The search for self-awareness
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In the ongoing debate on the formation of national identities, we often find ourselves expected to take a primordialist-perennialist or modernist stand: is nationalism, with its cultivation of culture, a modern phenomenon or not? When studying historical texts that show signs of self-awareness, a distinction can be made if the benchmark used is the presence of a political agenda. Yet some texts complicate such a distinction, because they may not serve a political goal due to circumstances, but nevertheless seek to profile a country’s culture. One such example is the *Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiae* (1772-1778), a unique case because of its origin – a country in dependency – and its character: a Latin text discussing important aspects of a national identity in its onset. This substantial history of the Church on Iceland, published in Copenhagen in four volumes, was to be the last great literary achievement to be produced on Iceland in Latin, and it ended an era of productive Latin writing with a formidable bang. The main author, the Icelandic bishop Finnur Jónsson of Skálholt (1704-1789), had spent more than thirty years since 1746 to construct this *magnum opus*, that had been commissioned by the Danish Lutheran Church Council, and get it published. Writing during a period when Iceland was stricken by natural disasters and famine, and with the difficulty of procuring sources and finding time next to his daily occupations, it is extraordinary that he was able to finish the project at all. The reward would be that at last Iceland would have a Church history of its own, like its ruling authority Denmark and other states of its time. The initial aim was that the work would serve Icelandic students in their studies at the Latin schools of the Hólar and Skálholt dioceses, because at that time only limited information about the history of the church on Iceland was available in print. In other words, the work was needed, and the Danish authorities recognised the need. But the official commission was more general in its scope, which provided the author with an outstanding opportunity to profile his country outside of its borders, and that is precisely what he did. His *Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiae* went far beyond the original goal and exceeded any expectation: it received a hugely favorable reception internationally and became the standard work on Iceland for decennia

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1 A concise version of this chapter named ‘Finnur Jónsson’s Iceland: the periphery of the north at the centre of attention’ has been reviewed and accepted for publication; it is to appear in *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek* 36-2 (2018) – IASS 2016 conference proceedings.
after. But most of all, the initially humanist ideas used to profile Iceland gave way to contemporary ones that show a transition towards a modern, cultural-political debate.

The work reflects the encyclopedic nature of the literature written in its day, yet in content and thought is considered to be resting on the Icelandic historiography of the preceding two centuries. Finnur’s background of having studied in Copenhagen has had scholars place him in a Danish school of writing history that harked back directly to humanist historiography. This premise is seemingly supported by Finnur’s extensive use of *Crymogæa sive rerum Islandicarum libri III* by historiographer Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned from 1609 – a history of Iceland that was fundamentally humanist in its line of thought – for his description of the Icelandic state and its history. The general perception is that Finnur made use of what supposedly was at hand in *Crymogæa*: Bodinian thought about the Roman state projected onto the Icelandic state, as well as a glorification of the mediaeval Icelandic past. This is supposed to root Finnur in a historiographical tradition of glorifying his country’s past; his *HEI* is supposed to maintain a historical self-awareness that had taken root two centuries before and to close off an era of ‘baroque historical writing’ on Iceland, as it has been referred to by Svavarsson.

However, time had moved on since then, and thought had developed with it. *HEI* was written in the age of thought on liberty and independence, a development one would expect to be reflected in a country’s historiography. Finnur was not in a position that accommodated the display of such thinking though, because the circumstances under which he wrote were indeed not much different than they had been two hundred years earlier: Iceland still found itself in a state of

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2 Finnur Jónsson, *Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiae: ex historiis, annalibus, legibus ecclesiasticis, alisqve rerum septentrionalium monumentis congeta, et constitutionibus regum, bullis pontificum romanorum, statutis conciliiorum nationalium et synodorum provincialium, nec non archiepiscoporum et episcoporum epistolis, edictis et decretis magistratuum, multisqve privatorum litteris et instrumentis, maximam partem hactenus ineditis, illustrata*, vol. 1-4 (Copenha- gen: Gerhardus Giese Salicath, 1772-1778). The work will hereafter be referred to as *HEI*. The text editions used are the original ones, since there is no modern edition other than a facsimile of the same title (Farnborough: Gregg International Publishers, 1970).


6 *ibid.* 77.
dependency within the Danish realm. He had the example of how his colleague Arngrímur had handled similar restrictions at his disposal, which provided him with a welcome framework with which he could overcome the same barriers. Next, there was a clearly outlined commission for what he was to write: Iceland’s Church history, using authentic documents. This commission did not seem to leave much room for the author's autonomy, nor for the display of general knowledge or national self-awareness. Still, if Finnur wanted to introduce Iceland to a wider readership than just students on Iceland, as he now had the opportunity to do, an upgrade to the line of thought would be of benefit. In other words, if his own aim was to produce a text for an international market, there had to be contemporary 18th-century thinking in his work, or it would not sell. To find a method with which he could encompass modern ideas on state and liberty in his work was the biggest hurdle to overcome.

This chapter aims to investigate how Finnur dealt with the urge to display contemporary ideas in a situation that seemingly did not leave him much room to do so. I will argue that the textual criticism he applied—a novelty in Icelandic historiography that brought it to the level of his contemporaries—allowed him to take his distance from the past that he was describing. Furthermore, I aim to show that he made use of the practical approach and the historical angle provided by Arngrímur Jónsson in Crymogæa, and thereby canonised the foundations laid by Arngrímur, anchoring a notion of the self and the concept of the continuation of Iceland’s past into the present that were developed two centuries before. More importantly, he went on to elaborate on them, for in the course of writing, he provided a significant and adequate update to the portrayal of Iceland’s history by distancing himself from Arngrímur’s ideas on the Icelandic state. It is my opinion that a positive change in foreign perceptions of Iceland, as well as the emerging of a general sense of national awareness within the Danish empire—both effected by the academic climate in the Danish realm—enabled Finnur to take his distance and profile Iceland in a new way, one that was no longer apologetic. I will propose that the line of thought in HEI is in line with ideas circulating in the Danish realm and other parts of Europe at that time, and is not humanist or the culmination of a trend supposedly set by Arngrímur, as has been previously assumed. My aim is to show that HEI displays a conscious, well-wrought self-awareness previously undetected which ranks Finnur as a proto-nationalist who completely

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7 See the images on p. 163-164. This letter of commission from the Council, dated June 11th, 1746, preserved at Landsbókasafn, numbered 27a fol., and at the Danish Rigsarkivet in the archives of the Generalkirkveispektionskollegiet, section kopibøger for the years 1745-50 (dated June 16th, 1746), 270-271: ‘...det derfor er at ønske, at en udforlig Íßlandsk Kirke-Historia grundet paa authentique Documenter maan komme for lyset.’

reinterpreted the Icelandic past. Finally, with this study I hope to shed light on the stage in which Icelandic self-awareness found itself during the 18th century, and to establish a review of ideas on Finnur’s work in modern Icelandic academia – that the perceived glorification of the Icelandic past in Crymogæa is continued in HEI – that will help to contribute to a more comprehensive appreciation of HEI and Finnur’s great achievement.

THE INCREDIBLE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ON ICELAND

The fact that an extensive work such as HEI could see the light of day is not obvious, for in the 1700s life on Iceland was difficult. A chain of natural disasters, livestock disease and hardship befell the country; consequently, living circumstances and general education were generally at a low and the population fluctuated heavily.9 Such was the situation when the Icelandic school master Jón Þorkelsson (1697-1759) pleaded with the Danish Church Council for the improvement of education on Iceland. His plea was successful: it resulted in the Council sending him to Iceland in 1741 together with the Danish bishop Ludvig Harboe (1709-1783), who was to act as a visitor in order to investigate the state of the Church on Iceland, to introduce catechism and regulate the rite of confirmation. Harboe did a great deal more than that and saw to it that numerous reforms were carried out to improve living conditions and to educate the population both generally and as Christians.10

One of the gaps in learning materials that Harboe as a Church official identified was a written history of the Church on Iceland. Up until then, the only available text that contained some information about the history of the Church in Iceland was Arngrímur Jónsson’s Crymogæa, as did other works by the same author.11 The first part of the history of the Church in Denmark, the Annales Ecclesiæ Danicæ by Erik Ludvigsen Pontoppidan, had just been published, and in line with this it seemed advisable that a similar work be used at the Latin schools on Iceland. So as to expedite matters, Harboe wrote a letter to the Church Council in 1746, in which he made mention of this fact and stressed the need for the writing of a proper history of Iceland’s church to be used by students at the aforementioned schools – and others, if it so came to pass.12 He also informed the

9 The population fluctuated between a high of 50,358 in 1703 and a low of 39,190 in 1787. All numbers can be found at http://www.statice.is/ (accessed January 5th, 2018).
11 Letter from Harboe to the Church Council, dated June 7th, 1746, preserved at Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands in the archives of the Church Council, box 5 (hereafter ÞÍ KI-V): ’Íslandi man hidintil har havet Mangel paa en Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiae, foruden hvis af Arngrimi Jone Crymogæa og andre hans skrifter...’
12 ibid.: ‘...hist og her hvorvel ufuldstændig kand colligeres, og det synes fornøden, at et Compendium i denne materieudi skolerne i Ísland maatte introducere, foruden at og anderstædes Nytte deraf kunde forventes.’

