A LAND WITHOUT KINGS

When Vikings colonised Iceland in the 870s, they established a society in which local chieftains, not distant monarchs, held the reins of power. **Philip Parker** tells their story

A view of Þingvellir National Park in western Iceland. It was here, in AD 930, that Viking settlers established the first pan-Icelandic assembly – possibly the oldest parliamentary body in the world

About 50 years after their raids first spread terror along the coastlines of north-western Europe, the Vikings struck westward. This time some of them sailed not in search of treasure or slaves but as land-hungry warriors seeking safe havens in which to found colonies away from increasingly powerful Scandinavian kings.

Using the Faroe Islands as a stepping stone, the Vikings could reduce the risks of long voyages across the open waters of the Atlantic. By the 830s a territory in the North Atlantic had been discovered by pioneers including Flóki Vilgerðarson, who dubbed it Ísland (Iceland), in memory of the chilly winter he spent there.

However, these were strictly exploratory voyages. The first successful colonising expedition arrived later, in AD 874, led by the Norwegian Ingólf Arnarson. The following decades saw streams of settlers from Norway and the Viking colonies in the British Isles arrive in a great *landnám* ('taking of the land'), and within 60 years almost all of the available territory had been claimed.

Free from the direct control of the distant Norwegian monarchs, who were much too preoccupied with their own struggles against rival magnates to interfere with the new colony, the Icelandic Vikings were able to dispense with the authority of kings. Left to their own devices for three centuries, they created a unique form of society that came to be known as the 'Icelandic Commonwealth'.

Much about Iceland was familiar to the settlers: it was indented with fjords, at the heads of which they could establish farms. Yet it was not as fertile as the Scandinavian lands they had left behind. Much of the interior was uninhabitable, studded with volcanoes and covered with great glaciers such as the Vatnajökull, and too cold for much of each year to support agriculture.

A statue of Ingólf Arnarson, the Norwegian explorer who led the first successful colonising expedition to Iceland, in AD 874

Though there were swathes of woodland, mostly native birch, these were soon felled for firewood and building, resulting in erosion that reduced the soil's fertility still further. The minimal agriculture possible was, therefore, pastoral, mainly cattle herding, supplemented by fishing and seal hunting.

These settlers lived at the edge of subsistence, and a cold or wet summer could lead to famine. Population density was low: Iceland's first census, taken in 1106, counted 4,560 free farmers, which probably equates to a total population of around 10 times that number. Settlements comprised farms clustered around the longhouses of local chieftains. Farms were constructed largely with turf, and within them families cooked, ate and slept in a single long room.

This way of life bred a fierce independence. The Icelandic sagas (see the box on page 32) tell that the original colonisers of Iceland fled the tyranny of the Norwegian king Harald Finehair. Though several of his successors planned to force the colony's obedience to the crown, the difficulties of launching such a venture to a far-flung island meant that nothing came of the idea for almost 300 years.

With no threat of invasion, there was little need to establish a central tax-raising authority to fund defence, and no Icelandic king arose to challenge his Norwegian counterpart.

Instead, power devolved to the level of local chieftains called *goðar*. There were 39 of these, spread across the four quarters (or *várthing*) into which Iceland came to be divided. But the *goðar* did not rule territorial domains in the manner of European feudal aristocrats; rather, their authority rested on the allegiance of retainers (or *thingmenn*) whose lands often intermingled with those owing loyalty to other *goðar*. If a *thingmann* found himself at odds with his chieftain, he could transfer his loyalty to another by declaring himself 'out of *thing*' with the first.

Notable deeds

This early period of 'taking of the land' is described in the *Landnámabók*, a 13th-century compilation of earlier sources, which details the names, ancestry and notable deeds of the first settlers in each district.

Once this initial phase of settlement was over, territorial disputes inevitably erupted. The danger of uncontrollable feuds prompted the settlers to formalise what had, until then, been a somewhat haphazard political system – and so, in AD 930, they established the *Althing*: the first pan-Icelandic assembly.

The *Althing* has a good claim to being the world's oldest parliament. It was modelled on smaller meetings held in Scandinavia, where all free men had a right of hearing.

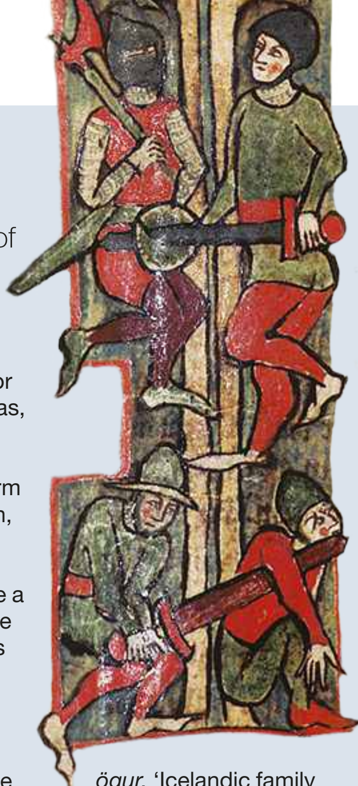
The settlers chose a suitably spectacular setting for this assembly – a site on the

DREAMSTIME/ALAMY

"Left to their own devices, the Vikings **created a unique form of society known as the Icelandic Commonwealth**"

The sagas of Iceland

What can epic tales of war and exploration tell us about Viking Iceland?



