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# Viking and Norse Settlers and Their Lasting Impact on Iceland and Its People

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**Viking and Norse Settlers and Their Lasting Impact on Iceland and Its People**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to investigate the lasting impacts the Norse settlers had on Iceland's environment and people. While in Iceland, a field journal was kept to record observations and notes. An interview was conducted on the various ways Vikings have left their mark on Iceland with the groups tour guide. It was discovered the Norse settlers' deforestation of Iceland was the tipping point for the environment. Without the birch forests and other plants, the soil became loose and vulnerable to the strong winds of Iceland. Despite the Vikings' role in the environment, it was observed that Icelanders are very proud of their Norse heritage.

## **Introduction**

The island of Iceland had practically been left untouched by human civilization since it rose from the ocean. In the mid to late 800s CE, Norse settlers discovered and quickly established a permanent presence on the island (Luft, 2001). Iceland has greatly changed since the first humans sought to make Iceland their home. This research will be seeks to answers the question: How did Norse settlers affect Iceland and later generations of Icelanders. Within this question, the researcher focuses on two main areas of Norse influence on the environment and the cultural.

Through the literature review, the researcher learned Norse settlers colonized Iceland quickly in their hunt for resources. The settlers ravaged the land of its natural birch forests, using the wood for various necessities (Luft, 2001). This rapid deforestation contributed to current issues Iceland has had with soil erosion and lack of forest growth. .

## **Methodology**

To answer the question of Norse influence on Iceland's landscape and culture, the researcher decided to use three primary means to gather information: conducting a literature review, maintaining a field journal of observations while in country, and conducting interviews with native Icelanders. Each of these methodologies have limitations but combined provide a more holistic picture of Norse influence on modern Iceland. The first step, the researcher conducted a literature review of current scholarly work on the topic to find common themes and gaps. This information provided a foundation for the research and helped with the development of interview questions to be used while in Iceland.

The researcher spent six days in Iceland during March 2018 as part of a research abroad trip. During the trip the researcher kept a field journal to keep a record of observations. These observations included the various ways that the Norse were referenced in daily life, information

learned from locals and museums, personal experiences, and transcriptions of interviews. Additionally, photographs and videos were also used as artifacts to supplement the field journal. The researcher used an iPhone to take pictures and GoPro to record videos of various experiences in Iceland.

Finally, the researcher conducted interviews with native Icelanders to gain their perspective on Norse culture. Due to the limited amount of time and access to Icelanders, the researcher decided to use semi-structured interviews to allow for a conversation and see what information could be obtained. These semi-formal interviews included talks with museum guides and various Icelanders met on the week trip. One structured interview was conducted with the groups tour guide Baldur Gylfason.

### **Literature Review**

The researcher reviewed multiple scholarly articles that covered the Vikings impacts on the Icelandic environment. These articles provided important information that aided the researcher in country and provided the historical background on Norseman in Iceland. Two major themes emerged from the literature: Norse deforestation and farming, and modern response to deforestation. These themes will be explored in more detail below.

When Viking settlers first arrived in Iceland, an immediate use of all Iceland's resources was a key factor of the settlements' survival. With over 30,000 Norse settlers moving to the island in a very short amount of time in the late 800s CE (Luft, 2001), the main resource that was in high demand was wood. Wood was an important fuel source, construction material, and used in a multitude of other applications by the Norse settlers. The forests were quickly cleared for the valuable wood resources and in favor of farmland and grazing fields for livestock. Wood was so valuable that there is evidence the settlers turned to using drift wood and other non-native woods to

meet their demands (Mooney, 2016). This over consumption of wood has had a lasting impact on the environment in Iceland. After the Norse settlers arrived in the early days of Iceland's discovery, they started to clear land for farms and grazing fields. Iceland's soils, being mostly made of volcanic material, are very prone to erosion. The deforestation, along with the weak volcanic soil, has caused Iceland to lose up to 40 percent of its nutrient rich soil to erosion (Catlin, 2016). Henry Fountain of *The New York Times* has even noted that "With vegetation unable to gain much of a foothold, farming and grazing have been next to impossible in many parts of the country." They also explained that the loose soil and Iceland's strong winds have led to extremely damaging sandstorms (2017).

With forests now covering such a tiny part of the island, only a little above one percent, the Icelandic Forestry Service (IFS) is doing everything it can to breathe new life into the Icelandic landscape (IFS, 2018). The IFS is currently heading many projects and collaborates with many other organizations all with a similar goal (IFS, 2018). It is obvious Iceland is very passionate about trying to reverse the devastation caused by the Norse settlers and volcanic activity. The Iceland Forest Service prides themselves in their mission to spread awareness of the initiative to regrow Iceland's natural forests. Iceland citizens' attitude toward helping with forestry has improved as well (Eysteinnsson, 2017). According to the Iceland Forest Service, the land area covered by forests has quadrupled since the 1950's (2018). This shows that though it can be a slow process, Iceland is making progress in the efforts. However, the IFS does note that the process is going to continue to be slow. Iceland's low population of only 300,000 means "it take at least 70 years to plant trees on one percent of Iceland's land area." (Eysteinnsson, 2017).

