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Iceland — the Island of the Smiths, Ironland

A layman's reflections

By Gad Rausing

The traditional date of the discovery of Iceland is c. 860 A.D. when, according to the Norse sagas, Gardar Svavarson was driven there off his course for the Faroes. (*Hauksbók, Landnamabók.*)

He circumnavigated the island, and "for him the land was called Gardarsholm". A few years later another early voyager, Floki Vilgerdardson, barely managed to survive his first winter on the island. (*Hauksbók.*)

"The spring was rather cold. Floki went north on the mountain and saw a fjord full of ice, and they called the land Iceland, as it has since been called." (*Landnamabók.*)

But why did Floki, the earliest settler, pick such a name? An explorer, hoping to attract settlers could be expected to choose an attractive name for the new land. Erik the Red did so in the next century, calling his discovery "Greenland", although it did, and does, merit a wholly different appellation.

Even today, the sea around Iceland is mostly free from ice, and in the ninth century the climate was probably slightly more favourable. The name was probably slightly more favourable. The name "Iceland" does not seem justified, at least not in its accepted sense, "the land of ice". Can there be another explanation?

Although this account of Floki's naming of the island recurs in both *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*, the two main sources of the lost "Urlandnama", it still appears to be an explanatory tale. Prof. Sven Benson (of Göteborg) cites the glaciers of Vatnajökull, Myrdalsjökull and Eyafjallajökull, visible far out to sea, as having inspired the name. The summit of Vatnajökull, 2117 m high and situated about 3 miles from the shore, should be visible, from masthead level, at a distance

of 102 nautical miles. (The formula for visible range: $R = 2,08 \times \sqrt{A + \sqrt{B}}$, A and B being the altitude of the object and the observer's eye respectively.)

Another explanation is however possible.

Who first saw Iceland we do not know. But he was a brave man, or possibly an unlucky one, and it was a long time ago.

Whether Pytheas of Massilia ever reached the island remains uncertain. He speaks of "Thule" as a country inhabited by barbarians who cultivated the soil. The archaeological record of Iceland is bare of any traces of such habitation, so Norway appears much more likely a site.

There is no extant literary evidence of Roman ships having reached Iceland, but three Roman copper coins of the period 270–305 A.D. came to light, two at Bragðarvellir in Hammarsfjord and the third in Valnes, mute evidence of Roman captains blown far off course offering sacrifices before the return voyage. Both sites are in the south-east corner of Iceland. When Gardar and Floki first arrived, they found that "Christian men lived there, those whom the Norsemen call *papar*, i.e. priests. They fled when the Norsemen came because they did not want to live together with heathen men, and they left behind Irish books, bells and croziers, which chowed them to have been Irish." (*Landnamabók, Islendingabók.*) The presence of Irish anchorites in Iceland is also attested by several place-names.¹

The Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis,

Not

¹ Vestmanöyar were named for Hjorleif's run-away slaves, but there are many compounded with *pap-*, such as Papey, Papyli, Papafjörður, Papós, Papafell.

the *Voyage of Brendan*, describes the voyage of St. Brendan, who lived c. 490–570. This voyage, to a land in the far west, where God reigned supreme, went by way of a number of islands. Some of the adventures described were certainly fabulous, but most of them, although set down in the vague terms of an epic narrative and hardly ever localized, are clearly based on authentic seamen's reports. (Probably St. Brendan did not experience all of these adventures himself, but the legend is a valuable description of the lands known to Irish sailors in pre-Viking times.)

According to the *Navigatio*, one day the Saint and his crew found themselves being blown towards a stony island, "very rough, rocky and full of slag, without trees or grass, full of smiths' forges . . . (uiderunt insulam . . . valde rusticam, saxosam atque scoriosam, sine arboribus et herba, plenum officiniis fabrorum . . .) As they sailed alongside it . . . "they heard the sound of bellows blowing like thunder, and the sound of hammers on iron and anvil" . . . (audierunt sonitus follium sufflancium quasi tonitruum, atque malleorum collisiones contra ferrum et incudes.) One of the smiths threw a red-hot lump of iron at the sailors (iactavit predictam massa ignea de scorio immense magnitudines atque feruoris sed illis non nocuit) but missed, the red-hot projectile making the sea boil where it fell. (Transiuit enim illos quasi

spacium unius stadii ultra. Nam ubi cecidit in mare, cepit feruera quasi ruina montis ignei fuisse ibi, et ascendebat fumus de mare sicut de clibani ignis.)

This island of the smiths who threw red-hot lumps of iron after the retreating saint is also described in the *Immran curaig Máele Dúin*, a secular seamen's tale, probably dating from the ninth century.

These passages seem to describe the eruptions of an island volcano. If so, this can only have been in the Azores or, more likely, in Iceland (or in Icelandic waters, like the Surtsey of today).

The old Celtic word for "iron" was "Isarnom", in old Norse "isarn" or "isen". Thus, the land of iron in the Irish tale would have been the land of "isarnom", and as such the *papar* of Iceland may have known their land.

No sailor landing in a strange harbour will fail to question the natives about the land, particularly if they speak a familiar language. We know from the sagas that many of the *landnamsmen* had visited, or even lived in, Ireland. What is more probable than that they borrowed the name for the new land from the *papar* they met there?

In old Norse, the land of isarnom, the land of iron, became *isenland* or *isarnaland* — and to the new generation, born and bred in the land, no longer knowing Irish and with no knowledge of the Irish origin of the name, gradually Island, Iceland.