*Chapter 1*

# Medieval Iceland



## Setting the scene

> That winter Ingólfr held a great sacrifice and sought for himself an omen concerning his destiny . . . The intelligence directed Ingólfr to Iceland. After that each of those kinsmen [Ingólfr and his brother-in-law Hjǫrleifr] prepared his ship for the voyage to Iceland; Hjǫrleifr had his war booty on board, and Ingólfr [carried] their common property, and they put out to sea when they were ready . . . When Ingólfr saw Iceland he threw his high-seat pillars overboard for good luck; he declared he would settle where the pillars came ashore.[1]
>
> Þenna vetr fekk Ingólfr at blóti miklu ok leitaði sér heilla um forlǫg sín . . . Fréttin vísaði Ingólfi til Íslands. Eptir þat bjó sitt skip hvárr þeira mága til Íslandsferðar; hafði Hjǫrleifr herfang sitt á skipi, en Ingólfr félagsfé þeira, ok lǫgðu til hafs, er þeir váru búnir . . . Þá er Ingólfr sá Ísland, skaut hann fyrir borð ǫndugissúlum sínum til heilla; hann mælti svá fyrir, at hann skyldi þar byggja, er súlurnar kœmi á land.

The modern visitor to Iceland from abroad usually approaches the island from the air, very differently and much more easily than the first settlers did as they approached an unknown land by sea on board small ships, bringing with them some family members, their animals and some precious household possessions, probably including some numinous object representing the power of their gods, like the first settler Ingólfr's high-seat pillars. Travelling today

towards the almost suburban sprawl of Reykjavík from the airport at Keflavík along a metalled road and in a comfortable bus, the visitor may find it hard to imagine the privations that faced the first inhabitants of Iceland and that, indeed, continued for many of their descendants down to the twentieth century. Yet a glance outside the bus window tells the story: the landscape is in most respects as rugged, barren and striking now as it was at the time of the first settlement in the late ninth and early tenth centuries AD, and the weather is also much the same, with rain, snow or sleet, depending on the season of the year, occasional sun, and wind, almost always wind blowing.

The first historian to write in Icelandic, Ari Þorgilsson (1068–1148), claimed in his 'Book of the Icelanders' (*Íslendingabók*), written 1122–3, that at the time of the earliest settlement the island was well wooded: 'At that time Iceland was covered with trees between mountain and foreshore' (*Í þann tíð vas Ísland viði vaxit á miðli fjalls ok fjǫru*). If so, the new settlers' sheep and goats probably ate the dwarf birch trees and other shrubs that grew there within a relatively short time. Humans and European domesticated animals were intruders into this vulnerable early medieval landscape, where previously the only large land mammal was the arctic fox, though there were then, as now, sea mammals, birds and fish in abundance. Ari also said that Irish hermits, called *papar*, sought sanctuary on the island but fled when the heathen settlers appeared. These men must have been relatively few in number. The landscape itself was in some significant respects unlike the homelands of the colonists, whether they came from mainland Scandinavia, as the largest proportion probably did, or from the northern British Isles and Atlantic islands. Snow-capped mountains and fjords were familiar to them, but many of the Icelandic mountains were volcanic, and actively so. Iceland is one of the liveliest geothermal countries on earth, with earthquakes, dangerous volcanoes, hot springs, geysers (the word is Icelandic in origin) and swift-flowing rivers that descend from the barren central lava plateau to the sea, often branching into many-channelled streams that flow across black, volcanic sands.

In spite of its name, Iceland, the climate of the island is milder than would normally be expected of a place on a latitude so far north (64–6°), certainly much milder than Greenland, in spite of the latter's attractive name. This is because the Gulf Stream influences the climate and also brings an abundance of marine life there. Without this ameliorating influence, Iceland's climate would be almost too harsh for human habitation, given that 11.6 per cent of the land surface is covered by glaciers and only the coastal strips (approximately 23 per cent) are fertile enough to support crops and animals. In summer, sheep can be grazed on upland pastures that are snow-covered in winter.