## **Discussion**

### **Soil Conservation**

While the researcher gathered a great amount of new information, most was regarding

the Norse tradition and influences that are still prevalent in today's society. This information came from the interviews and personal observations of the researcher. New information was ascertained concerning what Iceland is and has been doing to reverse the effects of deforestation. This information was gathered from a conversation with a member of the Soil Conservation Service of Iceland (SCSI).

Iceland has always been a fragile ecosystem, and the Norse settlers were just the tipping point causing the dramatic changes to the landscape. Around the time of settlement 900 years ago, birch forests covered 27 percent of Iceland. Today wooded forests only cover about one percent (SCSI, 2018). According to the SCSI, there was an inversion in the amount of grass and birch species after colonization (Blanks, personal communication, March 15, 2018). Soil erosion has become a serious problem facing Icelanders today, as they are losing all their nutrient rich soil to erosion. In turn, they are finding it harder and harder to raise livestock and grow produce. This soil erosion is partly because Norse settlers used farming and grazing techniques they learned in Norway that did not work on the volcanic island of Iceland (Blanks, personal communication, March 15, 2018). Grazing by animals can also cause the soil to become very fragile. Iceland's soil is unique because it is mostly made of volcanic material, containing many nutrients for plant growth, however, also weakens the soil making it prone to movement by the harsh wind patterns.

Many Icelanders are really passionate about saving their island. The proud people are stepping up to fix what mistakes were made so long ago. While there are many organizations attempting to make a difference, the researcher focused on the Soil Conservation Service of Iceland. SCSI is a governmental agency tasked with stopping desertification, soil erosion, promotion of sustainable land use practices, and restoration of degraded land (2018). SCSI has tried using invasive plants, such as Lupine, to stop erosion and naturally strengthen soil (2018). They are now trying to use more native grasses, such as Lyme grasses, stone walls and fences have

been used to try to stabilize the soil movement and plant growth, placing them perpendicular to wind patterns. Iceland is also now using tractors and airplanes to distribute seeds and fertilizer around the island (SCSI, 2018). Grazing by animals can cause the soil to become very fragile and winds can cause it to easily erode.

### **Viking Legacy**

The researcher conducted an interview with the group's tour guide, Baldur Glyfason, to discuss how the Vikings left a lasting impact on Iceland's people. According to Baldur, isolation has a big role in the Norse's lasting impact on today's people. Since Iceland was always so isolated from the rest of the world and had little to no outside influence, parts of their culture developed and change at an extremely slow pace. Icelandic language is practically unchanged since time of the Vikings (Glyfason, personal communication, March 13, 2018). Icelandic people can still read sagas and tales written by the Vikings. Even though Scandinavian countries have the same Norse heritage, they have evolved a lot more than Iceland due to their connection with the rest of the world (B. Glyfason, personal communication, March 13, 2018).

The researcher found many examples of the Vikings impact and lasting presence in modern day Iceland. One such example is the Icelandic justice system. For the original few that settled the island, there was no capital punishment for murder or theft. The biggest punishment was banishment. There were so few that made up the original settlers that everyone was needed to do their part; therefore there was almost always an opportunity for redemption (B. Glyfason, personal communication, March 13, 2018). That is still partly true today, as the Icelandic justice system may seem relaxed to foreigners. The divorce rate is high in Iceland, and this can also be traced back to Norse culture (B. Glyfason, personal communication, March 13, 2018). Vikings never took marriage as seriously as some other cultures. Their mentality was never "till death do us part," so that still carries over today. Icelanders see marriage in a more casual light. Something not very well



known is that the modern day Icelanders are only 50 percent Norse in ancestry with the other half coming from Irish (B. Glyfason, personal communication, March 13, 2018). The original Norse settlers were mostly male, and when wives and families started to be desired, they sailed to Ireland to find women (B. Glyfason, personal communication, March 13, 2018). Baldur also gave examples of the many things that are named proudly after their Viking heritage, such as the Icelandic Police Special Response team, which is called the Viking Squad (personal communication, March 13, 2018). The researcher noticed that multiple food and beverage items are named after Vikings. Many businesses also use Vikings in their branding to appeal to tourists.



Figure 1. A package of dried fish called “Viking Snack”



Figure 2. An example of a small shop called “The Viking” in the town of Akureyri.

### **Conclusion**

The population of Iceland is heavily involved in the reforestation and rehabilitation of their home. The researcher was not only able to learn about what is already known about the early Viking settlers and their impacts on Iceland, but also compare that with how the amazing people of Iceland view their heritage. If one was to expand this research, it is suggested that the new research focus on the attempts to reforest the Iceland. The researcher wished to look into this aspect more but decided to focus on the Viking connections.

Iceland and its people still bear the scars and marks that the ancient Viking and Norse Settlers left. Modern Icelanders are struggling to conserve their nutrient rich soil from erosion and regrow their birch forests. Even though these amazing people are still dealing with the impacts of their ancestors' choices, one can see that they fully embrace their Viking heritage. The people of Iceland proudly wear their heritage. While on the surface there are plenty of references to the Vikings throughout their culture, the connection goes deeper than what meets the eye. Their roots

are still embedded in the traditions, ideology, and culture of the Norse people.

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