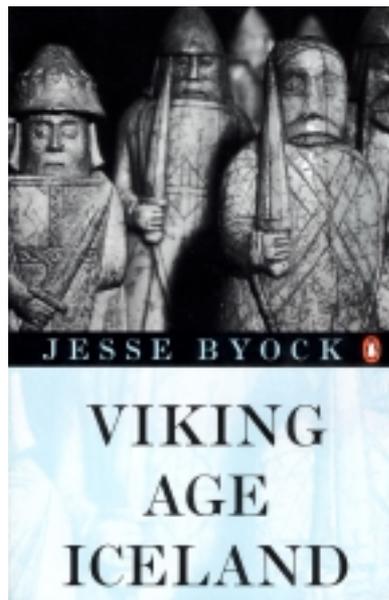


Life in the Viking North Atlantic
**Research Opens Window
on “Otherwise Lost World”**

By Judith Gabriel Vinje



**New
book!**



The author Jesse L. Byock in Iceland.

VIKING AGE ICELAND

by Jesse L. Byock

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While the historical veracity of the Icelandic sagas is still subject to intense scholarly debate, recent studies, along with emerging archaeological evidence, cast new light on these millennium-old documents. Increasingly celebrated as world class literature, the works of the saga writers open a window on Viking Age society – not only on its vibrant myths and raging feuds, but on the equally intriguing dimension of pioneer survival. The sagas reveal much about the politics, local customs, and cultural and legal codes which shaped this Viking Age North Atlantic settlement and steered its development as an essentially peaceful and sometimes egalitarian republic.

Iceland was an island society of Norse settlers with no kings or warlords, no towns or villages. Its rugged volcanos, glaciers and lava deserts loom amid its fertile valleys, and this country is unique in being the only European society whose historical origins are widely known. Our knowledge today of this society comes thanks to the works written down between 1100 and 1300 in Iceland, sources that include histories, laws and sagas, and which together chronicle the medieval state's formation during the Viking period.

“From social-historical and anthropological viewpoints, early Iceland is a fascinating social laboratory,” says Jesse Byock, an archaeologist and professor of Old Norse and Viking history and literature at the University of California at Los Angeles. Byock draws from extensive research into the sagas, as well as state-of-the-art archaeological finds, in his most recent book, *Viking Age Iceland*, (Penguin, 2001). This cutting-edge socio-historical study explores the first centuries of the Old Icelandic Free State in the period from the 10th to the mid-13th century.

The emphasis in *Viking Age Iceland* is not the sagas’ colorful pagan pantheon – the mythical Nordic deities and the accounts of their supernatural intercessions in the lives of kings and commoners. Byock’s main interest is the practical everyday existence of Norse and Celtic immigrants eking out a living 1,000 years ago on this remote subarctic island.

This well-written book takes up a wide variety of subjects, including the social fabric, domestic realities, cultural codes, politics and the legal infrastructure, and the mechanisms that defused conflicts among the fiercely independent early Icelanders. What emerges is a picture of a people who had an extraordinary opportunity to shape their own destiny. Essentially, theirs was a successful experiment in proto-democracy with strong egalitarian processes.

Of importance for comparative studies of the Viking Age, Byock’s study of this Viking society sheds light on life throughout the medieval north, and he notes that there are significant differences between the island society and the rest of Scandinavia. Here the analysis is skillful, logical and sophisticated, with Byock stressing that Iceland was a decentralized community, a land of farmers and small scale chieftains. While the Icelanders were obsessed with the operation of law, the country was run without a formal law enforcement or an army.

Plumbing the sagas, and weighing the anthropological, literary and legal evidence he supports his conclusion with research in archaeology, law and other disciplines. In *Viking Age Iceland*, Byock has recreated a multifaceted scenario of Viking Age life from the settlers’ survival strategies to the roles of women, from farming techniques in this harsh environment, to the influence of the conversion and the development of the church. As such, the book is a vivid companion to reading the sagas, shedding light on many of the elements in the literature, particularly the legal and political aspects of early Icelandic society.

