is no longer extant; the laws of the Free State have only been preserved in *Konungsbók* and *Staðarhólsbók*, manuscripts written between 1250 and 1270, which have different contents, arrangements and formulations. The combined laws of the Free State are called *Grágás* ('grey-goose').

From about 930 power appears to have been divided among thirty-six chieftaincies called *goðorð*, each headed by one or more *goðar* who were equals.[14] In about 965 the country was divided into quarters or *fjórðungar* (sing. *fjórðungr*). Quarter *things* (*fjórðungsþing*) and quarter courts (*fjórðungsdómar*) were established, the latter as part of the *Althing*, and the number of *goðar* was increased

14 For the following, see J. Benediktsson, 'Landnám og upphaf allsherjarríkis', in S. Líndal (ed.), *Saga Íslands*, I, pp. 172–86.

to thirty-nine. There were now twelve *goðar* in Norðlendingafjórðungur (the northern quarter) and nine in each of the other three quarters: Austfirðingafjórðungur (to the east), Sunnlendingafjórðungur (to the south) and Vestfirðingafjórðungur (to the west). The purpose of this division was probably to maintain the balance of power between the different parts of the country and the ruling families. To secure a balance in the *Althing* three additional men were elected from each of the eastern, southern and western quarters to sit with the *goðar* in the *lǫgrétta*, the law council, so that there would be twelve representatives from each quarter.

The *Althing* was not an *alþingi* (*allsherjarþing*) in the sense of an 'assembly of all freemen', as were, however, the regional courts which were called *várþing* ('springtime assemblies'). To the *várþing* the *goðar* brought all their *thing*-men, and there appointed every ninth of them to follow them to the *Althing*. The *thing*-men who stayed behind paid their *goði* a due called *þingfararkaup* to meet the expenses incurred by him and his followers by going to the *Althing*. The *Althing* can thus be said to have been a representative assembly.

The judicial system consisted of the *várþing*, the quarter courts of the *Althing*, and shortly after 1000 also the Fifth Court (*fimmtardómr*) of the same assembly. Each *várþing* was the joint responsibility of three *goðar*, each of whom nominated twelve assessors to a panel of thirty-six judges. The quarter courts of the *Althing* functioned as courts of appeal from the *várþing*; most likely they too consisted of thirty-six men. The Fifth Court had forty-eight members of whom thirty-six pronounced sentences; it was both a court of final instance in cases that the quarter courts had not been able to settle, and of first instance in special cases. The *goðar* appointed the members of the courts of the *Althing* but they had no formal judicial authority themselves, nor any responsibility for the legal proceedings and the execution of sentences. However, the mutual personal relationship between *goði* and *thing*-man implied that the former should help the latter to obtain his rights. If the *goði* neglected this, the *thing*-man could turn to another *goði*, more able and willing to help, and become his *thing*-man.

The functions of the law council at the *Althing* were to make new laws (*nýmæli*), interpret existing laws, and to make amendments and exemptions from the law. Here the authority of the *goðar* was formal as well as real; the thirty-nine of them and the nine additional men appointed from three of the quarters made up the forty-eight-strong voting body. Each one of the forty-eight could bring with him two men for consultation, so that altogether the law council, including also the law-speaker and the two bishops of Iceland, had 147 members.

The power of a *goði* was based on his influence in the judicial system, and on his family and its resources. Wealth, in the form of gifts and banquets, was used to secure the support of friends and *thing*-men. The prestige of a *goði*, and the respect in which he was held, increased with the size of his following when riding to the *thing*-meetings or on other journeys. It was only during the *thing* sessions that he possessed territorial power and influence, regionally at the *várthing*, nationally at the *Althing*. At the regional autumn assembly (*leið*) it was his task to report any new legislation and pass on other important announcements and news from the *Althing*. Outside the *thing* sessions his influence was based on the authority he had over his *thing*-men. This might imply a certain local power in his home district. There were, however, local settlement units called *hreppar* (sing. *hreppr*), each under the leadership of five *hreppstjórar*, that were collective organs for specific public tasks (cf. Chapter 13).

Chieftains and the Church in Iceland

The fact that the Icelandic chieftains were called *goðar* (cf. OI *goð*, 'god') has led to the traditional assumption that their office originated from their function as cultic leaders. This theory is now regarded as doubtful. It is difficult to see any connection between the later judicial, administrative and legislative tasks of the *goðar* and their supposed original function as 'sacrificial priests'. They may well have held cultic and sacrificial feasts for their households, friends and *thing*-men, as indicated by the later saga tradition, but it does not seem reasonable to suppose that the chieftains who established the Icelandic constitution based their rule and political functions on pagan concepts and functions; they came from the Norwegian areas most infiltrated by Christianity and from the Viking settlements in the south-west where Christianity had gained a firm foothold.

