

Monuments to Settlers of the North: A Means to Strengthen National Identity¹

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Abstract – In this article two topics will be discussed: a) Icelanders' proposal to erect a memorial to the country's first settler, Ingólfur Arnarson, and the ensuing public debate and b) the background to the memorial to Thorfinnur Karlsefni, who is said to have settled in the New World shortly after 1000 AD, and the debate that took place in North America. The principal research questions concern the role of intellectuals in the 19th and 20th centuries in raising public support for the idea of erecting the memorials to the settlers, and what arguments were adduced to promote nationalistic sentiments among the public for that purpose.

Keywords – Iceland, settler, Ingólfur Arnarson, monument, Einar Jónsson, pioneer, the New World, Thorfinnur Karlsefni, Norse

Introduction

One November day in 1875 a group of people gathered on Austurvöllur field in the middle of the little town of Reykjavík, where a statue was to be unveiled: a gift to the Icelanders from the Copenhagen City Council to mark the millennium in 1874 of the settlement of Iceland. The statue was a self-portrait by the renowned sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844), who was of half-Icelandic descent. Although presented on the occasion of the millennium, the statue did not serve to commemorate the settlement of Iceland.

Some years earlier a debate had taken place about marking this national milestone by erecting a memorial to Ingólfur Arnarson, identified as Iceland's first settler in the medieval *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements). This discussion had, however, led to nothing, but the

¹ Translated from Icelandic by Anna Yates.

proposal had given rise to a debate about the role of public art. The idea of a monument to Ingólfur Arnarson came up again in the first decade of the 20th century. The suggestion appeared in the Danish press as a response to the idea that the Danes should present the Icelanders with a bronze cast of Thorvaldsen's figure of the Greek hero Jason, on the occasion of a visit to Denmark by Icelandic parliamentarians in 1906.

In this article two topics will be discussed: a) the Icelanders' proposal to erect a memorial to the country's first settler, Ingólfur Arnarson, and the ensuing public debate and b) the background to the memorial to Thorfinnur Karlsefni, who is said to have settled in the New World shortly after 1000 AD, and the debate which took place in North America. The intention is to throw light on the ideas of opinion-makers in the later 19th and early 20th centuries about the role of the settler and their conceptions of works of art commemorating him, on the conflict between the artist and those who commissioned such works, and on how their views related to the image of the North. The principal research questions concern the role of intellectuals in the 19th and 20th centuries in raising public support for the memorials and what arguments were adduced in order to promote nationalistic sentiments among the public for that purpose; in addition, the expectation of what the monument's message would be with respect to Nordic culture, and how an artist's radical artistic philosophy relates to ideas of the character of the Norse, will also be discussed.

A Thousand Years of Iceland: A Monumental Debate

The idea of memorials to honour the memory of individuals, not for their descent or family but for their work in the interests of their nation, or even of humanity as a whole, arose from the Enlightenment, and it entailed putting across a certain message to the public.² With the rise of nationalist consciousness in the 19th century—which led both to unification, in Germany, for instance, and demands for secession and autonomy—the erection of monuments in continental Europe increased. National monuments were erected, some of them on a large scale, in honour of national heroes—both

² Berggren 1991: 22–23.

MONUMENTS TO SETTLERS OF THE NORTH

real-life people and folk heroes who served as national symbols, or who were personifications of concepts such as *liberty* or *the nation*. One of the best-known examples of this is the Statue of Liberty in New York, erected on Liberty Island in 1886.

Lying behind the idea of national monuments in the 19th century was generally a nostalgic glorification of a social order based on traditional values. Stylistically they were usually characterized by the adoption of models from the classical humanist tradition. They could also be a propaganda tool for certain groups in favour of some specific idea, exploiting the alleged will of the people to unite around some symbol. They were meant to be timeless symbols to uphold the memory of some event, or a historical or mythical person.³

It was in early 1863 that the idea was proposed that the millennium of the settlement of Iceland should be commemorated by the erection of a monument to Ingólfur Arnarson, the first settler. It was discussed in a small group of intellectuals in Reykjavík, and the debate continued intermittently until 1874. No action resulted, however, due to a lack of resources. The debate on the matter indicates how people viewed the role of public works of art, and merits further scrutiny. In order to understand the situation, it is important to bear in mind that Iceland was at that time a Danish colony that had, however, gained greater autonomy after the end of absolutism in Denmark in 1848. But the political debate in Iceland was coloured by an ambivalent attitude to the Danes, and among the members of the intellectual Evening Society (Kvöldfélag) in Reykjavík were zealous advocates of Icelandic independence, such as the artist Sigurður Guðmundsson (1833–1874), who, at a meeting in 1863, proposed that a memorial to Ingólfur Arnarson should be erected in Reykjavík to mark the millennium of the settlement.⁴ Like other Icelandic intellectuals of the time, Guðmundsson had been educated in Copenhagen, at the Royal Academy of Arts, in the mid-19th century. He had there become acquainted with national-romantic views, both through his studies and from other Icelandic intellectuals in the city. He soon became deeply interested in the Icelandic sagas,

³ Ellenius 1971: 24–26, 39–42.