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Council that he had found two candidates who might take on the assignment: the brothers Finnur and Vigfús Jónsson, both clergymen. They had already promised him to take on the task, he added. He asked the Council to send these men a formal invitation, which he felt would encourage them even more to proceed, and added that in his opinion the work be written in Icelandic or Latin and on completion be sent to the Council 'for further inspection'.

Harboe had chosen the Jónsson brothers purposefully: for their clerical profession and academic background, for their acquaintance with historiography through their father’s works, and last but not least for the fact that they, as he wrote to the Church Council, had the best collection of sources – native, that is – at their disposal to take on this task, a prerequisite for contemporary historiography of any consequence. The Council lost no time in responding and four days later it sent out the requested invitation to the brothers, in which they were encouraged to write the Church’ history using authentic documents, to the country’s greater glory and for the public good. The Council added that the brothers were free to choose in which language – Latin, Danish or Icelandic – they would compose the work; in the case of Icelandic, the Council would see to having it translated. Finally, as Harboe had suggested, the Council requested that any part of the work that was completed be sent to them for revision and approval every year, to commence the following year.

The Jónsson brothers indeed were a good choice of author: theirs father, archdeacon Jón Halldórsson, was a self-professed historian who had produced several annals of churches and monasteries as well as biographies of bishops and other clergymen. These circumstances made for an environment in which they became acquainted with historiography, their father’s writings were to provide him with basic information for the construction of his church history. Furthermore, Finnur had studied theology in Copenhagen from 1725 until 1729, where he met and was influenced by scholars such as the royal historiographer Hans Gram, bishop and theologian Erik Ludvigsen Pontoppidan, and the Icelandic antiquarian

13 ibid. ‘...de ville skrive denne historiam Ecclesiasticam i det Íslandske eller latinske Sprog, dog maatte de, naar de havde fuldfærdiges dette Arbeide, sende somme til nogle Ettersyn til det høylærde General-Kirke-Inspections-Collegium.’
14 ibid.: ‘at tvende brøder og Provster udi Skalholts Stift namlig Hr. Finnur Jonssen (...) og Hr. Wigfus Jonssen (...) haar de beste collectanea i dette studio i hænderne, saa de frem for andre ere i Stand til derudi noget at præstere.’ The documents mentioned pertain to copies of sagas from the collection of Árni Magnússon, as well as manuscripts from the library of their father; see Kristjánsson, Bókabytting, 116 and 118.
15 Letter from the Council mentioned in note 7: ‘Saa kand vi ikke forbigaaan, Eders Velærværdigheder hermed at anmode, og kærligen at formane, det De endeligen ville vedblive deres gode forsæt i at forfatte til landets Berømmelse og Publici Nytte en Ísklandsk Kirke-Historia...’
Árni Magnússon. Through them, he was introduced to contemporary historiography and with the sources that were available. It was Pontoppidan’s recent history of the Church in Denmark, the *Annales Ecclesiae Danicæ Diplomatici* of 1742-1751, that would serve as the model for Finnur’s *HEI*. It provided a suitable frame of reference for contemporary readers – both Icelandic and foreign, considering the language chosen – to learn about the history of the Church on Iceland and that of the state.

Both brothers responded that they would rise to the occasion, but also indicated that they were but moderately enthusiastic about the prospect. The main reason for their hesitation lay in the availability of additional sources that they considered necessary, or rather lack thereof, a problem that would turn out to be one that, based on their correspondence with the Council, would last throughout the duration of writing *HEI*. Furthermore, they foresaw a clash between fulfilling their daily duties and embarking on such a project. Nevertheless, they began writing, and the first fruits of their endeavours were sent to the Council in the autumn of 1747. What would follow were more than twenty years of labour, interrupted by illness or indisposition otherwise, the death of Finnur’s wife, the struggle to obtain sources, and another struggle to procure publication. During the process, Vigfús Jónsson would disappear from the picture altogether, the Icelandic royal advisor Jón Eiríksson would be contracted by the Council as a proofreader, and Finnur’s sons Hannes and Steindór would be employed to further the project in various practical ways, such as providing additions, translating

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19 Letter from Vigfús Jónsson to the Council, dated September 19th, 1746 (þÍ KI-V): ‘…at jeg vilde sammenskrive Historiam Ecclesiasticam Islandiae (…) hvor til jeg finder mig alt for ringe. (…) Original Documenter har jeg ingen, uden Copier.’ Letter from Finnur Jónsson to the Council, dated September 1st, 1747 (þÍ KI-V): ‘…har jeg ikke alleeniste at forstaar Provste embede udi Borgefiords Syßel, man og saa har været bebyrdet med Officialis Affairer udi Skalholts Stift.’
20 It does not become clear what kind of sources Finnur had difficulty in obtaining. Many sources – letters, agreements, legal texts – supporting the narrative are reproduced integrally, and it seems likely that these were the ones he was referring to, not sources that were more readily available to him such as those that had appeared in print or had been copied recently (e.g. kings’ and bishops’ sagas, *Sturlungasaga*, Comestor’s *Historia scholastica*, and contemporary historiographies).
21 Finnur sent a first draft of Periodus I with his letter of September 1st, 1747, Vigfús sent in his first version later that month.
sources into Latin, editing, and supervising the printing process. Finally, despite all setbacks, the first of the four volumes appeared in 1772 and the last in 1778.

FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

Finnur had accomplished a trajectory resulting in a text the extent of which no other Icelandic author of the 18th century could boast: a comprehensive Church historiography of Iceland in Latin up until the present day. He did not have to re-invent the wheel completely though: the road that lay before him had been paved previously by the aforementioned Arngrímur Jónsson, with the publication of his two major works Brevis Commentarius de Islandia (1593) and Crymogæa: the former an apologetic work, the latter a historiography. With Crymogæa, Arngrímur had introduced humanist historiography to Iceland single-handedly, and in doing so he had found a means to place Iceland and its history on the map for an international audience in ways no one could refute. With the aid of Jean Bodin’s Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem (1566) and Bodin’s thoughts on states therein, Arngrímur developed a framework within which he could fit the Icelandic state that was recognisable and acceptable to a foreign audience. He invented a construction for the description of Iceland’s past continuing into the present: an aristocracy turned into a monarchy, first Norwegian from 1262 until 1379 and then Danish. By Bodin’s standards, both kinds of government were virtuous, and by applying them to Iceland Arngrímur could present his country’s past and present in a legitimate, positive way. It was a construction that provided room for statements that sang Iceland’s praises, but were safe to make within the context of the Danish realm: for instance, he could call the era of aristocracy, when Iceland was independent, ‘praiseworthy’, which in the context of Bodin’s ideas was self-evident: no one would take offense to it.

Arngrímur then went on to profile his country by opposing one of Bodin’s three thoughts on changes in languages, which according to him did not apply to Iceland. He put the focus on the purity of Iceland’s language and profiled it as a modern classic, thus ranking it higher than the other Scandinavian languages, and even above Latin – a statement that the intended learned Danish audience could hardly oppose with the arguments provided by Arngrímur. The result was a narrative with a general focus on the past’s continuation into the present that was

22 Without disregarding the input of these men, I will continue to refer to the author of HEI as Finnur Jónsson, since he was the main author and chief editor.
24 ibid. 117-118.
25 ibid. 119.
26 ibid. 120.
accepted soon after both by a Danish audience and elsewhere and that later made its way into Icelandic historiography, notably in HEI.

Arngrímur Jónsson achieved what he had set out to do and in doing so, he provided future Icelandic authors with a basis for writing about their country’s history, as well as with safe tools for the display of self-awareness in their writings. No less important is the fact that his works also showed them the way to overcome the obstacle of passing censorship by taking practical precautions. The dedication of both Brevis Commentarius and Crymogæa to the Danish king, the choice of an accepted genre for both, and the choice of Latin as the language of the learned would all have contributed to the works’ approval by the Danish censors. It had worked at least twice for him, since both texts had passed censorship, so the same path was bound to assist those who came after him.

Finnur followed Arngrímur’s example in all respects: the dedication of the work, the choice of language and the choice of genre. The question is whether he did so consciously on all accounts. In the case of Crymogæa, Arngrímur is likely to have taken care of these matters very purposefully to help procure publication, since he had written it without the king’s commission, using sources meant to be used otherwise. Finnur, on the other hand, had been commissioned by the Church Council, so it would seem logical that he would go through the motions as far as the dedication of the work went. Books one and two are consequently dedicated to the king, Christian VII. The genre had already been decided by the Church Council, so that would not be any point of contention in the passing of censorship. And as to his choice of language, the Council had been very clear that it was up to him to decide which one to use, so any of the three languages mentioned would be acceptable.

