

# FINNUR JÓNSSON'S ICELAND: THE PERIPHERY OF THE NORTH AT THE CENTRE OF ATTENTION

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## Abstract

On the far northwestern edge of the Occident, during a period of hardship, the eighteenth-century Icelandic bishop, Finnur Jónsson, succeeded in rewriting Icelandic history, bringing it into the realm of contemporary thought, while remaining firmly grounded in Icelandic literary heritage. His achievement, the *Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiæ* (1772-1778), would find great acclaim among European scholars and marked a new phase in thought on the Icelandic self. Commissioned to produce a Church history of Iceland, Finnur found himself presented with a unique opportunity to put Iceland on the international map, as the work was intended for the country's greater glory and the public good. There was just one problem: if his story was to find success outside Iceland, it had to be universally recognizable. Both form and content had to live up to the international standards of the day. Contemporary thought broached subjects such as freedom, but how was an Icelandic author, whose country was under foreign rule, to describe his country's history in such terms? It would seem that these were serious obstacles. This contribution aims to illustrate how Finnur managed to construct a picture of Iceland under such circumstances, and how his decisions contributed to a positive reception of Iceland abroad. I propose that his decision to write in Latin, the use of modern textual criticism and enlightened ideas about the North, enabled him to present Iceland to a wider European audience. Using such ideas enabled him to highlight Iceland's past as one of freedom from dependence, long before nineteenth-century nationalists did so. Finally, I will discuss the consequences of this focus as a decisive factor in the development of Icelandic self-awareness over the longer term, thus aiming to contribute to the broader debate on the creation of new identities.

## Keywords

Iceland, self-awareness, historiography, Montesquieu, government, Mallet

How can an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Church history contain ideas that sound like the forerunner to nationalist thinking? How can it become the work of reference about a country for decades to come? It seems improbable, but the *Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiæ* by the Icelandic bishop Finnur Jónsson (1704-1789) did exactly that: it brought Iceland to the attention of contemporary scholars, and made its mark in profiling the country in ways that would have a long-lasting effect, as I hope to demonstrate.

What makes it so interesting is the fact that Finnur produced this text using ideas about freedom and the North to profile a small country at the edge of western civilisation where these ideas were thought out and exchanged. Moreover, the premises under which he wrote were not likely to accommodate such an enterprise. Iceland had been part of the Danish realm since the



Kalmar Union in 1397, and Danish king Frederick V (1723-1766) had commissioned a Church history, not a history of Iceland. On top of this, for Iceland it was a century of natural disasters and general hardship. These were not ideal circumstances for an Icelander to write about his own country and freedom. Still, not only did Finnur (see picture left, source: Jónsson, 1778, nn) succeed in living up to the original commission, but he also dealt with these limitations to construct a new image of Iceland, based on contemporary thought. There evidently was a need to do so: for centuries, the opinion of Iceland in foreign literature – such as the travel accounts *Van Yslandt* (1561) by Gories Peerse, *Islandia* from 1607 by Dithmar Blefken, and *Nachrichten von Island, Grönland und der Strasse Davis* (1746) by Johann Anderson – had generally been negative, so negative that the Danish crown deemed it necessary to set the record straight internationally. This provided Finnur with the opportunity not

just to write the history of the Church in his country, but also its general history, with the aid of modern ideas.

These elements have produced a text that is bound to spark interest; if anything, it raises a lot of questions. How did the author do it? Where did the ideas used come from, how did he manage to employ them? And how did his choices influence the way in which he could map Iceland in the short run, and help shape national self-awareness in the long run?