⁴ Collection of the National and University Library of Iceland. Fundargerðarbækur Kvöldfélagsins í Reykjavík, 30. janúar 1863 [Minutes of the Evening Society in Reykjavík, 30 Jan. 1863]. Unpublished.

and also in cultural history in general, and he apparently gathered materials from a multitude of sources, as indicated by drawings he appears to have traced from foreign books and periodicals, probably during his student years in Copenhagen.⁵ Thus it is probable that he had seen illustrations in foreign periodicals of monuments erected in continental Europe in the 19th century.

Guðmundsson was a keen advocate of the development of Reykjavík, visualizing the small town growing to be Iceland's capital and the centre of culture. He was the first member of staff of the Antiquarian Collection (Forngripasafnið), preceding the National Museum of Iceland. In addition, he worked in various other fields of culture. His idea of commemorating the millennium of the settlement by a monument to the first settler is in keeping with the tradition that had evolved in Europe as a manifestation of growing nationalism. Like many monuments in other countries, the image of the settler Ingólfur was a symbol for a historical event. The rather amateurish sketch Guðmundsson drew of Ingólfur, with his arm raised and a sword at his belt, reflected the established conventions of depicting warrior heroes.⁶ The posture is the classical *contrapposto*. But Ingólfur does not hold his sword aloft as was the rule with military heroic figures, but holds a flaming torch, like the Statue of Liberty in New York. In this way Guðmundsson alluded to old accounts of the settlement of Iceland, according to which a man could claim only the land he had crossed on foot between dawn and dusk, carrying a living flame. The torch may also be interpreted more broadly as symbolizing the settler who lights the way to Iceland for those who follow.

There was considerable debate in the Evening Society as to whether or not a monument should be erected. Some members suggested something more practical, such as purchasing a steamship, or constructing a parliament building or a home for the Antiquarian Collection. Many of the speakers emphasized the importance of a visible memorial to the settlement, something out of the ordinary. One member, for instance, said during a debate about the statue,

⁵ These documents are in the collection of the National Museum of Iceland.

⁶ The drawing has been published in the chapter "Ingólfur Arnarson" in Kristjánsson 1948: unnumbered page.

MONUMENTS TO SETTLERS OF THE NORTH

“The statue must also be such, that people can salute it.”⁷ In Guðmundsson’s view, it was a matter of honour for the Icelanders as a nation to commemorate their first settler with a statue, as all civilized nations would do. At a meeting of the Society in 1874, he pointed out that the Americans were that year planning to erect a statue of Leifur Eiríksson (Leif the Lucky), which should be seen as an inspirational challenge to the Icelanders. Guðmundsson also visualized the statue as a landmark on Arnarhóll, a grassy knoll said to be the place where Ingólfur’s high-seat pillars washed ashore.⁸ The choice of the site thus had a historical resonance, while also evoking the same national monuments in mainland Europe in the 19th century, which had a crucial influence upon their surroundings.

The debate about the statue of the first settler in the Evening Society gives no indication that any prominence was given to presenting a heroic image. In a newspaper article publicizing the proposal, the tone was more of gratitude towards the pioneering settler. The people of Iceland were also urged not to let the millennium of the settlement pass without commemoration. From the arguments of those who were in favour of the idea, especially Guðmundsson, one may infer the significance of the statue to the Icelanders as a nation among nations, and its importance for Reykjavík as a future capital. These attitudes were founded, of course, on growing nationalism, with the aim of promoting patriotic fervour; but the civil aspect was given equal weight by promoting Reykjavík, which had been the home of the first settler, as an ideal capital for the nascent nation.⁹

⁷ Collection of the National and University Library of Iceland. Fundargerðarbækur Kvöldfélagsins í Reykjavík, 10. apríl 1874 [Minutes of the Evening Society, 10 Apr. 1874]. Unpublished.

⁸ According to medieval sources, when he arrived at the coast of Iceland, Ingólfur flung his high-seat pillars, carved with likenesses of Norse gods, into the sea, vowing to settle where they washed ashore. Thus he placed the choice in the hands of the gods, and was led to Reykjavík.

⁹ “Hugvekjur út af þúsund ára landnámi Ingólfs og fyrstu byggingu Íslands II” [Homilies on the Millennium of Ingólfur’s Settlement and the First Inhabitants of Iceland II] 1864: 159–162.

Ingólfur Arnarson—Iceland's Columbus

Although plans to erect a statue of Ingólfur Arnarson in Reykjavík came to nothing in 1874, King Christian IX of Denmark and Iceland visited his colony that year, and the Icelanders received their first constitution. This marked a turning point in the Icelanders' campaign for independence: thirty years later Iceland attained home rule, and a Minister of Iceland was appointed, resident in Reykjavík. The town had thus taken on the role of capital city, and it was developing a more urban identity. A parliament house of cut stone had been built, with the beginnings of a flower garden where the Thorvaldsen statue stood. In addition, two banks had been built of stone on the main street, and in 1906 construction work commenced on a stone building to house the National Library. Preparation was under way for the foundation of the University of Iceland. Iceland's first professional artists had made their entrance and were showing their work. Urban culture was establishing itself in Iceland's main centres of population, and a forum for it was coming into being in Reykjavík.

