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High Seat Pillars and the Settlement of Iceland: Fact, Fake News or Folklore?

Terry Gunnell

THE PRESENT article¹ is, in a sense, a follow up to several other pieces that I have written in recent years dealing with the question of whether later folkloric material has any value for the study of Old Norse religion, and not least for helping us understand the background and evolution of the Icelandic *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements) and the Icelandic family sagas.² It is essentially a case study that focuses on a single highly debated motif encountered in the modern coat of arms used by the city of Reykjavík. In short, it deals with the veracity of the accounts in *Landnámabók* telling of settlers making use of floating high-seat pillars to decide where they should live,³ and most particularly those which apparently led the accredited first settler, Ingólfur Arnason, to set up home not far from the centre of Reykjavík.⁴

Views of the value of *Landnámabók* as a source have, of course, varied greatly over the years, ranging from the complete trust expressed in early scholarly works⁵ to Sveinbjörn Rafnsson's relatively recent statement that the

1 In a slightly different form, this article was presented as the Hermann Pálsson Memorial Lecture at the University of Edinburgh in 2023. Earlier versions were presented for the Miðaldastofa at the University of Iceland in February 2023 and at the International Saga conference in Helsinki in August 2022. With the assistance of Paul Edwards, Hermann Pálsson was the translator of *Landnámabók* that was published in 1972. As will be noted later, he also wrote an article on the foundation myths found in the work in 1988.

2 See Gunnell 2010, 2014, 2020 and (with Muir) 2021; on the same subject, see Schjødt 2014.

3 With regard to the potentially symbolic nature of the so-called *þndvegissúlur* (high seat pillars) of Viking Age halls which appear to have stood either side of the *þndvegi* (high seat) in which the head of the hall sat, see further Gunnell 2001; see also Turville-Petre 1972.

4 *Landnámabók* 1986, 42-45 (chs S8-9): chapters in the two main different versions of *Landnámabók* (the so-called Hauksbók and Sturlubók versions) are referred to here with the capital letters H and S.

5 See, for example, the discussions in the introduction written by Hermann Pálsson for his translation and his article on the work: Herman Pálsson 1972; and 1988.

work is totally fictitious, and tells us nothing about the means of settlement or the beliefs and customs of the original settlers.⁶ The early date of those accounts dealing with the use of high seat pillars to settle land has received particular criticism in recent years, and most particularly in a detailed and well researched article by Jonas Wellendorf, which has justifiably received a great deal of attention. In this article, Wellendorf describes the settlement accounts in *Landnámabók* as being 'to a certain extent fabricated', suggesting that most of those dealing with the high seat pillars come from a later date than the original version of *Landnámabók*.⁷ When it comes down to it, there is comparatively little that is totally original in what I mean to say here in answer to such criticisms. The problem is that much of it has been said in works dealing with folk narrative rather than Old Norse literature, meaning that it has received very little attention from Old Norse scholars, and especially from scholars like Sveinbjörn and others who would like to question the role of the oral tradition in the creation of works like *Landnámabók*, simply because there is no solid evidence that such a tradition ever existed.

It is natural to begin by briefly outlining the main accounts in question, many of which readers will be well aware of. The common storyline in these stories recounted in both *Landnámabók* and various sagas is that settlers approaching Iceland would throw the high seat pillars taken from their previous halls in Norway overboard, and would then settle where they drifted to land, the belief being that some kind of divine providence lay behind this (and probably some involvement of Þórr, who seems to have been the god most associated with sailing, trees, and pillars according to those accounts that we have from Iceland and elsewhere).⁸

6 Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 2019, 151. On the same question, see further, for example, Helgi Þorláksson 2019b, 323 and 325. See also Jón Jóhannesson 1941; Meulengracht-Sørensen 1974; Wellendorf 2010; Hermann 2010; Hoefig 2014, 2017 and 2018; Gísli Sigurðsson 2015; Helgi Þorláksson 2015 and 2019a; and Auður Ingvarsdóttir 2019.

7 Wellendorf 2010, 11 and 7.

8 While both Freyr and Óðinn are said to own the ship *Skíðblaðnir* (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 18, 41-42; Snorri Sturluson 2005, 34, and 36; and *Ynglinga saga* 1979, 18), the only god that we see travelling at sea (apart from Loki in *Völuspá* st. 49) is Þórr: see, for example, the various accounts of Þórr's attempt to fish up the *Miðgarðsormr*, such as that in *Hymiskviða* sts 16-27 (note that all references to the Eddic poems refer the strophe numbering in *Eddukvæði* 2014). See also the account of Kráku-Hreiðarr in *Landnámabók* 1972, 232 (S197 and H164) telling of Þórr guiding Hreiðarr when he was at sea; and that of Helgi *inn magri* telling of how Helgi always invoked Þórr when he was at sea (in *Landnámabók* 1986, 250-251 (chs S218 and H184)). With regard to Þórr, pillars, and trees, one can mention the so-called 'Pillars of Hercules' in the North Sea noted by Tacitus in *Germania* ch. 34 (Tacitus 1948, 128); the account of 'Donar's oak' by Willibald (see Kritsch 2019, 99); and the narrative telling of Hallsteinn Þórólfsson asking Þórr to send him pillars (see below).

As Pernille Hermann and Hermann Pálsson have noted,⁹ the accounts in question can all be referred to as ‘founding narratives’. The key figures here are Ingólfr Árnason (from Dalsfjord in Sunnfjord, in West Norway); his friend Hrollaugr Rögnvaldsson from Mæri (near Trondheim); Þórólfr Mostrarskegg (from Sunnhordland); Þórólfr’s close friend Björn *inn austrænni*, the son of Ketill *flatnef* from Romsdal with roots in Sogn; Björn’s sister, Auðr/Unnr *djúpúðga*; Þórðr *skeggi*, grandson of Ketill *flatnef*’s brother; Loðmundr *inn gamli* (also from Sogn); and then Ögmundr Kormáksson.¹⁰ One notes the close family relationships and friendships here, all of which appear to have had a role to play in the choice of ways in which to approach the settlement of land—if, of course, the stories can be trusted.¹¹ One also notes how many of these people come from west Norway.

