



Viking Age Iceland

Jesse L. Byock

Download now

Read Online →

Viking Age Iceland

Jesse L. Byock

Viking Age Iceland Jesse L. Byock

Medieval Iceland was unique amongst Western Europe, with no foreign policy, no defence forces, no king, no lords, no peasants and few battles. It should have been a utopia yet its literature is dominated by brutality and killing. The reasons for this, argues Jesse Byock, lie in the underlying structures and cultural codes of the islands' social order. 'Viking Age Iceland' is an engaging, multi-disciplinary work bringing together findings in anthropology and ethnography interwoven with historical fact and masterful insights into the popular Icelandic sagas, this is a brilliant reconstruction of the inner workings of a unique and intriguing society.

Viking Age Iceland Details

Date : Published September 1st 2001 by Penguin Books (first published February 22nd 2001)

ISBN : 9780140291155

Author : Jesse L. Byock

Format : Paperback 448 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Historical, Medieval, Fantasy, Mythology

 [Download Viking Age Iceland ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Viking Age Iceland ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Viking Age Iceland Jesse L. Byock

From Reader Review Viking Age Iceland for online ebook

Sarah says

Incredibly useful and informative book about Iceland in the Viking period

Lysanxia says

Très bon ouvrage, extrêmement détaillé, et qui ne se contente pas seulement de se référer aux sagas pour nous livrer la vie quotidienne des vikings : il les cite également allégrement à titre d'exemples, ce qui nous permet une entrée et une familiarisation faciles avec la littérature scandinave médiévale.

Par contre, Jesse Byock s'intéresse beaucoup aux aspects politiques, administratifs et judiciaires de l'île, au détriment parfois, à mon avis, de la vie quotidienne, même si les quelques chapitres consacrés exclusivement à la nourriture, aux moyens de subsistance... sont d'une précision époustouflante.

Je conseillerais donc pour une première entrée en matière un ouvrage plus généraliste et facile d'accès comme "L'Islande médiévale" de Régis Boyer, que ce livre très approfondi permettra de compléter pour une étude plus ciblée et plus poussée.

En tout cas, dites adieu à tous les clichés et préjugés sur cette civilisation si méconnue !

Bob Newman says

No King but Only Law

This book is either more or less than it seems. The back cover promises a lot, but the book delivers something rather different. If you are a scholar of early Iceland, this will be a top, must-read book. If, like me, you are just generally interested in history, it may prove too detailed. With VIKING AGE ICELAND, you get a very well-researched, extremely well-developed study of law and government in the "free state" period of Icelandic history, that is, from earliest settlement in the last quarter of the 9th century to the 13th century. Between ten and twenty thousand people arrived on the big, but often-barren island in the first sixty years, occupying all the usable land. Within the first century, they had caused so much environmental damage that all the forest was lost and half of the grassland. They established a stratified, but decentralized society with a parliament of sorts that met each year...the Althing. As no towns or villages ever grew up, Iceland operated as a single, island-wide village. "Early Iceland was an ideal laboratory for exploring the forces that cause and prevent social stratification." (p.11) But how can we study such a society, given that archaeology has yielded only scant remains, and is unlikely to reveal many details of how social stratification actually occurs ? Byock turns to the sagas, the ancient Icelandic epics, which, it turns out, have not often been used for anthropological purposes. He skillfully mines these for examples to show how individuals used both violence and negotiation to solve disagreements and build alliances for their own profit. The larger part of the book focusses on such topics---law, feuds, negotiation and arbitration, and the ways in which big men became bigger. It is full of fascinating examples from many different sagas, and contains some great maps. (I loved the maps !) Thus, if you are interested in 'legal studies' or the anthropology of law, you have definitely come to the right place. This is a 5 star book for you; I can't think why you wouldn't get hold of this book immediately.

However, if you wanted a general history of Iceland in those Viking times, this book is less than it seems. Though economics plays some role in the discussion, and there is a large section on the conversion to

Christianity, these are seen in the light of how previous patterns of government/law influenced economic and religious life or were influenced by them. For example, Iceland's peaceful conversion is often labelled 'amazing', but given the society Byock depicts---one devoted to compromise and arbitration---such an explosive issue as change of religion could be solved with little violence (p.301). The legal system operated without an executive authority. Order was maintained mainly by negotiation and compromise, often through the arbitration of 'big chieftains'. Prosecution and carrying out of penalties was a private matter. Iceland differed from both Europe at the time, and later, from early America. Therefore, to understand medieval Iceland and the sagas, Byock argues (p.308), you must have some familiarity with its law. The sagas and laws together illustrate the way Icelanders thought their society worked. This may be fascinating stuff for you. I found it interesting enough, but I felt that I had bought a book that offered something other than what I expected.