It is in this social context that one must view the debate that took place in 1907–1908 about the statue of the settler Ingólfur Arnarson by sculptor Einar Jónsson (1874–1954). The background was, as mentioned above, that a delegation of Icelandic parliamentarians visited Denmark in 1906 at the invitation of King Frederik VIII of Denmark and Iceland. At the end of the visit it was proposed that the Danes might present to the Icelanders a bronze cast of Thorvaldsen's sculpture *Jason*, but this idea met with an unenthusiastic reception in the Danish press. Instead it was suggested that it would be more appropriate to present the Icelanders with a statue of their first settler and, referring to the fact that Jónsson had participated in the Free Exhibition (Den frie Udstilling) of 1906 with a maquette of the settler, to commission the Icelandic sculptor to make it. Not surprisingly, this idea was warmly welcomed in Iceland. The following appeared in the periodical *Ísafold*:

We would receive a most beautiful and hugely famous work of art in *Jason*, and it is most pleasant to us that the sculptor, that world-renowned genius, was of Icelandic origin. Yet it weighs far more heavily, many times more, that the likeness should

MONUMENTS TO SETTLERS OF THE NORTH

not commemorate a southern, Greek mythical hero, but a Norse Viking and, more than that, the most famous man in the history of this land, except for Snorri Sturluson: Iceland's own Columbus.¹⁰

The tone of the article is high-flown and nationalistic. Not only does it emphasize Thorvaldsen's family connection with Iceland, which the Icelanders were keen to uphold, it also glorifies the Norse, symbolized by the Viking, vis-à-vis the southern hero of Greek mythology—clearly irrelevant to the Icelanders. On the other hand, the significance of Ingólfur Arnarson for Iceland is stressed by likening him to a famous name in international history, Christopher Columbus. When the issue was again addressed in the press, in relation to the discussion of whether or not the Danes would give the Icelanders the statue of Ingólfur, it came as no surprise that the idea was raised that the Icelanders might find it more rewarding if they were to erect their own statue.

This idea clearly soon gained a following: less than a month later the periodical *Ingólfur* announced on its front page, under the headline “Ingólfur Arnarson Is Coming!” that the Danes had decided against the gift, and that a movement had arisen among the inhabitants of Reykjavík to raise a memorial to Ingólfur. The main news item was that the Reykjavík Craftsmen's Association (Íðnaðarmannafélagið í Reykjavík) had determined to contribute 2,000 krónur to a fund to purchase the statue of Ingólfur from sculptor Jónsson. The paper reports that a committee had been elected to gather contributions, and urges the public and the merchants of the town to give to the fund.¹¹ Einar Jónsson was at that time living in Copenhagen, where he had been since graduating from the Royal Academy of Arts in 1899. The committee sent him a telegram informing him that the Craftsmen's Association had started fundraising, so he could safely commence work on the statue. The process that was thus put in

¹⁰ “Harla fagurt og tilkomumikið og stórum frægt listaverk fengjum vér, þar sem Jason er, og hugnæmt er oss það, að höfundurinn, hinn heimsfrægi snillingur, var af íslenzku bergi brotinn. En hitt vegur stórum meira, margfalt meira, að líkneskið jartegni ekki suðræna, gríska goðfræðishetju, heldur norrænan víking og þar á ofan frægasta manninn í sögu þessa lands, annan en Snorra Sturluson,—Kólabus Íslands.” “Jason eða Ingólfur” [Jason or Ingólfur] 1906: 218.

¹¹ “Ingólfur Arnarson kemur!” [Ingólfur Arnarson Is Coming!] 1906: 159.

motion was somewhat like what the members of the Evening Society had envisaged. In both cases an association was involved, and public contributions were solicited. Now, however, an Icelandic sculptor was available to take the commission.

The Ingólfur Committee (Ingólfsnefnd) looked for ways to publicize the project, and in the autumn of 1906 an eloquent magister of philosophy and psychology, Guðmundur Finnbogason (1873–1944), was commissioned to give a public lecture on Ingólfur in a hall in Reykjavík. Finnbogason knew Jónsson well, as they had been students at the same time in Copenhagen. A great progressive and a patriot, he had a fine reputation as an orator. His speech began on an optimistic note, celebrating the progress that had been achieved in Iceland, which he attributed to the nation having gone to serious work, which in turn had enhanced the Icelanders' faith in their own capabilities. The movement to erect a statue of Ingólfur was, he said, one of the clearest examples of the will of every class of society to honour the ideal of nationality. Stressing this point still further, he maintained that hopes for a prosperous future for the nation were founded on the memory of all that was finest and brightest in the nation's history; for this reason there was a desire to erect a monument to the first settler.