The first answer to these questions can be found in the person of the author himself. Finnur Jónsson had the scholarly background to perform such a task. His father, archdeacon Jón Halldórsson, had introduced him to historiography, and he had studied in Copenhagen under historians such as Hans Gram, where he was introduced to existing historiographic literature and learnt the craft of textual criticism (Hermannsson, 1979, 10). Also, through his father and his connections, Finnur had historical sources at his disposal. So, when in 1741 the Danish Church dignitary Ludvig Harboe went to Iceland to investigate in which way the state of the Church and schooling there could be improved, Finnur – by now a bishop – was a logical choice to approach for producing an Icelandic Church history, which Harboe had found local Latin schools in need of (Guttormsson, 2000, 309-319). He found Finnur, and his brother Vigfús, willing to take on the task, and a formal commission was sent in 1746 by the Danish Church Council. The stakes were high, as the commission indicated: the work was to be written "for the country's greater glory and for the public good" (Landsbókasafnið 27a fol., 1746). Finnur

had the background and the means, and got started straight away. It would take nearly 30 years to finish the work.

Secondly, the choice of language and the set-up were of crucial importance to the work's success. The Council had left it up to Finnur to decide whether he was going to write in Latin, Danish or Icelandic, and he had chosen Latin. This cannot have been any coincidence. Censorship was still in place, and a learned, Latin text – along with the work's dedication and the choice of genre – was likely to expedite approval, for it would not influence the common man's way of thinking in ways that might endanger the monarchy. Finnur dedicated his work to the Danish king and modelled his work on the contemporary Danish Church history by Eric Pontoppidan, the *Annales Ecclesiae Danicae* (1741-1752), which constituted a mould that had been tested and approved. Moreover, Pontoppidan's set-up was modern: comprehensive and encyclopaedic. It combined the history of Church and state, reflecting the connection of the two in the Danish realm at that time. This provided Finnur with the opportunity to put not just the Church, but his whole country on the map in a way that was accepted and in vogue.

In sum, judging by the language and the set-up, the audience that Finnur envisioned was learned and international. After all, the work was designated for the country's greater glory and the public good, and only few Icelanders had command of Latin or could afford to buy the work (Kristjánsson, 2008, 134). With such an audience in mind, the content had to match the mould: the work had to contain recognisable, and preferably modern ideas, or the story would not sell outside Iceland's – or Denmark's – borders.

Finding recognisable ideas on the historical Icelandic state was not the problem: there was the internationally acclaimed history of Iceland called *Crymogæa* by the Icelandic historiographer Arngrímur Jónsson, published in 1609, that Finnur duly used. Arngrímur had used humanist ideas about the cyclical nature of states and applied them to Iceland, ideas he had borrowed from the famous 16<sup>th</sup>-century political philosopher Jean Bodin. The result was the following construction of the historical Icelandic state: it had known two kinds of sovereign government that had been equally good, in the sense that its rule was virtuous and beneficiary to those who lived under it; these two types of government had been aristocracy and monarchy (Middel, 2016, 117-118). Arngrímur created a past continuing into the presence, with a short period of negative government in between that he called oligarchy during the so-called Age of the Sturlungs (*Sturlungaöld*) in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when Iceland's socio-political structure began to collapse:

Iceland's praiseworthy aristocracy turned into the worst kind of oligarchy [...]. No plan for bringing back peace to their state seemed more agreeable or sound to the Icelanders – both chieftains and common men – than to submit to the rule of one king (Benediktsson, 1951, 164-165).

Arngrímur offered no glorification of Iceland's past, nor did Finnur adopt such a presumed glorification, as has been accepted generally (Skovgaard-Petersen, 2012, 467-468; Svavarsson, 2006, 282; Svavarsson, *Greatness*, 2003, 561; Svavarsson, *Latinity*, 2003, 75).

Still, nearly two centuries had passed, and it would not seem likely that Finnur would copy Arngrímur's notion of the historical Icelandic state integrally. Indeed he did not: in book I, he reproduced Arngrímur's take on the change of state in stronger wordings:

A degeneration of the old aristocracy, first turned into oligarchy and later even into tyranny and some sort of anarchy (...) for which evil no remedy seemed more agreeable than that all would submit to the rule of one king (Jónsson, 1772, 374).

