

From the Sagas to Indriðason

A brief summary of Icelandic
literature by

Árni Sverrir Bjarnason





Iceland and the manuscripts ...

This is a story about a small community who stumbled upon something remarkable a long time ago and has spent the last 800 years or so trying to figure out what to do with it.

Where are the castles?

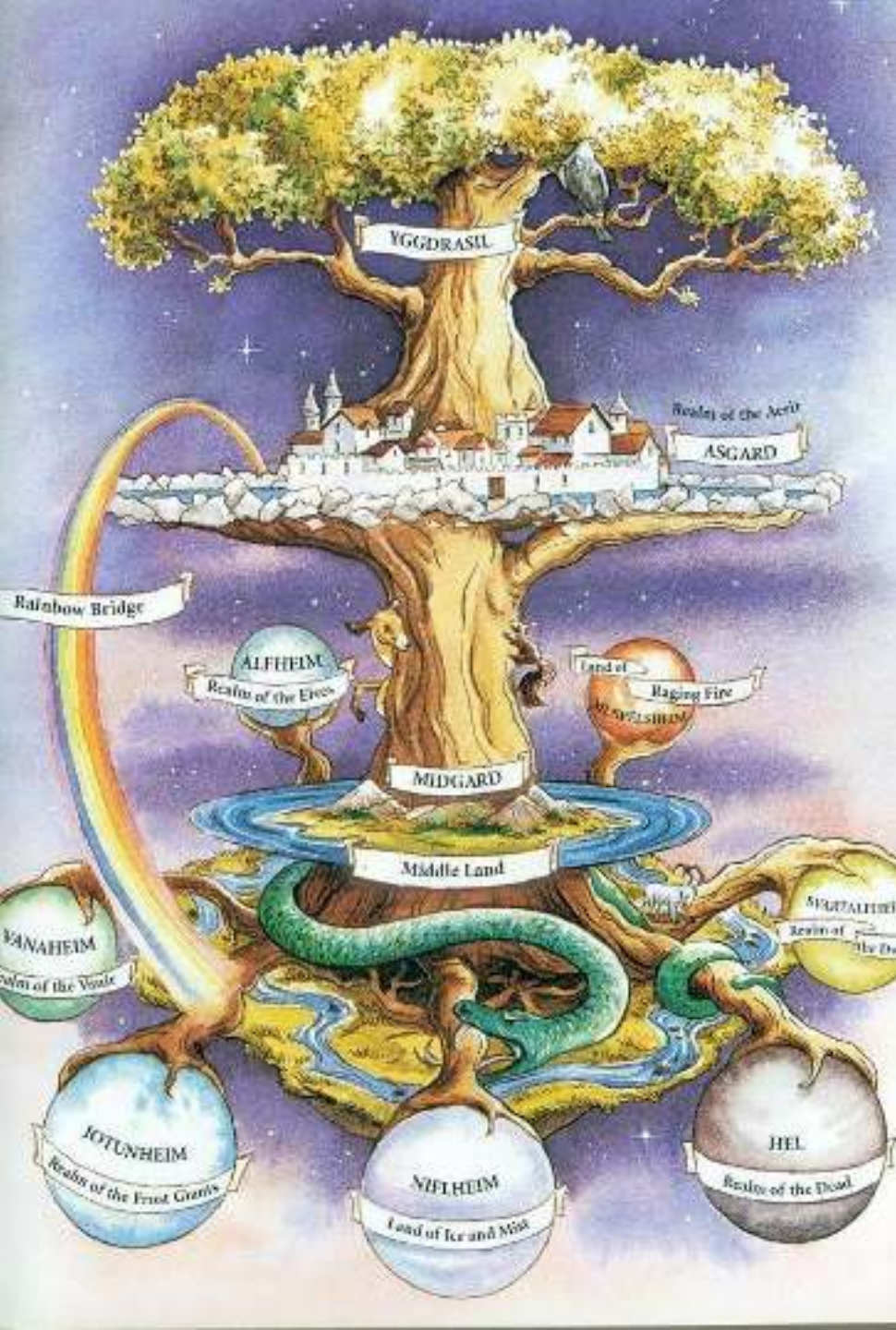
- When travelling through Iceland one notices almost a complete lack of old buildings anywhere.
- Even at Thingvellir, our most historical place.
- Oldest house is in Reykjavik from 1762
- The legacy is stored elsewhere.
- The age of writing began in Iceland in the 11th century. Reached its peak in the 13th and 14th century.
- Around 300 stories composed in old Norse.