Cameron DeHart says

Dense history textbook on Viking Age Iceland (duh). The Free State period of Icelandic history before the covenant with Norway is fascinating, from a "state development" perspective. The society was legalistic and based on feuds, that were not necessarily lining up along kinship lines, and were adjudicated by chieftains who "owned" a finite number of titles. The title wasn't strictly tied to jurisdiction, and the chieftains would "advocate" for different parties at the annual Althing (kinda like a legislative court). The chieftain-advocates would argue in the Althing and local things to settle feuds. There was no military or executive power (police, king, governor), so the whole system relied upon settling feuds rather than dictating and enforcing strict policies from on high. Violence was entirely privatized. The Church of Iceland never developed much power and was kept out of lay society, in part due to their poor land holdings. All the valuable land had been distributed by the time Christianity arrived, and the original Icelanders were fiercely protective of their property, such that most of the land given to the Church was formally retained by private citizens.

I wrote a paper about Iceland's unemployment benefits system, which is unique among the Nordic countries for being not-super generous. I found that most Icelanders exercise their "exit" option by moving to England or Scandinavia during weak economies, and many men of working age are happy to attend university (generously subsidized) or work in fishing-adjacent industries. The biggest factor, however, was their flexible exchange rate which they played with whenever the economy slipped. Unemployment rarely went above 3%, and with the absence of any sizeably socialist or communist parties in Iceland in the 19th and 20th centuries, there wasn't an impetus to expand to welfare systems like there was with the Red-Green parties in Scandinavia.

I'm super interested to learn more about the period in between my two encounters with Iceland, the Viking Age and rise of modern statehood in the 20th century. This book stops at the covenant with Norway, but I'd like to learn more about the effects of empire-building and what conditions led Icelanders to embrace nationalism and push for autonomy in 1918 and independence by 1944.

Bibliowulf says

Jesse Byock combines environmental science, anthropology, and archaeology to view the Icelandic family sagas through the lens of human adaptation and environmental change in the region. Sagas thus become accounts of the daily reality of survival within these conditions, and seen from this perspective, the events depicted in the sagas are indeed not infrequently driven by struggles for scarce resources. It is worthwhile, however, to mention at this point what the author emphasized several times himself in his talks and seminars

- namely, that the purpose of this methodology is not an attempt to "prove that the sagas are true" in all their plot details (they certainly have literary value of their own), but rather to emphasize that the sagas are not devoid of sociological information. As such, they prove to be valuable research tools in the study of structure and dynamics of early Icelandic society.

Medieval Icelanders had a need of such stories to circulate about themselves, their past, and their legal structure. What could be done in an escalating conflict with one's neighbor who is better connected or has more sons, for instance? The absence of a specialized policing force in medieval Iceland placed the responsibility of action upon the individual. Saga narratives regularly make these subjects the center of their focus, informing the audience what could be done in various situations and what actions their protagonists undertook when faced with the same dilemmas and choices; which approaches were successful and led to increased renown, and which approaches brought failure and ridicule; what worked and what did not. Such constant emphasis on reality-based scenarios, often dictated by competition for scarce resources (whether they be material, such as forest land; legal, such as support at a þing; or more personal, such as prestige), demonstrates that the saga audience was interested in hearing this material and that it was still relevant to them in their own times. The sociological information in the sagas, coupled with the wide range of variability in which this information is presented, allows them thus to be approached as ethnographic accounts, giving a comprehensive portrayal of a unique medieval society.

The interdisciplinary approach to the sagas taken in this book remains as refreshing today as when it was printed nearly fifteen years ago.

Chris says

Excellent companion to the Icelandic Sagas, with great maps.

Jason says

Good introduction to the history and culture of the Icelandic Free state. Another reviewer praised it with the phrase "Freedom is possible." I had the opposite impression, for all the law and social structure which we have long been lead to believe was enlightened for its time, actual justice required having a goði to back you up. It reminded me of the tendency of those who can afford expensive attorneys getting better outcomes in the modern justice system. Plus ça change.....

