

An Introduction to Old Norse Literature - The Age of Settlement

Landnámabók ('The Book of Settlements')

Floki and his crew sailed west across Breidafjörð and made land at Vatnsfjörð in Bárðastrand. At that time the fjord was teeming with fish, and they got so caught up with the fishing they forgot to make hay, so their livestock starved to death the following winter.

The spring was an extremely cold one. Floki climbed a certain high mountain, and north across the mountain range he could see a fjord full of drift ice. That's why they called the country *Iceland*, and so it's been called ever since.

In the summer, Floki and his men planned to sail away, but they were only ready just before winter. They tried unsuccessfully to tack round Reykjaness, and then their towboat with Herjólf on board broke loose from the ship. He managed to scramble ashore at a place called Herjólfshaven. Floki stayed the winter in Borgarfjörð. They found Herjólf and sailed over to Norway the following summer. When they were asked about the new country Floki had nothing good to say of it, but Herjólf described its merits as well as its faults. Thorolf said that in the land they'd found, butter was dripping from every blade of grass. That's why people called him Thorolf Butter.

6. *The Blood-Brothers*

There was a man called Björnolf, and another called Hroald, sons of Hromund Gripsson.¹¹ They left Telemark because of some killings and settled down at Dalsfjörð in Fjarlar Province. Björnolf had a son called Orn who was the father of Ingolf and Helga. Hroald had a son called Hrodmar, father of Leif.

Ingolf and Leif were blood-brothers, and they went on a viking expedition with Hastein, Herstein, and Holmstein, the sons of Earl Atli the Slender of Gaular. They all got on well together, and when they came back home they agreed to join forces the following summer. Next winter the blood-brothers gave a feast for the earl's sons, and at that feast Holmstein swore a solemn oath to marry Helga Orn's-daughter, or else not to marry at all. People didn't like this vow. Leif flushed red, and he and Holmstein parted on cool terms when the feast was over.

In the spring the blood-brothers got themselves ready for a viking expedition, planning to set out in search of Atli. They met up with them at Hisargafl. Holmstein and his brothers were the first to attack, but after they'd been fighting for a while, Olmod the Old, son of Horda-Kari and Leif's kinsman, turned up with support for Leif and

Ingolf. Holmstein was killed in this battle and Herstein had to run for it. After that the blood-brothers set out on their viking expedition.

Next winter, Herstein led an attack on Leif and Ingolf, hoping to kill them, but they were put on their guard and made a counter-move against him. There was a fierce battle and Herstein was killed. After that a number of their friends from Fjörð Province rallied round the blood-brothers. Then messengers were sent to Earl Atli and Hastein to offer compensation, and a settlement was reached on these terms that Leif and Ingolf were to give the earl and his son everything they possessed.

After that the blood-brothers got ready a large ship of theirs and set out in search of the land Raven-Floki had discovered, by that time called Iceland. They found the land, and stayed the first winter at South-Alftafjörð in the Eastfjords. It seemed to them the south part of the country was better than the north. After spending a winter in Iceland, they went back to Norway. Later, Ingolf laid out all his money to go to Iceland, but Leif went on a viking expedition to the west and plundered in Ireland. Once he found a large underground chamber there and went inside. It was dark until light started coming from a sword someone was holding. Leif killed the man and took the sword and a good deal of money besides. After this he was known as Hjórléif.¹² He plundered all over Ireland and took a great deal of loot, including ten slaves called Dufthak, Geirraud, Skjaldbjörn, Halldor, Drafdrit, —the rest of them aren't mentioned by name. After that Hjórléif went back to Norway and joined his blood-brother Ingolf. Earlier Leif had married Helga Orn's-daughter, Ingolf's sister.

7. *Sacrifice*

That winter Ingolf held a great sacrifice to discover what the future had in store for him, but Hjórléif would never sacrifice to the gods. The oracle told Ingolf to go to Iceland. After that he and his brother-in-law got their ships ready separately for the voyage. Hjórléif loaded his ship with the loot he'd won, and in his Ingolf carried what they held in common. As soon as they were ready they put out to sea.

8. *In Iceland*

The summer Ingolf and Hjórléif went to settle in Iceland, Harald Fine-Hair had been King of Norway for twelve years; that was 6073

Sigurður Nordal, writing in 1944:

En þótt sú gjöf væri góð, mun hún hjá flestum þiggjandanna jafnframt hafa ýft upp þann harm, að frumritið og aðrar hinar fornu skinnbækur vorar, sem Íslendingar væru þess nú um komnir að varðveita vel og öllum færari að hagnýta til rannsókna, skuli vera erlendis og fjarri þeirri þjóð, sem skapaði þessar ódauðulegu bókmenntir og í fátækt sinni gerði handrit þeirra úr garði af slíkum stórhug og hagleik.

And though that gift was good, in most of the recipients it also reawakened the sorrow that the original, and the other old manuscripts of ours, which Icelanders were now in a position to preserve well and [were now] more competent to use for research, should be out of the country and far from that people which created this immortal literature and in their poverty produced their manuscripts with such magnificence and skill.

Some introductory reading:

Clover, Carol J. and John Lindow, eds. *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* (Ithaca, 1985).

McTurk, Rory, ed. *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford, 2005).

O'Donoghue, Heather. *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2004).

Pulsiano, Philip, ed. *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (London, 1993).

Historical and literary background to the family saga

Andersson, T. M. *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey*. Yale Germanic Studies 1 (New Haven, 1964).

Byock, J. *Medieval Iceland* (California, 1988).

Clover, Carol J. *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca, 1982).

Foote, P. G. 'An Essay on the Saga of Gísli and Its Icelandic Background', in *The Saga of Gísli*. Tr. George Johnston (London, 1963), pp. 93-134.

Turville-Petre, G. *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford, 1953).

Sørensen, Preben Meulengracht. *Saga and Society* (Odense, 1993).

Vésteinn Ólason. *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders* (Reykjavík, 1998).

Translations of the sagas may be found in *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection* (London, 2000) as well as *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (Reykjavík, 1997).