Still, the choice of Latin is an interesting one. It would serve the students at the Latin schools, as had been Harboe’s intention, but it would not benefit many other Icelanders. There were relatively few who had had an education that gave them command of Latin to start with, and as Finnur himself indicated by the end of the process, there would be but few scholars on Iceland who would be able or willing to make this purchase, since everyone on Iceland was struggling financially at that time. Since the Council had taken a much more general and comprehensive approach to the work’s future use than Harboe by determining it to be written for ‘the country’s greater glory and the public good’, Finnur had basically been handed a carte blanche to profile Iceland outside its borders – at least within the greater Danish realm –, one which he is bound to have interpreted literally. On the one hand he was restricted by the commission to produce a Church

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27 The king had in fact commissioned Arngrímur to hire and translate Icelandic manuscripts for the use of Danish historiographers to help them; ibid. 113.
28 The dedication is ‘domino Christiano septimo’ and ‘principi haereditario’ respectively. Book three has no dedication, and book four is dedicated to Ludvig Harboe, ‘a patron, who is to be held in the highest regard by his friend’ (‘fautori & amico suo maxime colendo’).
29 Kristjánsson, Bókabylting, 134.
history, but on the other hand the Council’s phrasing of it left him with unforeseen opportunities. If his books were going to reach a wider audience than just students and remain within the commission’s outline, Latin was the logical choice: in the 18th century Latin was the vehicle for conveying information about Iceland outside the country’s boundaries.\(^{30}\) Latin would give the book the status that would appeal to an international audience that obviously was to be learned, and Finnur accounted for his choice, with the addition that he would use words that were new and ‘less Latin’ where necessary to prevent the loss of meaning, since he would rather fit Roman garb on an Icelandic body than the other way round.\(^{31}\)

After deciding on the language, he chose to model *HEI* on Pontoppidan’s recent history of the Church in Denmark, the *Annales Ecclesiæ Danicæ*. This was an excellent choice, because it provided an appropriate and acknowledged framework and therefore an easy, safe and familiar way both to comply with the Council’s wishes and to reach the intended wider audience.

First of all, the set-up was suitable. Pontoppidan’s *Annales* consisted of the following elements: an introduction to the arrival of Christendom in the North, followed by a general description of the state and its government per century, with a *historia personalis* of kings and bishops and an annalistic description of events within the Church during that time. Finnur used a similar methodological construction for *HEI*: he started off with a *periodus* containing a description of Iceland in the era following its settlement and of early Christians, missionaries and Iceland’s christianisation. These were followed by *periodi* that all started with a general description of events under worldly reign, followed by the state of Church and religion, and the bishops of the Skálholt and Hólar dioceses and their deeds in these periods. He understandably placed the most important event in the Church’s history – the Reformation – at the centre of the work, at the beginning of book three. This set-up constituted a mould in which Finnur could start each period with the description of the country’s – to a wider, foreign audience probably more interesting – general state history.

Secondly, it was a mould that was recognisable, because it was contemporary in its encyclopaedic structure. Pontoppidan had made use of a construction that provided a wide range of information in an organised and systematic manner for present and future use and reference, resembling contemporary foreign writings that presented information in a similar systematic manner. To reach a foreign audience, this modern approach would serve very well.

And thirdly, in line with the former, Finnur adopted a modern textual criticism towards his sources, as displayed by Pontoppidan, that had been absent

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\(^{31}\) *HEI IV* (1778), præfatio ii-iii: ‘satius qvippe ducens vestem Romanam corpori Islandico, qvam corpus vestibus, aptari.’
in humanist historiography. Instead of merely citing the sources that he had used, Pontoppidan laid them out, indicating whether or not they were integral reproductions and explaining why he had used them, and presented the readership with his own conclusions and arguments. Having been taught the craft of textual criticism by Gram, Finnur followed suit: in the preface of book four, he accounted for the set-up of HEI, the sources used and his treatment of those sources, and thanked his coworkers. In the main text this approach is reflected by the display of a critical appreciation of the information provided by his sources, and in the footnotes by supplementing quotes with critical information. For instance, instead of merely adopting the positive term ‘aristocracy’ to designate the Icelandic state until approximately 1220 AD, as Arngrímur Jónsson had done, Finnur added that it could also be something close to mix of aristocracy and oligarchy, hence not necessarily something positive. Another example of Finnur’s critical approach to his sources can be seen in a comment he made about Arngrímur’s credulity in believing the fictitious Engravilandia to be Iceland. Last but not least, he also took a critical distance to the events he described, such as the way the Church reformers had carried out the Reformation on Iceland. As Sigurðsson has pointed out, his interpretation of history was autonomous, and he used the criterion of progress. His textual criticism enabled him to voice his own ideas about events, resulting in a modern, hermeneutic kind of historiography that made it easy to create a distance between the past and the present, for which he accounted.

Another clue as to how Finnur came up with a text that would hit home with his audience, not to mention the censors, lies in the prominent use of both Pontoppidan’s, Harboe’s and Arngrímur’s works as source material, as well as the additional use of works by various other, more or less contemporary historiographers and theologians within the Danish realm. Their texts had passed

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32 Among those he thanks are Ludvig Harboe, Jón Eiríksson and his son Hannes; HEI IV, præfatio xx-xxii.
33 HEI I (1772), 101: ‘Primitivus reipublicæ Islandiæ status (…) aut fuit aristocraticus, aud ad eum proxime accedens, ex oligarchico & aristocratico mixtus.’
34 HEI IV, 122: ‘Arngrimi autem, viri doctissimi & subacti judicii credulitatem non satis mirari possum.’
35 HEI III (1775), 126: ‘Alterum autem impedimentum, quod nostratibus antiquæ Religionis amorem abjicere disssavit (…) fuit certe non optima, imo tantum non perversa, reformandi methodus.’
37 HEI IV, præfatio v: ‘De omnibus autem & singulis tam ego meam passim in historia ecclesiastica, quam alii suas, sententias dudum exposuerunt, unde facile judicari poterit, quid pretii cuilibet statui debet.’
38 Among these are Jón Árnason (Arnesen), I, 102; Thomas Bartholin (Bartholinus), I, 212; Absalon Beyer, I, 363; Peder Classon Friis (Petrus Undalinus), I, 371; Hans Gram, IV, 135; Ludvig Holberg, I, 357 & 400; Arild Huitfeldt (Hvitfeldius) ibid. and IV, 170; Jakob Langebek (Langebekius) IV, 130; Gerhard Schøning, I, 363 & 569, IV 140; Peter Frederik Suhm, IV, 140; and Þormóður Torfason (Torfæus), I, 378.
censorship and had been accepted internationally: the intended readership – both at the Latin schools and abroad – would have been acquainted with them. Finnur used Pontoppidan’s work as his primary point of reference for the history of the Church in the Danish realm, Harboe’s for the Reformation on Iceland, and Arngrímur’s for Iceland’s social-political history. Incorporating a state history into a Church history may not seem obvious, but within the context of the Danish realm, whose king was also the head of the State Church, it was. Pontoppidan explains his description of Church and State in his Church history by stating that the State is that ‘on which the outward condition of the Church depends.’\footnote{Pontoppidan, Annales I, 497: ‘Der Zustand im weltlichen Regiment, von dem der äussern Kirchen-Zustand gemeiniglich abhanget...’} Finnur accounts for his depiction of both in the introduction of book four, where he states that it was his intention to display the fruits of Church and State so as to show God’s goodness, wisdom, omnipotence and providence.\footnote{HEI IV, præfatio iv: ‘Principale autem mihi institutum fuit omnia ita delineare, ut omnium oculis pateret, quales fructus ecclesia & Respublica ex singulis retulerint, utqve ineffabilis juxta ac inæstimabilis Die (...) benignitas (...) imperscruabilis vero sapientia, omnipotentia, & providentia (...) agnosci, & (...) celebrari possent.’} Where Finnur refers to Pontoppidan, it mainly concerns subjects or events that pertained to this history of the Church both in Denmark and on Iceland, about which Pontoppidan had already written and which therefore did not need extensive attention by Finnur.\footnote{E.g. HEI I, 382: ‘Hæc constitutio habetur Pontoppid. Annal. Eccles. Danic. Tom. 1. pag. 728 ad annum 1267’; HEI III, 343: ‘Vid. Pontoppidani Annal. Eccles. Danic. Tom. 2. Pag. 744.’} In the case of Arngrímur, Finnur referred to his writings for details about the Icelandic state that he did not need to reiterate.\footnote{E.g. HEI I, 101-102: ‘De forma Reipublicæ Islandicæ ex professo scripsit nostrarium doctissimus ARNGRIMUS JONÆ Crymogææ Lib. I. cap. 7-8-9’; HEI I, 375: ‘De Aristocratia Islandorum agit ARNGRIMUS Crymog. lib. I. cap. 7. 8. 9. Sed de mutatione Reipubl. lib. 3. unde qvædam horum mutuati sumus.’}

With all of these choices, Finnur had created a situation for profiling his country internationally in a manner that was keeping up with contemporary historiography. While nothing stood in the way of his getting started, there was only one important matter left to be dealt with: how was he going to sell his story – that of the history of Iceland’s Church, but more so of Iceland as a state – outside of Iceland? He did not have to look around for long: the starting point for his discussion of the origin of and developments within the Icelandic state had to be Crymogææ, not only because it was the most comprehensive historiographic account available, but among the sources available to him also pretty much the only one.\footnote{Torfason’s Historia Rerum Norvagicarum also contained information about Iceland, which Finnur used elsewhere, but not in his discussion of the Icelandic state.} Nevertheless, it was more than suitable, for its model of the Icelandic state offered an excellent and safe basis to work on and from. The ideas on this subject that Arngrímur had developed in Crymogææ had been accepted internationally immediately after its publication, not only in Denmark but also by a
wider international audience, and they continued to be used as a point of reference for discussing Iceland right up to Finnur’s day. \textsuperscript{44} Finnur introduced Arngrímur as nostratium doctissimus, ‘the most learned of our fellow countrymen’, in writing about the Icelandic state, thus canonising a legacy commonly accepted and still acceptable.

