



Viking Age Iceland

By Jesse L. Byock

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The popular image of the Viking Age is of warlords and marauding bands pillaging their way along the shores of Northern Europe. In this fascinating history, Jesse Byock shows that Norse society in Iceland was actually an independent one—almost a republican Free State, without warlords or kings. Combining history with anthropology and archaeology, this remarkable study serves as a valuable companion to the Icelandic sagas, exploring all aspects of Viking Age life: feasting, farming, the power of chieftains and the church, marriage, and the role of women. With masterful interpretations of the blood feuds and the sagas, Byock reveals how the law courts favored compromise over violence, and how the society grappled with proto-democratic tendencies. A work with broad social and historical implications for our modern institutions, Byock's history will alter long-held perceptions of the Viking Age.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The Icelandic Vikings, according to Byock, professor of Old Norse and Medieval Scandinavian at UCLA, were far more than fur-clad, flea-bitten, mead-swilling raiders, as legend would have them. In this survey of their surprisingly complex society, spanning the three centuries from the island's settlement to 1260 when the king of Norway took control of it, Byock shows the Icelanders as a strong-willed and legally minded people who managed to carve a living as farmers out of an inhospitable environment while creating a remarkably modern free state governed by powerful laws and notions of honor instead of warlords and kings. He introduces readers to the Icelandic economy, social life (especially blood feuds) and home and family life, including a wonderful illustrated appendix on construction using turf. While this book will appeal to some readers of popular social surveys, in particular *The Last Apocalypse: Europe at the Year 1000 A.D.* by James Reston Jr., Byock's tone is generally academic and so more similar to that of, say, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*, by James Davidson. Byock's approach to his material also threatens an academic dust-up. He defies historiographical convention, but not without good and well-stated reason, by mining the Icelandic sagas for historical truths. Some may consider this approach akin to mining Cheever for truths about the lives of 20th-century suburbanites, but he certainly puts those facts he finds to cogent use. Illus.

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From Library Journal

Byock (old Norse and medieval Scandinavian, UCLA; Medieval Iceland) here attempts to dispel some popular Viking stereotypes. The image of the Viking as a pitiless destroyer of monasteries and a pillager of towns must be amended, he argues, to include the creation of great literature, a republican form of government, and the mechanisms for conflict resolution. Byock presents the evolution of Viking Iceland from its settlement beginnings, to its flowering as a highly developed legislative body, to its dissolution at the hands of the conquering Norwegians, who imposed a monarchical government in the 1260s. Byock uses Icelandic sagas to illustrate Viking efforts toward a type of conflict resolution that would be least injurious to society as a whole. He also points out the roles that women and Christianity played in the evolution of what was, for a time, a progressive society. This work should appeal to both students and general readers with an interest in Viking-age Europe. Recommended for academic and larger public libraries. Robert James Andrews, Duluth P.L., MN

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Review

"Byock brings several disciplines to his work, crossing the boundaries between history, literature, law, and archaeology. This well-written book takes up a wide variety of subjects, including the social fabric, domestic realities, cultural codes, politics and legal infrastructures, and the mechanisms that defused conflicts among the fiercely independent early Icelanders." —**Viking Heritage Magazine**

"A vital and original reinterpretation both of the sagas and of the society which created them. Byock's book is an essential guide at once to living conditions and to mentalities." —**The London Review of Books**

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