HISTORY OF ICELAND

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THE FORMATION OF ICELAND

Between one hundred and two hundred million years ago, volcanic eruptions under the edge of the Eurasian and North American crustal plates began to pull them apart during the breakup of the supercontinent Pangea. The sea flowed in to fill the gap, ultimately creating the Atlantic Ocean. As the plates continued to move apart, driven by undersea eruptions along what we now call the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, magma formed a mountain chain along the sea floor. Above a major volcanic plume, the island of Iceland was pushed up above the ocean between eighteen and sixteen million years ago. Other islands associated with the same rift and mountain-building include Jan Mayen in the Arctic Ocean, the Azores, Ascension, and St. Helena to the south.

Iceland is still creating itself: it is one of the most geologically active places on earth, with over two hundred volcanoes peppered along the rift between the North American and Eurasian plates which divide the country almost in half on a crooked northeast-southwest line. An eruption on the inhabited southern island of Heimeay in 1973 was especially dramatic. Earthquakes are frequent. The creation of new land continues and the island of Surtsey made headlines as it rose between 1963 and 1967.

Iceland is much more than a country of volcanoes and hot geysers, however; eleven percent of the country is covered in enormous glaciers, the largest in Europe. As climate change melts glaciers worldwide, Iceland is losing nearly ten billion tons of ice every year, leading to its rebound against sea level of over fifteen centimetres since 1995.

Surprisingly for a volcanic island, northern Iceland also has formed some sedimentary rocks. On the Tjörnes Peninsula, rocks have been found containing plant and shellfish fossils between two and five million years old.

HUMAN HISTORY

In 330 BC, the Greek navigator Pytheas described a land, Ultima Thule, in the farthest north. According to him, the land lay six days and nights' sail away from Brittania and one day and night from the end of the world. Tempting though it is to give this ancient genius credit for discovering Iceland, most geographers agree that he probably ended his northern explorations in Norway.

At the time of settlement, Iceland's sole native land animal was the Arctic fox, surviving on a diet of seabirds and their eggs. Marine animals, fish, and birds abound in Iceland, however, and the first explorers were likely fishers and hunters in search of these riches—particularly cod and walrus tusk. In the last years of the eighth century, Irish monks and hermits—in Icelandic called "papar"—may have visited Iceland in their endless search for solitude and safety. Their peace was not to last; in 850, a Faroe Island

resident, Naddoður, drifted off course on his way to Norway and spotted Iceland's eastern shore. As he sailed away from the island, snow was falling on its narrow mountains, so he gave this unknown country the name Snæland (Snowland).

Five years later, Swedish Viking Garðar Svavarsson was pushed to the same coast during a storm and decided to circumnavigate the country, becoming the first known person to establish that it was an island. He stayed for the winter in Skjálfandi Bay, naming his abode Húsavík—a name that survives today—before returning home.

In the following years, other Norsemen visited Iceland and explored the possibilities of settling there. Hrafna-Flóki attempted a settlement, but failed to make hay during his first summer and all his livestock starved to death in the winter. Observing one of the fjords fill with icebergs prompted his return to Norway, leaving Iceland with its permanent and somewhat misleading name; despite lying near the Arctic Circle, its harbours are mainly ice-free year-round thanks to the influence of the North Atlantic Current, an offshoot of the Gulf Stream. (Iceland is also warmer than Norway, although its average temperature in the summer is a lot cooler.) The sporadic Norse settlement may have been partly stimulated by the hunt for walruses, whose tusks were one of the most valuable commodities traded in medieval Europe.

Around 871 Hallveig and husband Ingólfur Arnarson established a permanent home at Reykjavík, setting off the Age of Settlement which lasted until 930. Today the archaeological work which revealed the medieval community is celebrated with a fascinating exhibition, "Reykjavík 871 +/- 2".