The notion of continuity that Arngrímur had introduced in the description of Iceland’s past offered a starting point unparalleled to any other Icelandic source available. After all, there was no better or safer foundation for presenting a positive and self-conscious picture of the present day than to use one equally positive that was firmly secured in the past and that had been accepted. The way in which Arngrímur had applied Bodin’s ideas about what constitutes a good type of government to the political structures that Iceland had known led the readership to the conclusion that from a 16\textsuperscript{th}-century perspective, Iceland – save for a short period of political instability caused by oligarchia in between – had always been favoured with good governance, first with aristocratia and later on with monarchia.\textsuperscript{45} The two-state construction that resulted from this reasoning – a picture of Iceland’s political past consisting of two equal pillars – painted a unilaterally positive image of the country that defied contradiction: the past under the former had been good, and the present under the latter was the best present that ever was.\textsuperscript{46} The picture presented, therefore, does not represent the glorification of a past of freedom that has been projected onto the text by modern scholars.\textsuperscript{47}

It is no surprise that Finnur would make use of this legacy to have a solid and safe backdrop for the description of the history of the Icelandic state, and he actually says so in book one.\textsuperscript{48} It offered a welcome frame of reference for the information he was to provide on state-related events, especially on the internal strife on Iceland between 1220 and 1262-1264 that led to the transition into monarchy. What is new, and understandable from a theologian’s point of view, is that he introduces the cause of this transition first and foremost as acts of fate or rather as acts of grace and disposition by God himself, who is the only one to

\textsuperscript{44} Among those indebted to Arngrímur are Ole Worm, Stephanus Johannis Stephanius and Rasmus Christian Rask; see Chapter 2 and Middel, ‘Arngrímur Jónsson’, 124.
\textsuperscript{45} Benediktsson, \textit{Opera} vol. 2, 164-165: ‘Etenim sub ipsum mutandæ Reipub. tempus laudabilis illa Islandiæ Aristocratia in pessimam Oligarchiam transformari cæpit [sic]. (...) Nec enim alia visa est incolis pacandæ Reipub. expeditior, nec magis tuta ratio, quam si tam Magnates quam plebs unius Regis imperio coercerentur.’ According to Bodin, the third type of virtuous governance is \textit{democratia}.
\textsuperscript{46} For the notion of the best political present that ever was, see Martin Gosman, ‘The notion of time in 16\textsuperscript{th}-century French royal entries’, in Martin Gosman \textit{et al.} (eds.), \textit{The growth of authority in the mediaeval west}, Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1999, 39-61.
\textsuperscript{47} See Chapter 2 and Middel, ‘Arngrímur Jónsson’, 121.
\textsuperscript{48} See note 42.
change times and governments.\textsuperscript{49} The first of three further direct causes echoes what Arngrimur had written: the old aristocracy had degenerated into oligarchy, until the Icelanders realised that there was no better way out of the situation than to submit to one ruler: a monarch.\textsuperscript{50} The wording is stronger than Arngrimur’s in that Finnur refers to the era of political instability as one that even went from \textit{oligarchia} to \textit{tyrannis} and \textit{anarchia}, but the gist is the same. Secondly, he states that the humanity of the kings with whom they were dealing – their entreaties, persuasion and promises – had satisfied and softened the minds of the Icelanders.\textsuperscript{51} Finally, Finnur explains that the king, at the instigation of a visiting cardinal, had prompted the bishops on Iceland to persuade the Icelanders to submit to him, for the fact that they were subjects to no king was an undesirable and improper – \textit{impium} – situation.\textsuperscript{52} It was obvious that the aid of God’s men was needed to remedy such an unnatural situation, and the king also realized that convincing the Icelanders to become his tributaries was something he was not going to achieve without the aid of bishops on Iceland anyway, Finnur stressed.\textsuperscript{53} Taking these three causes into account, the decision to submit and to become subjects to kings as foster and guardians of the Church had not seemed disadvantageous to the Icelanders.

Another part of Arngrimur’s legacy that provided Finnur with a tool to profile his country was the fact that Arngrimur had classified Icelandic as a modern classic by stating, among other things, that this could be seen in old manuscripts.\textsuperscript{54} The notion of Icelandic as a classical language having been commonly accepted, Finnur used these mediaeval writings to prove another point: he wrote that no one could deny that hardly any other \textit{natio} – not even the most cultivated – had produced as many authors in as many disciplines of knowledge and science in an

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{HEI}, I, 374: ‘\textit{Causæ autem mutationis regiminis & status reipublicæ, præter rerum fata, seu verius, ipsius Dei beneplacitum et dispensationem, qvi solus tempora mutat & imperia transfert...}'

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{HEI}, I, 103: ‘Tandem vero incolis non alia visa est pacandæ reipublicæ expeditior ratio, qvam si universi uniis imperio coërcerentur [sic]; \textit{HEI}, I, 374: ‘\textit{Antiqvæ Aristocratææ, primo in Oligarchiam, tandem vero in Tyrannidem & Anarchiæ qvandam speciem, degeneratio (...) cui malo medendo non alia visa est expeditior ratio, qvam si omnes uniis Regis imperio coërcerentur.' This cyclical nature of changes in constitution was something that Arngrimur had adopted from Bodin, who in turn had adopted and adapted it from Polybius; see Alexander Demandt, \textit{Der Idealstaat. Die politischen Theorien der Antike}, Köln: Böhlau, 1993, 209-212; Donald R. Kelley, \textit{The beginning of ideology. Consciousness and society in the French Reformation}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 64.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{ibid.}: ‘\textit{Regum Norvegiæ in nostratæ humanitas, preces, persuasiones & speciosissima promissio, qvibus ambitios qvorundam animos impleverunt & demulserunt.'

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{ibid.}: ‘...\textit{...inconveniens et impium esse, Islandos præter reliquarum gentium morem nullius Regis imperio subjectos (...) qvod plebi Islandicæ inculcare & persuadere, Episcopi, ad id a Rege, Cardinalis instinctu subornati, haud qvaqvam omiserunt.'

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{HEI}, I, 363: ‘Sed Rex Norvegiæ, in id jam omnes nervos intendens, ut Islandos sibi tributarios faceret, nihilqve se sine Episcoporum auxilio perficere possens...'; \textit{HEI}, I, 379: ‘...\textit{nihil se sine Episcoporum auxilio perficere posset...}'

\textsuperscript{54} Benediktsson, \textit{Opera} vol. 2, 30: ‘...\textit{in libris manuscriptis, veteris puritatis et elegantiae reHORTISSIMIS.'
era considered dark, judging by Iceland’s written legacy.\textsuperscript{55} Furthermore, education and literature had experienced the same rise and fall in four stages on Iceland as in other countries, which in the case of Iceland ran from 874 until the Reformation.\textsuperscript{56} Finnur also made clear that Iceland could never reach its peak in any way until after that event; thus sciences and scholarship were to be restored leading up to the present day.\textsuperscript{57} Using old tools for new ends, Finnur profiled Iceland as a country of science and scholarship before modern times, and a suitable distance to the past had been maintained – more manoeuvres that would be recognisable to a contemporary audience focused on science.

