

STATE AND STATELESSNESS IN EARLY ICELAND

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Today the study of medieval Iceland and its sagas has significantly broadened from what it was just a decade and a half ago.¹ The related tools of social history, anthropology, and socio-literary analysis are now all engaged, and as a result, the older distinction in Icelandic studies between fiction, involving purely literary inquiry, and fact, involving purely documentary historical analysis, is fast disappearing.² In its stead, society, sagas, and history are being

¹ This is a working draft. The final paper will include the full footnote apparatus.

² Agneta Breisch provides a detailed survey of the current historical and social approaches in the first chapter of her excellent new study, *Frid och fredlöshet: Sociala band och utanförskap på Island under äldre medeltid*, *Studia Historica Upsaliensia*, no. 174 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994). Two very thoughtful overviews of the changes involved in medieval Icelandic studies are Helgi Þorláksson's: "Að vita sann á sögunum: Hvað vitneskju geta Íslendingasögumarmar veit um Íslenskt þjóðfélag fyrir 1200," *Ný saga* (Tímarit sögufélags 1/1987): 87-96 and his "Mannfræði og saga," *Skírnis* (spring, 1989): 230-248. See also Gísli Pálsson's introductory essay, "Text, life, and saga," in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992): 1-25, and my, "Saga Form, Oral Prehistory, and the Icelandic Social Context," *New Literary History* (16, 1984-85): 153-173. The study of medieval Norway is undergoing similar change: See Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

recognized as intertwined facets of a united cultural study.³ Still needed, however, is a sharper understanding of what type of society early Iceland really was. To this end, the term primitive has been much bandied about in recent years. But, whether one classifies early Iceland as primitive or not really misses the point. Far more crucial is the need to explore the underlying dynamic of Iceland's social evolution. The essential factors and processes that make up and propel this dynamic hold the key to our understanding of Iceland's medieval development.

The term primitive is an unsatisfactory way to describe early Iceland, not least because it is difficult to reconcile the connotations of this term with Iceland's situation as the major northern offshoot of Viking Age Scandinavia. Scandinavia was, at the time of Iceland's settlement, far advanced into the Iron Age, and the technology of the culture was sufficiently sophisticated to allow its members routinely to cross the North Atlantic. Administratively, members of the same Norwegian culture that immigrated to Iceland were equal to the task of setting up and maintaining major trading towns in Ireland. Scandinavians of the period also established the Danelaw and conquered England. Around the time of Iceland's settlement, Norsemen also founded the Norman state, rose to prominence in Old Russia, and carried on extensive long-distance trade with the Caliphate of Baghdad and the Byzantine Empire. Although Iceland shares aspects with simple, egalitarian societies, it is worth keeping in mind that this immigrant society was not the offspring of primitive culture groups.

³ A fine example is Eva Österberg's innovative essay, "Strategies of silence: Milieu and mentality in the Icelandic sagas," in *Mentalities and Other Realities: Essays in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian History* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1991), pp. 9-30.

Early Iceland, does indeed display some features common to so-called primitive societies. Prominent among such features are the country's elementary political structures. The immigrants who founded Iceland became participants in what in some ways resembles a "headless" or "stateless" society, a type of social organization which anthropologists have identified in different parts of the world. The essential ingredient in such societies is the absence of institutionalized hierarchical structures associated with the centralizing political and economic functions of a state. Early Iceland fits loosely into this category since the *goðar* wielded little executive power and did not rule territorial units. Outwardly, Iceland with its *goðar* shares characteristics with "big man" societies found in places such as Borneo, New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and the Pacific Northwest. *Goðar* and prominent *bændr* resemble big men in some ways; however, Icelandic leaders and their families were more successful than usual among big men in retaining their wealth and status over generations. Icelandic social arrangements also provided for a greater continuity of power than arrangements generally found in non-stratified societies where big men predominate.