Christianity was publicly accepted by the Icelanders at the *Althing* in 999/1000 following tough negotiations and pressure from the Norwegian king Olaf Tryggvason (cf. Chapter 7). The dominating position of the *goðar* would hardly have survived the introduction of Christianity if their power had rested on a pagan sacral foundation. Leading men among them were the very persons who initiated the formal acceptance of the new creed at the *Althing*. In doing this they must have been aware of the increased power that kings and chieftains in Western Europe had gained from their leading role in the early Christian church organisation; the Church certainly enabled the *goðar* to increase their power and influence.

Initially the introduction of Christianity did not imply a close relationship with Rome. The Church of Iceland evolved as a 'national church' of Germanic

type in which secular magnates had extensive power and influence. The first native bishop, Ísleifr (1056–80), was the son of one of the leading *goðar* responsible for the conversion in 999/1000, and his family, later called *Haukdælir* (named after the farm of Haukadalur), wielded great power in south-western Iceland. Ísleifr was succeeded by his son Gizurr (1082–1118) who made his farm Skálholt into a permanent bishop's seat, initially for the whole of Iceland.[15] For a long time bishops were chosen on the terms of the *Haukdælir* and later also of their neighbours and allies, the *Oddaverjar* (from the farm of Oddi). These two families dominated both secular and ecclesiastical politics in Iceland, as well as economy and trade.

When a separate bishopric for northern Iceland was established with Hólar as its see at the beginning of the twelfth century, the *Haukdælir* wielded great influence there too, later in cooperation with the *Oddaverjar*. The leading chieftains of the north, the *Ásbirningar*, did not elect one of their own family as bishop until 1201.

Locally the Church expanded as chieftains and wealthy farmers built private churches on their farms. The proprietary church system (German *Eigenkirchewesen*) was initially universal in Iceland, at a time when it was about to break down elsewhere in Europe. The person who built a church was obliged to endow it, to maintain the building and to provide a priest. He administered the property of the church, normally a part of the farm on which it was built, as well as other farms. In the early phase, when priests were not expected to be well educated, the church-farmer would serve as a priest himself or have someone in his household do it. But as time went on, better qualified priests were educated, not only in the episcopal sees but also in schools on important farms such as Haukadalur and Oddi.

Payment of tithes was introduced in Iceland in 1096–7, earlier than elsewhere in Scandinavia. Half of it, the quarters of the church and the priest, was administered by the church-farmer, who thus increased his economic resources. The other two quarters went to the bishop and the poor respectively. The share of the poor was administered within the framework of the *hreppr*, by the five *hreppstjórar*.

Over the years it often happened that the church-farmer gave his church the whole farm on which it was built. The joint ecclesiastical institution of church

15 For the following, see M. Stefánsson, 'Kirkjuvald eflist', in S. Líndal (ed.), *Saga Íslands*, 2 (Reykjavík, 1975), pp. 55–144; M. Stefánsson, *Staðir og staðamál: studier i islandske egenkirkelige og beneficialrettslige forhold i middelalderen* (Berger, 2000). M. Stefánsson, 'Islandsk egenkirkevesen', in *Rett og historie: Festskrift til Gudmund Sandvik* (Oslo, 1997), pp. 138–56.

and farm then became a private foundation and an independent economic unit, called *staðr* (Latin *locus religiosus* or *sacer*). It was a usual condition when a *staðr* was created that the donor and his successors should have the right to continue to administer its economy and to benefit from it, which could be a very lucrative privilege. If such a condition was not made the bishop could nominate an administrator for the *staðr*, usually one of the local chieftains.

Concentration of power in Iceland

The spokesmen for Christianity dominated eleventh-century Icelandic politics. After the establishment of the *Althing* in about 930 power began to be concentrated in fewer hands. From the mid-eleventh century this process accelerated and continued until the Icelanders placed themselves under the Norwegian crown in 1262–4.

At first this was to all appearances a largely peaceful process; the influence and power of the leading families seem to have increased mostly by inheritance and marriage, and by friendship relations and alliances. From the end of the eleventh century tithe transferred wealth from the lesser farmers to the bigger ones and probably contributed, more than anything else, to widen the gap between the aristocracy of the *goðar* and the rest of the population. Characteristically, two of the leaders responsible for the introduction of tithe were Bishop Gizurr and Sæmundr Sigfússon *fróði* ('the wise') of Oddi who forged the alliance between the *Haukdælir* and the *Oddaverjar*.

The concentration of power that progressed from the mid-eleventh century was above all characterised by the formation of territorial lordships, *ríki* (realms). Domination was established over a district that would eventually have more or less fixed boundaries. At first it included at least three *goðorð* – the area of one *várþing*, and later expanded by the acquisition of ever more *goðorð* by one *goði*. There is evidence to indicate that the territorialisation of the *goðorð* began with a *goði* controlling two *goðorð* in his *várthing* district, thereby gaining authority over two core areas. It then became difficult for the *thing*-men of the third *goði* to gain the support they needed. A *goði* who ruled a *ríki* can be called a *stórgoði*, big chieftain. Under the rule of such men it is possible, for the first time, to speak of local government in Iceland.