Finnur, it seems, had provided minor, yet adequate updates to the information taken from Arngrímur that suited a Church history, and he had characterised Iceland as a place of learning that to an 18\textsuperscript{th}-century audience would appear one of the highest standards in its day, with the manuscripts to prove it. The political state in the so-called Sturlungaöld had changed by divine decree, providence if you will, and a combination of royal diplomacy and ecclesiastical authority had expedited the process in an acceptable manner. It displayed the connection between the Lutheran Church and the State in Finnur’s time and setting, although the narrative concerned the days of Catholicism, and it gave the outcome of the events during that era a teleological meaning, one where state and Church went hand in hand.\textsuperscript{58} The ensuing account of what happened after the transition to a monarchical state featured ups such as the Reformation, with its downside being the way in which the reformation was brought about, and downs such as the plague and the neglect of Iceland (and other remote parts of the realm) by the otherwise praiseworthy kings when wrapped up in wars and other affairs.\textsuperscript{59} Finnur stated facts, both positive and negative, while voicing his own opinion and

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{HEI} I, 216: ‘Ex his (…) jam manifestum est, licet præsens ætas a qvibusdam (…) obscura vocetur, Islandis tamen haud qvaqvm talem fuisset, sed apud eos literarum lucem omni spe & probabilitate clarius splendisse, qvod nemo facile negabit, qvi tantam Auctorum multitudinem, tantamqve scriptorum (…) diversitatem observare velit, quantam vix ulla alia, & ne cultissima qvidem, natio producere potest; idqve non in unico tantum, sed vario eruditionis & scientiarum genere.’

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{HEI} III, 163-164: ‘Rei scholasticae & literarum statum ad qvamvis superiorum Perjodorum, pro ratione instituti, ita tetigimus, ut inde patere possit, qvalia eorum qvovis temporis intervallo fuerint fata, qvae rite considerata non inepte cum hominis ætate comparari possunt…’

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{HEI} I, 218: ‘Et ut verbo dicam: Si religio a Papismi fermento pura & vita inculpata adfluisset, vix unqvm melior, clarior, & doctor Islandia fuisset.’

\textsuperscript{58} It seems to echo a letter of Paul to the Romans (Romans 13:1), ‘Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.’

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{HEI} III, 121: ‘Methodus qvam in reformanda Ecclesia Missi & vicarii Regii adhibuerunt, pro diversos eorum statu diversa fuit (…) pleraqve contra optima & pietissimi Regis intentionem miscuere; \textit{HEI} II (1774), 353: ‘… omnia hoc tempore degenerasse, et quasi interitum minari cœpisse, invenias; Monarchiæ etenim Dano Norvegicæ multis qvidem nominibus laudabiles fuere Reges, bellis tamen plerumqve & aliis negotiis impliciti, longe dissitarum provinciarum, ut Islandiae, parvam vel nullam curam habuerunt…’
keeping his distance from the past by working towards the uniqueness of his own time. From this point of view, he was formally writing along the lines of contemporary historiography indeed, but the ideas conveyed in it seemed outdated. Old wine in 18th-century bottles, which would do for a Church history, but would it do for a wider learned audience?

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Indeed not, Finnur must have realised as the main work progressed and drew to an end. He had books one through three followed by book four, in which he presented a history of Icelandic monasteries, as well as a list of addenda and corrigenda to the first three books in which he reviewed what he had written before. In discussing the passage in book one about the end of the Sturlungaöld, Finnur repeated his earlier statement that the Icelanders were not brought to submit to royal authority by force or threats, but by persuasion, pleas and promises, as well as by the fact that the old aristocracy had started to topple. He used the same wording to describe the change of State as in book one, and continued by saying that the Icelanders had not regretted the way the monarchy had looked out for their interests since. He then added that most Reipublicæ ended this way, naming Sparta, Athens and Rome: despite their excellent state structures and most refined standard of learning they were subjected to royal authority eventually. Who, then, would be surprised by the fact that the Icelandic Respublica in the end would also be reduced to this state, Finnur asked his readers. According to him, one should wonder much more about the fact that in spite of internal conflict and strife it was able to maintain itself and secure freedom in the preceding four decades!

What is happening here? An interesting shift is taking place. To Bodin, and Arngrímur along with him, res publica was a neutral term describing different kinds of political structures under sovereign rule: aristocratia, democratia and monarchia. Yet according to Finnur, that which Arngrímur considered to be a negative type of governance – and therefore not a res publica – in an era of political instability had actually been one to which he himself refers as a res publica, under which the Icelanders managed to maintain the freedom which was lost with the

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60 See note 51; HEI IV, 140: 'Constat ita qve Islandos nec vi aut minis, sed partim persuasionibus, precibus & mollissimis promissionibus, partim Reipublicæ infirmitatibus & quasi occulto conversionis rerum fato, ad deditionem adactos esse…'

61 See note 50; ibid.: 'Etenim sub ipsum mutationis Reipublicæ tempus, antiqua Aristocratia in Oligarchiam, imo tantam Anarchiam mutari cepit, ut alia non visa sit incolis expeditior ratio, qvam si universi uniœs Regis imperio coërcerentur; sane eos spes non nefellit, nam hactenus per qvingentos, & qvod excedit, annos imperium Monarchicum nostris rebus haud penitendum sensimus…'

62 ibid.: '… qvis Rempubl. Islandicam ad has incitas tandem redactam fuisse mirabitur? Sane qvod per quadringlentos fere annos tot intestinis seditioibus & externis insidiis vexata, stare & libertatem tueri potuerit, multo magis mirandum est.'
transition into monarchy. In Finnur’s words, this *res publica* is a particular type of state, clearly distinguished from *imperium monarchicum*, and more importantly, the former has received a positive connotation in light of the fact that it was reduced to the latter. The notion of a *res publica* has become that of one particular social-political structure that occurred in the past and that is connected with the notion of freedom, which constitutes an essential part of it – Finnur even calls it a *libera respublica* explicitly. He opened the chapter by saying that love of freedom was part of the Icelanders’ *nativus character* and that it had brought them to Iceland in the 9th century in the first place, when they wanted to escape the rule of king Haraldur hárfagri in Norway. No wonder, then, that they should create a free state.

He continued by saying that the Icelanders had not regretted their choice to become part of a monarchy, and quoted Lucan’s *Pharsalia* stating that peace had returned along with a ruler. A word to the wise? Lucan was referring to the fact that anyone praying to the gods for an end to a civil war – in his poem the one between Caesar and Pompey that preceded the principate of Augustus – must realise that ‘such is the kind of peace that comes with a ruler’, to indicate that the introduction of imperial rule may have brought peace, but it had meant the end of *libertas*. With his use of *ista pax* in chiasm to *hic furor* (i.e. the madness of the civil war), Lucan left it to the reader to decide the relative merits of either. Citing Lucan in this context could not have been accidental: it is the prelude that allowed Finnur to launch a new take on Iceland’s political past, a take that was much more elaborate and explicit than anything written in the previous three books of *HEI* and that was different from Arngrímur’s viewpoint, because it actually does open the door for elevating the past over the present. The parallels with other nations in history that suffered a similar fate were drawn first to provide a solid foundation. Finnur’s normative revaluation of the term *res publica* used in contrast to *imperium monarchicum* consequently enabled him to paint a picture of an

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63 *HEI* IV, 130-131: ‘Nos ad hujus officii vim, qvam habuit sub statu liberæ Reipubl. respectum habentes...’

64 *HEI* IV, 125-126: ‘...tali hominum genere prognati, qvod avitæ libertati & qvicqvid audendi licentiae, nil vero invite pati adsuetum, monarchicum & absolutum, qvod instituit Haraldus Pulchricomus.’

65 *HEI* IV, 140: ‘Cum Domino pax ista venit.’ This is a direct quote of Lucan’s *Pharsalia* 1.670.

idealised, imaginary political past of Iceland as a land of the free, as opposed to a political present that is the lesser, though definitely the more preferable, of two evils: dependency in peace versus a situation of internal strife.

The final blow had been dealt to Arngrímur’s well-balanced two-state construction, where equal value was attached to both aristocracia and monarchia: it had to make room for a new construction that favoured a political past, with the aid of ideas about state and liberty that marked a development since the days of Bodin and that seemed more in accordance with ideas of contemporary authors such as Montesquieu, as will be discussed later on, with a different value to the concept of res publica and in favour of aristocracy over monarchy. Iceland had been given a new rationale that conformed to modern standards: Finnur was not ‘unwittingly Bodinian’, as Svavarsson concludes, he was not Bodinian at all. He had come a long way though, in the nearly thirty years it took him to finish HEI. Earlier passages that deal with respublica and libertas show the starting point of the grand finale in book four, but there is not yet a link between the two, nor have they reached their final form. The term respublica occurs but once before to denote the type of state on Iceland in the age of aristocracy, and this is only in a footnote to the passage in book one that leans on Arngrímur in describing the changes between 1220 and 1264. The connotation with libertas is absent, but at the beginning of the same chapter – again, in a footnote – we find Finnur stating that the Norwegian king in that same era came to experience the Icelanders’ love of their ancient freedom, a statement reiterated in the main text in the next chapter. The direct association of libertas with the Sturlungaöld does not occur again until the aforementioned passage in book four; in other instances the term is used when it concerns the freedom of the Church. In other words, both concepts are associated with the same era, but the new profile of Iceland’s past through an intricate connection between the two did not take shape until the end.