The 14th-century manuscript *Flateyjarbók* shows the exploits of Olaf Tryggvason

Among the key sources for Viking history are the sagas, tales of heroism, feuding and exploration that probably began in oral form before being written down, mainly in Iceland, around the 13th century.

Some of the sagas have a historical core, such as the *Orkneyinga Saga* that tells the history of the earls of Orkney, or the *Vinland Sagas* recounting Viking voyages of exploration in North America. Even these are distorted by the demands of storytelling and the interest of the authors in glorifying one family or group's deeds over that of another. So, for example, it is almost impossible to determine from the evidence in the sagas exactly which parts of the Americas were visited by the Vikings.

The largest group of sagas are the *Íslendingasögur,* 'Icelandic family sagas' set mainly in the first century of the Viking colony in Iceland. They tell of conflicts between Iceland's major families, and the often tragic outcome of feuds between larger-than-life personalities over seemingly trivial slights, with the events often unfolding over several generations.

Njál's Saga tells how Njáll Thorgeirsson is sucked into the feuds sparked by the murderous behaviour of his friend Gunnar Hámundarson. Njáll was burnt to death in his farmstead by a posse bent on revenge for the murder of one of Gunnar's cousins by Njáll's son.

The sagas provide a vital source of evidence about the organisation of Viking society, and offer us a unique window on those elements within it that are overlooked by more conventional history.

For example, *Saga of the Greenlanders* documents the story of Freydís, daughter of Erik the Red (discoverer of Greenland), who organised and led a voyage to North America; this gives us an insight into the powerful role some women played in trading missions. The role of Gunnar's wife, Hallgerð, in provoking the saga's central feud also shows that Viking women did not play a purely passive role in the quarrels of their menfolk.

Öxará river in the south-west of the island, fringed by a volcanic cleft. The location was as accessible as it was spectacular, and *goðar* and their *thingmenn* journeyed there from across the island when the assembly convened in mid-June each year.

Local courts

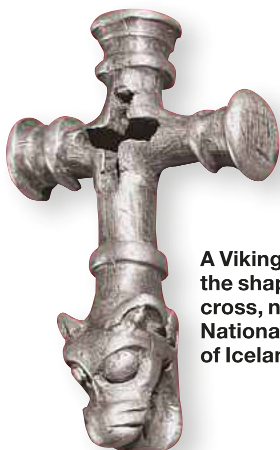
At the *Althing*, the chieftains gathered with their retinues, serving as lawmakers – reviewing existing laws and making new ones – and as judges, presiding over cases that could not be decided in local courts.

The gathering was overseen by the *lögrétta*, the legislative council led by a *lögsögumaðr* or lawspeaker who recited one-third of the Commonwealth's laws from a great rock at the centre of the assembly site each year. It was a very public form of parliament and judiciary.

The requirement for all the *goðar* to attend meant that, though feuds – often bloody – did arise, the *Althing* acted as a safety valve, a neutral arena where settlements could be negotiated before conflict got out of hand.

By the 12th century, Icelandic society had begun to change, swayed by external influences – most notably Christianity. Missionaries had earlier attempted to preach in Iceland, though with little success until a concerted effort by the Norwegian king Olaf Tryggvason led Thorgeir Thorkelsson, the lawspeaker of the *Althing*, to declare in AD 1000 that Iceland should be Christian.

> "The *Althing* acted as **a safety valve for often bloody feuds** – an arena in which settlements could be negotiated before conflict got out of hand"



A Viking amulet in the shape of a cross, now in the National Museum of Iceland

As money and land was bequeathed to the church, much of it came under the control of local landowners, and the *goðar* grew in wealth, consolidating their power. A number of chieftaincies fell into the hands of just a few families or even single individuals so, by about 1220, political power had become the exclusive preserve of just six families.

The remaining *goðar* ruled over what were effectively mini-kingdoms and, as the rewards of power grew, so did the violence the *goðar* employed to preserve and enlarge their territories. From the late 12th century, Iceland was riven by civil wars, characterised by large-scale pitched battles quite unlike earlier feuds.

Loose alliances coalesced around two powerful families, the Oddi and the Sturlungar. The latter had close ties with the royal family of Norway, whose authority had grown far stronger in the previous three centuries and now had the resources to meddle in the Icelandic civil wars.

The long reign of King Hákon Hákonarson (1217–63) saw the Norwegians gradually increase their influence in Iceland as the Sturlungar and Oddi tore the Commonwealth apart. Among the casualties of the conflict was the great Icelandic poet and historian Snorri Sturluson, murdered in 1241 on the orders of King Hákon, reputedly for his part in a conspiracy to depose him.

Battle-weary, despairing and seeing in continued independence only continued bloodshed, the Icelandic chieftains pledged their allegiance to the Norwegian king at the *Althing* in 1262. It was an ignominious end to the Icelandic Commonwealth, and brought to a close the experiment of rule without kings.

So it happened that, four centuries after their ancestors had fled Norway to escape the oppression of Harald Finehair, the Icelanders found themselves firmly under the thumb of his royal descendants. **H**

Philip Parker is a writer and historian specialising in late antiquity and early medieval Europe. He will be speaking at the *BBC History Magazine* Vikings Day at MShed in Bristol on 15 March. *historyextra.com/events*

DISCOVER MORE

BOOK

▶ **The Northmen's Fury: A History of the Viking World** by Philip Parker (Jonathan Cape, 2014)

BRIDGEMAN