Closely related to these accounts are several others that must be included in the discussion, starting with that of Skalla-Grímr Kveld-Úlfsson from Firðir (just north of Sogn in Norway), who takes the somewhat original approach of substituting the pillars with his dead father Kveld-Úlfr, Egill Skallagrímsson’s grandfather; and then Hásteinn/Hallsteinn Atlason (also from Sogn), who, rather than pillars, uses *setstokkar* (bench pillars) when finding where to settle at Stokkseyri in the south of Iceland (close to Ingólfr’s territory).¹² Alongside these we have the account of another key settler in the east, Þórhaddr *enn gamli*, who brings with him the pillars and earth from his cult house in Mæri.¹³ No mention is made here of the use of the pillars, but the narrative is clearly associated with the same tradition. Alongside these are the accounts of Hallsteinn Þórólfsen, the son of the earlier-mentioned Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, who is said to ask Þórr for pillars, and then Kráku-Hreiðarr Ófeigsson who deliberately decides against using pillars, nonetheless suggesting that he was well aware of the tradition.¹⁴ All of these accounts echo once more what was stated above about close family connections and associations with western Norway.

Finally, we have the two Christian variants. The first tells how Orlygr Hrapppson, the brother of the earlier-mentioned Þórðr Hrapppson, who was

9 See Hermann 2010 and Hermann Pálsson 1988.

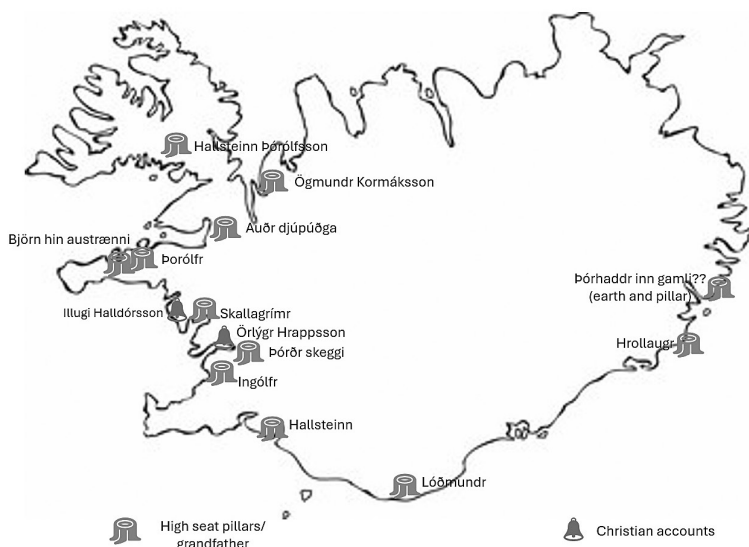
10 Ingólfr: see *Landnámabók* 1986, 42-45 (chs S8-9); Hrollaugr Rögnvaldsson: see *Landnámabók* 1986, 317 (chs S310/H270); Þórólfr Mostrarskegg: see *Landnámabók* 1986, 124 (chs S85/H73) and *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 7-8; Björn *inn austrænni*: see *Laxdæla saga* 1934, 6; Auðr/Unnr *djúpúðga*: see *Laxdæla saga* 1934, 7; Þórðr *skeggi*: see *Landnámabók* 1986, 49 (ch H11) and *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts* 1991, 1; Loðmundr *inn gamli*: see *Landnámabók* 1986, 302-303 (chs S289/H250); and Ögmundr Kormáksen: see *Kormáks saga* 1939, 250.

11 See, for example, Helgi Þorláksson 2019b, 337.

12 Skalla-Grímr: see *Landnámabók* 1986, 68-71 (chs S29-30); and *Egils saga* 1933, 71-73; Hásteinn/Hallsteinn: see *Landnámabók* 1986, 371 (ch S371) and *Flóamanna saga* 1991, 238.

13 *Landnámabók* 1986, 307 (chs S297/H258).

14 *Landnámabók* 1986, 164 and 232 (chs S123/H95 and S197/H164).



Map 1: Sites identified in narratives about Icelandic settlers deciding their place of settlement by throwing items overboard.

related to both Björn *inn austrænni* and Auður / Unnr *djúpuðga*, and was provided with church timber, a plenarium, a bell and some earth by St Patrick in Ireland, all of which were expected to be used in the construction of Örlýgr's new home and church in Iceland. The main story is found in the *Landnámabók* account telling of how the bell sank on the journey, but later found its way to Örlýgr's new settlement in Kjalarnes in south-west Iceland.¹⁵ Interestingly, the account of the subterranean travelling bell is omitted from *Kjalnesinga saga*, which simply stresses that the bell was still around in the fourteenth-century church, but had suffered from a bad case of rust.¹⁶ Alongside this, we have the story of Illugi Halldórsson, only found in *Landnámabók*, which briefly tells how Illugi threw the church timber he had collected from Norway overboard, and later built a church where it landed in Mýrar, very close to Skalla-Grímur's settlement in Borgarnes.¹⁷ As can be seen here, both stories focus on timber.

If we look at a map of the settlement sites connected to these narratives, one notes immediately how closely situated most of these settlements were, and also a number of areas in which they appear comparatively rarely (Map 1). One also notes the way in which the two Christian stories fit right in the midst of the

¹⁵ *Landnámabók* 1986, 52-55 (chs S15/H15).

¹⁶ *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 4 and 43-44.