Finnbogason's speech was largely a eulogy for Ingólfur, although in fact little was known of the real character and history of the first settler, and the presentation must be interpreted in the light of the occasion and the purpose of the address. Finnbogason stated, for instance, that Ingólfur was probably a handsome man, since his sister Helga was described as "the finest of women." He also maintained that Ingólfur was a man of faith, as he was supposed to have sought guidance from his gods, and did not doubt them, and thus he was spared the torment of having to make a choice. He said that Ingólfur had no choice, but that he simply obeyed, and that his obedience was easy for him. On the other hand, Finnbogason presented Ingólfur as a pioneer: not only did he sail to Iceland, he undertook to make a settlement there, and to set an example for others to follow.¹² Later in his lecture Finnbogason gives a description of the settler, as envisaged by Jónsson:

¹² Finnbogason 1943: 30–35.

MONUMENTS TO SETTLERS OF THE NORTH

He stands on Arnarhóll, leaning on his high-seat pillar. He is a young man, handsome and chieftainlike. From his face and posture shine confidence, strength and resolve. Indomitable, he looks over the land to which the gods have directed him, the land which is to take on all his hopes, all his achievements and honour. He feels that he is a pioneer into the land of the future; he knows that many noble men will walk in his footsteps, and that this is the beginning of the history of an entire nation. He has planted here a stout branch of his nation's family tree in new soil. And in his mind he sees it grow and blossom. Through his ideals he sees a vision of the history of the Icelandic nation.¹³



Figure 1. Einar Jónsson, *Ingólfur Arnarson*, 1907. Plaster. The Einar Jónsson Museum.

¹³ “Hann stendur á Arnarhóli og styðst við öndvegissúlu sína. Hann er ungur maður, fríður sýnum og höfðinglegur. Úr svip hans og viðmóti skín trúnaðartraustið, styrkurinn og stefnufestan. Óruggur horfir hann yfir landið, sem guðirnir hafa vísað honum á, landið, sem nú á að eignast vonir hans, alla hans dáð og drengskap. Hann finnur að hann er forgöngumaður inn í land framtíðarinnar; hann veit, að í spor sín muni margir göfugir menn ganga og að hér byrjar saga heillar þjóðar. Hann hefur gróðursett sterkan kvist af kynviði þjóðar sinnar í nýjum jarðvegi og sér hann í huganum vaxa og blómgastr. Í hillingum hugsjónanna sér hann sögu íslenskrar þjóðar.” Finnbogason 1943: 36.

The Settler—The Pioneer Spirit

In his sculpture Jónsson had complied with the same tradition as Guðmundsson in his sketch, depicting a man standing with his weight resting on one foot and one arm raised. Jónsson's Ingólfur Arnarson is, however, a far more martial figure, standing erect by his high-seat pillar with its dragonhead tip, and grasping his halberd, while the other arm rests on his upright shield. He wears armour and a helmet, his body is swayed slightly backward while his facial features are strong, and the look in his eyes is penetrating. He is a Viking, in battle array and heavily armed, and from his physique and expression we can deduce his physical and mental character. He is the image of the tough, determined Norse settler.

In 1902 Jónsson had made a maquette of a small statue of Ingólfur that in principle was the same as the large statue completed in 1907. From the late 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century various drafts and completed works survive in which the artist sought inspiration in Norse mythology. It should also be mentioned that, prior to studying at the Royal Academy, Jónsson was a student with Norwegian sculptor Stephan Sinding, a symbolist who portrayed themes from Norse mythology and encouraged Jónsson to seek motifs in the sagas of Icelanders. In addition, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries works such as *Danmarks Kronike* by Saxo Grammaticus, *Heimskringla*, and the *Prose Edda* were published in Scandinavia in splendid editions, illustrated by well-known Nordic artists of the time. The visual Old Norse world, as conceived by Nordic artists—many of whom had based their work on research in museums and consultation with scholars—was thus not unfamiliar to Jónsson.

By the autumn of 1907 Jónsson had completed the statue and the bas-reliefs on the pedestal. He sent photographs to the Ingólfur Committee, which were exhibited in Reykjavík. The image was pleasing to Jónsson's Icelandic contemporaries. Heraldic, it portrayed qualities that the Icelanders of the time attributed to their ancient heroes as described in saga literature. One of those who wrote an article in the press about the statue was Ágúst H. Bjarnason. Like Finnbogason, he had studied philosophy at the University of Copenhagen at the time when Jónsson was beginning his artistic career in the city. He writes:

MONUMENTS TO SETTLERS OF THE NORTH

The image of Ingólfur will be most beautiful from the side where one approaches it unhindered, and nothing conceals Ingólfur's physique and appearance—that is to say, the side where he grasps his halberd. There is so much strength, vigour and fortitude in all his physical build, and his face is so strong-featured, that it must elicit admiration [...] One must admire most greatly his physical form. The chest is very powerfully developed, and the coat of mail fits the body so closely that it delineates all the musculature [...] The face, on the left side, is most determined and manly, yet with fine features.¹⁴

The writer is full of admiration for the athletic male body and connects the appearance of the figure with personality traits that are deemed admirable. Much of what he says is similar to Finnbogason's lecture on Ingólfur Arnarson. The pioneer stands straight-backed with his chest flung out, and his halberd—the Old Norse weapon of choice—raised on end.