Most of the original domestic structures in Iceland have disappeared, except for stone foundations. Classic Viking farmsteads had long stone and turf dwelling houses with a central hearth and stone and earth benches along the side walls, and postholes down the centre that held roof supports. Adjacent to the houses were stone cattle byres with stone slab stalls and a central drainage channel, and outhouses. Timber roofs were covered with turf. These structures carried on the Norwegian building tradition which was also emulated in the western and northern isles of Scotland and the Faroe Islands.

Although most of the original male settlers in Iceland were Norsemen from Norway and Denmark, recent DNA studies revealed that many of the females were Gaels—either slaves or wives acquired from Ireland and Scotland. Interestingly, limited immigration over a thousand years has made Iceland a hotspot for medical researchers studying aspects of the human genome.

THE ALTHING

The "Alþingi" was founded at Þingvellir around 930. This is often called the oldest continuous parliamentary institution in the world—although the Faroese would challenge this—and was essentially a union of chieftain-farmers in an outdoor assembly. This assembly was held in a rift valley with the North American and Eurasian plates on either side. Several dozen of the most important chiefs from settlements all over the country met for two weeks to decide on legislation and dispense justice. It was the beginning of

a democratic nation—the chieftains set the laws, but needed majority support of all landowners. All free men could attend the assemblies, which were the main social event of the year. They drew large crowds of farmers and their families, parties involved in legal disputes, traders, craftsmen, storytellers, and those seeking mates. Attendees set up temporary camps (búðir) during the session. The center of the gathering was the Lögberg, (Law Rock) a rocky outcrop on which the elected Law speaker (lögsögumaður) took his seat as the presiding official of the assembly. Around 950, the country was divided politically into four quarters, each one having its own law courts to decide legal issues. This arrangement remained until Iceland came under Norwegian control around 1264.

The Althing adopted Christianity in 999 or 1000, and the Church took over many of the functions of government—collecting tithes (taxes), settling disputes, and establishing the first schools. A thirst for learning meant that many church officials were educated abroad, bringing fresh ideas into the country. Literacy led to the first historical writing in 1077, ultimately giving us the Book of Icelanders, the Book of Settlements, and the Icelandic Sagas. These early histories and sagas give us an unrivalled picture of a medieval country and its middle-class inhabitants.

Iceland's history has always played out amongst the vagaries of Scandinavian and broader European events. Lutheranism was introduced to Iceland in the 1530s by German fishermen and traders with the Hanseatic League before it was imposed in 1550 by King Christian III of Denmark and Norway, following the beheading of the last Icelandic bishop.

RECENT HISTORY

Disasters have taken a heavy toll on Icelanders. In 1707 the Black Death (bubonic plague) killed nearly a third of the population. The Laki Eruption of 1783–4 caused widespread destruction in Iceland and killed more than half of its domestic animals, resulting in a famine that killed nearly a quarter of its human population. The effects of the massive volcanic eruption were felt worldwide, with a drop in global temperatures that caused crop failures in Europe and drought elsewhere. The difficulties of living here caused nearly twenty percent of the population to emigrate, mostly to Canada, at the end of the nineteenth century.

World War II brought prosperity to Iceland and fostered a sense of nationalism that led to independence in June of 1944. An economy dependent on fishing and agriculture now expanded to include defence as a founding member of NATO, and new opportunities in international banking and trade as a member of the European Economic Area.

Iceland's economy combines capitalism and free markets with an extensive welfare system. Except for a brief period during the 2008 crisis, Iceland has managed high growth, low unemployment, and a remarkably even distribution of income. The economy still depends heavily on the fishing industry for more than 12% of GDP. Since the 2010 volcanic eruption and resulting press coverage, tourism has become the main pillar of economic growth with over a million foreigners visiting in 2016. Since the 2008 crisis, the government has been trying to diversify the economy into manufacturing and service industries, particularly into tourism, software

production and biotechnology. Iceland's population has tripled in the last century, from 100,000 in 1926 to 200,000 in 1968 and 300,000 in 2015.