¹⁷ *Landnámabók* 1986, 65 (ch H21).

main group of settlements, all of which, as noted above, involve close family ties. The Christian accounts are clearly far from isolated. So, which came first?

In his earlier-noted article on *Landnámabók*, Jonas Wellendorf questions the idea expressed by the Swedish folklorist Dag Strömbäck that the form of the Christian accounts are 'a Christian cast of the old heathen custom'. In this connection, he points to the existence of two other hagiographic Christian accounts that might have been known in Iceland in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries—accounts which Wellendorf argues might lie behind the Christian accounts in *Landnámabók* while simultaneously potentially offering a model for the apparently pagan narratives.¹⁸ The first account, part of which is found in translation in a fragment of a fifteenth-century Icelandic manuscript, tells how St Giles from Provence visits Rome and is given two doors with pictures of Peter and Paul on them by the Pope. Since the doors are too heavy to transport with him, Giles throws them into the Tiber. He later discovers that they have floated after him all the way to Provence.¹⁹ To Wellendorf's mind, the carved doors are 'not only analogous to Illugi's church timber, but also Þorólfr Mostrarskegg's high seat pillars on which the image of the pagan deity Þórr was carved'. He concludes that the account of St Giles shows 'that the story of Illugi is much more than the Christian reworking of a pagan Icelandic custom that Strömbäck wanted to see'.²⁰

The next hagiographic account that Wellendorf refers to is taken from the life of the Irish St Declan, who lived between 1171 and 1210 (in other words, after Ari Þorgilsson is supposed to have composed the first version of *Landnámabók* with Kolskegg *fróði*). Preserved in two fourteenth-century Irish manuscripts, it tells of a visit Declan made to Rome and how, in a church on the way home, a bell from heaven suddenly landed in front on him. The miraculous bell then follows Declan on his journeys until it is accidentally forgotten on a rock by one of Declan's followers. In answer to a request made to God, the bell then reappears floating on top of a rock and leads the travellers back to a small island just off Ireland, which turns out to be too small for comfortable habitation. Like Moses, Declan then uses his staff to make the water between the island and the mainland recede.²¹

These two accounts are certainly worth bearing in mind, and they certainly offer interesting parallels. It is thus important to take note of them, especially with regard to the accounts dealing with Illugi and Orlygr. Nonetheless one also needs to note a number of key differences that exist between these narratives

18 See Wellendorf 2010, 136, and Strömbäck 1970, 135.

19 Wellendorf 2010, 12-13.

20 Ibid, 13.

21 Ibid, 15-16.

and those in *Landnámabók*. For one, while it involves some floating doors with pictures on them which might potentially be compared with Þórólfr's pillar with its image of Þórr, the account of St Giles has nothing to do with deciding where to live. In the case of Declan's bell, while it floats to land and points to a place of settlement, unlike Orlygr's bell, it does not sink, and the place of settlement is clearly wrong. If we are looking at a case of textual borrowing here, one would expect the details to be somewhat closer. With regard to whether such hagiographic accounts might lie behind those telling of the use of high seat pillars to find land, one wonders exactly why they should have been adopted in such a way. I certainly agree with Wellendorf that in all cases we are clearly dealing with a belief in Divine Providence,²² but does this have to be something that begins with Christianity? And were the stories only remembered because they might have had some relevance to Christians, as Wellendorf suggests?²³

With regard to other potential parallels, Wellendorf also mentions the etymological legend of how Stockholm got its name. This first appears in an account by Johannes Messenius from 1611 in his *Sveapentaprotopolis*, which tells of how the people of Sigtuna had been looking for a new safe place to live, and in order to help them decide, they let a log full of gold float freely down the river, the plan being to see where it came to land. It apparently washed up on Stadsholmen, the site of the modern Gamla Stan.²⁴ Wellendorf says that here, rather than being an original story, 'it seems likely that Messenius drew on Icelandic sources'.²⁵ There is one key problem with this statement. While Messenius was certainly interested in Icelandic material, as noted above, the only Icelandic account to talk of 'stokkar' (or benches) rather than 'súlur' (or pillars) was that dealing with Hásteinn/Hallsteinn Atlason which is recounted in both *Landnámabók* and *Flóamannasaga*. *Landnámabók* only became available in print in 1688, and *Flóamannasaga* much later in 1838. If Messenius had known this account, he would have had to have read it in a manuscript. But which manuscripts of these works would have been available to him in Stockholm at this time?

What is, unfortunately, far too rarely talked about in this connection is the fact that the type of legend relating to the founding of Stockholm would probably have been well known to many Swedes as part of the Swedish folklore tradition. When it comes down to it, there was no need at all to look to Iceland. As the aforementioned Dag Strömbäck effectively demonstrated in the *Atlas över svensk folkkultur* from 1976, in an article that largely echoed what he had previously written in an earlier piece from 1958, later republished in his *Folklor och filologi*

22 Wellendorf 2010, 20-21.

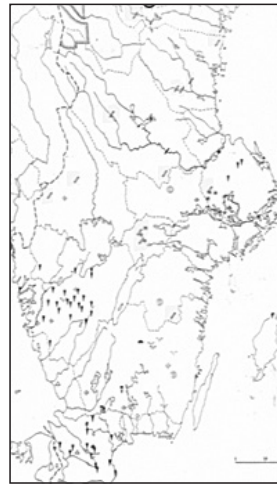
23 Ibid, 19.

