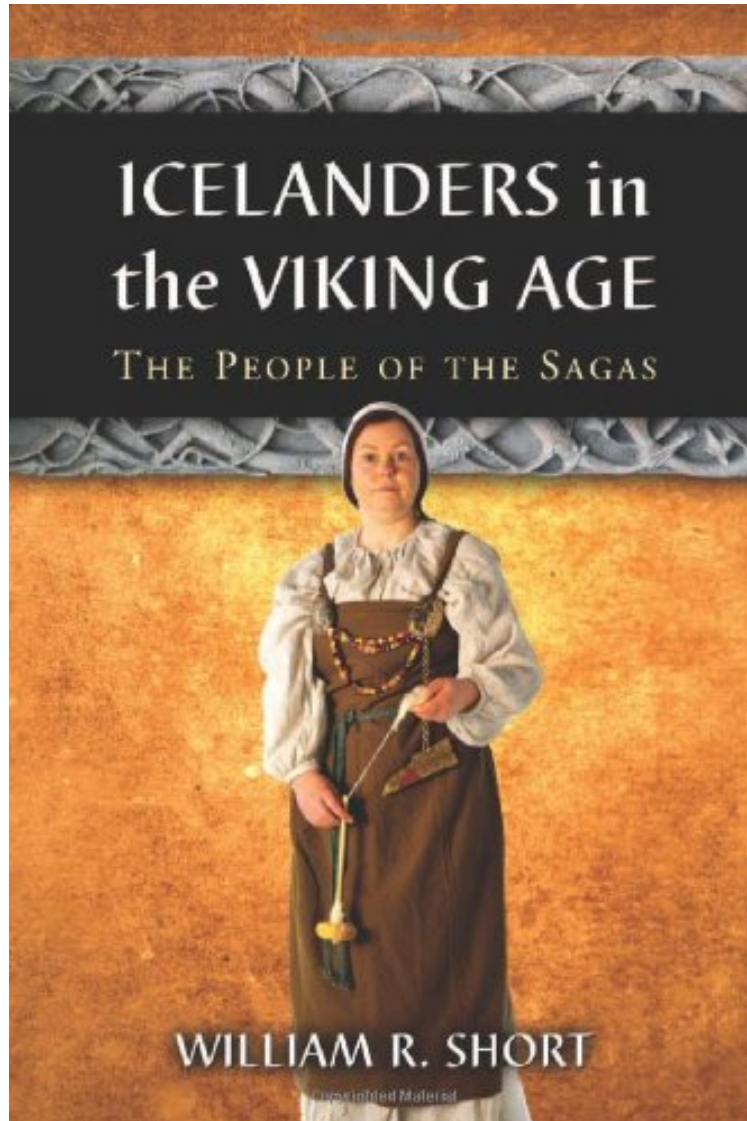


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Icelanders in the Viking Age: The People of the Sagas

William R. Short

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William R. Short : Icelanders in the Viking Age: The People of the Sagas before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Icelanders in the Viking Age: The People of the Sagas:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Fire and Ice,....Icelandic Life in the sagas.By R.D. Wertz/SharaMe and mine have been Historical re-inactors for over 31 and 37 years (plus time in by my sons)As such we are most passionate about our hobby and devote much time to it. We travel when we are able and visit the places and museums of our special areas of study,....in order to more absorb the experiences of the cultures we study. So it was that we have, less than 2 weeks past, just returned from far Iceland.We brought back with us thousands of photos, books and

