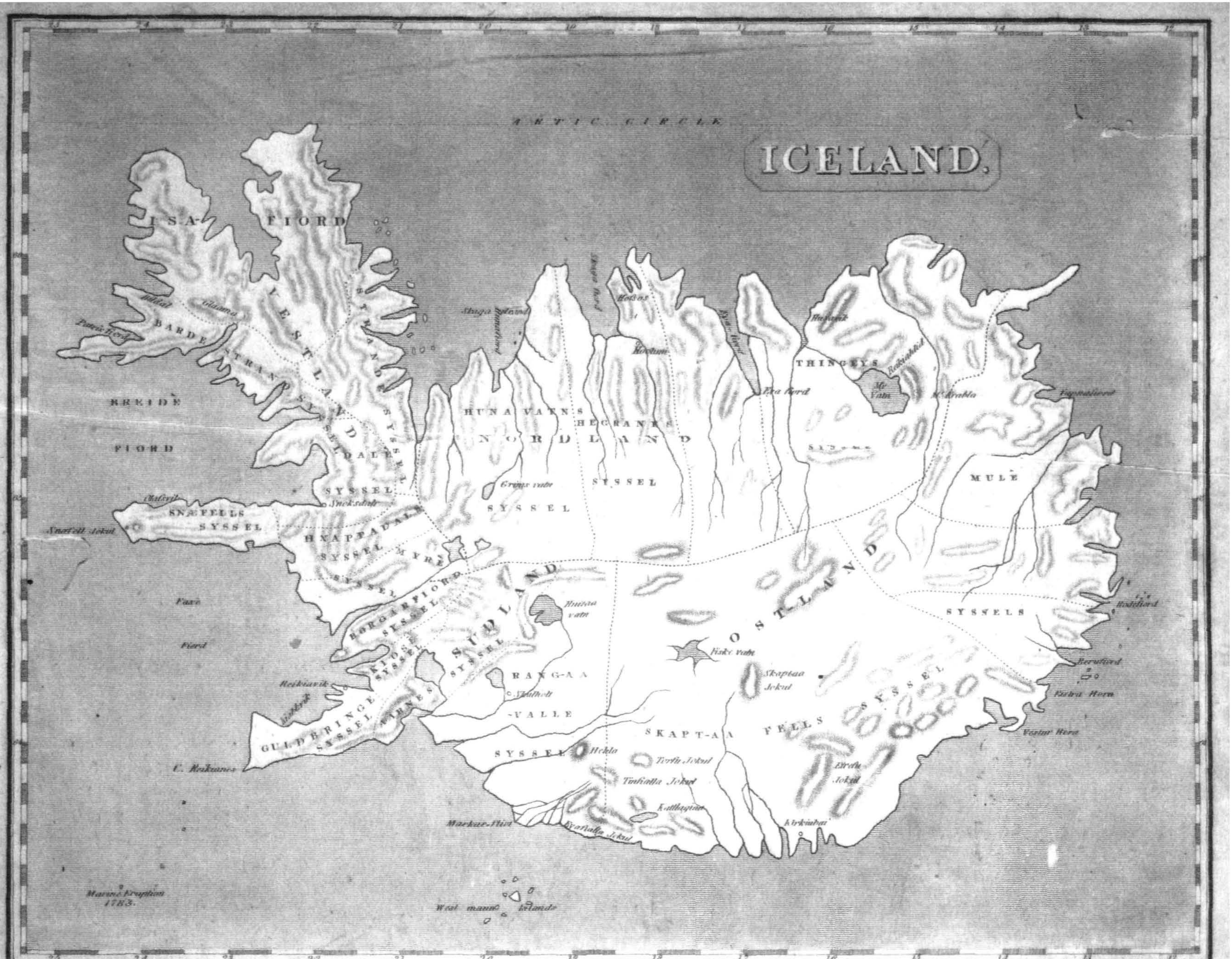
TRAVELS IN ICELAND.



ICELAND
ARTIC CIRCLE
ISA FIORD
VESTLAND
BARDE STRAND SYSSEL
BREIDE FIORD
SNÆFELLS SYSSEL
HNAPPADALS SYSSEL
MYRE SYSSEL
BORGARFIORD SYSSEL
KIOSE SYSSEL
GULDBRINGE SYSSEL
ARNES SYSSEL
HUNA VATNS
HEGRANES
NORDLAND
SYSSEL
THINGEYS
MULE
SYSSELS
SUDLAND
RANG-AA VALLE SYSSEL
OSTLAND
SKAPT-AA FELLS SYSSEL
Hekla
Markar-Fliot
Westmann Islands
Reikiavik
C. Reikianes
Faxe Fiord
Vester Horn
Berufiord

TRAVELS

IN THE

ISLAND OF ICELAND,

DURING THE SUMMER OF THE YEAR

MDCCCX.

By SIR GEORGE STEUART MACKENZIE, Baronet,
PRESIDENT OF THE PHYSICAL CLASS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY;
VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE ASTRONOMICAL INSTITUTION
OF EDINBURGH,
&c. &c. &c.

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LONDON.

1812.

But where to find that happiest spot below,
Who can direct, when all pretend to know?
The shudd'ring tenant of the frigid zone
Boldly proclaims that happiest spot his own:
Extols the treasures of his stormy seas,
And his long nights of revelry and ease.

— — — — — — — — —

Such is the patriot's boast, where'er we roam,
His first best country ever is—at home.

GOLDSMITH

T. ALLAN AND COMPANY,
Printers, Edinburgh.

TO HIS EXCELLENCY

FREDERICK, COUNT TRAMPE,

LATE GOVERNOR OF ICELAND,

NOW OF DRONTHEIM, IN NORWAY,

&c. &c. &c.

AS A TESTIMONY

OF RESPECT FOR HIS PUBLIC CHARACTER,

AND OF GRATITUDE FOR HIS KIND EXERTIONS

TO RENDER THE JOURNEY THROUGH ICELAND

AGREEABLE AND SUCCESSFUL,

THIS VOLUME

IS INSCRIBED

BY

THE AUTHOR.

ADVERTISEMENT TO THE SECOND EDITION.

A SECOND Edition of this Work having been called for, within the short period of six months from its first publication, while it has greatly flattered the Author and his Fellow-Travellers, has allowed but little time for procuring additional information. They have, however, revised the work carefully; and a succinct account of the Revolution (as it has been called) which took place in Iceland in the year 1809, has been added to the Appendix.

A Map of the great Volcanic Eruption which happened in 1783 has been procured, and reduced to the scale of the Map constructed for this Work.

EDINBURGH,
April 1812.

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PREFACE.

THE Island of ICELAND is but little distant from that of Britain: it has long been known to contain many extraordinary natural phenomena; and yet very few have been induced to visit it, either from private curiosity, or from the more general views of science. The first British travellers who attempted to explore the country, probably thought their observations too uninteresting to be communicated to the public; and even the Letters of Von Troil, who accompanied them, though in many respects valuable, were, perhaps, chiefly so, by awakening the curiosity of science to that neglected, but remarkable country.

In the year 1789, Sir John (then Mr) Stanley visited Iceland, with more extended views, and explored some parts of the country that had not been examined by Sir Joseph Banks. The very interesting account which he has given of the Geysers and the Reikum springs, in his letters to Dr Black, leaves room for regret that he has not given to the public a complete narrative of his voyage.

The importance which the study of Mineralogy has of late years acquired, and the intimate connection which it is now acknowledged to hold, with all legitimate views of geological science, rendered the examination of Iceland particularly desirable. Impressed with this idea, and several circumstances combining to strengthen the desire I had long entertained of visiting that island, I resolved to gratify my wishes during the summer of the last year.

My intentions being known, two gentlemen of the University of Edinburgh, Mr Henry Holland (now Dr Holland,) and Mr Richard Bright, expressed a wish to accompany me; and I did not hesitate to meet their wishes, knowing them to be young men of very superior talents and acquirements, in a high degree pleasing in their manners, and as I hoped to

to number them (as I now have the happiness of doing) among my friends. I was the more gratified by this incident, as particular circumstances had deprived me of the company of my friend Thomas Allan, Esq. a gentleman well known to mineralogists; and of that of Mr Hooker, whose reputation as a botanist is already very great. Mr Hooker, at the desire of Sir Joseph Banks, had gone to Iceland in 1809, and had made considerable collections in natural history, which were unfortunately destroyed, by the burning of the ship in which he was returning to England. He was desirous of repairing his losses, with the comfort of a companion to share his toil. Notwithstanding the destruction of his notes, and of almost every thing he had collected during his stay in Iceland, this gentleman has given to the world a volume replete with valuable information. It was only a short time ago, that Mr Hooker resolved to publish his work, (having first printed it merely for the use of his friends), and before he informed me of his intentions, I had, by his kind permission, extracted and printed his botanical remarks.