24 Messenius 1612, 133.

25 Wellendorf 2010, 17.

from 1970,²⁶ numerous folk legends appear to have existed in Sweden telling of how logs are freely floated down a waterway in order to allow the powers that be to indicate where a new church should be built. To give one example:

When they were going to build a church in Skillingmark and Järnskog, some wanted the church further up in the parish. On the border of Norway, they cut down two logs. Into the end of one, they knocked a shilling, and in the other a horseshoe. They threw the logs into a watercourse and where they stopped, that's where the church should be built. One log landed at Edet between Asksjön and Björklången. That is where they built the Skillingsmark church, that was where the log with the shilling had come to land. The other log with the horseshoe floated down between Björklången and Vadjungen and down to a place called Stommen. There they built the first church in Järnskog, probably in the fifteenth century or maybe earlier.²⁷



Maps 2 and 3: Sites of legends describing how people in Sweden decided the sites of new churches by throwing logs in the water.²⁸ (Courtesy of the Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för Svensk Folkkultur.)



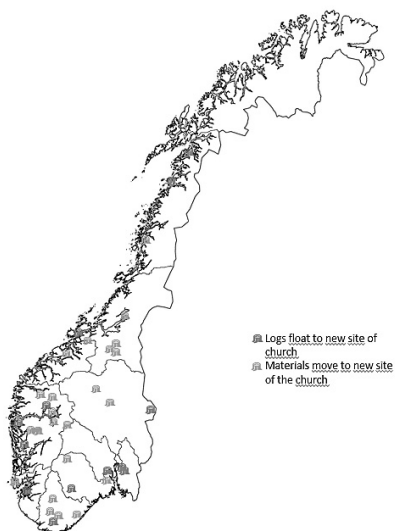
Someone puts a log in the sea, a lake or a river. The site of the new church is where the log comes to land.

²⁶ See Strömbäck 1976 I, 14–15 and II, 37–42; cf. Strömbäck 1970.

²⁷ Translated from af Klintberg 1972, 258-259; see also 348). All translations from the Nordic languages in this article are by the present author.

²⁸ Strömbäck 1976, I, 14-15.

As in the example given above, these legends have a common format: they state that the reason for floating the logs down the waterway is either that there was a dispute about where the church should be sited, or that the work on a new church had been mysteriously torn down at night, the building materials disappearing. Maps 2 and 3 show the distribution pattern of these legends, and exactly how many examples have been recorded in Sweden. As the respected Swedish folklorist Bengt af Klintberg notes in his *Types of the Swedish Legend*, these legends (which he classes as type U13: 'Floating Log Marks Out Site of Church') are particularly common in those areas bordering western Norway, such as Dalarna, Hälsingland, and Jämtland, as well as in Östergötland, Närke, Medelpad, Ångermanland, Lappland, and Norrbotten.²⁹ While the legends deal with churches rather than sites of settlement, and while the Almighty is commonly said to be the one who wants the church to stand elsewhere, an equal number of legends seem to blame other supernatural powers such as trolls or underground beings. In short, we are not just dealing with Christian thought, more the idea of any 'higher power'.³⁰



Map 4: Sites of legends describing how people in Norway decided the sites of new churches by throwing logs in the water or by finding the materials being moved there by some higher power.³¹

29 af Klintberg 2010, 361-362.

30 Ibid, 361.

31 Christiansen 1958, 201-209: ML 7060.

Considering the distribution of the stories noted above, it is not surprising to discover that similar folk legends are found in Norway, and not least in precisely those areas in which the Icelandic settlers who apparently made use of high seat pillars to decide where to settle had lived before they came to Iceland: in other words in Trøndelag, Møre og Romsdal, and Sogn og Fjordane (see Map 4). My information here is drawn from Reidar Christiansen's *Migratory Legends* (1958), and the information he provides about the distribution of those legends he classifies as migratory legend (ML) type 7060: Disputed Site for a Church.³² To give one example from Møre og Romsdal:

There was a big argument about where Frei church should stand. The people of Straumsmiss wanted to have it at Naasjynneia, on Aspøyen island. But the Bærsøya and Freiøya island people couldn't agree with that. They were island people, and they did not want to have the church on the mainland. And it so happened that they were going to start building on Aspøy. But they never made more than three attempts. Whatever they had built by the evening was torn down by the next morning. The people of Frei parish said that they should throw three logs out onto the fjord, and if they came to land in Frei parish, then the church should be built there. And then one of the logs came to land on the Frei peninsular. And so the church was built on Frei.³³

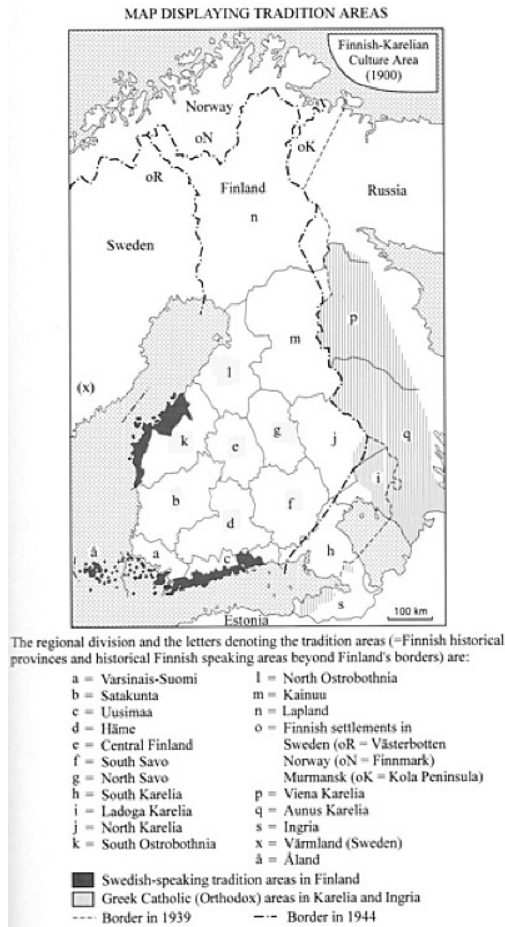
The parallels between these Swedish and Norwegian narratives and the early Icelandic legends are naturally striking, as is their Norwegian and Swedish distribution. I do not think that there is any reason to imagine that all of these stories should have an origin in the account of St Giles and his doors, and nor do I think they have roots in the manuscripts of the Icelandic sagas. Interestingly enough, while a number of legends of this kind are also found in western Finland³⁴ (see Map 5 below), to the best of my knowledge, there are no legends in Icelandic folklore about the sites of churches being decided in this way. The only narratives of this kind with a Christian background are the two narratives from *Landnámabók* mentioned above, which are of course quite

32 I would like to express my gratitude to the late Reimund Kvideland for originally bringing this material to my attention in a lecture that never came to be published (Kvideland 2005); to Reimund's wife for letting me have a copy of the lecture; and to Kyrre Kverndokk and Line Esborg of the Universities of Bergen and Oslo for helping me track down the relevant legends.