culinary and absorbed knowledge, and a thirst for more. As Viking re-inactors living in the Southern U.S. our special area of study is fairly unique in an areawhere most re-inactors favor the American Civil War as their center of interest. Books on the Vikings ofScandanavia are most difficult to find. Yet After many years of re-inacting, I have well over 130 in my personallibrary. To find a new one of value is indeed to find a treasure. We returned from Iceland with several newbooks for our library, but not, this one. Our pinpoint of interest is on the Norse-based Vikings, and so we havevisited the most Northern and Southern reaches of that place already. But it was the Norse with wives and servantsof Ireland who first took to the colonization of Iceland. And so we also traveled there to continue our research. However, we did not find the number of books we had hoped to return with, and so I turned to to try and fill in those gaps in our knowledge. That was how I came to discover this volumn on the Icelanders of the Sagas.The book is a delight for one such as me. It makes solid use of the Sagas, and archological evidence, to tell of lifethere in that forbidding place of fire and ice where natural mammals are confined to the sea and only the horses,sheep and cows brought there by the Norsemen inhabit the raw landscape devoid of all other 4-footers.(except Artic Foxes, and seals from the sea) but their main source of protein came from the sea and the birds which rule the air over the island. The author uses theSagas to portray dailey life of the Norsemen turned Icelanders. The book is broken down into easily readable chapters of allaspects of life from the land and seattlement of it, to laws and social structure, food production and home life, tradeand transportation, art and religiion etc. etc. Stories from the sagas themselves are often quoted to both describe lifein general and specific examples of custom and personal occurances in the lives of individuals. Whenever possible theauthor gives English interpretation to unfamiliar words from the Sagas, as in descriptive names of those men and womenwho lived during the times of the Sagas,...'Hreda(Menace), 'Manvitsbrekku' (wisdom-slope), 'in grai'(the gray) and objects. adjectives, and places; 'anddyri' (porch),'black' (blar), 'footboard'(fotbord) 'latrine' (kamarr), etc. The Sagas are used to describe manners of dress as in the story of one Gisli who's wife and foster-daughter's heavyskirts dragged on the frost as they followed him to a hiding place, only in their dragging, left a clear trail to followfor his enemy, Eyjolfr inn grai (the gray) to follow after with his men, to find Gisli. (apparently leading to Gisli'ssusequent slaying). Mention is made of women wearing fringed shawls "she had bound a shawl about her that wasdecorated in black stitching with fringes at the ends" and a form of shaggy cloak (roggvarfeldr) whice was composed ofloosely woven wool cloth into which was woven tufts of long fleece wool was introduced at regular spacing, so that oncecombed smooth, created a warm and water-repellent outter garment. The author provides at the end of the book 37 pages of extensive (foot) notes, enough to delight even the most seriousof researchers plus an additional 3 pages of further reading suggestions (many/most of which already reside in my own privatereasearch library)Plus a delightfully informative Glossary of interesting terms and interpretations. The book arrived only 2 days ago, and I've barely been able to put it down since. It is rich in information while beingeasy to read by even the most inexperienced researcher/re-inactor,....it is regularly illustrated with black and white photos,of landscapes, artifacts, re-inactor clothing etc., detailed line drawings and engravings of archeological finds.I was delighted to discover within it detailed information and line drawings of 'Eriksstadir' the home of legendary Erik the Red,a place we visited and got to explore and take photos of (The longhouse that we visited is an accurate recreation built withinsight of the original archeological find, near the same freshwater stream Erik and his household used to obtain their fresh waterfor their everyday needs.) There are a rotation of regular costumed interpreters there who stay in persona to describe to visitorstheir dailey life on the homestead,...I wasn't surprised by much, but one bit of information that was new to me. i.e. the book authorspeaks of an additional sleeping area in the loft over the end (South-facing) small entrance hall, but the costumed interpreter mentionsthat the loft there was used for the sleeping of virgins,...so that they might sleep safe from the attentions of amorous males...and at West end Pantry (matbur) loft,(with an entry door on the North hill side) was used for food storage. The book is a treasure of new to me, information, as the Icelandic Vikings, partly by necessity, differed from their Norse originsin resources they had to rely on and adapt to. i.e. Iceland lacked the vast mature forests of mother Norway, (But DID have struggling but building-limited forests,...as will be mentioned and detailed further) and so housing hadto be erected using what was at hand, mostly stone, turf, and driftwood. The Lava rich soil yielded no clays to speak ofso pottery for cooking vessels and mold-making for the casting of metals, would not have been available and must needs be imported if itwas to be had, at all,...and although modern day Iceland is almost devoid of forests, 'Landamabok' speaks of Swede Gardarr Svevarssonsetting out in search of 'Snaeland' (snowland/Iceland) sailing around it to determine it Was an island and saying : "and it was woodedfrom the mountains down to the sea." These original forests were primarily composed of Birch, willow and Rowan, and possible someconiferous growths, but except in sheltered areas, the trees rarely grew taller than about 12 feet. (modern day Icelanders have a joke re.their present lack of dense forests of old "If you ever find yourself lost in the forest of Iceland,....all you have to do, is stand up")Another natural resource the Viking era Icelanders had in abundance was thermal pools etc. used for cooking with,(but apparently with an accompaningsulfer smell) and to bath and wash clothes in. Soapstone to cook in and clay/potery was imported from Norway, whilethe local Lava fields provided building materials. One more note on Iceland before I conclude,....re. the lava fields, they were/AREtotally Trecherous to attempt to cross on foot or horseback. They can stretch for Miles and merely wait for the foolish to attempt tobrave them. To try, is to invite the breaking of limbs before one has ventured upon them, even the length of