Until the early twelfth century the *Haukdælir* were the most powerful family in the country and they maintained a leading position throughout the rest of the Free State period. From the mid-eleventh century they dominated Árnesthing, a compact and strategically situated area, comprising the see of Skálholt and lying close to Thingvellir where the *Althing* met. Eyrar on the southern coast,

one of the two most important commercial centres of Iceland in the Free State period, was within their sphere of power.

At the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth centuries *ríki* were established by other leading families such as the *Oddaverjar* in Rangárthing to the east of Árnesthing, the *Ásbirningar* in Hegranesthing/Skagafjörður in northern Iceland, the *Svínfellingar* in the south-east, and the *Austfirðingar* in the east. This development continued a century later with the rise of lordships in Eyjafjörður and Thingeyjarthing in north-eastern Iceland and Borgarfjörður in the west.

In the second half of the twelfth century the *Oddaverjar* came to the fore in Iceland. This is reflected by the fact that a member of the family was elected bishop of Hólar and that the see of Skálholt was given to a protégé of the family, Thorlákr Thórhallsson (1178–93), and then to Páll Jónsson (1195–1211), the son of Jón Loptsson of Oddi. Jón was by far the most influential and powerful Icelandic chieftain of his time.

Around 1200 the *Sturlungar* entered the small group of leading Icelandic families. They were the three sons of the *goði* Hvamm-Sturla of Dalir at Breiðafjörður in western Iceland, who had been active and acquisitive in the second half of the twelfth century. In 1215 Sighvatr Sturluson completed the formation of *ríki* in Eyjafjörður and Thingeyjarthing in the north-east. At the beginning of the thirteenth century his brother, Snorri Sturluson, the great saga writer, established a *ríki* in Borgarfjörður on both sides of the boundary between the quarters Sunnlendingafjórð ungur and Vestfirðingafjórð ungur. By then the rule that a *goði* could only have *thing*-men within his quarter had long been disregarded.

Around 1220 large *ríki* had taken shape over most of Iceland. Only in the divided Vestfirðir were there no more than tendencies towards the formation of more extensive territorial rule. The development of *ríki* entailed new methods of government by the *stórgoðar*. In this respect the royal *hirð* or retinue in Norway was an important model. Trusted men, *trúnaðarmenn*, functioned as counsellors of the *stórgoðar* and probably also represented them in local government, while their daily retinue of *fylgðarmenn* (followers) or *gestir* ('guests') served as a bodyguard and could be used in police and coercive actions if necessary. Military force was increasingly important in the bitter and destructive power struggle that characterised the last phase of the Free State period.

The power base of the *stórgoðar* changed as the *ríki* evolved. The farmers lost the option of choosing their *goði*. Within a *ríki* they were all subjected to the same *stórgoði* as his *thing*-men. The former leadership of the *goðar*, based on family and friendship, now became territorial, political authority. The *stórgoðar*

gained control over the judicial activities in the district and decided all cases between their *thing*-men at their residential farms. Consequently, the local and regional *things* declined.

The ability of the *stórgoðar* to utilise the economic resources and manpower of their *ríki* were, in the end, the factors that determined whether they would survive in the internal power struggle. They tried to channel various contributions and payments to a centre from which they could be redistributed to achieve political ends. Most often such a centre would be a *staðr* under the management and control of the *stórgoði*, in itself a strong economic power base since it enjoyed the incomes of church lands and tithe.

At the end of the twelfth century Bishop Thorlákr Thórhallsson tried to establish the bishop's authority, *forræði*, over the local churches, primarily the *staðir*, allowing the laymen to continue to administer them and their economy as temporary benefices, *lén*, under his supervision. He had considerable success in the Austfirðir but was effectively resisted by Jón Loptsson of Oddi. After that the lay opposition to his policy gained the upper hand.

Snorri Sturluson (1178/9–1241) is a good example of a chieftain who managed to acquire several *goðorð* and vast economic resources mainly by control over *staðir* and other ecclesiastical institutions. It was in this way that he established his *ríki* centred upon Borgarfjörður. In *Íslendinga saga* his nephew Sturla Thórðarson states that Snorri was not short of economic resources after having gained control of the *staðir* Stafholt and Reykholt in that area. Riches begot riches. The *stórgoðar* could buy more farms, expand their activities, and strengthen their political position. Snorri and his two brothers owned at least ten times as much property as their father, and their power corresponded to their wealth.

The evolution of territorial lordships in the form of *ríki* may be regarded as a stage on the way towards organised statehood. The Icelandic constitution based on *goðar* and *goðorð* was, however, an anomaly. No single chieftain or family had the resources required to gain the upper hand in the internal power struggle and so control the whole country. To increase their strength and prestige the chieftains sought the support of the Norwegian king and became his liegemen in return, and there was also increasing Norwegian influence over the Icelandic church. What is more, the Norwegians had by the early thirteenth century more or less monopolised trade with Iceland and shipping to and from it. It is therefore easy to understand why the medieval Free State was nearing the end of its unique history.