Among other primitive characteristics was the complete absence of villages, towns, or other concentrated communities and the fact that Iceland's culture was oral in the formative early centuries. Further, the economy was simple by European standards. Without towns or trading communities, it was based on the widespread presence of small, relatively self-sufficient family-based units. Another aspect that Icelandic society shared with primitive culture groups

was the role of feud, which served as a means of settling disputes. Nevertheless, when dealing with early Iceland, surface similarities with societies at elemental levels of social integration can be misleading.

We might also keep in mind that too much can be made of the concept of statelessness, since Iceland did have specific elements of statehood: a formal national legislature and a well-defined court system, both embracing the entire country. If early Iceland was distinctively headless, we can with fairness also say that it was an embryonic state. This latter facet is especially striking since early Iceland was a single island-wide political community that found no room for tribal arrangements. How can we explain this mingling of features? The answer is that early Iceland a hybrid society that experienced a complicated evolution. Iceland was the product of two very different cultural forces. On the one hand, it inherited embryonic state structures from the mainland. On the other, it was headless because of the conscious choice of the settlers not just to forego but to legislate against overlordship. The result was a self-defined polity held in a suspended condition for several centuries by the operation of legal and social mechanisms--the court cases, feuds, arbitrations, and forms of mutual manipulation and solicitation such as *vinfengi*--friendship arrangements that we see so often in the sagas. These mechanisms were supported by, and fashioned in response to, the needs of a remote society in a fragile northern environment. This society could not absorb the cost of endless feuding or intermittent warfare. The constant and often overwhelming peer and economic pressures to act

moderately, that is with *hólf*, served to retard the movement toward what historians call overlordship and anthropologists refer to as stratification.

Comparing Iceland to culture groups at elemental levels of social integration and trying to squeeze Iceland into such formulations will not answer our needs. If we, however, turn away from strict comparisons and focus instead on the unusual features of Iceland's settlement, then a definition is indeed possible. The crucial concept is "de-evolution." What has not been recognized about the formation of early Iceland is that the evolutionary machinery was running in reverse. Rather than a primitive society that had reached a modest level of social complexity as part of a standard evolutionary progression, early Iceland was different. Its headless, primitive condition was due to a de-evolution. This dynamic was experienced by European colonists who took advantage of the safety accorded by the distance of the North Atlantic to de-stratify, that is, to shed most of the aristocratic levels of society along with a significant portion of the roles played by overlords.

In their own eyes, the tenth-century settlers and the lawgivers among them were probably just emphasizing the rights of free farmers in reaction to the restricting of such rights in contemporaneous Norway. The Icelandic fixation on Norway as the mother country plays a crucial role in the island's social development. It is perhaps not too much to say that the early Icelanders strongly disliked the growing stratification in contemporaneous Norway. With a consistency that suggests the influence of an ideology, the insular population strove through

lawgiving and implementation of social codes to limit class differentiation and the potential for overlordship in all but economic areas.

Even in economic areas the emphasis on generosity, feasting, and gift-giving served to retard stratification, forcing the rich (and few, if any, in the early centuries were outrageously wealthy) to redistribute a significant portion of their surplus goods. Medieval Icelandic society had an egalitarian look and feel, without being truly egalitarian in the sense of simple societies. In fact, if we look closely at the sagas we see that behavior was dominated by driving, tight-fisted self interest. W. P. Ker hit on just this cultural aspect when years ago he wrote. "The sagas differ from all other 'heroic' literatures in the larger proportion that they give to the meanness of reality."⁴

To a certain extent Icelandic society, from the start, remained stratified, distinguishing between slaves, landless freemen, and freeborn landholders. Politically only this latter group of farmers counted. In sociological terms, the first generations of Icelanders ratcheted the level of the new society down a few notches. Social arrangements moved to a simpler level of complexity than in Norway with king, aristocrats, and various levels of free and unfree. The result was a society reflecting the desires of peasants not aristocrats, one that was neither truly primitive nor especially simple.

