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MORE TRUTHFUL HISTORY, PLEASE

The history of Iceland is full of interesting events, peoples, developments—and misconceptions or myths. Ever since the first centuries of settlement there has been a tendency to portray the Icelanders' past in a positive light. In the immediate years before the dramatic collapse of the Icelandic banking system in 2008, the temptation to depict Icelanders as the true heirs of Vikings, voyagers, poets and entrepreneurs was particularly strong. Historian *Guðni Th. Jóhannesson* looks at the (ab)use of history, hubris, and the irrelevance of academic historians.

Whatever is incorrect in these writings, it is vital to adhere to that which is more truthful.”

These words of Ari the Learned, often called Iceland's first chronicler, have been a popular maxim in works about Icelandic history. A chieftain and scholar, Ari wrote the *Book of Icelanders* in the 12th century, a short overview of the island's history, including the foundation of the nationwide parliament (Alþingi), the discovery of territories west of Iceland, and the peaceful Christianization of the country. Ari also composed or had a hand in the original making of the *Book of Settlements*, a list of Iceland's settlers—their lineage, where they came from and where they built their new homes.

AUTHORIZED HISTORIES

But was it all true, or at least “that which is more truthful?” Ari wrote the *Book of Icelanders* for the bishops of Iceland and his caveat about incorrectness and truthfulness may indeed have been an oblique reference to an inevitable bias in the work. After all, it hails the alleged achievements and wisdom of the chieftains and clergy, the ruling class of the day. Maybe he knew better but also what was expected of him.

It would of course be unfair and anachronistic to measure ancient writings by modern academic standards about objectivity and detachment. Still, we should keep in mind, maintaining our focus on Ari the Learned, that his *Book of Icelanders* was commissioned or authorized, to use

contemporary parlance. Also, there were other underlying motives at the time. For instance, the *Book of Settlements* was partly written to refute accusations from abroad that the people of Iceland descended from 'slaves and thugs.'

Thus, a positive, prejudiced version of the past was created. History was used, or abused. Then again, we need not look to distant days for such behavior. During the years before the spectacular collapse of the Icelandic banking system in 2008, when state bankruptcy was narrowly avoided, Iceland's history and heritage were routinely skewed, glorified and, yes, abused. Old myths or misconceptions swelled, just like the super-sized banks, the artificial stock market and the real estate bubble. Nothing was safe from hype.

THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

Today, nobody can dispute the fact that Norse people reached the shores of what we now call North America around the year 1000 AD. Archeological findings at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland confirm accounts in the Icelandic *Saga of Greenlanders* and *Saga of Eiríkur the Red*. In 2000, the Norse discovery of the new lands one thousand years before was justly celebrated in style, both in North America and Iceland. A grand exhibition was put in place at the Smithsonian, and a team of Icelanders sailed on a replica of a Viking vessel from Iceland to New York.

The ventures of Leifur 'the Lucky' Eiríksson and other Norsemen were a true feat of navigation, individual resilience, and courage. Even so, the overall importance of these travels may be contested. Oscar Wilde famously remarked that the 'Vikings' discovered America but were wise enough to keep quiet about it. Take for instance the noble woman Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir. She has been hailed as a Christian missionary as well as the first European and 'white' mother

in America, having given birth to a son, Snorri, in the New World. While there is little doubt that Guðríður existed, historians point out that she did not sail westwards on a religious mission. Furthermore, they have challenged the accounts in the Sagas about a pilgrimage to Rome and an audience with the Pope. But people in the tourism industry and various statespersons have not been that willing to share the skepticism. Why spoil a good story?

THE VIKING SPIRIT

More portentously, in the immediate years of pride before the fall of 2008, the nautical feats of some thousand years ago were linked to the alleged superiority of Icelandic entrepreneurs on the international scene. Labeled as 'Venture Vikings,' many of the business moguls ascribed their apparent success to the 'Viking Spirit' of daring and adventure. The body of statespersons and politicians seemed to agree. Already in 2000, the year of celebrating the westward voyages, President of Iceland Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson argued that "the spirit of exploration and discovery" had been kept alive in the minds of the Icelanders and therefore they now excelled on so many fronts.

This became a recurrent theme, but the collapse of 2008 made a mockery of the Icelandic 'Venture Viking.' Icelandic businessmen (it was a male-dominated profession) had not been imbued with the positive features of daring voyagers but rather made their fortune from borrowed money and shady dealings. With this in mind, the Viking connection only seemed appropriate (and not so fortunate) because the original Vikings had pillaged and plundered overseas. Accordingly, one historian recently wondered whether they should not be described as the despicable 'terrorists' of their time.

THE GOLDEN AGE

During the 19th century, Icelandic intellectuals and members of parliament led the fight for increased autonomy from Denmark, a peaceful struggle that finally ended with full independence in 1944. Throughout the process, history was one of the strongest weapons in the Icelandic armory. Iceland, the story went, had been settled by freedom-loving men (again, women hardly figured in the story) who fled tyranny and taxation in Norway and founded a free state, not to mention the first nationwide-parliament in the world. The rule of law prevailed, voyagers discovered new lands, and writers composed the Sagas. This 'golden age' only came to an end in 1262, after decades of needless civil strife that culminated in 'treason' when Icelandic chieftains pledged allegiance to the King of Norway. A period of Norwegian domination was followed by centuries of Danish rule until the Icelanders awoke and began to yearn for their long-gone glory days of independence.

By the time Iceland regained its independence, this version of history—a classical tale of rise, decline, and renewed rise—had become firmly

entrenched in the collective memory of Icelanders. During the boom-years at the start of the new millennium, it still seemed to permeate people's self-image.

THE IRRELEVANCE OF ACADEMIA

Where did people learn this history? The notions of Icelandic superiority prior to the crisis of 2008 brought to the fore a deep schism between many academic historians on the one hand and the great bulk of statespersons and the general public on the other. In the last decades of the 20th century, a number of historians had begun to revise Icelandic history, casting doubt on the more nationalistic version of the past. Thus, they would argue that Harald Fairhair, the king who supposedly united Norway and forced people to flee to Iceland, played a far smaller role than previously assumed, or that he may not have existed at all. Also, Alþingi, the Icelandic parliament, was not a democratic body and 'freedom' was limited to an elite upper class. Later on, the subjugation to the King of Norway was not 'treason' and a lamentable loss of independence. There was no state and people's sense of nationhood was drastically different from the modern era. Similarly, the way to independence that

started in the early 19th century and led to the foundation of a wholly independent republic in 1944 was not simply a story of a united nation fighting a foreign foe. The ultimate goal changed over time and there were inherent clashes and contradictions in society. Moreover, progress was often influenced by positive developments abroad like the victory of parliamentary democracy in Denmark at the start of the 20th century, the popular principle of self-determination at the end of the First World War, and the German occupation of Denmark in the Second World War. And of course there was no 'Viking Spirit,' transferred across the centuries.

Why did the revised, more cautious and less glorious version of Iceland's past not reach society at large? First, it did not fulfill the political role of providing a positive, unifying history. Second, the academics were neither encouraged nor that willing to take part in public arguments about the past. But while history is far too important to be left to the historians alone, they must try to make themselves heard. Otherwise, misconceptions about Icelandic superiority might lead to another collapse. Hubris can always repeat itself. ✱

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