While the statue received a generally enthusiastic reception from those who made their views known, they were less pleased with the bas-reliefs on the pedestal. In these, which were the sculptor's addition, Jónsson had expressed his own idiosyncratic symbolic interpretation of the settlement of Iceland. From the dispute that arose between Jónsson and the Ingólfur Committee, it is clear that in Iceland people knew little of his other work. Only two of his works were familiar to the Icelandic public: *Outlaws (Útlagar)*, purchased by a merchant in 1904, which stood in the lobby of Parliament House, and a sculpture of romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson on Lækjargata, one of Reykjavík's main streets. Both were naturalistic works. But by this time Jónsson had abandoned naturalism for symbolism in his art, and he had shown his work with a radical group of Danish sculptors in Copenhagen who exhibited as the Free Sculptors (*De frie Billedhuggere*). Several of them had been in Paris in the 1890s, where they had encountered and adopted symbolism. Many of them had

¹⁴ “Fegurst verður Ingólfsmyndin á þá hliðina, þar sem komið er að henni berskjaldaðri og ekkert hylur vöxt né yfirbragð Ingólfs, en það er þeim megin, er hann stýðst við atgerinn. Er svo mikill styrkur, fjör og festa í öllum líkamsskapnaði hans og andlitið svo svípmikið, að það hlýtur að vekja addáum manna [...] Einkum hljóta menn þó að dást að líkamsskapnaði hans. Brjóstið er hvelft mjög og hringabrynjan fellur svo addánlega vel að líkamanum, að þar mótar fyrir hverjum vöðva. [...] Andlitið er á vinstri hliðina einbeitt mjög og karlmannlegt, en þó svíphreint.” Bjarnason 1907: 272.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

been influenced by the French sculptor Auguste Rodin. The ideas reflected in the works were, however, more important in the art of the members of the Danish group, who had been influenced by the social views prevalent at the *fin de siècle*. Central to their ideology was the requirement of originality, which in turn relates to the concept of the autonomous creative individual, known to Danish artists through the writings of Danish writer Georg Brandes about German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.¹⁵

Like his fellow Free Sculptors, Jónsson was deeply influenced by radical ideas about originality in art. In the bas-reliefs on the sides of the pedestal on the theme of the settlement of Iceland, he departs from conventional illustration. Instead of illustrating the narrative of the *Book of Settlement* he expressed his ideas about the settlement in allegorical scenes, based on symbols and personifications, with references to the ancient text. This conflicted with representational principles, and the members of the Ingólfur Committee found his work hard to understand; in addition, they could not accept his interpretation of history. They were especially distressed by the image *Flight of the Gods to the Mountains of Iceland*, which depicted the gods racing for the mountains with a gigantic hand behind them, in front of which was a man with arms spread wide. In a letter to the artist, the committee members said that he was misrepresenting history, as Ingólfur had fled Norway to escape tyranny, not Christianity. They pointed out that the Old Norse religion had persisted in Norway for a whole century after Ingólfur and others left for Iceland.¹⁶ The artist replied that his intention was not to illustrate in the bas-reliefs the account of Ingólfur's settlement, but to express his ideas about the culture of Norse mythology, which came to Iceland with the settlers. He writes:

The gods come speeding on a cloud through the air, and far in the east they see in the rosy dawn the symbol of Christianity, the great hand of God. In God's hand is Christ, who willingly extends his arms (not nailed). The gods flee, not in fear, but because their day is past. They hasten towards the land of sunset, "Iceland"—and tread their final walk on their white

¹⁵ Nielsen 1996: 27–31.

¹⁶ Kristjánsson 1948: 173.

MONUMENTS TO SETTLERS OF THE NORTH

feet, from the mountains of Iceland into the fiery red of the setting sun.¹⁷



Figure 2. Einar Jónsson, *Flight of the Gods to the Mountains of Iceland*, 1907. Relief. Plaster, destroyed. The Einar Jónsson Museum.

The artist's expositions did not suffice to reconcile his views on the reliefs with those of the committee, but the committee members felt that they might be added in due course, provided that they reflected the account given in the *Book of Settlements*. Jónsson refused. He dismissed the proposal, which he said showed that the committee members intended him to uphold the dead letter, which was opposite to his own views.

