

# Viking Age Iceland

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The popular image of the Viking Age is of warlords and marauding bands pillaging their way along the shores of Northern Europe. In this fascinating history, Jesse Byock shows that Norse society in Iceland was actually an independent one—almost a republican Free State, without warlords or kings. Combining history with anthropology and archaeology, this remarkable study serves as a valuable companion to the Icelandic sagas, exploring all aspects of Viking Age life: feasting, farming, the power of chieftains and the church, marriage, and the role of women. With masterful interpretations of the blood feuds and the sagas, Byock reveals how the law courts favored compromise over violence, and how the society grappled with proto-democratic tendencies. A work with broad social and historical implications for our modern institutions, Byock's history will alter long-held perceptions of the Viking Age.

Jesse Byock is a professor of Icelandic and Old Norse studies at UCLA. He is the translator of *The Saga of the Volsungs* and *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* for Penguin Classics. *The Family and Sturlunga Sagas: Medieval Narratives and Modern Nationalism*

Each society's social drama could be expected to have its own 'style', too, its aesthetic of conflict and redress, and one might also expect that the principal actors would give verbal or behavioural expression to the values composing or embellishing that style.

Victor E. Turner, *An Anthropological Approach to the Icelandic Saga*

The Sagas differ from all other "heroic" literatures in the larger proportion that they give to the meanness of reality.

W. P. Ker, *The Dark Ages*

The family sagas, dealing with the tenth and early eleventh centuries, and Sturlunga sagas, covering the years from approximately 1120 and 1246, are the most important, as well as the most extensive, source for a study of social and economic forces in medieval Iceland. These two related groups of vernacular prose narratives are rich mines of information about the normative codes of Iceland's medieval community.

The Family Sagas

The family sagas are called in modern Icelandic *Íslendingasögur*, "the sagas of the Icelanders". They have no close parallels in other medieval European narratives, which are mostly in verse and are often of a more epic character than the sagas. Some family sagas tell us about the settlement of Iceland, but most of them concentrate on the period from the mid tenth to the early eleventh century. In a crisp and usually straightforward manner they describe the dealing between farmers and chieftains from all parts of the country and among families from diverse elements of the society. They explore the potential for an individual's success or failure in the insular world of the Old Icelandic Free State.

Whereas the Sturlunga sagas are mostly about individuals engaging in the power struggles of an emerging overclass and give almost no information about the personal lives of ordinary farmers and local leaders, the family sagas tend to concentrate on precisely these concerns. With regularity the stories focus on private matters and offer

insights into personal problems of families and the health, good of ill, of marriages. The family sagas often exaggerate situations of crisis. They deal less with extended kin groups, as the name 'family sagas' might imply, than with regional disputes in Iceland. Similar actions involving different characters are repeated in different locales. With constantly changing detail, the literature present potential issues and the responses that individuals in the society needed to make to them if they were to succeed. Among the matters stressed were methods of reacting to overly ambitious or otherwise dangerous characters, precedents for various legal positions and modes of action, successful interventions by advocates, different means of settlement, and the principles underlying the establishment and maintenance of ties of reciprocity.

In the oral saga, as elsewhere in oral tales, one may assume that adherence to strict fact was never an issue. Nor was the saga-teller required to memorize a fixed text; a general outline of a story that was perhaps of historical origin was sufficient. The medieval audience expected the narrator of a family saga to observe certain strictures. Most importantly, the saga had to be credible, that is, the story had to be portrayed as possible, plausible, and therefore useful within the context of Iceland's particular rules of social order and feud. The sagas served as a literature of social instruction.

In an earlier book, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, I suggest that feud served as a cohesive and stabilizing force in Old Icelandic society. Because the rules of feuding, as they developed in Iceland, regulated conflict and limited breakdowns of order, violence was kept within acceptable bounds throughout most of the history of the Free State. The ways in which feud operated provided a structure for the sagas. In examining the question of the oral saga, I found probable the existence of a pre-literate stage of well-developed saga-telling employing a compositional technique that became the foundation for the written saga. This simple, easily adaptable technique was based on the use of active narrative particles that occur in no particular order and fall into three categories: conflict, advocacy, or brokerage and resolution. Guided by the parameters of socially recognized conduct, the storyteller or storywriter arranges these action particles in various orders and with different details. By using the particles he (or she) translates social forms into narrative forms. In anthropological terms the particles reflect the phases of Icelandic feud. These discrete units of action, the hallmark of the saga style, were a convenient means for an oral or a literature teller to advance the narration of a complex tale.

Working within a tradition of known characters, events and geography, the saga-teller chose his own emphasis. He (or she) was free to decide what details and known events to include and what new actions to introduce. These choices not only made for variety in the small clusters of actions that linked together to form chains of saga events, but also served to distinguish one saga from another. Although the medieval audience probably knew in advance the outcome of a particular dispute, the essence of a tale could be put forward differently each time. This economical and effective technique of forming narrative prose applied to both oral and written saga composition. Freedom from reliance on a fixed, memorized text allowed individual authors to incorporate new elements, such as Christian themes and changing ethical judgements.