one's own body. Iceland is a forbidding place that was occupied by a determined and hard people who rarely lived past the age of 40 or so, ... though via the Sagas, it is known that a fortunate few lived to at least 80 (an added note which shall hopefully save me embarrassment via my more informed re-enactor cousins).....The sagas were written, not as they played out in their proper time of the 9-11th centuries, but written in the 12th century; primarily by learned scholars, whose beliefs were Christian, and no longer the Pagan of the original characters and bards of the Viking Age, of which they were written of. And so, though written/recorded in the original Icelandic language,.....the written recorders were inclined to do something the original Bards had, by oral tradition, sought strongly NOT to do. i.e. changes were made, to the originals, based on the new religious biases. i.e. As I understand it, 'Oral Traditions' demands that memorization be precise, NEVER varying from the originals by so much as a single word. Bards by their nature, would create their poems, songs and prose on their own special brand of code, that allowed them to praise a man for his deeds, or condemn him. The choice was his, and it was an unwise man who did not treat a bard with respect due him and warm hospitality, for he might easily become a future chapter in a bard's repertoire. It appears though that the Icelandic bards did strive to primarily record the history of their lands and people, and so perhaps did not take personal liberties as bards in other places. Oral history required that the teacher pass down what they had learned and that their students learn all stories, etc. word for word, with no variations. These students were usually youths who came to them to learn, and who had a perchance to have about them a sharp memory ability for that was what was most needed. They were taught, word for word, and had to recite back as often as necessary until there were no mistakes. For a story/poem/song to endure the ages, it was necessary to not entrust its preservation to a single individual, because death could easily take that person before they had had opportunity to pass it along,....so ideally, as many minds as possible were trained, in hope that the stories would survive. Down through the passing years, despite efforts to not do so, an occasion word was apparently lost and replaced with another, hence different sagas sometimes had small differences : " When Thorbjorn sur (sour-milk) sailed into Dyrafjorde from Norway with his family in the year 952, the land was fully settled, according to the sagas. 'Landnamabok' (an Icelandic history book of the 12th century) says that Vesteinne Vegeirsson gave him half of the valley Haukadals while 'Gisla saga Surssonar says that Thorbjorn bought the land in Haukadals." And so I conclude, that the sagas were a form of bardic stories that were eventually taken from memory and put to print. Where I had always understood them to be an accurate record of history, it appears that they were more a form of entertainment, and not to be taken to be taken as historical fact., (YET,....there is still the issue of 'oral history' which I am still reluctant to totally dismiss)...Regardless, the author makes clear acknowledgement of this and I still maintain the the book is a delightful addition to the Viking library, and the author's book now has me having a Much Clearer understanding of how to read and understand the sagas (which I already have in my library but repeated attempts to read them had been met with certain roadblocks,....I now look forward to tackling them again with renewed interests)

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. One of the best overviews of early medieval Iceland. By Martin Cox If you're looking at buying this book, you've probably already figured out that the Vikings weren't the nasty brutes of their historical portrayals (well, some were, but this was an era awash in nasty brutes). What you might be having problems with is figuring out "well, then what were they and how DID they live". This book is an excellent--in fact, I would say "outstanding"--overview for either the person who has a casual interest in the period, or for someone who is trying to delve deeply into the history, culture, and lifestyle of the time. I approached the book from the point of view of an early medieval reenactor looking for better information on how the Norse people lived in that period. Unfortunately, the publications one tends to run across tend to one of two extremes--either very simple information based upon questionable research with little to no sourcing (I'm looking at you, Osprey Publications) or scholarly tomes that are a painful slog to read (and I've got a bookshelf of those). This book manages to walk deftly between the two worlds--providing the information in an easy-to-read (I would even say enjoyable) writing style while also providing detailed sourcing for the author's statements. That's commendable, because without the sourcing, a statement is just one person's opinion. The sourcing is also a great jumping-off point for those interested in delving into the original sources. The book is laid out in a logical format, with sections on history, cultural attitudes and mores, material goods, and Viking weapons and warfare. It's richly illustrated with maps, photographs of the Icelandic historical sites, and photographs of the author (and others) in their reenactment clothing. I have the book on an early-generation Kindle, which does not do graphics justice, but when I read it on my Tablet, they look great. I'm sure that some of what the author states is open to debate, and some may even be wrong. That's the nature of early medieval studies--whether scholars or reenactors, get three people in the same room and you'll come out with four strongly held opinions.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Awesome book! By Indra This is a great introductory book for those more seriously interested in old Iceland. The writing is straight to the point, which I liked. It covers many topics, which I also liked. I'd recommend reading sagas, then reading this book, then reading/rereading more sagas. You will enjoy everything more.