The early settlers soon modified their behaviour and agricultural practices to adjust to their new environment. They found they could not grow many of the grain crops they were used to back home in their damp, cold climate, being restricted largely to hay, nor could they keep such a variety of animals. Sheep, goats, cows and pigs were kept initially, but the bones of cattle and pigs largely disappear from the archaeological faunal record during the eleventh century. Medieval Icelanders have been fittingly described by the Icelandic historian Gunnar Karlsson as sedentary pastoralists, living largely on a diet of milk products and meat. Horses were very important for human transport and as pack animals across a difficult terrain where made roads did not exist.

Building in wood, the standard material in early medieval North-West Europe, became difficult because, after the initial period when there were some trees, all wood had to be either imported, mostly from Norway, or gathered as driftwood. Hence a great many Icelandic farmhouses were structures of stones, some wood and turf, and this method of construction persisted into the modern period. A good idea of traditional farm construction methods can be gained from a visit to the reconstructed medieval farm at Stöng in Þjórsárdalur, probably built at some time in the eleventh century. This farm was buried under volcanic ash from an eruption of Mt Hekla in 1104 and later covered by a glacier. When the glacier receded in the early twentieth century, the ruins were revealed. They were excavated in 1939 and restored in 1974, as part of Iceland's celebration of its 1100th anniversary (assuming the settlement to have begun in 874). After *c.* 1200, the lack of local wood for building boats placed a severe restriction on the ability of Icelanders to travel abroad and engage in trade independently, and they became more and more reliant on foreign merchants, firstly Norwegians, later English and German traders, and finally a Danish monopoly that lasted until 1787.

## Why Iceland?

Given the physical nature of the place, one might ask why people colonised such a marginal location, the last part of the European land mass to be settled by humans, aside from Greenland, which was settled from Iceland. There are several probable answers to this question. In the first place, the climate was warmer in the settlement period than it became after 1300. Secondly, the settlement of Iceland took place towards the end of a period in which colonies of mainland Scandinavians (from Norway, Sweden and Denmark)

established themselves in many parts of Western, Eastern and Southern Europe in the period of the so-called Viking expansion, from the mid-eighth to the mid-eleventh centuries AD. The reasons for this large-scale movement of people are various and have been much debated. The expansion westwards was only one of the trajectories followed by Viking colonists, mostly from Norway. There were Norwegian colonies in most of the North Atlantic islands, from the Orkneys and Shetlands to the Faroes and so on to Iceland. There were also Norwegian settlements in Ireland, the Hebrides, the Isle of Man and northern parts of Scotland. Early sources tell that some of the early settlers in Iceland had already tried their luck in other Scandinavian colonies, and had decided to see whether Iceland offered better prospects. So, in this context, Iceland was just one of many, the last settled colony of the Norwegian diaspora. Early reports appear to have suggested that people could make a good living in a place where land and resources were as yet unclaimed and unexploited.

Medieval Icelandic sources themselves give another reason for the settlement, a reason that accounts for the proportion of the population that came from Norway, rather than those who came from Britain and the Atlantic islands. That reason is substantially political and to some degree economic. Again and again in the introductory sections of sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), sometimes known as family sagas, the narrators insist that their protagonists, or the latters' ancestors, emigrated to Iceland to escape the tyranny of the Norwegian king Haraldr hárfagri 'Fair-hair' Hálfdanarson (r. *c.* 870–932), who was in the process of exerting his authority over all regions of Norway and intruding upon the autonomy of local leaders, who had previously used to enjoy relative independence and political freedom. Although there is probably some truth in this claim, modern scholars have suspected that it is also to some degree ideologically motivated. As we shall see in discussing the Icelandic saga later on, medieval Icelandic society, and the literature produced by it, reveals an equivocal relationship with royalty and aristocratic authority. On the one hand, Icelandic independence and egalitarianism can be seen in the literature to be highly valued qualities; on the other, Icelanders often claimed for themselves close family relationships with Norwegian and other royal families and valued these positively. This is unsurprising in a medieval European context, when socially stratified societies ruled by kings and hereditary aristocracies were the norm. The socio-political and economic character of medieval Icelandic society was an exception to this norm and, though it survived for approximately 400 years (the so-called Commonwealth period *c.* 870–1262), it eventually succumbed to medieval European normality, not by electing kings from within its own people, but by bowing to the authority of the king of Norway, whose subjects the Icelanders became.