The moderate description of Iceland’s past in connection with the present in book one had given way to an outspoken profiling of a glorious past that opposed a mediocre present in book four. Why did it take Finnur such a long time to develop his views and to advance his stand on things? The problem is that no immediately identifiable point of reference for his ideas connecting state and liberty can be found in HEI: he does not cite any sources in the passages in question. The train of thought in Finnur’s portrayal of the historical Icelandic state, with freedom as its trademark, is in line with ideas of its time, but where did it come from? And more

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67 Svavarsson, ‘Latinity’, 83-84.
68 HEI I, 374: ‘Qvo & pertinet nexus subordinationis inter Episcopos Islandiæ & Archiepiscopum Norvegiæ, qvi sub republica dudum obtinuerat.’
69 HEI I, 363: ‘indigenas avitæ libertatis tenacissimos esse expertus fuerat.’ I, 379: ‘Cum itaqve cerneret Rex, & indigenas avitæ libertatis tenacissimos esse…’
70 E.g. HEI I, 434: ‘…ut nostro tempore libertas sanctæ ecclesiae diminuatur vel violetur…’; ibid. 497: ‘…contra jus & libertatem cathedræ episcopalis…’
than that: how did he get away with writing such a blatantly positive statement about Iceland’s political past at the expense of the present?

The most plausible answer to these questions lies outside of Iceland’s borders. The starting point for Finnur’s writings was a foreign context that called for an apologetic approach, for around the time when he received his commission, foreign literature about Iceland generally painted a negative picture of the country – something that had hardly changed since Arngrímur’s days. As a matter of fact, in 1746 one such book named Nachrichten von Island, Grönland und der Strasse Davis, written by Hamburg’s mayor Johann Anderson, was published, which provided incorrect and derogatory information about Iceland and its inhabitants that its author, never having visited Iceland, had received from sailors and merchants. Anderson claimed that the Icelanders in general were godless, superstitious, malicious, vindictive, cunning, immoderate, lascivious, lewd, deceitful and thieving. The work quickly became popular and was translated into other languages, including Danish, shortly after. The Danish authorities were alarmed by Anderson’s account of the situation in their dependency Iceland and immediately undertook action to investigate whether the Icelanders were truly as deprived and immoral as depicted. To this effect the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters sent Niels Horrebow, an attorney who had worked both at the Danish High Court and the Royal Court, to Iceland in 1749, to report and publish his findings. Ísleifsson has rightfully pointed out that sending Horrebow to Iceland stemmed from contemporary ideas about educating the people through science, not through hearsay, but a more urgent practical reason was that Anderson’s work was first and foremost considered an unacceptable tarnish on the glory of the Danish realm. Horrebow fulfilled his task and published his findings in 1752 in a polemical work called Tilforladelige Efterretninger om Island (‘A reliable account of Iceland’), in which he scrutinised the topics discussed by Anderson one by one and refuted all misconceptions categorically. Still, Horrebow did find that the country deserved greater attention than before formedelet mangel af oplysning (‘for lack of enlightenment’): in his dedication to the king, Horrebow wrote that when paid more attention, Iceland could become a part of the realm worthy of the king’s care.

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71 The main negative accounts about Iceland in Arngrímur’s day were Gories Peerce’s poem Van Yslandt from 1561 and Dithmar Blefken’s Islandia from 1607. For extensive information, see Sumarlíði Ísleifsson, Ísland framandi land, Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1996, 36–40 and 47–53, and said author, Tvær eyjar á jaðrinum, Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2015, 107–114.


74 Niels Horrebow, Tilforladelige Efterretninger om Island med et nyt Landkort og 2 Aars meteorologiske Observationer; Copenhagen: s.n., 1752.
and attention, one whose restoration consequently ‘would do the king honour and thereby would make thousands of people happy’. In other words, Anderson’s account was worthless and the record had been set straight, but there was room for improvement on Iceland; Danish honour was at stake, and something had to be done.

After Horrebow, the authorities sent the Icelandic scholars Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson to Iceland in order to travel around the country and produce an even more extensive account of the country in its entirety to conclude the task of correcting the image of Iceland. Their journey resulted in the publication Reise igiennem Island (‘Travels through Iceland’), published in 1772. Both the works of Horrebow and Ólafsson and Pálsson were translated and found international reception. As a consequence, in the course of twenty years the general take on Iceland abroad changed dramatically. With the international availability of modern accounts that met contemporary scientific standards, it did not take long before foreign explorers started making their way to the island to discover it for themselves and to publish their findings in books of their own. One could say that Anderson’s work in effect triggered a snowball effect that changed the foreign opinion of Iceland once and for all. In these developments, bishop Finnur was instrumental, since some of these explorers looked to him for information during their journey and he filled in the blanks of their knowledge of Iceland. Their mentioning of his knowledge earned him great acclaim, and the mentioning of the Church history on which he was working yielded interest in years to come. If anything, Finnur stood in the middle of the changes around him in literature, and the new positive outlook on Iceland opened up possibilities for a display of self-awareness that did not have to be apologetic anymore and assured the author of an international audience.

75 Horrebow, Tilforladelige Efterretninger, dedication iii-iv: ‘...at Landet fortienede større Opmerksomhed, end hidindtil sket er, formedelst Mangel af Oplysning, og, at det maatte være et Land, som var sin Allernaaadigste konges allerhøjeste Attention og faderlig Omsorg værd, hvorved det ogsaa med Tiden kunde blive et Land, som Deres kongelige Majestet, saa lange værden staaer, kunde have Ære af at have sat i Stand, og derved at have gjort mange tusinde Mennisker lyksalige.’

76 Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson, Vice-Lavmand Eggert Olafssens og Land-Physici Biarne Povelsens Reise igiennem Island, foranstaltet af Videnskabernes Sælskab i København og beskreven af forbemeldte Eggert Olafsen, Sorø: Jonas Lindgrens Enke, 1772.

77 Ísleifsson, Tvær eyjar, 164-165 and 170.

78 The first to venture out to Iceland was Sir Joseph Banks, fellow and later president of the British Royal Society, whose travels were put in writ by his travel companion, the Swedish theologian Uno von Troil. Von Troil praises Finnur as one of the most learned men when it comes to Iceland’s antiquities; Uno von Troil, Bref rörande en resa till Island, Uppsala: Magnus Swederus, 1777, 126: ‘...och lærde jag kêenna 3 rätt hederlige lærde, och i synerhet i nordiska antiquiteterna kunnoge mën, namligen Biskop Finnur Jonson på Skallholt, som har under händer Islands Kirko-Historia...’; ibid. 176: ’Jag hade dan lyckan at med denne heders mannen gjöra närmere bekantskap under min varelse på Skallholt, och af hans sællskap, haefa ej mindre nytta än nöje...’
Having such an increasingly Iceland-friendly environment to work within and like audience to write for, Finnur was gradually handed the possibility of using much more outspoken, modern ideas to construct his final design of the Icelandic state than the ones provided to him by his predecessor. They did of course have to be acceptable to the Church Council and the Crown. It turns out that Finnur had the wind in his sails. In the early 1750s, the Danish king commissioned Paul-Henri Mallet, a Swiss professor of literature at the university of Copenhagen, to write his *Introduction à l’Histoire de Dannemarc*, aimed at elevating the Danish realm in its entirety, including Iceland. Writing from a political angle, which concurrent authority could francophone Mallet use better to draw a positive picture of the Danish realm than Montesquieu himself? And so we find him using Montesquieu’s *De l’Esprit des Loix* to determine Scandinavia’s superior position over other countries within Europe and to assert the position that freedom was born in the north. They were free because of the uncultivated environment in which they lived: they had preserved their freedom due to the strength that living in such a climate required, as corroborated by Montesquieu. He wrote that they had left their countries to teach others that, being created equal by nature, no dependence could exist within reason but for the happiness of those dependent, which was dutifully reiterated by Mallet. With the aid of Tacitus’ *Germania*, Mallet in his second edition went on to describe the form of government ‘which formerly prevailed in the North’ as one where kings had already presided over a free people and chieftains had prepared important issues to be decided over by an assembly of free men. Thus prepared to highlight the uniqueness of the Danish realm as one


80 Charles de Montesquieu, *De l’Esprit des Loix* vol. 1 (introduced and annotated by Robert Derathé), Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1973, 300: ‘Je ne sais si le fameus Rudbeck, qui, dans son *Atlantique*, a tant loué la Scandinavie, a parlé de cette grande prérogative qui doit mettre les nations qui l’habitent, au-dessus de tous les peuples du monde; c’est qu’elles ont été la source de la liberté de l’Europe, c’est-à-dire de prèsque toute celle qui est aujourd’hui parmi les hommes.’

Mallet, *Introduction*, 8: ‘La grande prérogative de la Scandinavie, dit très bien l’admirable auteur de l’*Esprit des loix*, & qui doit mettre les nations qui l’habitent au dessus de tous les peuples du monde, c’est qu’elles ont été la ressource de la liberté de l’Europe, c’est à dire, de prèsque toute celle qui est parmi les hommes.’