Though mineralogical research was the principal object of the voyage, yet having enjoyed the opportunity of seeing much more of Iceland than any former British traveller, and having, with my associates, bestowed considerable attention upon every thing that appeared interesting in the island and its inhabitants, I cannot but conceive myself as still under the obligation of submitting to the public, the information that has been acquired, even although Mr Hooker's valuable book may, in some respects, have anticipated me.

The labour of composing the following work has been divided, that it might be sent to the press with as little delay as possible. To some readers, perhaps, the difference of style, which such a division of labour necessarily creates, may be displeasing: yet, I trust, that the advantages of it will be still more apparent; that it will be felt, when each individual of a party devotes himself to those particular objects of research, which are most suitable to his inclination and habits of thought, there is a probability of much more accurate, as well as extensive information being acquired, than if every one em-

braced the whole field; and that, in a work of this kind, accuracy of observation will be considered of far greater importance than mere uniformity of composition.

Whoever reads the Preliminary Dissertation on the History and Literature of Iceland, the account of the Present State of Literature, and the chapter on Government, Laws, and Religion, will find no cause to regret that these parts of the work have been executed by Dr Holland; and medical men cannot but be satisfied with his account of the diseases of the Icelanders, which will be found in the Appendix. The Agricultural Report of Cheshire has given an early celebrity to Dr Holland's name; and I have great pleasure in anticipating, from the labour he has employed in this work, a material addition to the reputation which he has so deservedly acquired.

Mr Bright has made the most of the materials we had time to collect, for an account of the Zoology and Botany of Iceland. To him we are indebted for the preservation of the plants we gathered, and indeed for by far the greatest part of the collection; and I shall ever retain a grateful remembrance of the

chearful and ready exertion he always displayed, and the undeviating good humour, with which he submitted to the cross accidents which sometimes befel us. In the midst of professional studies, he has found time to furnish me with many valuable remarks, and much useful information, which, without his assistance, I could not have procured. These, in addition to the materials of Dr Holland's Journal, and my own, have enabled me to draw up a narrative of our Voyage and Travels, in which simplicity has been chiefly studied. For the Narrative, and for what relates to Rural Affairs, Commerce, and Mineralogy, I am alone answerable.

I do not pretend, even with the able assistance I have received, to have accomplished all that might have been done, or to have rendered the future visits of naturalists to Iceland useless or unimportant. The eastern and northern coasts still remain unexplored, and from what I have learned, are well worthy the attention of mineralogists and botanists.

We went to Iceland, believing that we had provided against any difficulties which might occur; but we were so far deceived, that we found our-

selves obliged to spend much of the time in Reikiavik, the chief place in the island, which we had expected to employ in travelling through the country. The extreme slowness of the Icelanders, their awkward mode of loading horses, and the badness of the roads, (if any thing in Iceland can be called a road), occasioned much unlooked-for trouble and delay; and will be regarded, I trust, as an apology for any disappointment in expectations which may have been excited.

The geography of Iceland is still very imperfect; but a survey of the coast, in which two Danish officers have during some years been engaged, will doubtless, in a great measure, remove this defect. Ignorant of this undertaking, I took instruments with me for the purpose of improving the geography as much as I was able, and of making meteorological observations; but I soon found that it was impracticable to carry them safely, and to attend at the same time to the objects I had principally in view. Having obtained a copy of Minor's charts of the south-western coast of the island, I have been enabled to delineate those parts through which

we passed, so as to convey a tolerably correct idea of the face of the country. By means of a sextant, I found the latitudes laid down by Minor to be very correct; that of Reikiavik differing only 4″ from my observations. From the neighbourhood of Reikiavik, I took a set of angles with a theodolite, and from these, and observations taken with a compass as we travelled, our route has been traced. But, though the map I have drawn certainly gives a better idea of the country than any hitherto published, it must not be considered as by any means accurate; for I had no opportunity of rectifying my observations; and those made with a compass are liable to many errors. The small general map of Iceland is a mere sketch, made for the purpose of giving an idea of the shape of the island, and of the relative positions of different places mentioned in the course of the work.

Our deficiency in meteorological observations arises from causes already noticed. The register of the weather is annexed as it was made up at the time.

Though it was inconsistent with the plan of this

volume, to enter into details respecting the history of Iceland, it has been thought proper to give a very general historical sketch of the island, which may be useful to the reader. A very good account of the state of Iceland in the eighteenth century, has been published by Mr Stephenson, the present President of the Supreme Court of Justice in the island. From that book some valuable information has been extracted; and, in consulting other works of merit in reference to the same object, we have been actuated by the earnest desire of conveying to the public a distinct view of a country, which must ever be interesting, both to the moral and physical observer.

Edinburgh,
October 1811.

PRELIMINARY DISSERTATION

ON THE

HISTORY AND LITERATURE

OF

ICELAND.

BY HENRY HOLLAND, M D.

VII.L.24

DISSERTATION, &c.

THE History of Iceland, though possessing little importance in its relation to the political events of other nations, is nevertheless curious and interesting in many of its features. It is the narrative of a distinct and peculiar race of people; of a community which, oppressed by all the severities of soil and climate, and secluded amidst the desolation and most destructive operations of nature, has preserved, through the progress of nearly a thousand years, an enlightened system of internal policy, an exalted character in all religious and social duties, liberal methods of education, and the culture of even the more refined branches of literature and knowledge. Few of the events which are most prominent on the page of general history, are to be met with in the simple chronicles of this island. The battle, the siege, the rebellion, and the revolution, are here almost utterly unknown. In place of these social and self-engendered calamities, we find the record, pathetic in its simplicity, of the various physical evils by which the Icelanders have been oppressed,—the severities of a winter—the famine of the ensuing year—the virulence of an epidemic disease—or the horrors of an earthquake and volca-

nic eruption. With the civil history of the people, that of their literature is intimately combined; for, in the government and internal concerns of the country, mental attainments and civil influence have at all periods been closely linked together. The progressive state of religion forms another principal feature in their annals; and more appears of individual biography, than is common to historical writing; a natural effect, as it would seem, of the situation of the inhabitants, and of the condition of society which has existed among them from early times. The records of Iceland, in short, are not so much those of kings and governments, as of a community of families and a people: and the philosopher or moralist, while he gleans over the fields of history for the materials of his study, will find his researches successful even in the annals of this remote and desolate island.

The native historians of Iceland are numerous. Of their particular merits, more will hereafter be said: at present it may be sufficient to state, that they have successfully elucidated even the most remote periods in the history of their country, and that their simplicity and distinctness furnish strong internal evidence of authenticity. The minuteness of narrative, however, which forms their best recommendation to those who desire to study the character of a people and of a passing age, would deter the majority of readers from an examination of their contents. In the following sketch of the history of Iceland, the most conspicuous and remarkable features have been selected, to the exclusion of the numerous details with which the native historians have crowded the picture; while an attempt is made to trace the circumstances, giving to the Icelanders that peculiar and distinctive character, which, as a nation, they have always exhibited. In reference to the latter object, it was requisite that

some notice should be taken of the literature of the country at different periods; and, accordingly, with the narrative of events, are connected those sketches of the intellectual habits and pursuits of the people, which may best serve to illustrate this singular feature in their history. To a subsequent chapter is reserved the account of the present state of literature and education in the island.

Much argument has taken place on the question, whether Iceland was the Thule of the ancients. Though the affirmative opinion has not been without its authorities, and these of eminent character, yet there appears, on the whole, little that is satisfactory or probable in this hypothesis. Were it true that the Romans had ventured upon the northern ocean as far as the shores of this island, we might expect to find some distinct and well-marked record of the fact. The passages, however, from their poets and historians, in which the Thule is mentioned, do not afford any such testimonies; and some of these would seem to be decidedly opposed to the opinion in question. *

The discovery of Iceland, as first authenticated by history, is due to the adventurous spirit of certain Norwegian and Swedish pirates, about the year 860. Naddodr, the first voyager who visited the island, was accidentally driven upon the eastern coast, while sailing from Norway to the Faroe Isles:

* Those who wish to examine further into the merits of this question, may consult the writings of Saxo Grammaticus, Casaubon, Bochart and Mallet; the Crymogæa of Arngrim Jonas; the Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiæ, &c. The two first mentioned writers maintain the identity of Iceland with the Thule of the Romans. Arngrim Jonas is the principal opponent of this opinion. Bochart, Mallet, and Bishop Jonson, the learned author of the Ecclesiastical History, hold an intermediate belief; supposing it not impossible that Iceland was known to the ancients; but contending that they applied the name Thule, without particular discrimination, to several places near the northern boundary of their empire.

eastern coast, while sailing from Norway to the Faroe isles: he ascended to the summit of a hill near the shore; and, seeing around him only a solitary desart, the mountains of which were covered with snow, though it was then the autumn of the year, he gave to the country the name of Sniáland. Led by the report of this casual discovery, a Swede, called Gardar, pursued the same track; and, in the summer of 864, succeeded in circumnavigating the island, which he named Gardarsholm, or the island of Gardar. Floke, a pirate of much celebrity in those times, was the third adventurer in this track. Directed by the flight of ravens, which he had carried out with him from Norway, he reached Iceland; where he remained two winters; exploring, during this time, a great extent of the southern and western coasts, and giving to the island the name which it still retains. This was derived from the observation he made of a large quantity of ice in some of the bays on the northern coast; probably floated hither from Greenland.