The disagreement between Jónsson and the committee was concerned not only with the reliefs, but also with the settler's motto "Sjálfur leið þú sjálfan þig" (Lead Thyself), which Jónsson had carved onto the high-seat pillar, thus accentuating the autonomy of the settler, who was guided by nothing but his own will. As Finnbogason had done in his lecture on Ingólfur, the committee members pointed out that according to the historical sources the first settler had been guided by his gods to settle at Reykjavík. They proposed that Jónsson should change the motto to "Fréttin vísar til Íslands" (The Oracle Points to Iceland). The artist would not accept this. In his reply to the committee in early 1908 he defends his interpretation by referring to what he regards as characteristics of the Nordic race:

¹⁷ "Guðirnir koma á skýi þeysandi í gegnum loftið, lengst í austri sjá þeir í morgunroðanum „Symbol“ kristinnar, sú mikla guðshönd. Í hendi guðs sést Kristur, sem breiðir út fadminn af eigin vilja (ekki negldur). Guðirnir flýja, ekki hræddir, heldur af því, að þeirra dagur er runninn, þeir flýta sér til sólseturslandsins „Íslands“—og ganga á sínum hvítu fótum sína síðustu göngu af Íslandsjökulfjöllum inn í þá eldrauðu kvöldsól, er hún gengur til viðar." Kristjánsson 1948: 173–174.

I like this motto [Lead Thyself] very much, for a number of reasons. It tells us to have faith in ourselves, which I feel every person should have; to be guided by our own conscience and to take responsibility for what we do. Also because it is progress to lead oneself, instead of being led and following in the footsteps of others. And because this is primarily the motto of the North Germanic race—perhaps not officially, but it lives tacitly in the nature of the Northern peoples.¹⁸

Jónsson now saw his ideas about the autonomous individual, with which he had become acquainted through debates in Denmark on artistic originality, as intrinsic and characteristic of a specific race. Similar ideas are expressed in Finnbogason's lecture on Ingólfur Arnarson, although he refers only to an individual when he speaks of Ingólfur having the pioneer spirit, emphasizing his role as a pioneering settler. Finnbogason, however, stressed Ingólfur's faith in the guidance of his gods. Another intellectual and politician, Bjarni Jónsson of Vogur, a keen advocate for artists, gave a lecture on the artist and the statue of Ingólfur in early 1908 in which he strove to explain Jónsson's symbolic approach and defend his position. He focused especially on explaining the motto "Sjálfur leið þú sjálfan þig," Lead Thyself, which had met with such a negative response. He refers to the Eddic poem Grógaldur, in which these words are attributed to Óðinn himself. Bjarni Jónsson also defended the bas-reliefs, saying that "the artistic eye has correctly perceived the most vital consequences of the settlement of Iceland: to conserve and protect the memory of Old Norse culture."¹⁹

In other words, the Icelanders were the guardians of Norse culture, and this was portrayed in Einar Jónsson's work, according to his advocates. Bjarni Jónsson's method of supporting the artist, to tie

¹⁸ "Þetta „mottó“ hefur mér líkað svo vel og það af mörgum ástæðum. Það bendir manni á að hafa trú á sjálfum sér, sem mér finnst að hver maður eigi að hafa; að vinna eftir sinni samvisku og ábyrgjast það, sem maður adhefst. Einnig af því, að það er framför að leiða sjálfan sig í staðinn fyrir að láta leiða sig og feta í fótspor annarra. Líka af því, að þetta eru fyrst og fremst einkunnarorð norður-germannska þjóðflokksins, ekki máské opinberlega, en það lifir þegjandi í eðlisfari Norðurláfubúa." Kristjánsson 1948: 172.

¹⁹ "Þar hefir listamannsaugað séð rétt, hverjar afdrífari-kastar afleiðingar landnáms Íslands hafði: að vernda og geyma í minnum fornorræna menning." "Listir og vísindi" [Art and Science] 1908: 1.

MONUMENTS TO SETTLERS OF THE NORTH

his work of art in with the political debate of the time, is typical for the discourse of the early 20th century, when Iceland's new cultural society was emerging, and the statue of Ingólfur Arnarson—or the debate about it—was one aspect of that process. Evidence of this was the article in *Ísafold* in the autumn of 1906, cited above, in which Ingólfur was called “Iceland's Columbus.” In the autumn of 1908 *Ísafold* published an article in which the author, writing as “K,” discussed among other things the Ingólfur Committee's criticism of the message of the motto Lead Thyself, and maintained that the intention was not to erect a monument to Ingólfur because he was a man of faith, but because he had the “pioneer spirit.” “K” felt that the motto was an apt choice as it was at the heart of the character of the Germanic race, and cast “a shining light upon our nation's ambitions for independence.”²⁰



Figure 3. Einar Jónsson, The monument of Ingólfur Arnarson on the hill Arnarhöll in Reykjavík, around 1924. Photo: L. Albert. The Einar Jónsson Museum.

After some debate in the press, the subject died down. An agreement was reached with the artist on revisions, including changing the motto Lead Thyself to The Oracle Points to Iceland. Attempts to resume fundraising failed, as by this time money was being raised to finance another monument, to the politician Jón

²⁰ “Ingólfs-líkneskið. Hvar er nú komið?” [The Statue of Ingólfur: Where Is It?] 1908: 285.