## Where did the settlers come from?

According to 'The Book of the Land-Takings',[2] a record of the earliest settlers in Iceland and where they settled, several people bumped into Iceland, so to speak, before the first permanent settlement from Norway, which probably took place *c.* 870. These people were travelling by ship between the Scandinavian mainland and one or other of the Norse Atlantic island settlements. There was a Norwegian named Naddoddr and a Swede called Garðarr Svávarsson, the former blown off his course for the Faroe Islands, the latter attempting to get to the Hebrides. Another Norwegian, Flóki, with two companions, spent a winter in Iceland, and gave it its name on account of the pack-ice he could see in the spring in a northern fjord.

There were probably under 10,000 people inhabiting Iceland by the end of the period of settlement *c.* 930. Most medieval Icelandic written sources lead one to believe that the majority of those people had emigrated from various parts of Norway and that many of them belonged to the upper classes of society. The latter emphasis may well not have been entirely accurate; certainly, once they were domiciled in Iceland, the settlers' material circumstances appear to have become less affluent than those of their Norwegian counterparts, to judge by the evidence of the archaeological record. Undoubtedly, many of the socio-political institutions of the new Commonwealth were modelled on those of Norway, particularly Western Norway, including the practice of holding local open-air assemblies, called *þing*, the nature of the legal system and a number of other political institutions.

Equally important, however, were the structures that the Icelanders apparently deliberately repudiated, like the institution of kingship and a formalised social hierarchy below the king, as well as the allodial or odal system of land ownership held absolutely by families that Norwegians transferred to their other colonies, including the Faroes, Orkney and Shetland. In Iceland, different social and geographical conditions appear to have made such a system of familial land tenure and transmission unattractive. In terms of kinship and marriage, too, the Icelandic social system was based on a Germanic, more particularly Scandinavian, model with some significant modifications. And undoubtedly in terms of language, religion and culture Iceland was predominantly Scandinavian. Icelandic developed as a separate language from Norwegian during the medieval period, just as the other Norwegian colonies' languages did. The distinguishing thing about Icelandic, however, which is the reason it has been possible to write this book, is that it quickly developed a rich and varied vernacular literature, much of which has survived to the present

day. While some vernacular writing, as well as texts in Latin, have survived in Norwegian, and we have reason to believe that the Faroes, and to a much greater extent, the Orkney Islands, were literary centres too, the output of the Icelanders was prodigious by comparison. The reasons behind their textual productivity will be discussed below.

While one must acknowledge the dominant demographic and cultural influence of Norway on the early settlers in Iceland, there is another ethnic group whose influence was less overt but nevertheless important. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, advances in genetic research have revealed just how significant the contribution of Celtic settlers and slaves from the northern British Isles, particularly females, is likely to have been. Studies of European blood groups within the ABO blood group system carried out during the twentieth century have shown that the distribution of groups within the Icelandic population has similarities to those of the British Isles rather than to mainland Scandinavia. More recently, ongoing studies of the mitochondrial DNA (that is, DNA subject to maternal inheritance) of a sample of pre-1000 Icelandic skeletons seem to point to a difference between males and females in place of origin; a much greater proportion of female settlers, estimated as 63–5 per cent, seem to have come from Scotland and Ireland and a much higher proportion of males, estimated as 75–80 per cent, from Norway or other parts of mainland Scandinavia. In addition, ongoing comparative studies of strontium isotopes in teeth and bones confirm that migrants among the earliest settlers came from several different places, without as yet being able to identify those places precisely.

'The Book of the Land-Takings' mentions a number of early settlers of Celtic or mixed Scandinavian and Celtic ancestry, and it is possible that medieval Icelandic sources somewhat downplayed the proportion of the population that was not Norse, especially if it was female and unfree, and perhaps also because some Celtic settlers were already Christian. It is known that Icelanders kept slaves, both male and female, in the early period. They are mentioned in many sagas and in legal texts from the Commonwealth period. Slavery was big business throughout Europe in the early Middle Ages, and there is every reason to suppose that Scandinavians of the Viking Age engaged in the practice of buying and selling slaves, particularly from the British Isles. It is generally accepted that Icelandic society was among the first in Europe to give up slavery, probably not out of Christian virtue but because it was of small economic benefit. In this context, we may wonder whether the representation in 'The Saga of the people of Salmon River Valley' (*Laxdœla saga*) of the relationship between Hǫskuldr Dala-Kollsson, an ambitious Icelandic chieftain of Norwegian ancestry, who buys a concubine in a market overseas and eventually discovers that

she is the daughter of an Irish king, is not a deeply embedded Icelandic ethnic myth that seeks to acknowledge the Celtic connection while at the same time representing it as extraordinary and almost the stuff of wonder tales.

