

Icelandic Sagas: Eyrbyggja Saga and Vinland Sagas

Dr. Alan Haffa

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Icelandic Sagas Overview

- Saga=What is said; German, sagen, to say
- Mostly prose chronicles of the events of families who settled Iceland in the 9th, 10th, 11th centuries
- Authors unknown
- Oral history; written down in 12th and 13th centuries

Settlement of Iceland

- Late 9th century
- Men seeking to escape King Harald Fairhair of Norway; Independent until 1262
- Godi: chieftain-priest; local political leader, although people chose their godi
- Althing, 930 A.D.; democratic parliament with aristocratic base; All godi automatically were included
- Annual meeting

Honor and Feuding

- Personal honor and dignity were essential
- Extended to one's family and friends
- Injury required payment in blood or money
- Assembly's were called quarterly to resolve disputes
- Enforcement was left up to the plaintiff



Ketil Flatnose

- Sent by King Harold Fairhair to fight Viking raiders from Hebrides and Orkney islands
- He was successful but stayed and sent the fleet back
- King Harold seized Ketil's property in Norway
- Ketil gives his daughter, Aud, to king of the Western seas

Bjorn Ketilsson: son of Ketil

- Took possession of his ancestral estate and drove off the men the king had set up
- King declared Bjorn banished and an outlaw
- Bjorn sailed away West and was received by Thorolf, "a great friend of Thor"
- King outlaws Thorolf
- This was 10 years after Ingolf Arnarson had settled in Iceland (874)



Thorolf comes to Thorsness in Iceland

- Takes the wood from the Temple; pedestal which held the image of Thor
- Cast the pillars in the water for Thor to show him where to land
- Burned the land to mark his boundary claim
- Builds Temple; altar with ring of priest and sacrificial bowl and sacrificial twig; used to sprinkle sacrificial blood



Helgafell Mountain



- Helgafell Mountain: Holy; no one could look upon it without washing; nothing could be killed there; Place of afterlife; Later an Augustinian monastery
- Ground where he landed was assembly place; no one could defile it with blood or excrement; Skerry to walk on was built

Bjorn and Christian Kin

- Bjorn Ketilsson stays with relatives in Hebrides
- “they had a different faith, and he considered it paltry of them to have renounced the old faith which their kinsmen had had. He did not feel at home with them, and so did not wish to make his permanent residence there.”
- Bjorn the Norwegian; renegade
- Sails to Iceland

Thorolf Lamefoot

- Thorolf challenged Ulfar the Champion to a holmgang; "island going" was a duel on an island
- Ulfar was old and childless
- Thorolf won but was wounded and limped
- Three children: Arnkel was son



Sanctity of Thorsness

- Thorstein Thorskabit (eager to catch Cod) inherited farm when Thorolf godi died
- At spring assembly, Kjallekling clan caused trouble; walked off skerry
- Fight
- Thord arbitrates: No compensation; Field was defiled so no more assemblies there
- Thorgrim Kjallaksson should share maintenance and dues of Temple with Thorstein

Christianity comes to Iceland, ch. 49; year 1,000 A.D.

- Hjalti came to preach the gospel; Althing accepted it as law
- Snorri had a church built at Helgafell
- "A great incentive toward the building of churches was that the priests promised that a person would provide room in Heaven for as many as could find standing room in the church he built."
- No priests for a long time to serve in churches



Erik the Red and Greenland

- Fled Norway for Murder
- Murder and Feud in Iceland too
- Greenland had been sighted earlier by off track ship
- Settles on Eastern side (982)
- 25 Ship: only 14 arrived
- Settlement lasted until mid 15th century when Colder weather isolated settlement and Eskimos came South and challenged them

Leif Ericsson the Lucky and Vinland

- Vinland was the name he gave to America: discovered grapes and vines
- Called Lucky because he saved men stranded on a reef
- Eric fell off horse on way to ship and said "It was not meant for me to discover other lands..."
- Leif's brother Thorolf: shot in groin with arrow by Natives

Summary

- Sagas were important as genealogies and histories of Norse people
- Icelandic culture is a republic of sorts; there is law but it is complex and relies upon local strong men to enforce
- Icelandic sagas reflect constant strife over land and resources and honor
- Very gradual and slow transition from pagan to Christian