Thirty or more major family sagas are extant. These texts vary markedly in length: some, like *Hrafnkels saga*, are approximately twenty pages in modern volumes; others, such as *Njals saga* and *Laxdoela saga*, fill 300 or more pages. The family sagas are preserved in a wide variety of manuscripts, none of which is an original text definitely attributed to a specific author, despite the educated guesses of scholars. The oldest surviving examples of saga writing are fragments; the earliest are usually dated to the mid thirteenth century, although it is possible that some fragments pre-date 1200. Among the presumed oldest fragments are sections from *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Heidarviga saga*, *Laxdoela saga*, and *Egils saga*. These, like later copies of entire sagas, give no information as to when the earliest versions of the texts were composed; thus dating the sagas has always been a difficult task and scholarly conclusions are open to question. Decision on the age of the family sagas have been influenced by different theories of saga origins, a point underscored by Hallvard Mageroy: "A chief argument for placing the production of the family sagas in the thirteenth century is that only by this means can saga literature be seen as a natural branch of European literature in the High Middle Ages."

Copies of complete family sagas are preserved in vellum books dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For example, the fourteenth century compilation of *Modruvallabok* is the chief source for many of the eleven sagas it contains. Many other sagas are preserved in paper manuscripts from the sixteenth century and later. In the medieval period there were many more family sagas than have survived. *Landnamabok*, for example, names several that are now lost. Except for *Droplaugarsona saga*, which notes at the end that a certain Thorvald, descended from one of the main characters, "told this saga", all the family sagas are anonymous.

#### Other Books

*The Vikings in Iceland*. \*Includes pictures \*Includes medieval accounts \*Includes online resources and a bibliography for further reading Like many civilizations of past millennia, the Vikings are remembered in popular culture more for the fantastical accounts of their history than for reality. The written records of the history of the Viking period, consisting mostly of Norse sagas, metaphoric poems called *skalds* and monastic chronicles, were written down well after the events they described and tended to be lurid accounts rife with hyperbole. Furthermore, the most scathing tales of Viking raids are contained in the histories of monastic communities which were targets of Norse rapacity. These chronicles speak of the heathen Viking depredations of monastic treasuries and the ferocious torture and killing of Christian monks. The colorful bloody tales were certainly based on more than grains of truth, but they were also purposefully augmented to inject drama into history. Similarly Norse sagas written down in the post-Viking Age fixed what had hitherto been flexible oral tradition. They were often slanted to legitimize a clan or leader's authority by emphasizing an ancestor's bravery and skill in pillaging opponent's communities. As a result, the almost ubiquitous depiction of the Vikings as horn-helmeted, brutish, hairy giants who mercilessly marauded among the settlements of Northern Europe is based on an abundance of prejudicial historical writing by those who were on the receiving end of Viking depredations, and much of the popular picture of the Vikings is a result of the romantic imagination of novelists and artists. For example, there is neither historical nor archaeological evidence that the typically red haired, freckled Norsemen entered battle

wearing a metal helmet decorated with horns. This headgear was an invention of the Swedish painter and illustrator Johan August Malmström (1829-1901), and his work was so widely disseminated in popular books that the image stuck. Today the imaginary Viking helmet is an almost mandatory costume accessory in productions of Wagner's opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, which is not about the Vikings at all. It seems the horned helmet evolved from an imaginary reinterpretation of genuine Viking images of a winged helmet that may have been worn by priests in Viking religious ceremonies. The Norsemen were also medieval Europe's greatest explorers, moving across the North Atlantic to settle in Iceland, Greenland, and even North America. The first step in this epic journey was Iceland, a rugged island in the North Atlantic about 400 miles from the Faroe Islands and about 700 miles from the north coast of Scotland. Iceland has been called "the land of ice and fire," and the name is an apt one. Rugged fjords lead to towering glaciers. In spots, hot springs and geysers give a little warmth to green meadows and patches of bare, exposed bedrock. Active volcanoes loom over the landscape, sending plumes of smoke into the air and sometimes streams of lava far and wide. It's a land guaranteed to capture the imagination of an adventurous and pagan people who saw spirits in every hill and stream. Iceland was settled by the Norse in the late 9th century, and they started a thriving and unique culture at the edge of the known world. Until it was taken over by the Kingdom of Norway in 1262, it had no central government, instead consisting of a patchwork of large and small chiefdoms mediating disputes via an early form of the parliamentary system. *The Vikings in Iceland: The History of the Norse Expeditions and Settlements across Iceland* looks at the history of the Vikings' activities in Iceland, and how they affected subsequent exploration and colonization. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about the Vikings in Iceland like never before. ? ? ? ? ? . Furthermore, the most scathing tales of Viking raids are contained in the histories of monastic communities which were targets of Norse rapacity."