This marks the first big change regarding Arngrímur's kind of historiography. Finnur took a critical distance to his sources: he strived for an objective reading of history (Sigurðsson, 1982, 26). Instead of Arngrímur's early modern reproduction of sources, he voiced his own opinion about the events described and their interpretation by other authors. For instance, he updated the information from *Crymogaea* on the cause of the change into monarchy and the course this transition took by offering his own views: in addition to the disintegration of the socio-political system, it had been an act of God, expedited by the Norwegian kings' humanity (Jónsson, 1772, 374). Finnur concluded that the change into monarchy had not seemed disadvantageous to the Icelanders.

Finnur provided adequate updates to the information provided by Arngrímur that suited a Church history, and the result of his textual criticism was a modern, hermeneutic kind of historiography that facilitated a distance to the past. It was another step forward into modernity, but was it enough? Finnur's was the era of ideas about freedom and independence, and Arngrímur's well-balanced description of the continuous political past and present did not fit that bill. Finnur must have realised this as the work drew to an end, because an interesting shift takes place in the last book, that contains addenda to the former three. After repeating his description of the *Sturlungaöld* from book I in book IV, he adds:

No wonder that the Icelandic state was reduced to this state – one should wonder much more about the fact that it was troubled by internal strife and external stratagems for nearly four hundred years and still was able to hold its ground and maintain its freedom! (Jónsson, 1778, 140).

Hang on! *Reduced to this state? Maintain freedom?* What is going on here? For Arngrímur Jónsson, the transition into monarchy had been a *restoration* to a *respublica*, i.e. a good kind of government just like aristocracy, but Finnur now called it a *reduction* – a deterioration. What is more, the era of oligarchy, which had been negative in Arngrímur's eyes, had not been good in Finnur's either, but at least the Icelanders had preserved their freedom during that time – and implicitly lost it when the king took over.

So Finnur reevaluates the term *respublica*: it is presented as a particular kind of state with a positive connotation, as opposed to *imperium monarchicum*. Even more important is the fact that it is connected to the notion of freedom, which constitutes an essential part of it – elsewhere he actually calls it a *libera respublica*. Earlier on in book IV, he had introduced love of freedom as a part of the native Icelandic character, which in the 9<sup>th</sup> century had brought the first settlers to Iceland in the first place, when they wanted to flee Norwegian king Harald's tyranny. No



wonder, then, that they should want to create a *free state*. To Finnur, the political present was the lesser of two evils: peace in dependency as opposed to internal strife in freedom.

Favouring aristocracy over monarchy, love of freedom as the Icelanders' historical trademark: this revaluation of the country's history offered unparalleled opportunities to paint the picture of an idealised past, something no-one had done before. Finnur had dealt the final blow to Arngrímur's two-state construction: the country's new historical profile favoured an imagined social-political structure under which Iceland had been free, with the aid of ideas of states and liberty that seemed more in line with his contemporaries. He had come a long way: there are preludes to the new rationale combining a *respublica* with *libertas* in book I, but the connection between the two did not take shape until the end. So, what happened in the meantime? What caused the development towards a glorified depiction of Iceland's past, where did Finnur find these ideas, and why was he able to find acceptance for this depiction of Iceland within the Danish realm?

This is the point where we meet the transnational, because in the course of writing the *Historia*, the parameters for writing about the North in general and Iceland in particular changed. As stated before, up until 1746 Iceland had suffered poor depiction in foreign literature (Ísleifsson, 2015, 107-114, 144-147). The Danish crown sent people to Iceland to assess the situation and produce writings that would counter the allegations. The consequence of the resulting modern, scientific publications was that the public image of Iceland took a turn for the better that was to last, and the interaction between Iceland and the rest of the world intensified. Furthermore, in the 1750s the Swiss professor Paul-Henri Mallet was engaged by the Danish king to produce a new history of Denmark and its constituencies, which resulted in *Introduction à l'Histoire de Dannemarc*. What better way to put the North on the map than to use an internationally renowned authority on states and histories to back up his description of Iceland? And so, we find Mallet introducing Montesquieu's ideas about the North as the birthplace of freedom into the Danish realm. The introduction of these ideas changed self-awareness within the realm completely: Mallet used Montesquieu to assert Scandinavia's superior position over other countries and to depict Iceland's historical state as exemplary, and it all boiled down to the notion of freedom (Mallet, 1755, 8; Montesquieu, 1973, 300).