## Medieval Iceland society

The following section gives a brief account of the history of Icelandic society in the Commonwealth period (*c.* 870–1262) and of the changes that occurred after 1262–4, when Iceland had been 'normalised' to a common late medieval governmental pattern as a distant and rather poor dependency of a sovereign state, Norway, whose king appointed local agents to rule the country and collect his taxes. It is important for anyone who wants to understand the saga literature produced in medieval Iceland to have at least a basic grasp of Icelandic economic, social and political history, although the reader should always bear in mind that there was a considerable time gap of some 200–300 years between the Age of Settlement and the likely period of saga writing. Some further background reading is suggested in the Guide to Further Reading at the end of the book, and particular institutions and social practices will be mentioned whenever they are relevant to the analysis of saga literature. Table 1 sets out a chronology of important events during the period.

I shall draw attention here to some major characteristics of Commonwealth Iceland that set it somewhat apart from other medieval societies of the period. Perhaps because it was often not possible for the early settlers to bring their extended families with them on the voyage to Iceland, compensatory stress was placed on the worth of the individual to act – or not to act – in socially acceptable ways. Family support was still very important in many respects, particularly in the prosecution of marriages and feuding, but it is clear from saga literature that an idealised personal honour was above all the currency in which the esteem of an individual was measured. Further, personal honour was only inflected for gender to a degree. The qualities that characterised a manly man, courage, reticence, calculated but not excessive aggression, physical strength and honesty to a point, were not all qualities appropriate to women, although there is a sense in which women were often judged according to the masculine paradigm, and as often found wanting. The negative side of personal honour is also a common theme of saga literature, as one might expect. Cowardice, garrulousness, treachery, physical weakness or disability were the obverse of manliness, and were often expressed in a sexualised

*Table 1.* Important events in the history of medieval Iceland

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| *c.* 870–930 The settlement of Iceland |
| *c.* 890–900 King Haraldr hárfagri 'Fair-hair' Hálfdanarson consolidates power in Norway |
| *c.* 930 Establishment of the Althing (*Alþingi*) or General Assembly |
| *c.* 960 Division of Iceland into Quarters |
| 999 or 1000 Official conversion of the Icelanders to Christianity |
| *c.* 1004–30 Establishment of the Fifth Court (*Fimmtardómr*) |
| 1056 Ísleifr Gizurarson, the first Icelandic-born bishop, consecrated in Bremen |
| 1117–18 Writing down of the Commonwealth law code (*Grágás*) over the winter |
| 1133 First monastery established at Þingeyrar in Húnavatnsþing |
| 1153 Trondheim established as archbishopric for Norway and Iceland |
| 1220–60 The Age of the Sturlungs (*Sturlungaöld*) – civil unrest in Iceland |
| 1262–4 Icelandic chieftains swear allegiance to King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway and his son Magnús |
| 1271 King Magnús sends new legal code, *Járnsíða* 'Ironside', to Iceland |
| 1280 New law code, *Jónsbók* 'John's Book', sent to Iceland |
| 1397 The Kalmar Union of Denmark, Norway and Sweden begins |

idiom, in which the unmanly man could be accused of passive homosexuality or bestiality, termed *ergi*, a charge of such seriousness that it could lead to death.

The individual's possession of honour was his most important social attribute. Honour could be affected by the actions or inactions of others, particularly within the family. Any assault upon the honour of the family's female members, like an unauthorised sexual approach or encounter, was considered to reflect directly upon the honour of its male members, and there are instances in saga literature of feuds being started over women. Conflicts that resulted in injuries or killings demanded retribution on the part of the injured party or his representatives to restore honour and avoid the shame that would usually follow inaction. Family members and political associates were expected to participate in acts of vengeance in order to preserve honour and exact compensation. Each individual possessed a notional monetary value, as in other early Germanic societies, often called the wergild by modern scholars (literally 'man-payment', from Old English *wergeld*), and compensation awarded

by a court for injury or death had to be distributed among the kin group in accordance with a set formula: the closer the awardee was to the deceased genealogically, the greater the compensation. If compensation could not be agreed on, the alternative was to exact physical retribution, often in the form of killing or maiming. Another extreme option for the most heinous crimes, or if negotiations for compensation broke down altogether, was outlawry, which placed an individual right outside society.