33 The legend is registered with the *Norske-folkeminnesamling* (hereafter NFS) as having been collected by Edvart Langset from Iver Offernes of Frei in 1916; registration number: SIN 1006.

34 See Jauhiainen 1998, 289: N 491: "Building a Church".

different. Like the early legends of werewolves³⁵ which came to Iceland from abroad with the settlers and evidently faded out of tradition, there would appear to have been no reason for the stories to continue to be adapted to new Icelandic contexts, perhaps because of their strong association with pagan belief.



Map 5: Those areas of Finland in which one finds legends describing how people decided the sites of new churches by throwing logs in the water or having logs freely drawn to a new site by horses or oxen (b, c, d, f, g, k, l).³⁶ (Courtesy of Folklore Fellows Communications.)

35 See, for example, *Völsunga saga* 1943, 15-16.

36 Jauhainen 1998, 61.



Map 6: Sites of legends describing how people in Norway decided the sites of new churches by throwing logs in the water compared with those in which logs are freely drawn to a new site by horses or oxen.

For folklorists, it is natural to see the pagan legends of high seat pillars in *Landnámabók* as being the earliest variants of this type of legend, and of course, as noted above, they do appear to have a connection to those settlers originating in the same areas of Norway. The example from Stockholm noted above implies that legends of this kind were not limited to churches. Also worth noting is the stress on *logs* in plural rather than *a log*, and the mention of supernatural powers being involved, most commonly in the form of trolls and nature spirits (*huldre* or *underjordiske* beings), even though, as noted above, God is also mentioned.

I will return to the legends about floating logs and pillars later in the article. Before that, however, it is worth noting two interesting variants of the ML 7060 legend also found in Norway. The first, which is extremely widespread, simply tells how a supernatural force mysteriously moves building materials for a church overnight from one site to another. Once again, the supernatural force is evidently not limited to God. With regard to both the legends found in *Landnámabók* (and when it comes down to it, the mythology of Snorri's *Prose Edda*), the second variant is even more interesting. This tells how, rather than letting materials float freely down a river, those arguing about the site of a church are advised to harness a horse, or occasionally an ox to a stone or log, and to let them walk freely overnight. The church should then be built where the animals stop or lie down the next morning (see Map 6).

To give one example of this kind of legend dealing with a church at a place called Hindrum in Trøndelag:

Some wanted to have the church at Sæter, but that did not come to be. Then they agreed to build at Trøabakken above Hindrum, but that didn't work out either, because everything they built by day was pulled down at night. So they made the decision to put a log on a sledge and to set it going, and where it stopped, that's where the church was supposed to be. The horse stopped at Hindrum, where the church was later peacefully built.³⁷

Here is another legend dealing with a church near Voss in Hordaland:

They were going to build a church in Vang parish[...]. They started building but whatever they built by day was pulled down at night. No one knew what was going on. There was a wise old man. They asked him what to do. He said that the church should stand where four valleys meet. They said that an ox had moved from the remains at Bøjarmo'no over and down to Vangjen, which is where it had lain down. They started building where the ox lay down and it went so well that it was as if the work was doing itself.³⁸

Worth particular attention here are the elements of the animal 'lying down' and the role of the wise man.

As can be seen on Map 7, legends of this kind are also well-known in southern Sweden, where the horse is more commonly replaced by a pair of free moving oxen. They are also found all over the place in Denmark, which has no floating log legends (see Map 8),³⁹ and in large areas of Finland.⁴⁰ To give two examples from Öster- and Västergötland in Sweden:

The church at Västra Harg fell down one night before it was completely finished. Then they took a pair of oxen and linked them to four logs and the oxen were free to go wherever they went, and wherever they stopped the church should be built. [...] It was not right that it should have been built at the first place. The oxen should decide, no others.⁴¹

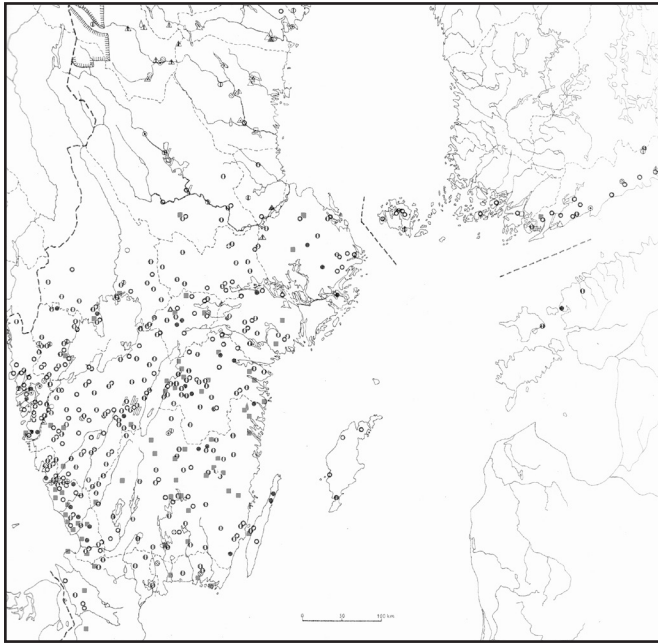
37 The legend is registered with the NFS as having been collected by Edvard Kruken in 1916; registration number: SIN 1000.