⁴ W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays in Medieval Literature* (London, 1896; New York, Dover, 1957), pp. 200-201.

A key difference between true primitive, tribal societies and medieval Iceland--a European immigrant society on the fringe--can be seen in the path of economic evolution *vis á vis* the natural environment. Primitive societies on the track of evolutionary development learn to increase their economic resources; Iceland did not. For example, the Aleut, a tribe of Alaskan Indians inhabiting a northern island region, treeless and with a climate similar to Iceland's, made technological advances designed to give them a measure of control over their environment. They built 15- to 30-foot-long kayaks entirely of animal skins and bone in order to fish and to hunt sea mammals as far away as the coast of Alaska. These boats had a unique split bow and were constructed with bone joints, a design which made the vessels many times as flexible as most modern boats and capable of sustaining speeds up to 10 knots. With this technology, the Aleuts, even with minimal natural resources, were able to exploit the surrounding ocean. Their society was engaged in economic evolution of the type described by standard anthropological progressions.

The medieval Icelanders, however, were European immigrants involved in a very different social dynamic. They did not adapt to their environment in a manner similar to simple societies. When the boats in which they had emigrated from Norway, the wide-bowed *knörr*, gradually became unfit for travel in the Atlantic, the Icelanders, lacking the woodlands of mainland Scandinavia, were unable to repair them. Without affordable boats, the island inhabitants could only marginally exploit the almost inexhaustible fish stocks and sea mammal resources in the

surrounding ocean. The small wooden boats that they did maintain, limited them to off shore fishing, done especially in the vicinity and shelter of nearby islands. Lacking suitable trees, they did not look for a substitute means to control their environment, severely restricting their economic well-being. They continued to adapt European technology, relying upon unsuitable scarce wood instead of looking to other materials such as skin. This meant that the Icelanders were unable to follow the best fishing or hunt freely on the open sea. Iceland, incongruous for a North Atlantic coastal community, became a largely land-locked ranching society in the midst of a fertile ocean. The only way the Icelanders could capture whales was when one beached itself on the shore. This sort of occurrence, though not altogether rare, was highly unpredictable and, as all readers of the sagas know, often resulted in serious disputes over ownership of the animal carcass. So too we see the same behavior in terms of agricultural technology. The Icelanders continued to use the same inefficient techniques that they had practiced in their European homelands, and this situation continued, essentially unchanged, well into the 19th century.

Restricted agricultural production, coupled with the lack of manufacturing, concerted commercial fishing, or sea mammal harvesting, limited Iceland's trade with the outside world.⁵

⁵ This situation did not change until the early fourteenth century when the export of *skreið*, dried cod, developed. Once started, the stockfish trade in grew rapidly. By the mid-fourteenth century the export of *skreið* and the industry that grew up around it had become firmly entrenched. This significant factor of change is in a period later than the one under

Trade, from the late tenth century on, was increasingly dependent on Norwegian ships and partners. Imported goods that were not paid for in silver were purchased through a small export traffic in wool, sheepskin cloaks, homespun, and agricultural products. Iceland could barely feed itself; in most years, therefore, there was little in the way of surplus foodstuffs to export. The trade in sulfur and such luxury items as white falcons and walrus ivory was always small. The restricted nature of Iceland's trade offerings to the outside world had significant consequences for the new society.