Byock first focused on the topic of feuds in an earlier book, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, (University of California Press, 1982) He also wrote *Medieval Iceland: Sagas, Society and Power*, (University of California Press, 1988). Both books are widely used as standard texts in universities throughout the world, from Japan to Russia. But *Viking Age Iceland* goes further than the previous works, exploring not just how the society came into being but how the people actually lived.

The result is a book brimming with details about everyday life on the isolated island, that not only looks at the social order but also considers the challenges presented by the unusual ecology. We learn what the Icelanders ate, how they built their homes and fashioned their latrines. With a shortage of good building wood for ships or houses in a land rapidly shorn of its native supply, the new immigrants turned to driftwood, and primarily to the soil itself, constructing sod and turf dwellings. Drawings and discussions of turf construction are included in *Viking Age Iceland*, along with maps illustrating sailing routes and landing sites. There are also extremely helpful illustrations of environmental elements such as patterns of fallout from volcanic eruptions to the range of drift ice, and factors which give a geographic focus to early Icelandic settlement and early social development.

Byock brings several disciplines to his work, crossing the boundaries between history, literature, law, and archaeology. A member of the UCLA’s Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, his earlier work on bone diseases in the Viking period led him to a study of the warrior bard Egil, the son of Bald Grim. (“Egil’s

Bones,” *Scientific American*, Jan. 1995). The work has developed into an on-going dig in Iceland’s Mosfell Valley, where Byock has found evidence of an entire Viking Age valley system, a series of early habitations that were engulfed beneath landslides and wind/water-borne soils around the year 1000. Byock and his team return to the site each summer.

And while archaeology is, of course, a major source of data about Viking Age life, it cannot tell narrative stories. “It only records what archaeologists find preserved and can interpret. The history of the Viking Age and later medieval north is fortunate to have the sagas to flesh out the rich archaeological finds,” Byock said. Without believing that the sagas provide strict historical fact, he finds that the sagas offer “a wonderfully useful window into a functioning yet otherwise lost world.” They offer valuable clues about the underlying structures and cultural codes of the Icelanders, and this careful usage of the sources is what has allowed Byock to explore how Iceland’s Viking Age social order came into being and how it functioned

Staking out a position that the sagas are neither historical fact nor complete fiction, Byock writes: “The family sagas are a register of the basic values of medieval Iceland’s conservative rural society, yet since the mid twentieth century historians and social scientists have shied away from using them as sources.” In *Viking Age Iceland*, he often turns to anthropology, weighing in an even-handed manner the “series of theoretical obstacles against historical analysis” raised in saga studies debates, and which still inhibit “innovative kinds of socio-literary and socio-historical analysis which could deepen the study of both saga and history.” He adds, “Scholars have had difficulty in utilizing these narratives for social and historical analysis. Not factual history, the sagas are stories by a medieval people about themselves. In many ways, they are rich ethnographic documentation....The sagas are one of the world’s great literatures and a knowledge of their social context increases our appreciation of their achievement.”

To achieve that, Byock offers much fresh material, drawing on episodes that earlier scholars eschewed, such as *Vapnfirthinga saga* (*The Saga of the People of Weapon’s Fjord*) and *Eyrbyggja saga*. Byock explains that insights he has drawn from these little used sources have changed the way he looks at the better known sagas. He also uses the so-called family sagas, which cover everyday issues confronting Icelandic farmers and their chieftains, from land ownership to stolen hay.

Byock brings to his analysis of society and saga a deep knowledge of Old Norse. He has translated several sagas, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, the mythic-legendary epic about ancient heroes and warrior queens of Denmark and Sweden. This new translation with Penguin (1998) makes this important Norse version of *Beowulf* readily accessible in the English-speaking world. He has also translated *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, one of the great works of world literature that is highly instructive as to ancient Scandinavian custom and moral codes.

From the saga accounts to the fallout of volcanic eruptions, *Viking Age Iceland* contains vivid accounts of Viking life. Written in a manner that is both approachable and fascinating, it will surely become essential reading for those interested in the Viking period. For the larger study of western Europe and early societies in general, this new book will open up the sagas and other Norse sources about life in the Viking north Atlantic to the broader appreciation they have long deserved.