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- Called Konungsbók eddukvæða in Icelandic. The King's book.
- Written in late 13th century by an unknown writer.
- Oldest and most important collection of Old Norse poems or Edda poems.
- Also contains heroic lays or heroic epic, based on the myth of Niebelungen.
- Inspiration to many authors such as, Strindberg, Wagner, Tolkien, Ezra Pound, Jorge Luis Borges.





The Edda poems

- The Edda poems are commonly divided into mythological and heroic lays.
- The mythological lays describe the Old Norse mythology.
- The creation of the world.
- The family of gods.
- The adventures of the gods and the inevitable apocalypse – Ragnarök.

The Edda poems



- The other part of the Edda poems are the heroic epics or lays.
- Mainly based on character from the Migration period in Europe.
- Attila the Hun, Siegfried, Gudrun, Gunnar, Brunhild.

Hávamál – The Saying of the High One (The Words of Odin)



Ungur var eg forðum,
fór eg einn saman:
þá varð eg villur vega.
Auðigur þóttumst
er eg annan fann:
Maður er manns gaman.

Young was I once,
and wandered alone,
And nought of the road I knew;
Rich did I feel
when a comrade I found,
For man is man's delight.

Deyr fé,
deyja frændur,
deyr sjálfur ið sama.
En orðstír
deyr aldregi
hveim er sér góðan getur.

Cattle die,
and kinsmen die,
And so one dies one's self;
But a noble name
will never die,
If good renown one gets.

Snorri Sturluson and Snorra-Edda

- Textbook in the old Norse literature and religion.
- Unique example of the Norse religion.
- So unique that it is difficult to ascertain how much of this religion is Snorri's fiction.
- Snorri also wrote *Heimskringla*, a story of Norwegian kings.
- He is also thought to have written at least one of the Icelandic sagas, *Egils saga*.

Book of Möðruvellir (Möðruvallabók) AM 132 fol

- The biggest and most important manuscript containing the Icelandic sagas.
- At least 100 hundred calfskins used in this manuscript
- The uniqueness of the Icelandic sagas.
- No known authors.
- Most of the sagas orbit around the importance of honor and the duty of revenge.



The Icelandic sagas – The story of burnt Njal



- One of the most famous and popular of the Icelandic sagas.
- Describes the rise and fall of two families in South-Iceland.
- The husbands are best friends but the wives are bitter enemies.
- Contains complex legal scenes.
- Dramatic ending for the main characters.