At the time of the settlement, Scandinavian/viking society was organized into groups of chiefdoms of which the many Norwegian petty kingdoms and regions controlled by *hersar* and other warlords are good examples. By the early tenth century, much of Scandinavian/viking social fabric had incorporated trade as a basic component, and all viking towns were dependent on aspects of commerce for their livelihood. The Icelanders, with only marginal participation in this trade, especially the exchange in high status goods, were without this mainstay of viking social fabric. One of the major problems that the new society faced on its distant island was establishing a functional social fabric without the basic structuring ingredient of trade. The underlying Norse society could be altered only so much, and the concept of trade was too fundamental to be dropped. The result was that the polity of farmers and big men which

consideration here.

emerged in Iceland, clung to the embryonic elements of statehood inherited from Norse society, while engaging in the only expansive trade available, a trade in allegiances that spread throughout the whole Icelandic jural community. Some of these allegiances were based on traditional blood and fictive kinship, such as fosterage, marriage, and blood-brotherhood. During the tenth century, however, the Icelanders refined their judicial and legislative structures and came to rely more and more on forms of overt political relationships such as the chieftain-follower ties and covert friendship alliances such as *vinfengi*. These sometimes competing but often complementary forms of allegiance found their dynamism in advocacy arrangements. The process of participation in these forms of allegiances elicited a type of behavior which mimicked standard trade relationships, a factor that explains the endless bargaining that takes place in the sagas. Of vital importance, the trade in allegiances served to re-align the basic social fabric in a manner that responded to market forces of supply and demand.

Perhaps we can come closer to understanding the not so primitive nature of early Iceland with respect to Scandinavian mainland society by a comparison with a readily understandable cross-cultural example: An Australian aborigine thrust into Sydney would experience significant trouble in adjusting to modern urban culture. Unlike the aborigine, early Icelanders, even young untested farm boys, easily adapted to life in Norway or elsewhere in Scandinavia or the British Isles. The ease with which the medieval Icelanders moved within these far more hierarchical societies is significant. Built into the sagas and other tools of socialization employed by this

island-wide community were the normative codes, cultural values, and social memory⁶ of the advanced societies from which the Icelanders came. If the Icelanders established a less stratified order, it was done with full knowledge of the alternative—mainland European social and political arrangements.

Icelandic society with its big men leaders shares many characteristics of culture groups termed ranked societies. These often include significant numbers of small-scale farmers who exhibit formalized, albeit limited, social differences. In early Iceland, as in ranked societies, there was some hierarchical differentiation, especially in matters of wealth. Some *goðar* and *bændr* were richer and some more powerful than others; dependent on these landowners were cotters, landless free laborers, and slaves. Like big men, the early *goðar* exercised only limited coercive powers. When comparing early Iceland with other societies, it is wise to keep in mind that other crucial factor: medieval Iceland was not a tribal society. Although kindred and clans existed and held a certain importance, such kinship groupings did not dominate political life as they did in societies where tribes controlled specific territory.

Previous studies of early Iceland have almost always over-emphasized the importance of kinship without noting the crucial limiting distinction that kin groups did not control geographical territories. The competition for regional control by warring clans, so important to

⁶ For an excellent discussion of social memory that includes the sagas, see James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

the shaping of authority and leadership in feuding societies such as old Ireland or nineteenth-century Montenegro, was in early Iceland largely absent. The feuds in Iceland were unusually short lived and decidedly directed toward resolution, since they frequently saw families represented on opposing sides. Within such a social make up, the authority of Iceland's *goðar* was not that of aristocratic warleaders backed by territorial kinship groupings but of political middle men adept at forming *ad hoc* interest groups of often unrelated backers. The best of such leaders were skillful at law and power brokerage.

Icelandic political life in the local districts where several chieftains competed for the support of the surrounding farmers resembles nothing closer than the operation of ward politics in a modern western city. Within a region of the city, ward politicians or bosses from different parties compete for the allegiance of the voters, who live interspersed among each other. Individual followers of different parties live next to each other and spread out among the different leaders without respect to territorial integrity. Though there may temporarily be areas of density of political affiliation, these tend to break up with time. So too, thingmen of different *goðar* lived next to each other.⁷ In Iceland as in ward politics, the *goðar* promised services, and

