Chapter 10
Landnám in the North Atlantic

Viking colonization had a crucial role in shaping national identities across the North Atlantic, and Scandinavia is seen very much as the ancestral homeland. This chapter will range from the Faroes to Iceland, and from 800 to 1400, as it examines how far Viking identity and culture survived from Scandinavia and how far it was reinvented in 13th- and 14th-century sagas.

Colonization of the Faroes

The Faroes, literally 'Sheep islands', are a group of 18 islands, 290 kilometres north-west of Shetland, and 675 kilometres from the west coast of Norway. Today they have a population of *c.*45,000 which proudly preserves its Norse heritage, including the infamous whale drives. The Faroese have their own Scandinavian language, halfway between Norwegian and Icelandic. During the 19th century they began to explore their roots, looking variously to Irish hermits, Norse exiles, and Basque whalers. The leading Faroese Home Rule politician, Jóannes Patursson (1866–1946) promoted the development of Faroese archaeology, but it was Sverri Dahl (1910–87), curator of the national museum (founded 1952), who excavated the first artefact that could be attributed to the Vikings: a ringed pin from a beach-side grave at Tjørnuvik.

In 825 an Irish source, Dicuil, writing in Charlemagne's court in Aachen, finished his compilation of the most advanced geography of the time, *De Mensura Orbis Terrae*. Dicuil referred to small islands to be reached by two days' sailing north of Britain; some of these islands had been uninhabited until settled by Irish hermits. After 100 years of occupation the hermits had been driven away by pirates, although the islands were still filled with countless sheep and diverse sea birds. Although Dicuil fails to name the islands it is generally accepted that he was referring to the Faroes. The accepted wisdom, therefore, was that the Norse settlement, or *landnám*, literally land-taking, took place in the 9th century, with the small Gaelic strain in Faroese language and place names surviving from the Irish hermits.

According to the *Færeyinga Saga* (*c.*1200) the main colonization took place in the 870s when Grimur Kamban sought refuge from Haraldr Finehair of Norway. However, there is no archaeological evidence for Irish anchorites, and it has also been observed that the Gaelic element in Faroese culture cannot be a result of 8th-century hermits who should not have been in a position to have children! Another explanation for the Gaelic strain is that the original Viking settlers were first- or second-generation Norse from the Northern Isles or Ireland. At one stage pollen evidence was thought to reflect human activity *c.*650 but that has now been discredited, and the earliest dates are now *c.*875–900.

There has been little excavation on the Faroes. A Norse hall and byre were excavated at Kvívík in 1941. There was evidence for cereal cultivation and room for up to 12 cattle in the byre, but sea birds and whales were also exploited. In the 1980s, a small 10th-century settlement was excavated at Toftanes. Despite the scarcity of timber the longhouse was of typical Norse stave construction. The majority of the finds were imported, including over 700 soapstone objects, hones, quern stones, a wooden gaming board, two ringed pins, and a jet bracelet, possibly from Dublin.

14. The bay at Tjørnuvik, Faroes: site of a Norse cemetery

Early democrats or environmental catastrophe in Iceland?

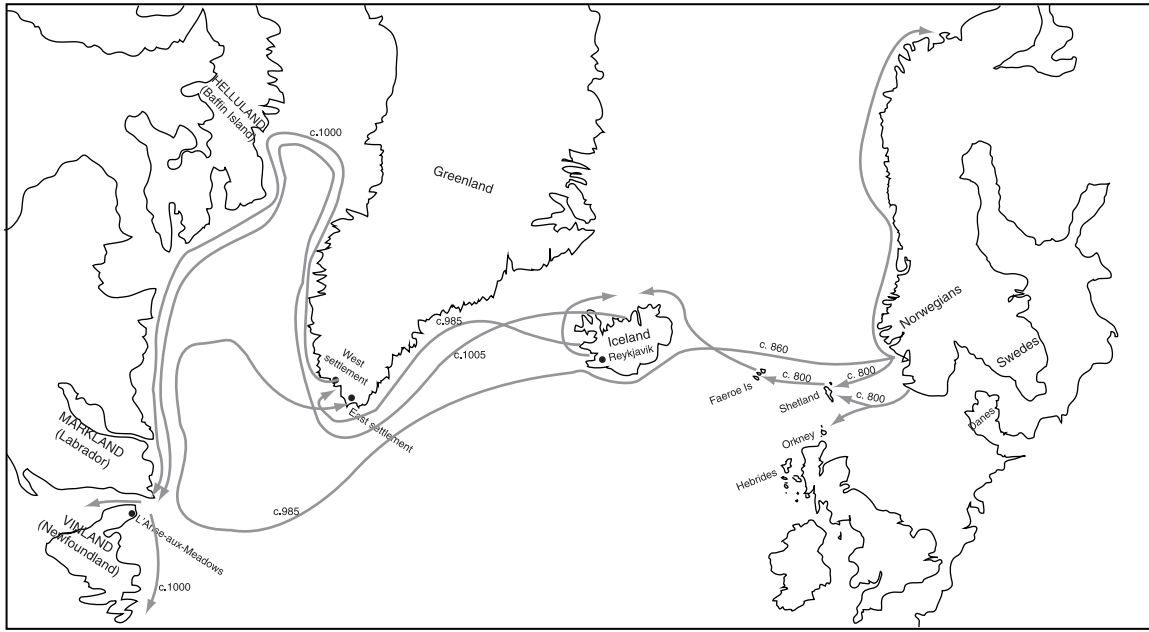
Most Icelanders will tell you that their country was colonized from Norway, starting in 874, and that Ingólfr Arnarsson was the first settler. The legend says that while exploring the coast Ingólfr tossed a wooden post from his high seat into the sea and followed it until it washed ashore at what was to become the Icelandic capital at Reykjavik. Again the first colonists were said to have emigrated from Norway to escape the tyranny of Haraldr Finehair. Similarly, there were a few Irish hermits but when the Norse first arrived they soon left. At the end of the settlement period, in 930, a special law code was enacted and an open-air assembly, the Althing, was established at Thingvellir. Thus goes the origin myth of a nation that proclaims itself to be the world's first democracy, with the Althing as its first parliament.