These voyagers carried back with them various and contradictory reports of the island thus recently discovered. Their expeditions, though affording some knowledge of the country, would probably not have led to its colonization, had not other causes contributed to this effect. At the period in question, Harold the Fair-haired, who had been successful in subjugating the several petty states of Norway, obtained the sovereignty over the whole of that kingdom. Many noble Norwegians, dissatisfied with the change, and aggrieved by the attempts of Harold to controul and reduce their privileges, determined to abandon the country which gave them birth. A body of these voluntary exiles, under the conduct of Ingolf, one of the discontented subjects, sailed from Norway, A. D. 874, and directed their course to Ice-

land, where they hoped to retain unimpaired their former independence. It would appear that this emigration was the result of a mature and well-concerted scheme; since Ingolf, with his kinsman Hiorleif, visited Iceland in 870; and afterwards returned to Norway, to assemble the different families, who were content to resign their fortunes to his guidance.

It is not necessary to the history of Iceland to trace back into ages more remote, the Norwegian people by whom the island was thus colonized. Forming one branch of the great Gothic or Teutonic family, which occupied at this period the northern kingdoms of Europe, it cannot be doubted that they were derived from one common source; and we look to their origin in the Scythian emigration, which, nine centuries before, under the banners of the victorious Odin, carried conquest and usurpation throughout all the vast regions of the north.

It is stated by the Icelandic historians, that the first settlers upon the island, found, on certain parts of the coast, wooden crosses and other instruments; from which it might be inferred that the country had before been visited, either by accident or design. The nature of the relics, thus discovered, led to the belief that these earlier visitors were Christians; and it was conceived probable that fishermen from Britain, or from Ireland, had been accidentally driven upon the coast, and had either perished there, or succeeded in refitting their vessels, so as to return to their own country. That they did not remain long on the island, is rendered probable by there being no vestige of habitations when the Norwegians arrived. Some of the Icelandic historians, however, make a different statement; and assert that there were actual settlements there, previously to the period of the Norwegian emigration. The Landnama Book, one of the

earliest of the records of Iceland, speaks of the discovery of crosses, bells, and certain writings in the Irish language; and mentions in another place the residence of some of these foreigners at Kirkiubai, on the southern coast of the island.* Are Frode, an eminent writer at the commencement of the 12th century, who took a part in the composition of the Landnama Book, states in another of his works, that the *Papæ*, as these original inhabitants were termed by the Norwegians, were actually upon the island at the arrival of the colony from Norway, and that they migrated elsewhere, from an aversion to the society of the Heathen strangers.† It is somewhat singular that a difference of statement should exist on this subject; more especially when we consider the early period at which the Icelanders began to compose history, and the minute attention they bestowed upon historical facts. The first opinion which has been mentioned, though not free from uncertainty, is probably that which approaches most nearly to the truth.‡

* Landnama Book. Proem et Part IV. Cap. 11. Havniæ 1774.

† Arii Sched c. 2.

‡ The testimonies of Alfred and the venerable Bede have been adduced, to prove that Iceland was known to the natives of Britain before the discovery of the Norwegian pirates. The description, however, given by Bede, of *an island, called Thule, six days sail from Britain, where there are no nights in the summer solstice, and no days in the winter*, seems to be derived solely from the testimony of Pliny, in describing the northern voyage of the celebrated Pytheas Massiliensis (*Hist. Nat. l. ii. c. 75, & l. iv. c. 16.*); and it appears probable that the Thule of Pytheas is to be found in the Shetland or Faroe isles, rather than in the more remote coasts of Iceland. In Hackluyt's Voyages (*London*, 1759), *vol.* 1. *p.* 1, it is mentioned, on the authority of Galfridus Monumetensis, and the Αρχαιονομία of M. Lambard, that the ancient British king, Arthur, about the beginning of the 6th century, subdued Iceland and Greenland, as well as many of the northern kingdoms of Europe.* It is further stated, in the same book, likewise from Gal-

However this may be, Ingolf and his associates found no other difficulty in establishing themselves on the island, than what arose from the nature of the country, at that time so much covered with thickets, that it was necessary in some places to open tracks through them. The infant colony which, directed by certain superstitious observances, was first settled in the south-western part of Iceland, received a rapid augmentation of its numbers.* Many other noble Norwegian families, dissatisfied with their condition under the imperious authority of Harold, left their country, attended by large trains of dependants, and followed the course of the earlier emigrants, who had sought liberty in the desolate regions of Iceland. Unassociated in their plans, and arriving at different times, they did not confine themselves to any particular district, but spread their settlements along all the coasts of the island. It appears that Harold at first opposed no hinderance to this emigration of his subjects, but even afforded them in some instances his assistance and advice, in the distribution of the lands upon which they fixed their new abodes.† Afterwards, however, its frequency so much alarmed him, that he issued an edict, imposing a fine of four ounces of silver upon every person who should leave Norway to settle in Iceland.

fridus, that Malgo, a successor of King Arthur, a second time conquered Iceland, and subjected it to his power. These accounts are evidently entitled to very little credit.

* When Ingolf approached the coast of Iceland, he threw into the sea the wooden door of his former habitation in Norway; and some time afterwards, finding it cast upon the shore at Reikiavik, he fixed his abode on this spot. We meet with relations of a similar practice among others of the first settlers in the country; it being regarded as a method of ascertaining the will of the Deities as to their place of settlement. *Landnama Book*, p. 1, c. 6.

† Landnama Book, p. 5, c. 1.

The emigrations, however, in despite of restriction, continued to a great extent; and, in little more than half a century, the coasts of Iceland were peopled in a degree fully equivalent to the means of subsistence which the country afforded. The Landnama Book, before mentioned, the object of which is to give a picture of the colonization of the island, describes with singular minuteness the arrival and spreading of the different settlers; and connects this narrative with a profusion of genealogical detail, unexampled perhaps in the annals of any other country. From this record it appears, that, together with the Norwegians, many Danes and Swedes came over to the country; and the names also are preserved of several individuals of the Scotch and Irish nations, who at this time chose Iceland as their place of abode.

The period occupied in this progressive colonization of the country, may be considered as the first in the history of Iceland. The Norwegians brought with them to the island their language, their religion, their customs, and their historical records. Their method of settling was accordant with the usages which existed at this period among the northern nations of Europe; a sort of feudal arrangement was immediately adopted, by which every leader of a body of emigrants, having occupied a district of country, distributed lands to his followers, under certain implied conditions of vassalage and subservience. Thus all the habitable parts of the coast were speedily parcelled out among the leaders of numerous small communities; and, fresh bands of emigrants still arriving, frequent contests arose between the new comers, and those already dwelling in the country. These contests for possession became in time so common among the petty feudal chiefs in different parts of the island, that a ne-

cessity was universally felt for the adoption of some system, which, by connecting the yet separate communities, might regulate the concerns, assimilate the interests, and unite the feelings of the whole. The beneficial change, thus required, was effected A. D. 928, fifty-four years after the arrival of the first settlers; and a constitution was established, well calculated to provide for the emergencies which gave it birth.

The general features of the new government, derived in part from the more ancient institutions of the northern nations, were undoubtedly those of an aristocracy. The island was divided into four provinces; over each of which presided an hereditary governor or judge. The southern and western provinces each comprehended three subdivisions or prefectures; the northern province four of these prefectures, on account of its greater extent; the eastern province only two: so as to give a distribution of the whole island into twelve secondary districts. Over each of these divisions was placed a prefect; who, as well as the governor of the province, held his office by an hereditary right, being originally appointed from one of the principal families in the district. The prefectures were further subdivided into smaller districts, called *Hreppar;* in each of which there were appointed five civil officers; elected from among those of the inhabitants, who, to a certain value of property, united the reputation of general sense and integrity. It was the province of these magistrates to maintain the peace and good order of their several districts; and more especially to attend to the condition and management of the poor.

In each of the three civil divisions thus established, were vested certain powers of assembly for public purposes. In the *Hreppar*, or smaller districts, these assemblies were com-

posed of all the inhabitants who possessed more than an assigned value of estate, and were of an unblemished moral character. Their proceedings, which related almost entirely to matters of local police, were under the cognizance of the Court of Prefecture; formed by the prefect and the deputies from the several included districts. At these second assemblies of judicature, which were held once in the year, a great part of the civil business of the country was transacted, and a superintendance exercised also in certain matters of religion; an appeal, however, being still reserved, in the first instance to the States of the whole Province, which met at particular times, and finally to the Supreme General Assembly of Iceland.

