

CHAPTER II.

THE SAGAS.

It appears that Iceland had long been inhabited by a small colony of Irish monks, representing the Culdee form of the Christian religion. About 874 A. D. a stream of emigration set in, composed of Scandinavians, which continued for a period of sixty years, during which time some four thousand homesteads were established around the habitable fringe along the great bays and firths. The first authentic successful settlement was made under Ingolf, a Norwegian, who, after a fruitless attempt on the south coast in 870, established himself at Reikiavik in 874. This tide of emigration was caused by the changes introduced in Norway by Harald Haarfager, for such people as could not endure them left for other countries, particularly to the habitable coast districts of Iceland. In the immigrations into Iceland three distinct streams are traced. The first was that of four noblemen from Norway—Ingolf, Ketil Hæng, Skalla-Grim, and Thorolf, who, with their dependents, settled in the southwest from 870 to 890. The second was that of Aud, widow of Olaf the White, king of Dublin, who came from the Western Islands of Scotland, followed by a number of her kinsmen, many, like herself, being Christians, and settled the best land in the west, northwest and north, and there founded families that long swayed its destinies, which occurred between 890 and 900. The third was a few more newcomers direct from Norway, which took place between 900 and 930. These completed the settlement of the south, northeast and southeast. In 1100 the population numbered about 50,000 souls, quite a proportion of which was of Irish blood. The government at first, in the times of paganism, was hierarchic and aristocratic. Christianity was not formally introduced until the year 1002, or about one hundred and twenty-eight years after the first settlement and not even then without much opposition. Schools were then founded, and two bishoprics in Holar and Skalholt. Old Icelandic possesses only forty runic monuments, all of them practically worthless from a philological point of view, the oldest of which is an inscription on a church door, dating no farther back than the thirteenth century, and therefore later than some