⁷ For a map of political affiliations in the Eyjafjörður region in northern Iceland around the year 1190, see my *Medieval Iceland: Sagas, Society and Power* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 114-119. See also Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Frá goðorðum til ríkja: Þróun goðavalds á 12. og 13. öld*, Sagnfræðirammsóknir, *Studia historica* 10 (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa menningarsjóðs, 1989). In the section, "Landfræðileg afstaða þingmanna og goða," pp. 24-30, Jón expands the coverage to include a region of

allegiance was governed by the rule of diminishing returns. A local party leader can only promise so many people to support them before running into problems of delivering on his promises when two supporters quarrel. So too Icelandic leaders competed for the allegiance of the surrounding free farmers, promising support and protection, but often running into problems of delivery. If there is a lesson to be gained in the sagas it is that farmers could not and should not depend upon such promises. The medieval narratives repeatedly show farmers as well as *godar* in a pinch searching for new allies and advocates. The result was that local regions in early Iceland remained a series of rival often shifting interest groups. As with the thingmen of Geitir Lýtingsson in *Vápnfirðinga saga* or the followers of Mörör Valgarðsson in *Njáls saga*, peripheral and sometimes prominent members switched allegiance from group to group. Kinship, like ethnic affiliation in ward politics, played only a partial, and over time diminishing, role.

In conclusion we can ask, what then was Iceland? The answer is that it was a hybrid society whose development was determined by the dynamics of its immigrant experience. From this experience there emerged an innovative social order marked by aspects of statelessness as well as elements of statehood. Features of both ranked and stratified societies were present as a result of an uncommon development. Initially the settlers destratified by leaving behind the

western Iceland.

developed military and political structures of the Scandinavian mainland. Then the emerging society evolved in new ways on a distant island in response to its own particular needs. The settlers and their descendants explored a variety of choices rarely, if ever, possible over such a long period of time on the European mainland where borders required organized protection. The result was a country that shows faint but unmistakable traces of the economic and political stratification and ranking of northern European culture, yet one that functioned for several centuries without complex political or social hierarchies. Beginning in the tenth century the settlers established a rudimentary state structure that declared to the outside world the island's independent status, but which internally operated without most attributes of a state. Internal cohesion was maintained by stressing lateral rather than hierarchical social arrangements and by accepting the principle that government was to be dominated by the requirements of consensus rather than the authority of overlords.

In keeping with the almost ideological commitment to consensual decision-making, the early Icelanders repeatedly opted for legally centered governmental solutions that for centuries hindered the development of executive authority. In this way, Icelandic culture was moving in opposition to the social and governmental developments on mainland Scandinavia. The two were both evolving, but in different directions. On the mainland, kings were, from the late ninth-century on, enlarging their authority at the expense of the traditional rights of the free farmers. The Icelanders themselves were well aware of this change. While it is doubtful that the settlers

and their descendants knew exactly what they wanted, there is, nevertheless, much evidence to suggest that the tenth-century Icelanders knew quite well what they did not want: They were collectively opposed to the introduction of the centralizing aspects of a monarchical state. This vital factor led to a significant amount of experimentation in Icelandic social and governmental arrangements, the manifestation of which we see in the sagas. Although not a democratic system, freemen nevertheless retained significant power, and both leader/advocates and their farmer clients played important roles in the operation of the society.

For several centuries after the settlement, Iceland was left to its own devices. This freedom from foreign interference changed toward the beginning of the thirteenth century when Iceland became increasingly connected with Europe and especially Norway. Then the elements of stratification, which had always been present but sublimated, gained new vigor. With increasing momentum, but uneven results in the different parts of the country, Iceland moved toward a feudal state structure,⁸ adapting aspects of increased, though often inefficient, hierarchy. In the more than two hundred and fifty years before this, from the late ninth- to the late twelfth- centuries, Iceland, in its devolved state, not only functioned, but at times functioned rather well. This much we can say at this point: the unusual mix of state and stateless characteristics present in medieval Iceland goes to the core of the problem of definition.

⁸ This point is nicely made in Agneta Breisch's, *Frid och fredlöshet*. See for example, p. 22.