This great assembly, called the *Althing*, * was held annually on the shores of the lake of Thingvalla; and was attended by all the civil officers, and by a certain number of the clergy and laity from every part of the island. In it were vested the legislative and supreme judicial powers of the state, and the decision in all important matters of national policy. Every appeal from the lower courts was determined here; and every magistrate made responsible to this tribunal for his public conduct. The functions of the executive government were committed by the assembly to a magistrate, elected by their votes, and retained in power during their pleasure. This supreme officer had the title of *Laugman*, or administrator of the laws. Chosen, in consequence of merit, from among the chiefs of the state, he was invested with all the dignities suitable to his office. He presided at

* From *all*, all, and *thing*, a forum or place of justice. This assembly corresponds in many circumstances to the Wittena-gemot of the Anglo-Saxons. Similar institutions, indeed, existed among most of the northern nations at this period.

the general assembly, conducted its counsels, and registered its decisions. He interpreted the laws of the nation, and pronounced the sentences which the administration of these laws required. His authority, though dependent for its duration upon the will of the states, was usually continued for many years, and often for life; while, at the same time, this uncertainty afforded an important check to abuses of his office. As the supreme magistrate of the country, he was wisely gifted with all the externals of dignity and power; and with equal wisdom restricted in all those points, where his influence might prove dangerous to the welfare of the republic. *

In this sketch of the constitution which the Icelanders created for themselves, an evident relation will be traced to the progressive institutions of several of the European states. One obvious peculiarity, however, offers itself in the present instance; arising, as it is probable, from the character and rank of the first colonists, and from their attachment to the habits and institutions of their Scandinavian ancestors. Elsewhere, the progress towards regular government was gradual, and every step made through contest and bloodshed. In Iceland, all was effected by a single and simultaneous effort. The necessity appeared for some bond of union among the several communities of the island: the voice of sage deliberation gave to the people this common bond, in a constitution which was received without tumult, and brought into action without delay. On this subject it would be an injustice to the reader not to quote the words of the elegant and ingenious Mallet.

'Le génie de ces peuples, leur bon sens naturel, et leur 'amour pour la liberté y paroissent sans aucun nuage. Au-

* A minute account of the constitution of the Icelandic commonwealth is given in the Crymogæa of Arngrim Jonas.

‘ cune force extérieure ne les croise, ni ne les gêne; c'est
‘ une nation livrée à elle même, qui s'établit dans un pays
‘ isolé, et comme separé du reste du monde; dans tous ses
‘ établissemens, on ne voit que la plus pure expression de ses
‘ inclinations, et de ses sentimens: et ils lui sont en effet si
‘ naturels, que l'on n'apperçoit pas dans les recits aussi
‘ naïfs, qu'étendus, des Chroniques Islandois qu'aucune déli-
‘ beration génerale, aucune irrésolution, aucune expérience
‘ des états différens, ayent précedé chez eux l'institution de
‘ cette forme politique. Tout y nait, et s'y arrange de soi-
‘ même; et comme les abeilles forment leurs ruches, les nou-
‘ veaux Islandois établissent chez eux ce gouvernement, qui
‘ semble ne devoir être le fruit que d'une longue experience
‘ et d'une étude réflechie des hommes; et dont un grand gé-
‘ nie de ce siécle (*Montesquieu*) remarque avec étonnement,
‘ qu'il a été trouvé dans les bois.’ *

The code of laws, adopted in connection with this new form of government, and progressively altered and amended by the decisions of the public assembly, is another striking specimen of the genius and habits of the Icelanders of this age. It was constructed with a minute attention to the usages of the people, and to the various objects in their internal economy. All the contingencies of society were provided for; the relations and duties of different classes prescribed; and other regulations introduced, which had in view the convenience and utility of the whole. As instances, may be mentioned the laws respecting marriage, divorce, and inheritance; those which regarded the management of the poor, the distribution of landed property, and the regulation of weights and measures. The criminal laws were equally

* Introduction a l'Histoire de Dannemarc, p. 118.

reduced to a systematic form, and adapted to the character of society in this age. In conformity to the custom of the other Scandinavian nations, corporal punishment was rarely inflicted; and the atonement for almost every species of offence was made by the payment of certain fines; which, in the cases of more heinous guilt, amounted sometimes to the confiscation of the whole property of the offender.* As, in the Spartan and Roman laws, no punishment was provided for parricide; from the same conviction that the nature of the crime was in itself a sufficient security against its commission. There are evidences in some of the ancient writings of the country, that the trial by jury was not unknown to the Icelanders during the early periods of their history. Their acquaintance with this mode of trial was not obtained from their Scandinavian descent; but it seems to have been resorted to only in particular circumstances, and was not adopted in the code of laws framed for the republic of Iceland.†

The constitution, thus adopted by the Icelanders, was preserved with little change for more than three centuries; during which period the records exist of thirty-eight Laugmen, who in succession sustained the executive powers. Were it allowed to apply the term to a desolate island on the confines of the Arctic Circle, this might be called the golden age of Iceland. Secured by physical circumstances from the ambition of more powerful states, an efficient government and well directed laws provided for the people all the advantages of justice and social order. Education, literature, and

* For an account of the *Wïgslode*, or criminal laws of the Icelandic commonwealth, see the Crymogæa of Arngrim Jonas.

† The Eyrbyggia Saga (Havnia, 1787, p. 47.) contains a curious narrative of the trial of a female, named Geirrida, accused of practising the art of magic; to judge in which case, twelve men were appointed, and put upon their oaths.—An account of the same transaction is given in the Landnama Book, p. 82, note.

even the refinements of poetical fancy, flourished among them: like the Aurora Borealis of their native sky, the poets and historians of Iceland not only illumined their own country, but flashed the lights of their genius through the night which then hung over the rest of Europe. Commerce was pursued by the inhabitants with ardour and success; and they partook in the maritime adventures of discovery and colonization, which gave so much merited celebrity to the Norwegians of this period. Many of their chiefs and learned men visited the courts of other countries, formed connections with the most eminent personages of the time, and surveying the habits, institutions and arts of different communities, returned home, fraught with the treasures of collected knowledge. Nor was there among the Icelanders of this period an extinction of the elevated spirit, common to their forefathers and to the age. The Sagas, or tales of the country, afford many striking pictures of that high feeling of honour, and of those deeds of personal prowess, which were cherished by the disposition of the northern nations, and which refused not to exist even in this remote and desolate region.

Of the several features which distinguish this remarkable period in the history of Iceland, the literary character of the people is doubtless the most extraordinary and peculiar. We require much evidence to convince us of the fact, that a nation, remote from the rest of Europe, dwelling on a soil so sterile, and beneath such inclement skies, should have sent forth men whose genius, taste and acquirements, did honour to their country, and to the times in which they lived. Such evidence, however, of the most decisive kind, we possess in the many writings which have come down from this period to the present age, and in the testimonies afforded by the con-

temporary writers of other countries. The reality of the fact, indeed, can admit of no doubt; and it is only left for us to speculate upon the causes which led to this singular anomaly in the history of literature.

The original settlers in Iceland were men who had possessed eminence and hereditary rank in the kingdom of Norway. Deserting their country from an abhorrence of despotic sway, they carried with them to their new abodes the language of their ancestors, (the Gothic or Teutonic root, from which so many branches have sprung;) and numerous records, both of individual family descent, and of the general history of the northern nations; these annals being preserved for the most part in that poetical form, which dwelt with an equal vivacity of impression upon the memory and feelings. The mythology of the Scandinavians, in its nature propitious to poetic fiction and ornament, was at the same time transplanted into Iceland; the gloomy scenery of which was not wholly unaccordant with the character and usages of this religion. The majesty and the terrors of Odin and of Thor might well be supposed to reside amidst the desolation of nature; and the future bliss of the Valhalla was pictured with a simplicity of description, which gave it to the imagination even of the Icelander, who knew but the names of luxury and splendour. The attributes of the other deities, and the metaphorical or fictitious events of the mythology, were equally adapted to the situation and conceptions of the people, during this infancy of their existence as an independent community.

Possessing thus the materials for history and the elements of poetical composition, and aided by various remembrances and associations connected with their former country, it is

not wonderful that the Icelanders should have been early led to the cultivation of these branches of literature. Other causes also contributed to this effect. The institution of a regular form of government, though it diminished the number of incidents which might have been adorned by the language of poetry, yet afforded a peaceable security of condition, which favoured the culture of the mind, and enabled those who had learning or genius to record the events and atchievements of ages that were gone by. The peculiar form, too, of this government, afforded a powerful incentive to mental exertions; and at the great annual assembly of the people, those who possessed quickness of talent, with powers of composition and oratory, never failed to obtain the applause of their fellow-citizens, and an influence in the deliberations of the state. Nor were the more domestic occupations of the Icelanders such as to preclude an indulgence of these dispositions. The summer's sun saw them indeed laboriously occupied in seeking their provision from a stormy ocean and a barren soil; but the long seclusion of the winter gave them the leisure, as well as the desire, to cultivate talents, which were at once so fruitful in occupation and delight. During the darkness of their year, and beneath the rude covering of wood and turf, they recited to their assembled families the deeds and descent of their forefathers; from whom they had received that inheritance of liberty, which they now dwelt among deserts to preserve.