Sigurðsson (1811–1879), one of the architects of Icelandic independence, and in the public mind the leading national hero. Not until 1923 did the Craftsmen’s Association decide to pay the costs of casting the statue of Ingólfur in bronze and installing it on Arnarhóll hill, but without the reliefs. It was ceremonially unveiled on 24 February the following year. Certain changes had been made: the facial features are less harsh, while the helmet is taller and the ornament is different. The major alteration, however, was that the motto, and the reliefs on the plinth, were absent. The monument was thus not the consistent work of art Einar Jónsson had conceived.

A Norseman in the New World

In October 1916 an article was published in the Norwegian-language American newspaper *Nordisk Tidende* (Nordic Times) reporting that a statue of Thorfinnur Karlsefni was to be installed in a planned sculpture garden in Fairmont Park in Philadelphia. According to the sagas, Thorfinnur sailed from Greenland to Vínland (America) at the beginning of the 11th century accompanied by a group of men and women and settled there with his wife Guðrídur Thorbjarnardóttir. The origin of the project of memorializing Karlsefni was that a wealthy woman, Ellen Philippe Samuel, by then deceased, had bequeathed half a million dollars to found a sculpture park to be made up of works depicting the history of America. It was reported that the first sculpture was to portray the “first settler,” and that a project committee had been appointed, comprising J. Bunford Samuel (widower of Mrs. Samuel), Henry G. Leach (secretary of the American-Scandinavian Foundation), and two of Icelandic origin: Stanley T. Olafsson and Mr. Björnsson. The article in *Nordisk Tidende* was accompanied by two photographs of Einar Jónsson’s maquette of his statue of Thorfinnur. It is reported that the sculptor has been requested to send the maquette to America, so that the committee could better assess it. The article also mentions a lecture given by Leach on Jónsson’s work in New York some years earlier, in which he describes him as one of the greatest sculptors in the Nordic countries and says that in his work one might see the old saga spirit reborn in modern form.²¹

²¹ “Norrønt minde” 1916: 1.

MONUMENTS TO SETTLERS OF THE NORTH



Figure 4. Einar Jónsson's maquette of the statue of Thorfinnur Karlsefni, 1916.
The Einar Jónsson Museum.

Einar Jónsson's involvement in the project was the result of this promotion of his work, which had taken place in connection with the publication in 1915 of an issue of the *American-Scandinavian Review* focusing on Iceland. It had included an article by Leach about Jónsson's work with photographs of his art. Leach, who was a scholar of Nordic studies, was in touch with colleagues in Denmark, such as the Icelandic professor Finnur Jónsson of the University of Copenhagen. Einar Jónsson and the professor were acquainted as Finnur Jónsson and another scholar, Valtýr Guðmundsson, who had written his doctorate at the University of Copenhagen on the living conditions of Icelanders during the saga age, had advised Einar Jónsson on the garments and equipment of Ingólfur Arnarson when he worked on his statue. It seems obvious that Leach played a part in Einar Jónsson being commissioned to make the statue of Thorfinnur. In a letter to Jónsson in 1915, he had informed him that plans were under way to erect a memorial to Thorfinnur Karlsefni in Fairmount

Park, Philadelphia; that the donor, Mr. J. Bunford Samuel, intended to ask two or three sculptors to submit proposals; and that he had mentioned Einar Jónsson's name in that context. Leach concluded his letter by asking Jónsson: Would designing such a statue interest you?²²

The photographs of Einar Jónsson's sculpture in *Nordisk Tidende* appear to have made an impression, and to have been well received, as evidenced by an article entitled *Leif Eriksson Støttens Eftermæle* published in December 1916 in Chicago in another American-Scandinavian periodical, *Scandia*. The writer begins by discussing disputes over a statue of Leifur Eiríksson (Leif the Lucky) in Humboldt Park, Chicago, in which he himself had been involved. He recounts that the statue of Leifur, especially his clothing and weapons, were inconsistent with people's ideas of the appearance and behaviour of the Old Norse. He said that nothing in the statue indicated that the subject was a seafarer, and that those who were familiar with the hard toil on Norwegian vessels could not identify with the image that had been presented. The man portrayed, wearing a flimsy tunic and armed with a sword, bore more resemblance, the writer claimed, to the men who long afterwards had travelled southwards along the shores of Europe and returned to Norway with their haul. The Vikings who sought out uninhabited islands to settle were entirely different. They used their battle-axes both as defensive weapons and as tools on sea and on land. "Around the statue in Humboldt there is no seaweed, no anchor, oars or boatshed. The axe, without which the Viking cannot survive, is absent." This is not a Viking who navigates the southern Arctic seas and the North Atlantic. "He stands, and he will probably feel the cold over the winter."²³

But the writer saw something quite different in the photographs of Einar Jónsson's Thorfinnur Karlsefni, published in the November and December issues of the *American-Scandinavian Review*. A Viking stood with his hefty battle-axe leaning forward and rested his arms on it. He wore a warm cloak, probably of homespun woollen cloth or hide, surmised the writer, over his chain-mail hauberk. Beneath the cloak a two-foot sword was visible in its scabbard, and on his back Thorfinnur bore a Viking shield. This image, the writer maintains, is a

²² Letter from Henry G. Leach to Einar Jónsson, 23 June 1915.