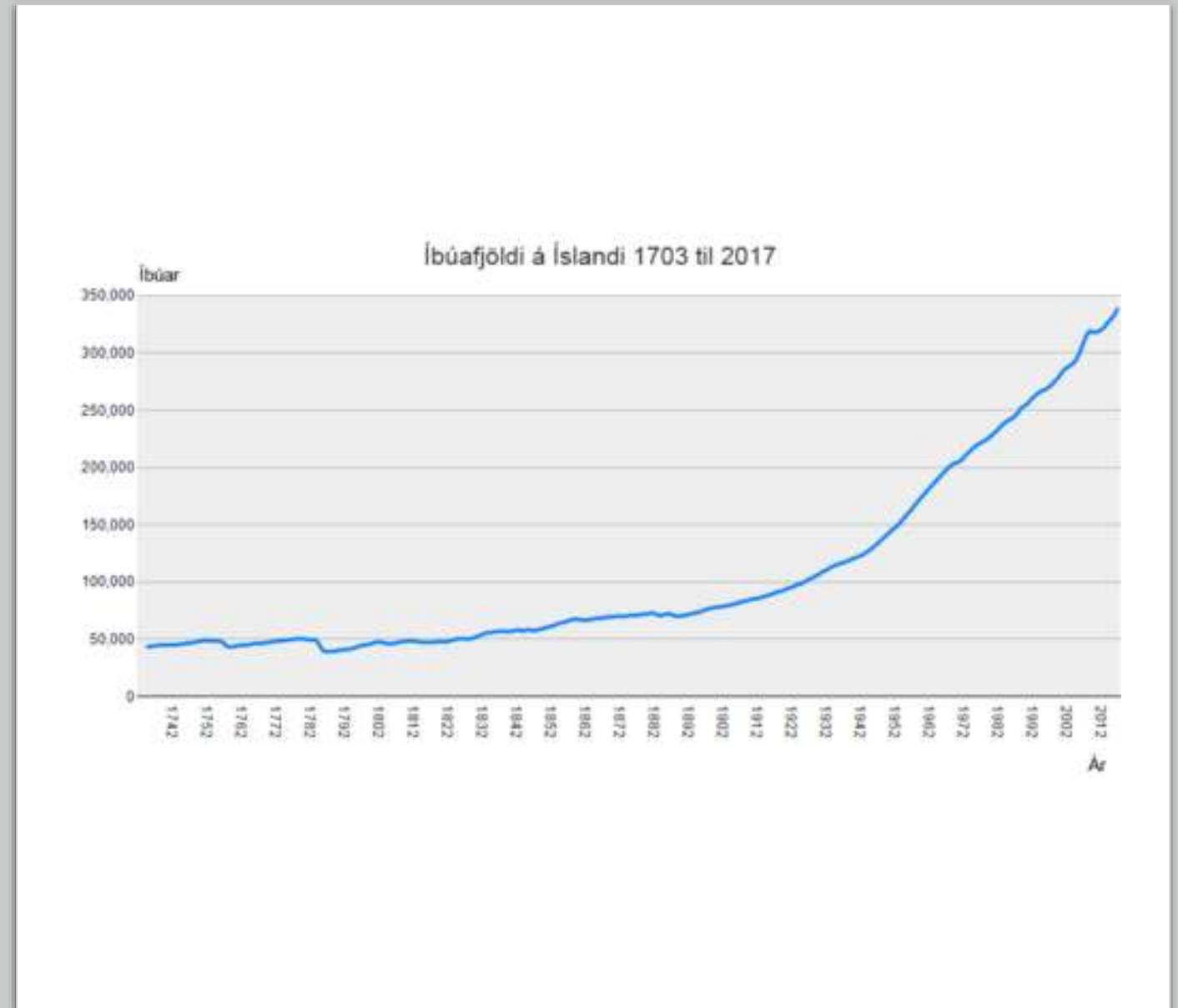


The Icelandic sagas – Egils saga

- Takes place in West Iceland.
- Very popular saga.
- Egill Skallagrimsson – the most memorable character of the sagas.
- Tells the tale of Egil, an Icelandic farmer who became the mortal enemy of Eric Bloodaxe the king of Norway.
- Egil is a brutal killer, a pirate and a warrior but also a poet and a loving father who grieves the loss of his son.

The Black Death and downfall of Icelandic culture

- The monasteries and church farms were centers of culture until the 15th century.
- At least 1/3 of the population died in the plague.
- Life in Iceland begins to be a battle of life and death against the nature. It stays that way until middle of 20th century.
- But despite this the manuscripts are read to Icelanders generation after generation





The Reformation, Guðbrandur and Hallgrímur

- In the 16th and 17th century most of the literary achievements came from the church.
- Translation of the bible 1584 – Guðbrandur Þorláksson, bishop.
- Passion hymns – Hallgrímur Pétursson, priest .
- This was also the time when the Icelandic manuscripts suddenly aroused interest among the Scandinavian royal families.
- The exodus of the manuscripts.





Romanticism and the long road to independence

- Inspired by romanticism, nations of N-Europe, in search for a golden era in their history, found records of this time in the Icelandic manuscripts.
- Icelandic students in Copenhagen soon caught on to these new ideas.
- Iceland at the time of the sagas vs. Iceland under Danish rule.
- The Romanticism view of wild nature.
- Writers tried to combine these two aspects into a political propaganda.



Jónas Hallgrímsson and the creation of Icelandic nationalism

- Jónas, a poet and a natural scientist.
- Inspired Icelanders with his poetry.
- Travelled the country studying its flora and geology.
- Created a new way of appreciate the harsh nature of Iceland.
- Many famous poems were written at this time, for example our national hymn.
- Icelandic folklore was gathered.

The 20th century, post-colonialism, post-modernism and Björk's Post album

- An age of extremes in Iceland. From being the poorest country in Europe to one of the largest bankruptcies in the world.
- Iceland independence in 1944. The military occupation in WW2 and military base.
- Reclaiming of the manuscripts.
- Halldór Laxness, Nobel laureate in 1955. Revived the Icelandic novel.
- Laxness tried to take the sagas from the conservative nationalists and make it accessible to the common Icelandic again.



The 20th-21st century, post-colonialism, post-modernism and Björk's Post album

- Writers nowadays have full freedom to experiment with the legacy of the manuscripts.
- Einar Kárason wrote a trilogy about the age of Sturlungar in the 13th century.
- Svava Jakobsdóttir og Gerður Kristný look at the Edda poems through feminist lense in their works.
- Our theaters explore the sagas and criticize the role they play in our nation building.
- Great interest in the era 16th-18th century.
- other issues: environment, equality, immigrants, LBGTQIA and on and on ...



And finally, the Scandinavian noir!

- The most popular genre in Iceland.
- It took a long time to develop in Iceland.
- Arnaldur Indriðason, Yrsa Sigurðardóttir and Ragnar Jónasson
- Even in the crime novels there is a connection to the old manuscripts – Arnaldur Indriðason's Konungsbók