But it was not solely as reviving the memory of former times, or as a source of domestic enjoyment, that the Icelanders of this age devoted themselves to the composition of history and poetry. The ambition of wealth and glory further animated their pursuits. Their bards and historians

visited other countries, resided amid the splendours of courts, were caressed by the greatest monarchs of the time, and returned to their native island, covered with honours, and enriched by the gifts which their genius had won. Thus, interest and emulation preserved the character which the people had acquired, long after some of the causes producing it had ceased to operate; and literature became with the Icelanders a species of commerce, in which the fruit of their mental endowments was exchanged for those foreign luxuries or comforts, which nature had denied to them from their own soil.

Such appear to have been the circumstances which gave rise to this singular condition of Iceland during the period from the 10th to the 14th century; nor will it seem extraordinary, when the nature of the causes is considered, that they should have had so much effect upon the habits and character of the people. It may be observed, in concurrence with the view that has been given, that their attention was chiefly engaged by the two branches of literature already mentioned, history and poetry; and that the more severe departments of knowledge, though not entirely disregarded, were by no means held in equal estimation. To these favourite pursuits they applied their utmost powers; cultivating them in various forms, yet reducing the whole to a system, which in its structure displayed great refinement and skill.

The poetry of the ancient Icelanders, though cherished by them with so much success, was not, however, essentially distinct in its character from that common to the other northern nations at this period. Before the emigration which originally peopled Iceland, the Scandinavian kings and chieftains retained in their courts, and about their persons, bards who might celebrate their greatness, and convey the memory of their deeds to future times. These men were called

Skaldr or Skalds:* they exercised poetry as a profession, and their exertions were munificently rewarded by those whose praises they sung. After the Icelanders were established as a people, and when, from the causes just enumerated, they had devoted themselves to poetical composition, their native poets assumed the highest rank among these bards of the age. The style of their composition was nearly the same as that of their predecessors in the art; but, from their more complete devotion to the pursuit, they appear to have acquired greater skill, and a superior excellence in the qualities which were deemed essential to this kind of poetry. We accordingly find that the Icelandic Skalds obtained a singular celebrity, not only in their own country, but throughout all the north of Europe. They visited the courts of England, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, and were everywhere received with the hospitality and honours due to their talents, and to the exertions they made in the service of their patrons. From catalogues which are preserved to us of the Skalds who flourished in the three last mentioned kingdoms, it appears that the majority of the whole number were natives of Iceland; and numerous testimonies exist of the superior reputation and influence which these islanders enjoyed in the exercise of their profession. †

* The origin of the word *Skald* has been variously stated. It has been derived from *Skiall, narratio;* from *skall, sonus;* from *gal-a, canere;* and by Torfæus *(Præfat. Hist. Orcad.)* from *Skalla, depilare.* The most probable derivation seems to be from *Skiael,* signifying wisdom or counsel; whence also the English word *skill.*

† See the *Skalda-tal,* or list of Skalds, in the appendix to Wormius's Litt. Runic. Also the accurate catalogue in the Sciograph. Hist. Literar. Island. p. 49; an excellent work, written by Halfdan Einarsen, rector of the school at Hoolum, and published at Copenhagen in 1777. Under the form of a *catalogue raisonée,* with notes and indexes, it affords the most complete account, yet extant, of the literature and learned men of Iceland.

So much has been written concerning the Scandinavian poetry of this age, that it will not be requisite here to enter with much minuteness into the subject. The character of this poetry exhibited certain peculiarities, derived partly from the mythology with which it was connected, partly from the situation and circumstances of the northern nations. The religion of the Scandinavians, highly metaphorical in its nature, and embracing many strange and exaggerated fictions, gave a corresponding tone to the poetical composition of the people. It abounded in allegory and abstruse images. The events and language of mythology, associated with the various objects of nature, threw over them a shade of mystery, somewhat akin to the sublime. Even where the subject was of a narrative kind, or the praises of a hero were sung, a studied obscurity was still preserved;—every name assumed some fictitious and figurative shape;—the thought was strained to meet the conceptions of the poet;—and the imagination oppressed by the magnitude of the metaphors employed. Owing to these causes, many of the compositions which have come down to us from this age, are either wholly unintelligible, or have little accordance with the rules and observances of modern taste.

The circumstances of the northern nations, and especially of the Icelanders, further modified the character of their poetry. Dwelling in countries where the softer features of nature were but rarely seen, and simple from necessity in all their habits and modes of life, their compositions seldom exhibit much refinement either of imagery or feeling. We do not find any extended descriptions of nature, or of the mental passions and emotions. All the allusions of this kind are short and abrupt; while yet they often involve a degree of hyperbole, which would be inadmissible in the poetry of the

present day. No resemblance was too vague or fanciful to form the basis of a metaphor; and the imagination being urged to the discovery of such relations, numerous allegorical phrases were thus obtained, which were habitually employed by the writers of the age; though with every license to the novelties which individual genius might suggest. Their phraseology, however, was sometimes much less extravagant; and, in the description of common events, we occasionally find a homeliness and simplicity of style, which are strikingly contrasted with the qualities just described. *

The structure of the verse in the northern poetry of this period, as exemplified by that of the Icelanders, was equally peculiar. Its harmony appears to have depended less upon the arrangement and number of syllables, (though this also was the subject of minute attention,) than upon certain alliterations, and repetitions of sound, which were studiously introduced into all their poetical writings. The assonance, thus sought for, was of a more various and complicated kind than is admissible in the mechanism of modern verse. The simple artifice of rhyme was indeed rarely employed; but upon the disposition of the consonants and vowels, and the repetition of these according to certain rules, infinite skill and labour were bestowed. Though it is difficult now to appreciate the beauty or propriety of these alliterations, we may presume that it was not merely as a demonstration of skill that they

* Instances of the metaphors employed in the poetry of the Skalds might be indefinitely multiplied. The earth is *the daughter and wife of Odin*;—hunger, *the knife of Hela or Death*;—mountains, *the bones of the giant Ymer*;—giants, *the sons of frost*;—a warlike mind is *an angry sword*;—a battle, *a storm of blood*;—the raven is said to *rejoice over the hard game of war*;—*a cloud of bloody drops covers the head of the wounded*, &c.

were used; and it is probable they had severally their adaptations to the nature of the Gothic language; which, abounding in consonants, might derive much increase of harmony from this artful disposition of sounds. The varieties of alliteration were exceedingly numerous. Sometimes a repetition of the initial letters of verses was required;—sometimes a correspondence in the initial letters of several words occurring in a distich or a verse; while in other cases, more complex repetitions of sound were obtained, by using not only the same initial letters in different parts of a distich, but also certain correspondent syllables, with regular intervals between them. These varieties were connected with an almost equal diversity in the metre of the poetry; of which some have estimated more than a hundred different forms. It has been supposed that certain of these metres have a correspondence with the Sapphic measure of the lyrical poets of antiquity; but this opinion may probably be considered more fanciful than certain.*

* The metre most frequently used among the Icelanders was one in which the stanza was composed of four couplets; each line of the couplet consisting of six syllables; as in the following example from the Gunnlaugi Saga, the address of Gunnlaug to Helga, at the time of their last parting:

Bramani skein brima	Enn sa geisli syslir
Brims und liosum himni	Sidan menia-fridar
Hristar horvi glœstrar	Hvarma-tungls ok hringa
Hauk-frann a mik lauka.	Hlinar uthurft mina.

'Like that of the falcon, the bright eye of the beautiful maid, shining from 'beneath an eye-brow, which is curved as the horned moon, hath enlightened me 'by its splendour. But the beam from beneath the moon-like eye-brow of the 'maiden adorned with rings, is the cause of evil, both to herself and to me.'

Some valuable critical remarks on the Scandinavian poetry of this age will be found in various parts of Mallet's *Introd. a l'Histoire de Dannemarc*; in the notes of his excellent translator, Dr Percy; and also in Dr Van Troil's Letter on

The Scandinavian poetry was thus an art of the most refined kind; and, as such, exercised with peculiar success by the Icelanders of this age. The skill of the poet being called into action even more than his imagination, contests in variety and facility of versification were very frequent, and much credit was attached to impromptus, as a proof of poetical talent. Instances of such extemporary composition are extremely common, and may be found related in most of the Icelandic Sagas.* From the same works it appears that these short pieces of poetry, (called *Flockr*, to distinguish them from the longer and more finished compositions, which had the name of *Drapa*,†) were frequently the vehicle of queries and enigmas, proposed to the ingenuity of competitors in the art. A striking example of this is recorded in the Hervarar Saga, where, to decide in a contest between a certain king and his vassal, relatively to the payment of tribute, a strict trial was made before judges of the intellectual skill of the two parties, in proposing and solving such poetical enigmas.‡ Satire, too, was by no means an uncommon subject of these poems; and it was at one time exercised with such severity

Icelandic Poetry In the specimen given above, the regular alliteration will be observed; and other instances of this will be found in No. IV. of the Appendix to this volume.