The importance of the individual's autonomous status can be seen at social levels beyond the family. The ruling social group of Commonwealth Iceland were the chieftains or *goðar*, and individual males of sufficient means entered into a personal contract with a single *goði* for protection and support for themselves and their households, a contract that either side could change if he wished. The *goðar* were supposed to represent the interests of their *þingmenn*, or supporters, at local assemblies (*þing*) and in some cases at the annual general assembly of the whole country, the Althing (*Alþingi*), at Þingvellir 'Assembly Plains' in South-West Iceland, which took place over two weeks every summer. The constitutional structure of the Icelandic Commonwealth was very complex, with the country divided into four Quarters (this division took place *c.* 960), each with its own *goðar*. The *goðar* in turn nominated judges to each of the four Quarter courts, which deliberated upon legal cases. Later (after 1004) a Fifth Court of review was added to the structure. The preservation and interpretation of the law was entrusted in large part to a lawspeaker (*lǫgsǫgumaðr*) who presided over the law council (*lǫgrétta*) and over the Althing itself.

In spite of the complex machinery of the law, the Icelandic Commonwealth had no executive arm. There was no one to implement the rulings of courts except the person or persons in whose favour they had been handed down. This meant that in most cases individuals and groups had to resort to violence or some other form of coercion in order to achieve the outcomes the courts said they should have. Although there were forces of moderation active in the society, the lack of executive power in the hands of authority meant that aggression was often the only recourse available to wronged individuals. Eventually, probably in the later twelfth century, as power became concentrated in the hands of five or six ruling families, who dominated large areas of the island, the balance between moderation and aggression was destabilised. These powerful families were able to amalgamate numbers of chieftaincies and raise what amounted to private armies. Political and social instability became characteristic of Icelandic society during the first part of the thirteenth century, the so-called Sturlung Age (named after one of the dominant families, the Sturlungar), and it was thus open to pressures exerted on its members by the then Norwegian king, Hákon

Hákonarson (r. 1217–63), to become a dependency of the Norwegian crown. In becoming a dependency of Norway, Icelandic society gained a different kind of constitution in which a new legal and judicial system was combined with the executive power of the king's representatives in the land.

## Religion

Some of the first settlers who had migrated from the Celtic realms were Christians, but the Scandinavian majority were not. They adhered to a polytheistic religion, a Scandinavian version of a system of beliefs that seem to have had much in common throughout the early Germanic world. However, those Viking Age Scandinavians who travelled abroad, and indeed even those who stayed at home, are likely to have learnt something about Christian beliefs from people and Christian sacred objects they came into contact with before the official conversion period. Those who wanted to trade with Christians were supposed to have undergone a form of preliminary baptism, the *prima signatio* or marking with the sign of the cross (Old Norse *primsigning*).

On the whole, conversion to Christianity within Scandinavia was what historians call a top-down process, initiated by those in authority and then gradually accepted by the populace at large. If we can believe medieval Icelandic texts, principally Ari Þorgilsson's 'Book of the Icelanders', the conversion in Iceland took place as a rational decision of the Althing in the year 999 or 1000 and so was somewhat different from the common Scandinavian and medieval European pattern. There has been a great deal of scholarly discussion about the Icelanders' motives for such a move, most recently assessed by Orri Vésteinsson, and in the last decade or so Orri and other, mainly Icelandic, scholars have suggested that the development of the Church in Iceland was a much slower and more gradual process than had previously been thought. However, the conversion to Christianity was not simply a religious phenomenon. Its importance to a study of the Icelandic saga is partly because the Church and the culture it gave access to functioned as agents of change and the means by which a variety of new intellectual influences became available to medieval Icelanders, influences which they were able to combine with traditional, largely orally transmitted forms of expression to create new literary forms. In addition, although runic literacy must have been practised by some Icelanders from the early settlement period, literacy using the Roman alphabet, specially adapted to writing Icelandic, followed the Christian conversion, as did access to manuscript books. These subjects are treated in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3.