81 Montesquieu, *De l’Esprit*, 295: ‘Il ne faut donc pas être étonné que (...) le courage des peuples des climats froids les ait maintenus libres. C’est un effet qui dérive de sa cause naturelle.’

82 *ibid*. 300: ‘...et apprendre aux hommes que, la nature les ayant fait égaux, la raison n’a pù les rendre dépendants que pour leur bonheur.’ Mallet, *Introduction* 8: ‘...& apprendre aux hommes que la nature les ayant fait égaux, la raison n’a pù les rendre dépendans que pour leur bonheur.’

of freedom, Mallet described the governmental past of Iceland as an exemplary one, where the first Icelanders, having fled the tyranny of Haraldur hárfagri in the 9th century, wasted no time in setting up their government, electing magistrates and setting laws. From these actions, Mallet wrote, their genius, natural good sense and love of freedom were evident, and a happy instinct had led them to discover a constitution with liberty at its proper basis through the spreading of authorities.84

Finnur probably could not have agreed more, and he was not the only one. These writings and ideas offered the tools to profile the realm and its individual components within and outside of the Danish borders on the level of thought, as Mallet’s Introduction was translated into English in 1770. With these tools self-awareness could develop and take shape in ways unexperienced before within the borders of the Danish realm.85 This is likely to have been expedited by the fact that the setting was right: the foundation of the aforementioned Royal Danish Academy in 1742 by Gram, Pontoppidan and others created an environment that stimulated the introduction and exchange of ideas within the realm. Many scholars – including men with whom Finnur worked and whose work he used, such as Harboe, Jón Eiríksson, and Finnur’s fellow historians Suhm, Schøning and Langebek – became members and found a platform in the Academy’s Skrifter for publishing studies on diverse topics concerning Scandinavia and the world in general, and the individual parts of the Danish realm specifically. The time was right for modern ideas of the self, and the setting was right for displaying them. Finnur’s Norwegian colleagues Schøning and Suhm took advantage of the situation by founding the Norwegian Royal Scientific Society and publishing their histories of Denmark and Norway, which would have them classified as the historians who paved the way for the development of national identity in Norway.86 As for Finnur himself, with ideas about the free Icelandic past commonly accepted by the Danish authorities and foreign intelligentsia from 1755 onwards, nothing stood in the way of their use in HEI.87 As it stands, the most likely explanation as to why and on what grounds we find him writing about the Icelanders’ ancient love of freedom and about freedom as the basis of their political past, as well as why these ideas occur at the end of HEI and not at the beginning, is that he became aware of the ideas that were

84 ibid. 118: ‘Une colonie de Norvégiens (...) s’établit en Islande... ils ne tardèrent pas à se choisir des magistrats, à publier des loix... Le génie de ces peuples, leur bon sens naturel, & leur amour pour la liberté y paraissent sans aucun nuage.’; ibid. 158 (edition of 1763): ‘Les Islandais guidés par un heureux instinct trouvent (...) cette constitution si belle où la liberté est assise sur son vrai fondement, sur une sage distribution des différents pouvoirs.’
87 One other event that facilitated the display of modern ideas was the abolition of censorship in Denmark in 1770 under the rule of Johann Friedrich Struensee. Since Finnur wrote that book four of HEI was finished in 1766, it seems unlikely that these ideas were added later on through. For the date, see Kristjánsson, Bókabytting, 130.
introduced into the Danish realm in the 1750s. The questions that remain are if, and if so, whence he adopted these ideas, for he does not quote anyone, and also what his position in the new academic environment was, since he was not a member of the Academy. If Finnur managed to develop or work out these ideas single-handedly from Iceland, at the edge of this academic environment, his achievement is all the more remarkable.

A critic and a prelate, Finnur added the note that the Icelanders’ love of freedom, as part of the native character which had evolved from the fact that they were descendants of kings and nobility, as well as vikings and other kinds of people accustomed to freedom, went along with arrogance — something that did not change until their conversion to Christianity. In other words, the Icelandic national character would not fully blossom until after that event in the year 1000 AD. Finnur’s remark was a modification of something Arngrímur had written, i.e. that the Icelanders not only descended from kings and nobility, but had also brought forth kings and nobility. By leaving out the second half of Arngrímur’s statement and by highlighting the make-up of the Icelandic nation as freedom-loving people of all ranks, Finnur effected an update that brought Arngrímur’s legacy up to a par with Mallet. Moreover, he painted a picture of a nativus character that had been delivered from its negative characteristic arrogance, thus leaving the implicit positivum, love of freedom, as its main trademark — up to the present day. Any perceived causal relation between the Icelanders’ native character and the events and outcome of 1220-1264 does not follow: it had been a diplomatic decision, made by people who had laid off their fastus and could therefore recognise an impium situation when they saw one, and act appropriately — they had done the right thing.

What with Mallet’s notion that political dependence is all right as long as those dependent remain equal and happy, Finnur’s statement that the Icelanders had not regretted their decision to become subjects to the Norwegian (and consequently the Danish) crown, followed by his quote of Lucan, can be seen in a new light. It very much resembles the concept of a social contract: the Icelanders were still free — sort of — as it was an innate feature of the nation, and the king

88 HEI IV, 125-126 (see also note 64): ‘Islandi (…) ex Regibus, Comitibus, Baronibus, Magnatibus, piratis & tali hominum genere progenati, quod avitæ libertati & qvicqvid audendi licentia, nil vero invite pati adsuetum (…). Talis, ut puto, majorum nostrorum nativus character, ex fastu & libertatis amore promanans (…) usquedum Christiana imbuerentur religione.’

89 Benediktsson, Opera vol. 2, 98. Arngrímur himself offered extensive information on such ancestries, Finnur only referred to the text of Landnámabók where relevant information could be found per category.

90 Here fastus finds itself in the same semantic field as impius; see note 52. Svavarsson’s interpretation that the nativus character stems from ‘being free and loving freedom’ therefore does not hold, nor does the conclusion that their ‘prawess and love of liberty’ were apparently also to blame for their internal fighting, but this may be due to a slight misquote by the author (‘ex statu & libertatis amore promanans’); Svavarsson, ‘Greatness revived’, 561; Svavarsson, ‘Hugmynd’, 282.
could make or break their happiness as dependents. Nothing, however, could surpass the original state of freedom that they had once known in a different political context, in an era during which they had also experienced a heyday in sciences and learning. Finnur did not suggest a direct link between the political situation on the one hand and scientific and scholarly excellence on the other, for the periods concerning the latter only covered parts of the era between 874 and 1264, and the relevant remarks were made in books one and three, before his concept of Iceland as the land of the free had been worked out. Besides, scientific excellence and scholarship were proficiencies that were prone to change and had therefore needed restoration since the Middle Ages, unlike their love of freedom, which was a permanent quality that had never changed. Arngrímur Jónsson’s political continuity had given way to a continuity of national disposition that craved a different political reality.

It was very strong language in a safe setting: Finnur had profiled Iceland as the land of the free and learned – and now moderately happy – in uncontestable ways, on historical grounds, as part of the Danish realm. The authorities could and would not object, and book four passed censorship following the other three. Closing the ranks on the works of Horrebow, Mallet, and Ólafsson and Pálsson, HEI was the final polish that the Danish crown needed, and the best advertisement Iceland could want.

‘FOR THE COUNTRY’S GREATER GLORY’

The new outlook on Iceland was a fact: the seeds for the glorification of an imagined past that was ratified by modern thought had been sown. In the change of climate around him, Finnur had once and for all closed the door on Arngrímur’s line of political continuity under different types of government. Freedom was the new keyword: Finnur’s libertas referred directly to an absolute freedom inextricably connected to a historical respublica that he himself had invented, not to a relative freedom under a monarchy, as Svavarsson has suggested, which is implicit, if at all visible. The author’s point was clear: there was a distinction between the past and the present. The conceptual framework concerning the state was no longer that of Arngrímur; it had undergone a dramatic change, a normative revaluation. Finnur started and took leave from a tradition that was founded nearly two centuries earlier, straight into his own era; he was no Arngrímur come

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91 Judging by the period covered in this part of HEI the ætas obscura in HEI I, 216 starts with the Christianisation of Iceland in the year 1000 and ends with the shift in power in 1264. The four stages in the rise and fall of schooling from HEI III, 163-165 ran from the year 874 until the Reformation, its heyday being between 1100 and the middle of the 14th century; Finnur could not leave out the fact that there had also been great schools, scholars and writings after the transition to Norwegian governance.  
of age, but a man in his own right. I would go as far as to say that Finnur is the first author to refer to what in terms of ideas may be called the free Icelandic state or republic, as opposed to Iceland’s later state of monarchical dependence, long before 19th-century nationalists and modern scholars did so. By distancing himself from both purely political–humanist and contemporary discourse in the discussion of the Icelandic state, Finnur’s discourse is searching, leaning towards a cultural approach in constructing a profile of the state that is connected to the native character of its people. He used the tools of textual criticism and enlightened thought to paint a picture of Iceland that stood out by focusing on and highlighting its political past in connection with a national self-awareness based on scholarship and freedom, not language – that was a done deal. His approach constitutes a kind of Icelandic self-awareness on the level of ideas that is new: recognisable, yet moving in new directions. From an apologetic start at the beginning of HEI, the outcome at the end can be described as protonationalist. The tide outside of Iceland had turned for the better, some fifty years before romanticism would attract people to places like Iceland for its culture and unspoiled nature to write glowing accounts about it, and all Finnur had to do was swim along with it.