* See the Gunnlaugi ok Skalld-Rafni Saga, Hervarar Saga, Eyrbyggia Saga, Egills Saga, &c.

† See Gunnlaugi Saga, Havniæ, 1775, p. 112, and note, p. 113.

‡ Hervarar Saga, Havniæ, 1785, cap xv. p. 128. Several other examples occur of the kings and princes of this age assuming the character of poets. The verses of Regnar Lodbrok, a warlike and celebrated king of Denmark, are still preserved: see Wormius's Litt. Runic. 195: also the fragment called *Nordymra*, published by Prof. Thorkelin, Lond. 1788. An instance is elsewhere recorded of a poet, Hiarno by name, who was invested with the royal diadem, on account of the excellence of an epitaph which he composed upon his predecessor.

against Harold, a king of Denmark, who had offended the Icelanders, that an invasion of the island was threatened; and it became necessary to pass an edict, making it a capital crime to satirize the Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish kings. Other laws also were enacted in Iceland about the same period, respecting the use of personal allusions in general, whether of censure or applause, in consequence of the extreme propensity to such topics which the poets of the country displayed.

Poetry having so entirely the character of an art among the ancient Icelanders, we might expect to find them possessing some common means of education in this favourite pursuit. The Edda, one of the most valuable remnants of northern antiquity, is a work designed expressly for these purposes. Much controversy has existed respecting this singular and celebrated performance; the period at which it was written, and the writers, being made equally the subjects of question. Though certain points of the discussion have never been completely decided, yet we may now consider ourselves as possessing all those facts respecting the work, which are of any material importance. It seems to be well ascertained, that the Edda is not entirely the composition of one person, or of one age, but that it derives its present form from several distinct sources. The name has been assigned to two different works; one of which is called the ancient Edda, or Edda of Sæmund; the other, supposed to be of more modern date, bears the name of the celebrated Snorro Sturleson, to whom it is ascribed. It must be remarked, however, that these titles were given at a period much later than the composition of either of the works; and that their accuracy has

been disputed, inasmuch as regards the names of the authors affixed to them. *

The ancient Edda consists of various odes; which, as some allege, are the fragments only of a much larger work, now lost to the world. These writings, suppressed during a long period by the mistaken zeal of the Catholic clergy, were brought to light about the year 1630, by Brynjolfus Suenonius, bishop of Skalholt. The most important of the poems are the Völuspa, and the Hávámal. The Völuspa, or Prophetess of Vola, is a digest of the ancient Scandinavian mythology, short and extremely obscure; the Hávámal, a singular collection of moral precepts, professing to be derived from the god Odin himself. These poems have generally been attributed to Sæmund Sigfuson, an eminent Icelander, born A. D. 1056; who, from his knowledge, writings, and various acquirements, has been called by succeeding authors, Frode, or the learned. This opinion, however, as before mentioned, has had its opponents; and strong reasons have been urged for believing that Sæmund did not compose, perhaps not even compile, the Edda which is ascribed to him. †

The second work, bearing this name, has come to us under a more perfect form; and though itself losing the garb

* Different derivations have been given of the name *Edda:* some have derived it from *Edde, a grandmother*, thus making it to signify the *parent of poetry*, or from *Atta, a father*, with the same use of the prosopopeia Others have referred it to *Odde*, the residence of Sæmund Sigfuson Arnas Magnæus considers the name as a feminine of the old word *Odr*, signifying wisdom, or reason.

† The principal opponent of Sæmund's claim to the first Edda is Arnas Magnæus; whose recondite inquiries into the early literature of Iceland have given him much celebrity. See his life of Sæmund Frode, prefixed to the *Edda Sæmundar, Hafniæ* 1787.

of poetry, is much better adapted to the object of instructing others in the poetic art. It is distributed into two principal parts. The first contains an extensive view of the mythology of Odin, under the form of dialogue; in which are explained the attributes of the deities, their several actions, and the other remarkable events of the mythology. This was a code from which the Skalds, or bards of the age, might derive incidents and allusions for the ornament of their verses. The second part of the Edda, which has been called Skalda, is a still more singular instance of the attention which was given at this period to poetry, as an art. It is a collection of synonymes, epithets, and prosodiacal rules, carefully arranged, and well adapted to increase the accuracy and facility of composition. The different errors of style are distinctly pointed out, and a minute account is given of the varieties of figure and of metre, which may be admitted into poetical writing. The origin of this extraordinary work, like that of the ancient Edda, is still a matter of dispute. Most authors concur in ascribing it to Snorro Sturleson; admitting, however, that certain additions were afterwards made to the Skalda, either by Gunnlaug, a monk who lived about the beginning of the thirteenth century, or, more probably, by a poet called Olaf Huitaskald, the nephew of Sturleson. The learned Arnas Magnæus, and some other writers, have contradicted this opinion, and suppose it more probable that the Edda was greatly altered, if not entirely composed, in the fourteenth century; an idea which is the less probable, since at this period the art of poetry had greatly declined among the Icelanders, and the office and reputation of the Skalds were now become almost wholly extinct. *

* See Vita Sæmund. Mult. Edd. Sæmund. præfix. p. 14; also Sciagraph. Hist. Lit. Island. p. 17. The controversy respecting the origin of the Edda, and the

It would be exceeding the limits of the present dissertation, to detail the names of all the eminent poets who adorned this period of Icelandic history. Besides the two celebrated men, whose names have been mentioned in connection with the Edda, those most conspicuous for their talents were, Egill Skallgrimson, a celebrated warrior as well as bard, who, in the court of Norway, rescued himself by his verses from impending death; Thorleif Jarlaskald, whose skill was so great, that while every one admired and applauded, no one knew whether his poetry spoke praise, satire, or reproach; Sighvatr Thordson, whose talents raised him to the counsels and friendship of two successive Norwegian kings; and the two brothers, Olaf and Sturla Thordson, who, in the thirteenth century, carried away the prize of fame from most of their competitors, both in Iceland and the kingdoms of the north. The former of these, surnamed *Huitaskald*, or the *White Poet*, from the colour of his hair, has just been noticed, as the supposed author of a part of the Edda. The latter, besides his celebrity as a poet, acquired much eminence in the departments of history and jurisprudence, and in other branches of knowledge. The chronicles of the country recite the names and compositions

examination of this singular work, have engaged many writers of great eminence. Besides those just referred to, we find connected with this subject the names of Wormius, Bartholin, Rudbeck, Resenius, Mallet, Suhm, Ihre, Thorkelin, &c. from whose several works the curious reader may obtain ample information on the subject. The principal editions of the Edda are those of Resenius, (*Copenhagen*, 1665), and of Mr Goranson, a Swede, who obtained his text from the Upsal Manuscript of the work. A French translation of the greater part of it has been given by Mr Mallet in his Introduct. a l'Hist. de Dannemarc; and this has been transferred to our own language by Dr Percy, in his Northern Antiquities. To the pens of Gray, Herbert, and Cottle, we owe poetical translations of several passages in the ancient Edda.

of many cotemporary bards, little inferior in skill, and who exercised with scarcely less reputation the art to which they were attached.

Great, however, as was the poetical celebrity of the Icelanders of this age, they derived a still higher character from their historical writings. These may be divided into the genuine, the fictitious, and those of a mixed character. Of the fabulous histories, which were chiefly composed during the earlier periods of the Icelandic commonwealth, some appear to have had a concealed and figurative meaning; others were mere fables, not connected with any such metaphorical allusions.* The Sagas,† or historical narratives, form a much more numerous and valuable class of compositions. These may in general be considered to belong to the last or mixed character of history; in which the fictions of the author are to a certain extent blended with the events he describes. Many of them, however, possess throughout all the features of real and authentic narrative, and afford sketches of the state of society during this period, which are highly interesting and important. In the subject of these Sagas there is considerable variety. Some of them furnish the history of particular events, either of a political or religious nature; others give the more simple narrative of a family, or a community of families; others, again, contain biographical sketches of the eminent individuals of the age, the king, the warrior, the poet, or the priest. The merit of these writings is equally various. In many of them we find a minute and wearisome description of events, neither interesting in them-

* See Torf. Ser. Reg. Dan. lib. 1. cap 1; and Bartholin's Antiq. Dan. lib. 1. cap. 11.