38 The legend is registered with the NFS as having been collected by Ivar Aasen; registration number: SIN 1387.

39 My thanks for Timothy Tangherlini for assisting me with assembling this distribution map.

40 Jauhainen 1998, 289: N 481 "Building a Church".

41 Translated from af Klintberg 1972, 258.



Map 7: Those places in southern Sweden where one finds legends describing how people decided the sites of new churches by having logs freely drawn to a new site by horses or oxen.⁴² (Courtesy of the Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för Svensk Folkkultur.)

- ❶ A pair of oxen are attached to a log and go where they wish to. Where they stop is seen as being the right place for where the church should be built.
- ❷ A single ox is attached to a log.
- ⚠ A pair of horses are attached to a log.
- ⚠ A single horse is attached to a log.

In Nittorp they tried building in nineteen places before they came to the right place. There was a man that told them that they should take a pair of oxen and have them pull a wagon with a stone on it. Where they stopped, that was where the church was built.⁴³

Interestingly enough, in Iceland, we once again find a very similar aetiological story elsewhere in *Landnámabók* telling of how the mare Skálm decided where the settler Þórir Grímsson should settle.⁴⁴ The horse was set

42 Strömbäck 1976, I, 13 (Map II).

43 af Klintberg 1972, 258.

44 *Landnámabók* 1986, 96-99 (chs S68/H56).



Map 8: Those places in Denmark where one finds legends describing how people decided the sites of new churches by having logs freely drawn to a new site by horses or oxen. (Courtesy of Timothy R Tangherlini.)

free, and where it ‘lay down’ to rest (‘lagðisk’) was where the farm should be built. Interestingly enough, the story in question is attached to one of the earliest versions of a well-known folk legend later known in Ireland as ‘The Three Laughs of the Leprechaun’.⁴⁵ In the *Landnámabók* legend, the suggestion that the behaviour of the mare should be observed is made by a so-called ‘marmennill’, or sea-man. We can probably go even further with suggestions of early Icelandic parallels. Indeed, considering the form of these legends about animals and their widespread distribution in southern Sweden and Denmark, there is good reason to envisage the same tradition as lying behind another early myth: that in Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda* telling of how the goddess Gefjun decided the setting of Sjaelland in Denmark with the help of four oxen that were set loose along with a plough. The wording is that they simply ‘námu staðar í sundi nokkvoru’ [lit. they came to a halt in a certain sound].⁴⁶

One could, of course, potentially attempt to argue that all of the examples of this type of legend go back to the biblical account in *Samuel* 1.6 telling of how the Philistines attempted to return the Ark of the Covenant to the Israelites by placing it on a cow-drawn cart and setting that loose. The only

45 Chesnutt 1999.

46 Snorri Sturluson 2005, 7.

problem with such a proposition is that the account in question has nothing to do with deciding where people should build or live. It also led to an angry God slaying between seventy and 50,000 Israelites.

A much closer model is the first-century account contained in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* noted earlier by both Hermann Pálsson and Jonas Wellendorf,⁴⁷ telling of how Cadmus received advice from the Oracle at Delphi about how an untamed heifer would lead him to the place where he should establish the city of Thebes.⁴⁸ As Hermann notes,⁴⁹ the account in question came to be largely repeated in the early Icelandic *Stjórn* manuscript, which it reached by way of Isidore of Seville. Especially noteworthy is the reappearance of the motif in which an outsider gives advice, and the suggestion that those involved should note where the heifer 'lies down', the belief being that gods point out where people should settle by means of letting animals walk freely.⁵⁰

Is there, therefore, reason to believe that all of the later Nordic legends of free-walking cattle or horses deciding sites of settlement or sites of churches have roots in the Bible or written versions of the Ovidian myth? Or are we instead encountering a range of versions of a widespread ancient shared folkloric motif that reached Northern Europe over the course of 800 years, much like the ancient myths of Polyphemus, Procrustes, and the Death of Pan, all of which are regularly found in later Nordic folklore.⁵¹ Those early versions of Nordic and Celtic folk legends found in *Landnámabók* telling of the high seat pillars, the *marmennill*, and the *nykur* (or waterhorse),⁵² all of which would later be found all over northern Europe, certainly all appear to have an oral, rather than a written background. Indeed, as Stephen Mitchell has noted,⁵³ in the case of the *Landnámabók* narrative of the *marmennill*, which precedes that of the mare *Skálm*, there is little question that we are talking of a folkloristic motif (which also appears in *Hálfs saga og Hálfsrekka*⁵⁴ rather than a literary borrowing).⁵⁵ Bearing in mind the later widespread Scandinavian legends that have been pointed out above, the same would certainly seem to apply to the stories of floating logs or high seat pillars, or free-moving livestock pulling logs, wagons, or land, all of which seem to underline the same basic idea of

47 See Hermann Pálsson 1988, 26-27, and Jonas Wellendorf 2010, 2.

48 Ovid 1921, vol. 1, 24-27.

49 Hermann Pálsson 1988, 26-27.

50 As Hermann notes (1998, 27), yet another example of this legend type is found in a story from Virgil's *Aeneid*, which came to be translated as part of *Breta saga*.

51 See, for example, af Klintberg 1972, 7-8; and further examples in Hansen 2002.

52 *Landnámabók* 1986, 120-121 (chs S83/H71).

53 Mitchell 1987, 399.

54 See *Hálfs saga og Hálfsrekka* 1944, 164-166.

55 See also Chesnutt 1999.

allowing natural forces to decide, or point out freely, a place of residence or a place of worship.