He achieved his goal. HEI was read by intelligentsia throughout Europe, and the reception was overwhelming. The encyclopaedic set-up, in Latin, had the desired effect: for at least a hundred years after the publication of HEI, it remained the standard reference work about Iceland. Right after the publication of book three, it made its way into the French periodical L’Esprit des Journaux and into the German Acta Historico-Ecclesiastica nostri temporis, where it was discussed extensively. Information about kings and bishops, monasteries, political and legal matters, history, literature, even elves and berserkers, as well as the texts of poems, prose and letters: literally anything that came to pass in HEI was read, used and reproduced by foreigners. English, Danes, French, Swedes and Germans, all

93 For the perception of Finnur as ‘Arngrímur come of age’, see Svavarsson, ‘Latinity’, 75.
94 Finnur shows the acceptance of Arngrímur Jónsson’s representation of Icelandic as a modern classic that is the country’s own in that he refers to it as antiqva lingva and nostra lingva, e.g. HEI I, 45 and 145, as opposed to for instance lingva Danica, e.g. HEI I, 446.
95 L’esprit des journaux 1 (Janvier 1776): 392-393; Acta Historico-Ecclesiastica nostri temporis oder gesammelte Nachrichten und Urkunden zu der Kirchengeschichte unserer Zeit Bd. 3 (1777); Vorrede xlix.
- Det skandinaviske literaturseelskabs skrifter 11 (1812), 2: Peter E. Müller mentions Finnur’s doubt that Snorri wrote the Snorra-Edda completely.
expressed their appreciation of the remarkable task Finnur had accomplished, calling it the most important work about the country’s history that contained invaluable material – for a long time it was even called the best Church history in the Nordic countries.97 Finnur himself was praised as a learned, wise man and an eminent author.98 At his death in 1789, it was said that HEI was one of the very

97 George Steuart MacKenzie, Travels in the Island of Iceland during the summer of the year MDCCCX, Edinburgh: Thomas Allan and Company, 1811, 67: ‘The Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiae (…) is written in Latin of remarkable elegance; and is replete with valuable information, not solely in relation to to the ecclesiastical affairs, but also to the political history and literature of the island.’

98 Von Troil speaks about Finnur as the most famous of all Icelanders in the world of literature; Von Troil, Bref, 176: ‘…men får endast nämna någre, som med mycken heder gjordt sig kände i den lärda verlden. Bland dem förtjenar at sättas i första rummet Biskopen i Skallholt D. Finnur Jonson, som urom flera lärda arbeten i i Nordiska antiquiteterna (…) nyligen uti tre Vol. in 4:o utgifvit en, med ej mindre granskning än lärdom sammanskrefven Hist. Eccles. Islandiae.’
best and most useful histories of Iceland, over whose praise foreign scholars contended with each other.  

Finnur had truly produced a *magnum opus* that met modern standards, and had asserted himself as a respectable historiographer and modern academic who published in appropriate periodicals. The greatest reward must have been the fact that some of his views constituting his picture of Iceland and its people were accepted internationally. The arguments that he used to profile mediaeval Iceland as a land of sciences and of the learned were adopted integrally by his Swedish colleague Uno von Troil in his *Bref rörande en resa till Island* from 1777, published only shortly after the first three books of *HEI* had appeared in print. Von Troil adopted Finnur’s statement that Iceland was practically the only country producing learned writings in the period between the years 1000 and 1264, as well as Finnur’s description of the different stages through which Icelandic literature and education went between 874 and the Reformation. He actually expressed the notion that the sciences ‘had been subject to the same revolutions’ on Iceland as elsewhere, something Finnur had only implied. What’s more, Von Troil explicitly stated that the era in which Iceland had been one of the few countries in Europe – and the only Nordic one – cultivating the sciences had ended ‘when it was cast under the Norwegian yoke’ in 1264 – something Finnur could hardly say out loud, especially not at the time when he wrote it. Von Troil saw and named things that were implicit in *HEI,* at a time when it was safe to do so, and underlined the presentation of Iceland as a learned nation that had its roots in the past. It is a shame that he wrote his letters before book four appeared in 1778: we will never know how he might have handled the summit of Finnur’s profile of his country to the outside world: Iceland as the land of the free.

Finnur’s work found its way to Iceland as well, be it somewhat later. In 1841 bishop Pétur Pétursson published a sequel to *HEI* that continued where Finnur had left off, i.e. in the year 1740. He accounted for it in his introduction and

*ibid.* 311: Marmier mentions Finnur as the most recent Icelandic historiographer, along with Jón Espólin.


100 E.g. he published a concise description of the state of the Church on Iceland in *Acta Historico-Ecclesiastica nostri temporis,* which was gratefully accepted by its editors; ibid. 35 (1779), 286-345.

101 See note 78.

102 See note 56; Von Troil, *Bref,* 171; ‘Men vetenskaperna hafva här fått vidkännas de på andra orter vanlige förändringar (...) Jag lågar för att gifva en målning härpå den lärde Skallholtske Biskopens Doctor Finnei tanka...’

103 See note 55; Von Troil, *Bref,* 141-142: ‘Ifrån Christna religionens antagande til 1264, då landet underkastades det Norrska oket, kan man således med skål saga, att Island var ibland de få ställen i Europa, och näftan det enda i Norden, hvarest vetenskaperne dyrkades och uppodlades, äfven som denne epoqve har at framvisa flere berömde män, än som sedan härifrån gjort sig namnkunnige.’
paid due respect to his predecessor.104 This new HEI again was written in Latin, printed in Copenhagen and dedicated to the king, who had supported it. With this knowledge, the intended readership would have been foreign as well; it hardly could be Icelandic, for the number of Icelanders able to read or afford such a book had not altered much since the days of Finnur.105 Half a century later, the Icelandic geographer Þorvaldur Thoroddsen would use and reproduce sources and historical and biographical information from HEI in his Landfræðissaga Íslands (‘A geographical history of Iceland’).106 The same can be said about historian Jón Espólín and politician Jón Sigurðsson.107

And so the echo of Finnur’s work was to resound on Iceland: it was used for its wide array of information and sources, but not for the ideas conveyed in it. From the late 19th century onward, the notion of the historical Icelandic free state would become instrumental in defining a national Icelandic identity and it would become a given in the discussion of the country’s mediaeval past, but all of this happened without the aid of HEI. 19th-century nationalist thought imported into Iceland happened to unite one of Finnur’s great merits – the invention of an imaginary golden age – and one of Arngrímur’s – language defining and binding the nation – in the vernacular, and made both authors obsolete in these respects.108 Latin had never been accessible to the masses, and by this time it had given way to Icelandic completely. Modern ideas were used to advance a modern stand, as Finnur himself had done in his day. This is the downside of Finnur’s great achievement: he had paved the way for Icelandic generations to come, his line of thought about the Icelandic state that featured the notion of a golden age avant la

104 Pétur Pétursson, Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiae, Copenhagen: Bianco Luno, 1841, introduction: 'Cum in votis maxime esset, Episcopi Dr. Finni Johannei Historiam Ecclesiastam Islandiae pro tenui mearum modulum continuare...'; ibid. 477: 'Vir suæ ætatis in Islandia doctissimus studiiis...'

105 It is likely that the audience for Pétursson’s sequel remained within clerical circles in the Danish realm, because it did not offer the historical information in its variety that might attract a wider audience.


108 The ideas of the most notable author on the Icelandic nation, Jón Jónsson Aðils, in his key work Íslenzkt þjóðerni (Reykjavík: Sigurður Kristjánsson, 1903) bear likeness to those of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, not to those of his Icelandic predecessors. For a comparison of the ideas of Aðils and Fichte, see Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, ‘Réttlæting þjóðernis. Samanburður á alþýðufyrirlestrum Jóns Aðils og hugmyndum Jóhanns Gottlieb Fichte’, Skírnir 169 (1995), 36-64. For an appraisal of this comparison, see Chapter 4.
lettre fitted perfectly with what became a common theme in 19th-century nationalist thought about state and nation, yet no one in or outside of Iceland made use of this part of HEI for its age and lack of accessibility, and modern academia have failed to recognise it and interpret it correctly for the projection of incorrect notions. The upside is that Finnur shaped Iceland's identity in a way that would have been the envy of any nationalist and he did it a century before such ideas came into vogue. One can truly say that the purpose of writing for the country's greater glory, as commissioned by the Church Council, was fulfilled.