† From *segia*, to say

selves, nor adorned by any of the graces of narrative; in others we meet with pictures of manners and feelings, in which simplicity itself is the charm, and where the imagination is insensibly led back to the times, the people, and the scenes, which are so faithfully pourtrayed. Of those which bear the latter character, the finest example, perhaps, is the *Gunnlaugs ok Skald-Rafni Saga*, or the history of Gunnlaug and the poet Rafn; of which interesting story, a short sketch is given in the subjoined note, without any other ornament than the original itself affords, and with the necessary omission of many circumstances which confer grace and beauty upon the tale. The authenticity of the narrative, and the reality of all the personages it includes, are fully established by the evidence of cotemporary writers.*

* Thorstein and Illugi, both men of wealth and power, dwelt in the great vale of the Borgard-Fiord, in the western part of Iceland. The former, who was son to the celebrated poet Egill, had a daughter named Helga, the pride of her family, and the loveliest among the women of the island. In the house of Illugi, the most remarkable person was his youngest son, Gunnlaug. Born in 988, he early acquired reputation from his stature, strength, and prowess both of body and mind; but his temper was turbulent and unyielding, and being opposed by his father in his desire to travel, he abruptly left his home, when only fifteen years of age, and took refuge in the house of Thorstein, by whom he was hospitably received. Here, while his mind was instructed by the father, his heart was subdued by the gentleness and elegance of the daughter. Living with Helga, and partaking in all her occupations and amusements, a mutual affection was quickly formed; and the restless impetuosity of the boy passed by degrees into the refinement and delicacy of the youthful lover. His character thus changed, Gunnlaug was reconciled to his father, and, during three years, resided sometimes with him, sometimes at the house of Thorstein. When he had reached the age of eighteen, Illugi consented to his going abroad; but he would not leave Iceland, till he had obtained from the father of his secretly betrothed Helga, a solemn promise that the maiden's hand should be given to him, if, after three years had expired, he returned to claim it. Departing from his native country, Gunnlaug visited the courts of England, Ireland, Norway, and Sweden, and was every where received with

From the Icelandic Sagas, our knowledge of the history and antiquities of the northern nations has derived many important additions. Still more valuable, however, in this respect, have been the regular historical writings of the Icelanders; many of which have come down, in a more or less perfect state, to the present time. The causes which led these islanders

the honours to which his person and talents entitled him His extempore poetry was admired and munificently rewarded · an art which he had early cultivated, though with so much tendency to satire, that he was called *Ormstunga*, or the snake-tongue. At the court of the Swedish king, Olave, he found the celebrated poet Rafn, likewise an Icelander, and of noble birth. A friendship formed between them, was soon afterwards broken, by a dispute, which took place in the royal presence, respecting the comparative merits of their poetry. Rafn, thinking himself disgraced, declares his determination of revenge; and, in pursuance of this, returns almost immediately to Iceland, where he seeks to obtain in marriage the maiden betrothed to his rival. The three years being gone by, and no tidings received of Gunnlaug, Thorstein, after some delay, gave to Rafn the unwilling hand of Helga, whose heart meanwhile remained with her former lover. The unfortunate Gunnlaug, hastening home to claim his bride, was accidentally detained by a hurt received in wrestling, and reached the abode of his father on the very day on which Helga became a wife A nuptial feast was prepared, with all the splendour suited to the condition of the families concerned. Gunnlaug, having hastened forwards from his father's house, shewed himself on a sudden among the assembled guests, eminent above all from the beauty of his person and the richness of his apparel The eyes of the lovers hung upon each other in mute and melancholy sorrow; and the bitterest pangs went to the heart of the gentle Helga. The nuptial feast was gloomy and without joy. A contest between the rivals was prevented by the urgent interference of their friends, but they parted with increased animosity and hatred.

The revenge of Rafn, though thus accomplished, gave him little satisfaction. Helga, refusing all conjugal endearments, spent her days in unceasing sadness. At the great public assembly at Thingvalla, the ensuing summer, Gunnlaug challenged his rival to single combat; and the challenge being accepted, they met on an island in the river, which flows into the lake of Thingvalla. The combat, however, though severe, was indecisive, and a renewal of it was prevented by an edict of the assembly, passed the following day, prohibiting the practice of

thus early to the composition of history, as well as poetry, have already been mentioned. Originally bringing with them from Norway numerous traditionary records of the Scandinavian people, they derived progressive additions to these, from the residence of their poets and learned men in the courts of the northern kingdoms, the princes and chieftains of which cherished the talents by which their own actions might be conveyed to posterity. Provided by these means with ample

duels in Iceland. Gunnlaug here sees his beloved Helga for a few moments, and for the last time; and in the empassioned language of poetry laments their mutual sorrows. Restrained from deciding their quarrel in Iceland, and each pursued by his own unhappiness and resentments, the rivals pass over to the territory of Sweden, and meet, attended by their respective companions, at a place called Dynguines. A combat takes place: the companions of each party fall victims to the bloody fray, and Gunnlaug and Rafn are left alone to decide their contest. The foot of the latter is severed by the sword of Gunnlaug, who wishes now to discontinue the combat; but Rafn exclaims that he would persevere in it, could he procure some water to alleviate his thirst. The generous Gunnlaug, trusting to the honour of his adversary, brings him water in his helmet from an adjoining lake. Rafn, seizing the critical moment, when the water was presented to him, strikes with his sword the bare head of Gunnlaug, crying out at the same time, "that he cannot endure that his rival should enjoy the embraces of the beautiful "Helga." The fight is fiercely renewed, and Gunnlaug slays his perfidious opponent; but dies soon afterwards of the wound he has himself received, when yet only in the twenty-fifth year of his age.

The remainder of the story is short and melancholy. The sorrowing Helga, her husband and lover both destroyed, is compelled to give her hand to Thorkell, a noble and wealthy Icelander. But these nuptials are equally joyless as the former. Her mind is wholly devoted to misery and gloom; and she sinks an early victim to the grave, bending her last looks upon a robe she had received from Gunnlaug; and dwelling with her last thoughts upon the memory of her unhappy lover.

A sketch of this story is given by the elegant pen of Mr Herbert, in the first volume of his poems. Were it less interesting, as a specimen of the manners and literature of the ancient Icelanders, the repetition of what he has so nobly done, would not have been attempted.

materials for history, they became the annalists of all the north of Europe; and the simplicity and precision which their narratives display, prove that they were well entitled to this pre-eminence. The history of their own country was not neglected amid the more conspicuous events of other nations; but the most careful record preserved of every circumstance occurring in the little community to which they belonged.

Isleif, the first bishop of Skalholt, who died in 1080, was the earliest of the Icelandic historians, and a man of great general learning; but his works are now unfortunately lost. Sæmund Frode, who has before been mentioned as the reputed author of the ancient Edda, was contemporary with the latter years of Isleif. He composed, among other historical works now extinct, the annals called, from his place of residence, Odda, which contain a chronicle of events from the beginning of the world to his own time. For this work he was peculiarly qualified from his studies at Paris and Cologne, where, in the earlier part of his life, he spent several years in the most ardent devotion to the pursuits of knowledge.* His friend and fellow-traveller Are Thorgilson, also from his learning surnamed Frode, was still more eminent as an historian of this age; but here, too, we have to regret the loss of what would have been among the most important of the ancient records of Danish, Norwegian, and English history, particularly of his lives of the Norwegian kings, from Odin to Magnus, the son of Olaus. He has left us, however, valuable testimonies of his talents and industry in the Icelandic Chronicle, usually called the Schedæ, and in the Landnama Book, for-

* The Annales Oddenses have been denied by some to be the work of Sæmund Frode, and have been assigned to a much later period of Icelandic literature. It is impossible, at the present time, to decide with certainty upon a question belonging to an age so remote.

merly mentioned, of which he appears to have composed the principal part. He died in 1148, when eighty years of age. Succeeding in the same track, was the celebrated Snorro Sturleson, who, born in 1178, became, when yet young, the wealthiest and most powerful man in Iceland. Twice he sustained the office of Laugman, or chief magistrate. His establishment was suited to the dignity of his condition, and in visiting the general assembly of the island, he was frequently attended by a splendid retinue of 800 armed men. The reputation which he acquired for learning and accomplishments was equally extensive. He had a minute knowledge of the Greek and Latin languages, was an excellent poet and historian, an admirable orator, and profoundly skilled in all the arts of his time. Besides the Edda, which is usually ascribed to him, and one or two fragments,* he has bequeathed to posterity his Chronicle of the Kings of Norway, called the Heimskringla;† a work which, while it strikingly displays the erudition and industry of its author, is scarcely less distinguished for the excellence of its composition and style. The latter part of his life was not equally fortunate with its commencement, being clouded by family feuds, which finally subjected him to a violent death in the sixty-third year of his age. It would appear that his character was not without its blemishes, as well as its noble and exalted qualities. To his private ambition he is said occasionally to have sacrificed the interests of his country, and much dissimulation and political artifice pervaded the whole of his public career.

These are but a few of the illustrious men who adorned at this period the literature of Iceland. A complete catalogue of the native historical writers would include nearly two hun-

* The Hattalykill, or Clavis Metrica, and the Bragarbot.