The examples given above nonetheless raise the obvious question of whether the foundation narratives of using floating pillars to find land were ever based on real events or 'genuine' pagan traditions? Were they merely family foundation myths? Jonas Wellendorf has argued, like some others, that the earliest version of *Landnámabók* contained little more than basic genealogical details about the settlers, and that many stories (such as those of the high seat pillars) were added at a later point by the early historians Sturla Þórðarson and Haukr Erlendsson.⁵⁶ Wellendorf cites the accounts of Ingólfr and Þórólfr as examples.⁵⁷ What he sidelines, though, is the interesting statement made by Sturla that Ingólfr's high seat pillars could still be seen in the kitchen of the farm in Reykjavík in the thirteenth century.⁵⁸ Whether these were actually the same high seat pillars that Ingólfr threw overboard is beside the point. The statement implies that this was the belief of those living on the farm that Sturla had apparently encountered, and that these objects 'carried' the story within them. In short, they were what Pierre Nora refers to as *lieux de memoire*, objects that keep a story alive as a form of proof.⁵⁹ Indeed, the possibility exists that it was these objects that inspired and helped preserve all of the family stories told about the settlement. All the same, was there any truth in the stories they maintained and passed on, which evidently did not start at this later point?

On the basis of our knowledge of currents around Iceland, it certainly makes sense that some of the pillars mentioned above might have ended up in some of the places where they are said to have landed, but as an experiment carried out by Svend-Aage Malmberg in 1983 showed, this is unlikely to apply to the extant story of the first settler, Ingólfr.⁶⁰ As I know from personal experience, having lived by a beach on Faxaflói bay in Reykjavík for over thirty years, driftwood is rarely found here, and I have never observed any trees floating by my window. Furthermore, the idea of Ingólfr and his people scouring the beaches for his pillars all the way from Ingólfshöfði in southern Iceland, and around the Reykjanes peninsular to Reykjavík as the account suggests makes very little sense.⁶¹ Nonetheless, as we all know, the oral tradition and personal memory can rarely be trusted to be *exactly* true.⁶² It is quite possible that Ingólfr

56 Wellendorf 2010, 4.

57 Ibid, 6-7.

58 *Landnámabók* 1986, 45 (chs SH8): 'þar eru enn öndvegissúlur þær í eldhúsi'.

59 Nora 1989.

60 Malmberg 1983.

61 See *Landnámabók* 1986, 42 (chs SH8), and Haraldur Matthíasson 1982, I, 77.

62 See for example Gísli Sigurðsson 2015.

simply tossed the pillars overboard as he entered the Faxaflói bay outside Reykjavík, and that they washed up on nearby Seltjarnarnes or somewhere else nearby. Indeed, Gísli Sigurðsson has informed me that Laugarnes in Reykjavík might have been a more probable site.⁶³ In short, the potential discrepancy in the extant account does not mean that the actual methods of throwing your pillars overboard or letting your livestock loose to roam should not have been used as a means of discovering where the gods wished you to live. Indeed, Tacitus wrote about the Germanic tribes finding omens in the behaviour of birds and animals,⁶⁴ and a wide range of sources ranging from Julius Caesar to Tacitus to Alcuin, Rimbert, Einar Helgason *skálaglaminn* in his poem *Vellekla*, and *Landnámabók* itself point to the fact that both the Germanic tribes and the pre-Christian Nordic people regularly made use of so-called ‘hlutkesti’ or ‘að fella blótspán’, in other words ‘lot casting’, to decide things.⁶⁵ Whether runes were involved in this is another question. Much like modern day Icelanders, the early settlers and their forefathers and mothers had a strong belief in the idea of fate—something which, in some ways, can be considered to have been their weakest link. When it comes down to it, one can suggest that throwing pillars overboard to find where you should settle is a larger example of the same practice as casting lots. It was certainly a good way of finding where the most driftwood was likely to turn up.

If this was a real practice—which to my mind, like that of Dag Strömbäck, seems to have been quite possible—what exactly might have been going on here, if it was seen as having some additional symbolic meaning? The Australian scholar Margaret Clunies Ross has made the slightly odd suggestion that the use of high seat pillars reflected the male penetration of virgin territory, forgetting the fact that in most cases here we are talking about a *pair* of pillars, just as we are regularly dealing with a *pair* of oxen.⁶⁶ Few men are so well endowed. More logical is the idea that the two pillars might have reflected male and female aspects, and that there was some relation to the Nordic foundation myth of the first humans, Ask and Embla,⁶⁷ as Verena Hoefig has indirectly suggested.⁶⁸ As has been noted above, most of the settlers making use of their high seat pillars in this way were apparently leading settlers for their area—founding fathers of some kind. Also worth considering is the way that Þórhaddr *enn gamli* (see above) brought both earth and pillars

63 Gísli Sigurðsson, personal communication 2022.

64 Tacitus 1948, 109.

65 See references and discussion in Gunnell 2010, 108–110.

66 Clunies Ross 1998, 126.

67 *Völuspá* st. 17; and Snorri Sturluson 2005, 13.

68 Hoefig 2014, 94–95.

with him, raising the possibility that in his case we have a symbolic transfer of homeland (in the shape of both trees and the soil that housed his forefathers) to a new territory.