²³ Ray 1916: 1

MONUMENTS TO SETTLERS OF THE NORTH

true depiction of the settlers of the Viking Age, and does honour to history and to Norwegian heritage.²⁴

A clear—and familiar—distinction is drawn here between North and South, and it is obvious from these words that Einar Jónsson’s proposal for a memorial to Thorfinnur reflected the ideas of people of Nordic origin about the appearance and physique of their Old Norse ancestors. The figure is equipped for battle and stands upright with a cloak on his shoulders and a shield on his back; with his extended, crossed arms resting on the axe handle, which leans forward, he looks over his left shoulder with a resolute expression. On his scabbard are images of Iceland’s guardian spirits and on the shield is a runic inscription describing the settler’s home country: “From the northern isle of fire and ice/of verdant dales and blue mountains/of wakeful sun and dreaming dark/abode of the goddesses of the Northern Lights.”²⁵



Figure 5. J. Bunford Samuel standing by the statue of Thorfinnur Karlsefni on the Schuylkill River Drive in Fairmont Park in Philadelphia, 1920. The Einar Jónsson Museum.

²⁴ Ray 1916: 1

²⁵ “Frá eylandi norðurs elds og ísa/blómstrandi dala og blárra fjalla/vakandi sólar og drauma—dimmu/dísa heimkynni norðurljósa.” “Þorfinnur karlsefni” [Thorfinnur “Karlsefni” Thorðarson] 1921: 1.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

As in the case with the statue of Ingólfur Arnarson, the composition of the piece is characterized by a strict formal structure and an emphasis on what may be termed the heroic image. The sculpture is made up of geometrical shapes, straight lines, oblique lines, and a circle. The expression and bearing of the figure indicate that Jónsson had set out, as with the statue of Ingólfur, through rigorous application of forms, to manifest ideas about the autonomous individual. It should be mentioned, however, that by this time he had moved on from the worldly individualism that had previously inspired him and now focused on the spiritual quest for lofty ideals. But the focus on the individual remained central to Jónsson's development of the work, as was the idea of the responsibility of the artist. In this sense his views were consistent with the idea of the settler of unknown lands.

Einar Jónsson went to the U.S. in the summer of 1917 to work on the final version of the statue. It was cast in bronze in 1917, and later a site was picked for it at East River Drive in Fairmont Park, Philadelphia, where it was unveiled in late 1920 at a ceremony commemorating the Norse settlement of America. A Philadelphia newspaper, reporting on the event, stated that the statue was the first of eighteen to be erected along the river to commemorate the many European nations that had gone to form the American nation.²⁶

Conclusion

While it would be unfair to compare Sigurður Guðmundsson's rough sketch for a figure of the settler Ingólfur Arnarson with Einar Jónsson's completed statues of the settlers of northern lands, Jónsson's sculptures, and the debate about them, are evidence of a changing emphasis in the ideas of what they were intended to represent. In the 19th-century discourse about the statue of Ingólfur, the emphasis was on the nation's gratitude to Ingólfur for commencing the settlement of Iceland. In accordance with this idea, Guðmundsson's figure holds a flaming torch—a reference to the rules of settlement to be followed by men—while the torch may also be interpreted to symbolize the pioneer who lights a beacon for others to follow after him. The torch becomes the first settler's

²⁶ "Unveil Viking Statue on East River Drive" 1920.

MONUMENTS TO SETTLERS OF THE NORTH

attribute, and not his weapon—the sword at his side—which remains, however, indispensable in the image of the Old Norse hero.

A good deal more resolve may be read from Jónsson's images of the settlers—from their bearing, facial expression, and weaponry. The images radiate the supremacy of the vigorous male, especially in the statue of Ingólfur. It is clear from the writings of the sculptor's contemporaries, Guðmundur Finnbogason and Ágúst H. Bjarnason, that this presentation harmonized with the views of various intellectuals of the time who were in a position to influence public opinion on cultural and social issues. In his lecture Finnbogason stated that Ingólfur had the pioneer spirit, and Jónsson implied the same when he said that *Lead Thyself* was a motto of the Northern Germanic race. While Jónsson's words must be attributed to his philosophical ideas that he had acquired in Copenhagen on originality in art, they also reflect other views expressed in the public debate on the statue of Ingólfur, in which “Nordicness” is portrayed as a strength. The same appears to have applied in the debate on the monument to Thorfinnur Karlsefni in the U.S. There, however, the focus is on Nordic man having grown strong through his struggle with the hostile nature of the North. In the view of Americans of Nordic descent in that region, the strength of the Norse settlers was manifested in their physique, bearing, and clothing. A man in a thin tunic, wielding a sword, had no place in northern climes. He would feel the cold, and his sword would probably prove easily blunted.

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