In fact this traditional account of the Icelandic *landnám* is provided by two written sources, set down at least 300 years later, which in turn were the basis of the medieval sagas upon which 19th-century

Icelandic nationalism was founded. *Íslendingabók*, or The Book of Icelanders, was written by the priest Ari Þorgilsson, (*c.*1122–33) and emphasizes the constitutional and ecclesiastical development of Iceland. *Landnámabók*, or The Book of Settlements, is an even later 13th-century source, which gives the names and histories of *c.*400 settlers. It is now seen as an attempt to give the Icelandic landscape a history combined with a post-hoc justification for medieval land-ownership patterns. It can no longer be used as an accurate description of persons and events in the 9th–11th centuries, although the Icelandic sagas based their account on it.

In reality, Iceland is closer to Scotland (795 kilometres) than it is to Norway (950 kilometres) and it is more likely that at least some of the first settlers came from the British Isles. No archaeological trace has been found of the Irish priests, or *Papar*, whom *Íslendingabók* claimed inhabited Iceland when the Norse arrived. However, modern DNA studies have revealed that approximately 20 per cent of the Icelandic gene pool probably originated in the Irish Sea region. This research has also demonstrated that while 75 per cent of male ancestors were from Scandinavia, only 37.5 per cent of females were, supporting the idea that the first colonists may have comprised a Hiberno-Norse element with Irish wives and slaves. Some place names may also relate to Norse contact with Ireland and Scotland prior to the settlement of Iceland, and there are Gaelic loan words, including the word for bull. It has even been proposed that the sagas, the heart of Icelandic identity and nationalistic feelings, actually owe their cultural roots to Irish oral poetry.

The early burials also reflect Irish influence on the costume of the early inhabitants of Iceland. Although there are 316 known pre-Christian burials, the majority were excavated in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and recorded in varying amounts of detail. Of those skeletons that can be sexed, males outnumber females by about two to one. Icelandic burials follow the general Norwegian tradition, but the graves are poorer and not at all monumental. Five boat burials are known, but all are small rowing boats used as coffins. The graves



15. The North Atlantic routes

are generally found under low mounds located near to farms, and the majority are in small cemeteries which probably relate to family groups. As in Scotland, there is little evidence for cremation, apart from one possible burial recently excavated at Hulduholl, near Mosfell. Ornaments and weapons are found, but many graves contain only a few items, and none are rich. Unlike Scandinavia, tools are rare, suggesting a shortage of raw materials and a low calibre tool-making industry. Iron was in short supply and heavily reused. On the other hand, a high proportion of men were accompanied by their ponies, and some by dogs. Several female burials reflect the mixed cultural origin of settlers, including a woman buried with a pair of tongue-shaped brooches and a small bell at Kornsá, a second whose grave-goods included a whalebone plaque, a trefoil brooch, and a ringed pin at Hafurbjarnarstaðir, and a third at Kroppur with a ringed pin and a strap end, probably made in the British Isles.