The Sagas of Icelanders are enduring stories from Viking-age Iceland filled with love and romance, battles and feuds, tragedy and comedy. Yet these tales are little read today, even by lovers of literature. The culture and history of the people depicted in the Sagas are often unfamiliar to the modern reader, though the audience for whom the tales were

intended would have had an intimate understanding of the material. This text introduces the modern reader to the daily lives and material culture of the Vikings. Topics covered include religion, housing, social customs, the settlement of disputes, and the early history of Iceland. Issues of dispute among scholars, such as the nature of settlement and the division of land, are addressed in the text.

"Provides information on the daily lives, culture, history, and society of the Icelanders in a clear and well-structured fashion that invites and informs modern readers. The 13 chapters are concise, and clearly laid out sections allow readers to review specific themes or read the work as a whole. Using both literary and archeological sources, Short presents a detailed, succinct, and informative overview of Icelanders of the saga age as well as the sagas themselves. Readers are enticed into further exploration of Viking-age Iceland with the inclusion of detailed chapter notes and recommendations for further readings. This useful introduction to the Viking age is an essential companion to the medieval narratives.... The authors in-depth research makes this a compelling, informative addition to almost any collection dealing with the sagas or the Viking age. Highly recommended. General and academic collections, all levels."--Choice "Informative...Short has done an excellent job...most interesting...I unhesitatingly recommend this book to anyone with even a shred of interest in the Viking era...faultless...tells a coherent story...this is a book stuffed full of interesting material for anyone interested in the sagas, the Viking age, the Icelandic Commonwealth, and early contact with the New World. Highly recommended."--Armed and Dangerous "A warning to readers. You may find you need to hide your copy of this book...chapters on pretty much all aspects of daily life.... You dont need to be a specialist in anthropology or history to understand...illustrated with numerous black and white photographs of Iceland and Icelandic artifacts, drawings and maps...enjoyed it very much. Youve got to hand it to McFarland as they publish some fascinating books."--Green Man "A perfect companion or an introduction to reading the sagas very easy to read, and covers many topics in the life of the people in Iceland during those times covers religion, laws, feuds, home life, and the settlement, among other topics truly gives you an overview of what everyday life was like [Short's] research is flawless, and his sources are well-documented bibliography is impressive very well-indexed entertaining, easy-to-read and very educational."--Lgberg-Heimskringla "Well-structured, easily understandable and practical...digs deep into a wide range of archeological and literary sources...presents readers with a realistic account of life in the saga age...excellent...thorough and accurate...interesting...especially helpful."--Iceland "Riveting exploration...a solid addition."--Midwest Book "Comprehensive but accessible history.... All aspects of society are covered including laws, conflict, domestic work, agriculture, gender roles, trade and production. Blending literature, legal codes, chronicles and archaeology and embellishing them with pictures, many of which he took himself. Short's book is a perfect companion to the study of the Icelandic sagas."--Reference and Research Book News. From the Inside Flap The Sagas of Icelanders are enduring stories from Viking-age Iceland filled with love and romance, battles and feuds, tragedy and comedy. Yet these tales are little read today, even by lovers of literature. The culture and history of the people depicted in the Sagas are often unfamiliar to the modern reader, though the audience for whom the tales were intended would have had an intimate understanding of the material. This text introduces the modern reader to the daily lives and material culture of the Vikings. Topics covered include religion, housing, social customs, the settlement of disputes, and the early history of Iceland. Issues of dispute among scholars, such as the nature of settlement and the division of land, are addressed in the text. About the Author William R. Short is an independent scholar living in Southborough, Massachusetts. He regularly demonstrates and lectures on Viking-age topics in universities, museums, and other cultural institutions in North America and Iceland.