So what exactly were the high seat pillars, and what was so special about them? As their name suggests, they were related to pillars in a hall that stood either side of the high seat (*þondvegi*) where the chieftain or head of the household sat. In an article written a number of years back,⁶⁹ I considered the potential symbolic value of these pillars in the context of certain small pieces of wood found holding up the roof beams of most halls and farmhouses in Scandinavia—objects which, up until the last century, were still called (in Icelandic) *dvergar* (dwarves) or their Nordic equivalent, a name almost certainly drawn from the mythological function of *dvergar* holding up the sky.⁷⁰ The parallels between this idea and the long-lasting idea of the roofs of church buildings being painted with stars are obvious. If we return to the symbolism of the pre-Christian Nordic hall, the high seat pillars naturally come down from the rafters and the *dvergar*, potentially representing the world tree, an image naturally echoed in the story of the oak tree said to grow inside the hall of Volsungr in *Völsunga saga*.⁷¹ As noted above, *Eyrbyggja saga* suggests that the pillars were decorated with images of supernatural figures, which the head of the house sat between, and before him was almost certainly a cauldron of some kind containing water, somewhat like a well (Urðarbrunnr / Mímisbrunnr?).⁷² In short, each hall would have contained all of the key components necessary for it to have been symbolically transformed into an image of the pre-Christian Nordic cosmos. All that was needed was for someone in the seat to don a mask and state that they hung on the windy tree for nine nights,⁷³ somewhat similar to what happens when a Christian priest states that the bread and the wine on the table in front of him/her are 'his' (or her) body and 'his' (or her) blood as part of the communion. The role of the world tree as a symbol of time is clear from *Völuspá*. The image of the wooden Ask and Embla as universal fore-parents⁷⁴ is equally powerful in such symbolic surroundings.

More solid evidence to support the idea that high seat pillars not only existed in the Old Nordic world but also had some symbolic meaning is nonetheless provided in the shape of a legal ritual implied several times in

69 Gunnell 2001.

70 Snorri Sturluson 2005, 12; see references in Gunnell 2001.

71 *Völsunga saga* 1943, 6.

72 See *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 7.

73 See *Hávamál* st. 138.

74 See *Völuspá* st. 17; Snorri Sturluson 2005, 13.

the Norwegian *Gulaping* law (extant version from ca. 1250) which covered the Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane areas of Norway that many Icelandic settlers came from. The laws in question underline that the high seat was recognised as a specific and significant seat in the house, and stress the necessity for the head of any house to be physically sitting here if they are to be summoned to court or wish to give a slave freedom.⁷⁵ Also clear is the fact that an heir is not seen as taking over a farm until he sits in this seat.⁷⁶ Particularly interesting is the statement about a potential buyer of a farm needing to gather earth from particular symbolic points of the farm, including the four corners of the hearth and ‘in’ (which probably means below) the high seat.⁷⁷ Similar ideas are found in the *Frostaping* law from ca. 1260 which covered the Trøndelag area. Here we have the clear statement that: “Every one shall have the disposal of his property, woman as well as man, as long as they are able to sit in their high seat”.⁷⁸ One can thus see very good reason for a settler to take his high seat with him to Iceland. Not only would he be taking his legal position with him, but he would also be making it very difficult for anyone at home to summon him or legally take over his land. But what exactly was it about these particular seats that bestowed so much power?

Whatever the case, on the basis of the evidence presented above, I believe that there is good reason to believe the statement made recently by Chris Callow in his very sensible *Landscapes, Tradition and Power in Medieval Iceland*⁷⁹ that ‘An awareness of the vitality of oral traditions and the probability that these informed many of the variations in written narratives should shape how we interpret them’,⁸⁰ and not least that ‘As with the *Íslendingasögur*, it seems safest to assume that *Landnámabók*’s contents were derived mostly from oral traditions, perhaps from one specifically related to the *landnám*’.⁸¹ While some of the accounts in *Landnámabók* appear to be aetiological attempts to explain a place name, or narratives that draw on earlier written accounts (such as that telling of Hrafna-Flóki’s ravens),⁸² it should never be forgotten that, as the early Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus wrote,⁸³ the Icelanders were famous for their knowledge of oral traditions (much like many other

75 *Norges gamle lov indtil 1387* 1846, 21, 86, and 33; *The Earliest Norwegian Laws* 1935, 62, 170, and 82.

76 *Norges gamle lov indtil 1387* 1846, 51; *The Earliest Norwegian Laws* 1935, 112.

77 *Norges gamle lov indtil 1387* 1846, 96; *The Earliest Norwegian Laws* 1935, 186-187.

78 *Norges gamle lov indtil 1387* 1846, 213; see also 217 and 219; *The Earliest Norwegian Laws* 1935, 338; see also 343 and 345.

79 See especially Callow 2020, 147-158.

80 *Ibid.*, 152.

81 *Ibid.*, 157-158; see also Gísli Sigurðsson 2015.

82 *Landnámabók* 1986, 36-37, 39 (chs S5/H5).

83 Saxo Grammaticus 1979, 5.

immigrant nations). There seems little question that, as Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell would have put it, totally rejecting the idea of the accounts of the high seat pillars having had a background in fact and tradition 'sounds like carelessness', not least when there is evidence of such stories having been known all over Scandinavia in later times, as has been shown above.

With regard to scholarly acceptance or rejection of oral material of this kind, it is worth remembering that there are obvious parallels here to the case of archaeological material. The fact that some materials survive in the ground over the course of centuries while others that are more organic disappear clearly does not mean that the much greater range of organic materials were never there. Similarly, the fact that the earliest written materials about dance and drama come from Greece and Rome does not mean that these arts originated there and that nothing of this kind was going on elsewhere. While the extant records about the high seat pillars in *Landnámabók* and the sagas may not be total fact, they seem to be far from being fake news. The material presented above certainly suggests that we seem to be dealing here with oral family folklore—foundation stories that appear to have been grounded in relatively widespread accepted pre-Christian Nordic custom, rather than wholly fictitious narratives with a background in written records from other countries. For me at least, this bestows *Landnámabók* with additional and everlasting value as a potential source on preserved pre-Christian worldview.

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Note: in line with Icelandic tradition, all Icelanders are listed by their Christian names rather than patronymics.

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