The traditional date for the founding of Iceland in 874 has also become discredited. A number of well preserved farmsteads have been engulfed by volcanic eruptions and tephrochronology, using the ash layers as dating horizons, can provide precise chronologies. In the 1990s radiocarbon dating gave some very early dates, in the 7th and 8th centuries, but there were problems with the dates, including the likelihood that they were based on charcoal from ancient timber, and they have subsequently been discounted. On the other hand, most archaeologists now accept that settlement probably began a little before 870, with rapid and aggressive colonization leading to a drastic reduction in birch and increase in grass by 890–900, as the settlers chopped down trees and created pasture. Research has also begun to focus on the process of creation of a new society, rather than on the date of the *landnám* per se.

Landnámabok probably does give a reasonable idea of the early settlement pattern. Although Iceland has a surface area of over 103,000 square kilometres, the centre is volcanic desert, and only one-sixth is habitable. *Landnámabok* mentions 598 farmsteads,

and all but 11 of these have been identified, scattered all around the coastline. It appears that the first settlers claimed large amounts of good farming land, and subsequently gave some to friends and relatives, who became their economic dependants and political followers. By the 11th century there were *c.*4,000 farmsteads, a figure that remained stable during the medieval and post-medieval periods. By the late 11th century the population had probably reached between 40,000 and 100,000 (compared to the present-day population of 250,000). Latecomers had to make do with slices of land in-between the large estates. Instead of being a land of isolated and independent farmers of equal status, medieval Icelandic society comprised several hundred powerful farmers each in control of a considerable number of people on his own estate and having political authority over up to 3,000 lesser farmers and cottagers bound to the estates by ties of ownership. By the 12th century, church attendance and the payment of tithes confirmed this situation.

The first farmsteads consisted of traditional longhouses, built in sod and stone, but also requiring considerable investment in timber. They had bow-sided walls with a doorway at one end and a hearth in the middle. This basic longhouse type was developed and modified, partitioned into separate rooms, and with extra rooms at the back. At Stöng, engulfed by volcanic ash in an eruption of Mt Hekla, the two additional rooms functioned as a dairy, and possibly a latrine or cold store. Such changes appear to be an adaptation to local conditions, both to the weather, so that shorter lengths of external wall were exposed, and to the growing shortage of suitable building timber.

Land ownership was the basis of economic as well as political power. Livelihoods depended upon stock-breeding, supplemented by fishing and fowling, rather than cereal cultivation. It appears that intensive colonization was accompanied by rapid environmental degradation. As the trees disappeared foraging animals had to be replaced by cows, and at Hofstaðir pigs and goats

Snorri Sturluson (1178–1241)

Snorri Sturluson was an Icelandic poet, scholar, and statesman. From the age of 3 he studied at Oddi, the cultural centre of Iceland. He played a leading role in politics and was twice law-speaker at the Althing. Snorri's farm was at Reykholt, in western Iceland. The site lies in the middle of a wide and prosperous valley which contains some of best farm land in Iceland. The passage-way farm has been excavated, revealing evidence for at least two important activity areas: wool-processing and de-lousing! Some cereal grain was also found, but must have been imported from Europe. Snorri's career brought him many enemies, including King Hákon of Norway, who had him killed in the cellar at Reykholt, in 1241.

Snorri's importance today rests upon his literary works. He compiled *Heimskringla*, a history of the Norse kings, which despite including a mythological section based on sagas, is also a key source for the early history of Iceland and Norway. Snorri was the author of the *Prose Edda*, which preserves fragments of 10th-century skaldic poetry, and may also have written *Egils Saga*.

decline in proportion to cattle during the 10th century. However, cattle had to be kept indoors for much of the year, their survival dependent upon the availability of fodder. At Svalbarð, in north-east Iceland, sheep herding was important from the first phase but, as the climate declines when Europe entered the Little Ice Age, sealing also became more important. At Svalbarð there was no cereal grain although hay was gathered for fodder and to cover the floor, and peat was used for bedding, fuel, and construction. Wild

berries, such as bilberry and crowberry, and edible seeds and leaves were also collected.

In academic discussions of early Iceland the previous focus on *landnám* and settlement origins has been replaced by a more modern 21st-century theme of environmental disaster. It has been estimated that 60 per cent of the original natural vegetation cover of Iceland was destroyed due to woodland clearance and over-grazing, followed by soil erosion. Landscape degradation enhanced by cooling climatic conditions subjected the Viking cultural system to severe stress – in economic, demographic, and social structures. In a society where families had become dispersed because of migration, new systems, such as *hreppur* – or agricultural cooperatives – had to replace former familial safeguards with a form of social services.

In summary, in the North Atlantic colonies, cultural change was eventually determined by environmental factors rather than by hybridization with an existing population, although the incoming colonists were by no means pure Scandinavian stock in the first place. The attachment to a Viking cultural identity was as much as a creation of later origin myths, at a time when it was politically expedient to look to a shared Scandinavian homeland.