These ideas quickly found their way within the realm and outside of it, disseminated by authors such as Gerhard Schöning and Peter Frederik Suhm, and their exchange was likely expedited by the recently founded Danish Royal Academy; self-awareness could take shape in ways unexperienced before in the realm (Kohn, 2008, 510-513). Because of this, Iceland could be profiled in a new, positive way on good authority that would be accepted by scholars internationally. This is precisely what Finnur did: he turned the historical Icelandic state into one of freedom. I would go as far as to say that Finnur is the first author to refer to the mediaeval *free Icelandic state*, long before 19<sup>th</sup>-century nationalists and modern scholars did. He shaped Icelandic identity the way Schöning and Suhm did in Norway, in the same setting. The start in book I was apologetic, the outcome in book IV is protonationalist, and it has to do with the changing environment in which the work was to be put.

What is more, he created this new Icelandic identity with a cultural approach: he profiles the historical Icelandic society by highlighting its members as freedom-loving and learned people of all ranks, bringing Arngrímur's legacy up to a par with Montesquieu and Mallet. Icelanders

had been a modern nation of science *avant la lettre*, he said, and they had the manuscripts to prove it. On top of that, he stated that they had lost one of two original trademarks – arrogance – with accepting Christianity, leaving the other – love of freedom – as the main feature of their *native character* up to the present day (Jónsson, 1772, 216). In other words, the picture of Iceland that emerged was positive, and undeniably so – no one could or would argue against it. Arngrímur Jónsson's political continuity had given way to a continuity of national disposition that craved a different political reality.

It is not clear where Finnur got his new ideas from directly, for he doesn't quote and he was no member of the Academy. We do know that he was in steady contact with his colleagues in the realm, who perused these ideas and whose work he was familiar with, and he had the help of royal historiographer Hans Gram and other people within the Academic environment, such as antiquarian Árni Magnússon and Royal Adviser Jón Eiríksson (Hermannsson, 1989, 96; Jørgensen, 1964, 165; Kristjánsson, 119&127). Be that as it may, if he worked out these ideas single-handedly, at the edge of that environment, his achievement is all the more remarkable. In the short run – we are speaking of one hundred years here – the effect was that the *Historia* became the standard work on Iceland. Information about kings, bishops, monasteries, history and literature, political and legal matters, as well as texts of poems, prose and letters: anything was read, used and reproduced. All expressed their appreciation, calling it the most important work about Iceland's history – even the best Church history in the Nordic countries. And most importantly, his ideas were adopted. His Swedish colleague Uno von Troil adopted Finnur's views of Iceland as a learned nation, and explicitly mentions what Finnur implied, but could not say out loud about the events of 1264: that Iceland was "cast under the Norwegian yoke" (Von Troil, 1777, 141-142). It is a shame that Von Troil's work appeared before book IV was published – we don't know what he would have said about Iceland as the land of the free.

In the long run, Finnur paved the way for Icelandic generations to come: his idea of a golden Icelandic age *avant la lettre* fitted perfectly with what became a common theme in 19<sup>th</sup>-century nationalist thought, and in political discourse in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, on Iceland. Finnur shaped Iceland's identity in a way that would have been the envy of any nationalist, a whole century before such ideas came into vogue. One can truly say that the purpose of writing for the country's greater glory had been fulfilled.

In conclusion, Finnur's way of dealing with his situation marks three things that are significant. First, the *Historia* supplies a clear point of reference for understanding the direction in which Icelandic self-awareness could develop on the level of ideas in its day, as well as how identities can be created. Next, the ideas used to this effect are about as mainstream European as it gets. Iceland was profiled in a way that kept up with what the rest of the world was doing. And finally, the *Historia* is an interesting text case when it comes to the transfer and exchange of ideas and the transgression of boundaries within and outside of the North.

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