† So named from the initial words of the book.

dred-names, some of them scarcely less eminent than those which have already been mentioned.* Though the sister muses, history and poetry, were thus principally cherished, there was not however an entire neglect of other branches of knowledge. The ancient calendars of the country, and the extraordinary skill which was exhibited in the maritime adventures of the people, shew that considerable attention was given to astronomical and physical observations; and many learned men in the island, especially Sturleson and Paul, a bishop of Skalholt, were distinguished by their attainments in mathematics and mechanical science.† The study of jurisprudence was pursued with much ardour and industry: it appears, from passages occurring in the Sagas, to have been made a distinct branch of education among the chiefs of the country, and the progressive improvement and excellent administration of the laws during the period of the Icelandic commonwealth, furnish sufficient proof of the success with which its cultivation was attended. Geography could not fail to engage attention, when their travellers not only visited all the kingdoms of Europe, but penetrated even into the remote regions of Asia and Africa.‡ Philological studies were pur-

* See Torfæi Ser. Reg. Danic. lib. 1. cap. 1. The other most important historical works of the ancient Icelanders are the Annales Flateyenses, Skalholtenses, Holenses, Vetustissimi, Regii, those called from the possessor of the manuscript, the Annales Resenii, the Sturlunga Saga, &c. Of the Annales Regii, an excellent edition will be found in Langebeck's Script. Rer. Danic. Vol. 3.

† See the Blanda and Rimbeigla books, published at Copenhagen under the patronage of M. Suhm. Also a treatise of the same age *de Algorithmo*, which is noticed in the Sciograph. Hist. Lit. Island. p. 161. The Rimbeigla book presents a singular assemblage of astronomical, chronological, and theological facts, and will be found well worthy the attention of the curious reader.

‡ Gissurus, a Laugman of Iceland in 1181, composed a work entitled *Flos Peregrinationis*, describing the various countries through which he had travelled.

sued by the learned men of the island with much diligence; and, in the course of the 11th and 12th centuries, they became familiar with the most celebrated of the Latin authors, deriving assistance to their own compositions from the classical authorities thus laid open to them. The study of the Greek language, though less general, was not however disregarded; as we find from the testimony of several writers of this age.

It was scarcely possible that all this intellectual culture should exist, without some regular system of education, forming its basis and support. The first establishment of this kind appeared about the middle of the 11th century, when Isleif, the first bishop of Iceland, founded a school at Skalholt. This was shortly after followed by the institution of three other schools in different parts of the island, and by provisions for the education of youth in connection with the monasteries which were at this time established. It appears also to have been a common practice for those who possessed wealth and property in the country, to charge themselves with the instruction and advancement of such young men as gave an early promise of eminence in their talents.* In the schools, besides the knowledge of their own language in reading, writing, and various modes of composition, the youth of the island were initiated into classical and theological studies; to the latter of which especially much attention was given. Poetry was made expressly a branch of common education, and even music, or possibly a form of recitation thus termed, appears in some instances to have been taught in a public manner.† Previously to the reception of Christianity in Iceland at the close of the 10th century, the Runic characters, which were brought over by the original emigrants from Norway, seem to have been generally used, where the memory alone was not trusted

* Hist. Eccles. Island. T. 1. p. 190. † Hist. Eccl. Island. T. 1. p. 190 and 327.

with the record of events. These were not, however, committed to the form of regular writings, but rudely inscribed upon the walls and rafters of their habitations, upon their shields, wooden staffs, and other implements of common use. About the time of this important change in the religion of the people, the Roman characters were introduced; the adoption of which was attended with manifest advantage to the progress of education, and to every department of literary pursuit.

Respecting the physical condition of the Icelanders in this remarkable period of their history, we derive our information chiefly from the poems, histories, and tales of the country, which incidentally furnish many interesting facts connected with this subject. The ancient Icelanders possessed, as is still the case with their posterity, few of the luxuries or more refined conveniences of life; and were occasionally exposed to severe privations from the nature of their soil, and the seasons under which they lived. There is some reason, however, to believe, though the fact cannot be regarded as positively ascertained, that the climate of Iceland was once considerably less austere than at present. From many sources of information it appears certain that corn was formerly grown upon the island, though in later periods, as a native produce, it has been utterly unknown.* Of the fact that the trees and shrubs formerly attained a much larger size, and were more numerous than is now the case, there is satisfactory evidence in the discovery of trunks of such trees among the morasses; and in the frequent mention which is made in the ancient writings, of houses and

* The evidences of the former growth of corn in Iceland are collected in a treatise by Snorreson, an Icelander, *De Agricultura Islandorum priscis temporibus*, *Hafniæ* 1757.

even ships, constructed of the timber which the country itself produced. It is probable also that the other internal supplies and means of subsistence which the Icelanders of this age possessed, were more abundant and various than at the present time. We find in the Laxdæla Saga, the narrative of a feast in the western part of the island, at which nine hundred persons were assembled, and which continued with much splendour and ceremony during fourteen days; and the Landnama Book affords another instance of an entertainment given by two brothers at Hialtadal, in the northern province, where there was an assemblage of more than fourteen hundred guests. Many examples occur in the histories of the country of the liberal hospitality which was exercised towards foreigners; who, coming to the island for the purposes of traffic, were received into the houses of the principal inhabitants, and frequently dwelt with them during the long winter of this northern region.

It is not easy to ascertain with exactness the population of Iceland at this period; but many circumstances render it probable that it was considerably greater than at the present time.* Like their descendants, however, the people were much dispersed over the country; their habitations being seldom grouped together, but placed wherever the situation and nature of the soil were propitious. Simplicity in all their habits and modes of life was a necessary effect of their situation and circumstances. The houses even of the wealthiest of

* Arngrim Jonas, in his Brev. Comment. de Island. sect. 4, mentions the fact of an estimate being made in the year 1090, by Gissurus, a bishop of Skalholt, of the number of those who, from the amount of their property, were enabled to pay tribute to the state. They were ascertained to be about 4000. This estimate, however, does not afford the grounds of more than a probable conjecture as to the total number of inhabitants.

the community were constructed of wood and turf; and the great annual assembly of the people was held at Thingvalla beneath the open canopy of heaven; the chiefs and civil officers dwelling at night under the covering of rude huts, erected near the place of public meeting. The occupations of the people appear to have been nearly the same as those common to the present race of Icelanders; and in these every class of the community, in greater or less degree, partook.* Fishing was necessary as a principal means of their subsistence: they clothed themselves by the manufacture of the wool of their sheep; while their cattle, which were numerous, afforded at once a regular employment, and the most valuable addition to their domestic comforts. A further occupation was furnished by their traffic with foreign countries, which even at this time seems to have been very considerable. The moral habits of the people bore a favourable proportion to their intellectual qualities, and were doubtless fostered and improved by the latter. Certain superstitious and unnatural usages, which belonged to their ancestors, and to the age, were blended with their early condition; but these speedily yielded to the influence of reason and of the Christian doctrines, and left behind few vestiges of their former existence. A very remarkable instance of this kind occurred in 1011; when, by an unanimous act of the public assembly, the trial by duel or single combat was abolished in Iceland; though the practice was then almost universal throughout Europe, and sanctioned for more than a century afterwards by the law and usages of many of the continental nations. †

* See Vatus dæla Saga, cap. 22; Liosvetninga Saga, cap. 25, &c.

† The exposure of children was one of the barbarous customs which the Icelanders derived from their Norwegian descent. Though this practice was not

One of the most important events during this period of Icelandic history, was the establishment of Christianity in the island. This momentous change was effected in a manner strikingly accordant with the genius of the government and of the people. From the year 981, when the knowledge of the Christian doctrine was first introduced by Frederic, a bishop from Saxony, to the close of this century, the number of those embracing the new faith progressively increased; and many missionaries, both foreigners and natives of Iceland, who had been converted abroad, came over to the island to aid its propagation by their efforts. They experienced much opposition from those who still adhered to the superstition of their ancestors: the invectives of poetical satire were poured forth against them, and even personal violence occasionally attempted by their opponents. These contests, and the growth of the new religion, at length engaged the attention of the government; and at the national assembly, in the summer of the year 1000, a formal discus-

formally prohibited when the Christian religion was adopted in the island, ye it did not long survive this event; and it appears to have been extinct in Iceland nearly a hundred years before it was finally abolished in Norway. Hist. Eccles. Isl Tom. 1. p. 71. Among the superstitions connected with the Scandinavian mythology, one of the most singular was the Berserkine, as it has been called; a treatise concerning which is subjoined to the Copenhagen edition of the Kristni Saga. The Berserkir were wrestlers or warriors by profession, who were believed by magical means to have hardened their bodies, so that they could not be injured by fire or sword. These men, roused at times by their incantations into a sort of phrenzy, committed every species of brutal violence; rushed naked into battle, and overpowered and slew all who ventured to approach them; till, deserted by the paroxysm, their supernatural strength left them, and they immediately sunk into a state of extreme debility and wretchedness. Many records of this strange superstition occur in the old Icelandic and Norwegian writings. It gradually disappeared together with other practices of magic and divination, frequent among the northern nations of this age.