John Carter McKnight says

Readable and fun. While breaking from traditional scholarly methods and interpretations, Byock still comes across as a bit old-school. He misses one major point: in several chapters on wealth, he completely overlooks the anti-trade values (not at all uncommon in subsistence-farming societies with strong honor codes) that made wealth acquisition problematic.

Miller's *_Bloodtaking and Oathmaking_* covers much the same ground, including specific incidents drawn from the sagas: while less of a casual read, Miller is more insightful, and more contemporary in his methods, freed from the pull of traditional scholarship Byock apparently still felt.

António Sarzedas says

As pessoa que hoje se espantam com a forma como a Islândia resolveu os seus problemas durante a crise financeira, esquecem-se que a verdadeira Democracia europeia não é grega, é escandinava e germânica. Os gregos deram-nos o termo, o norte deu-nos o espírito.

Vova says

900 ??????? ????? - ? ????? ? ???? ????????, ?? ? ???? ??, ?? ????? ????? ?????? ?? ??????? 9-13 ?? - ?? ?????, ??? ?????????? ?????, ? ????? ????? ?? ??? (?????? ? ??????), ?? ??? ? ??? ??????? ??? ????? (????? ?? ?? ?????, ? ????? ????? ?????? ????????, ??? ?????? ?? ???????????), ?? ??? ? ?????????? ?????, ? ??? ?????, ??? ?? ?? ??? ?????? ???????, ????? ?? ??? ? ??????? ????? (????? ??? ? ?????? ?? ??????). ??, ????? ?????, ?????.

Confaederica says

Se amate tutto ciò che è nordico e vichingo, questo testo è ciò che fa par voi! Attraverso l'uso delle saghe prodotte in Islanda, Jesse Byock ci offre un quadro completo, curioso e travolgente sulla società del tempo. Molto gradevole alla lettura e con molte citazioni a saghe portanti della cultura nordica.

Da leggere assolutamente!

??

Bryn Hammond says

I liked this one as a study of the society. The way society operated. It even has chapter names like 'The Sagas: An Ethnography of Medieval Iceland'. She conveys how they knew they had a chance to build a bit differently from back home in Norway, in 'The Founding of a New Society'; 'The Effect of Emigrating from Europe'. A lot were disgusted with events in Norway, when they sailed off. I came away with a healthy respect for their institutions, too. I also remember the study of feud in this book, how feud functioned, its place in the justice system: that was a strong point.

The whole is very much grounded in actual cases, whether from the sagas or archaeology or both, seen in detail. The case study approach that tells you so much.

Tomás Engle says

Thoroughly enjoyed this book, especially as a philosophical anarchist since Byock ends up detailing the rise and fall of one of the world's most enduring (couple hundred year-run a'int bad) anarchist societies.

Highly recommend reading if you're of that philosophical bent, interested in medieval history, the vikings or even just Scandinavia as Byock goes into the characteristics that made Iceland unique from Norway then and now.

Can't wait to read the full sagas in their glory now!

Elisa Camillacci says

Lavoro estremamente interessante, mi sarebbe piaciuto un approfondimento della comparazione tra la civiltà vichinga in Islanda e quella in Scandinavia. Ci sono rimandi, ovvio, sarebbe inconcepibile scindere il tutto, solo che ne avrei voluti di più. In realtà il libro si ferma fino alla conquista dell'Islanda ad opera dei norvegesi nel 1260, quindi l'intento era proprio quello di mettere in luce le peculiarità dell'Islanda, che rimase, nel suo isolamento, sempre uno stato libero, indipendente e non gerarchico.

Il voto effettivo sarebbe di quattro stelline e mezza, per il fatto che a volte l'autore risulta essere eccessivamente prolisso, ripetendo più volte concetti quando non c'è reale bisogno.

Per il resto l'ho trovato ottimo, indispensabile per leggere e capire le saghe norrene. Se avessi letto questo saggio prima di affrontare l'Edda di Snorri, sicuramente avrei compreso immediatamente quei passaggi che al momento mi erano rimasti oscuri.

Danien says

The author explores the settlement of Iceland by Vikings through to the end of the Free States period in the early 14th century when it came under Norwegian rule.

He presents a different perspective of the unique Icelandic Viking culture by combining historical fact with information extracted from the sagas. He describes how the largely agricultural population formed complex social and legal systems, based on advocates, and a political system without executive heads of state.

The text is interspersed with story bits from various sagas to illustrate these structures and general life on the harsh island but can be a little dry at times.

A good read overall that presents a more complete picture of what most people consider a violent culture.
