Editorial

The first year of the new millennium is soon at an end. At the same time as the millennium change has brought visions of the future, it has also involved a great deal of historical retrospection. Vikings and the Viking Age have been highlighted, especially in North America due to the 1000-year anniversary of the first Norsemen reaching the continent. All this focus on the Viking Age, which is actually a rather short period of the Nordic pre-history (ca 800–1050 AD), has resulted in a growing interest from a wide international public.

This year Viking Heritage Newsletter has also expanded to become a Magazine. Your responses to this change have been very encouraging. For the coming year we have a lot of visions and new ideas. A big problem, however, is how to finance our activities, as the Viking Heritage project has formally ended. Even though there is more interest than ever in what we are doing, it seems really hard for us to raise enough funds to carry on the activities. In order to continue we need to re-organise. This issue will unfortunately be the last paper version for a while. Our intention is to develop our magazine into a digital magazine that you can read and download from the Viking Heritage website.

To all of you subscribers who have already renewed your subscription we are offering an anniversary issue including five years of interesting articles from earlier issues of the Magazine, but also including new material. We hope that you all will find that good value for your money. We cannot, for obvious reasons, register any new subscriptions for the moment, but we will keep you updated with information about our doings on our website.

We would like to take the opportunity to thank everyone who has participated in this year’s issues. Thank you all for interesting articles! To all of you from all of us here at Viking Heritage: A Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year! And of course: pleasant reading!

Marita, Olle, Therese, Maj-Britt and Dan
Viking Heritage
Gotland University College
E-mail: viking@hgo.se

Words of Wisdom

Never reproach another for his love:
It happens often enough
That beauty ensnares with desire the wise
While the foolish remain unmoved.

From "Hávamál" ("The High One")
The stability of the Icelandic system of society was based mainly on the balance between two completely different principles. According to the ideology of the settlement phase all freeborn had equal rights before the law. On the other hand an aristocratic principle dominated the political structures of the free state. As we have already learned, godar and Pingmenn formed the leading classes in Icelandic society. The Icelandic social contract originated from the times when the land was fully settled. Consequently the pressure of a growing population could no longer be mitigated by a colonisation of new areas. Instead, for many freeborn and former equals the only chance for survival was to become dependents of a rich landowner, a development naturally overshadowed by deep social conflicts. To solve this problem all freeborn were subjected to the same law and a common institution was created: the great Althing, which represented a compromise between an ideological demand and social reality.

The end of the peaceful era (fríðar-öld) began when Christianity was introduced to Iceland. After failure by a couple of other missionaries, the north-German Dankbrand finally succeeded in converting some of Iceland’s leading godar. This, of course, alienated them from their own Pingmenn. That tension would finally burst into an open schism when at the great Althing of the year 1000 the two hostile parties declared themselves to be “ur liegem”; the Icelandic social contract threatened to break up. Only thanks to the dexterity of the law speaker could the threat of a civil war be averted. According to his judgement Christianity became the official religion of the free state, while heathen practices were still allowed if carried out in secrecy. Preserving the customs of child abandonment and eating horsemeat can be explained by their economic importance. The second conflict caused by Christianity arose from the introduction of church taxes. The church owner, in particular, benefited from receiving the greatest share of the tithe. As a result rich landowners started to build their own churches. As we recall, the principal of godarð was founded mainly on the economic equality of hændr and godar. However now the godar were forced to make up for the extreme accumulation of power by raising the leasing rentals for their tenants and acquiring new guardianships. In the long run the competition between godi and church owners led to the impoverishment of the Icelandic middle class. With the weakening of the power of their godar and their clans, it became more and more difficult for common people to come into their own. This extreme distortion of justice dramatically disturbed the former feeling of solidarity between all freeborn.

This development would not be without consequence for the institution of slavery. Yet, for the moment, let us return to the beginning again. Investigating the specific conditions of the colonisation phase we have to conclude that there had never been any real economical need for slavery! The fact that settlers took slaves with them to Iceland can of course be explained by the cultural conditions back in Norway: Many slaves were therefore captured during the journey, quite often from the Celtic nations on the British Isles. However slavery on Iceland is nothing more than an ideological import. Slavery’s disappearance is assumed to have occurred sometime around the end of the Viking Age. Actually, there was never any law to abolish slavery on Iceland. Rather some demographic changes were needed to make the system of slavery unbearable. Firstly we have to consider the diminishing livelihood on the average farm because of the competition between godar and churchowners. Then the fathers of the church were also concerned with a prohibition of infanticide and eating horsemeat. Yet these heathen practices were most important for the nourishment of large numbers of the population on one hand and birth control of slave class on the other. Naturally, the consequences of that development do not become evident to their full extent until a few generations later. We need mention that the preachers of God were not particularly engaged in the destiny of slaves.

Ironically it would be the breakdown of society caused by the introduction of Christianity that would bring about the disappearance of slavery on Iceland.

The third destructive conflict happened when church within the scope of the movement of libertas ecclesiae began to claim possession of land and property donations. As a problem, the definition of property as we find it in ecclesiaw law completely contradicted the conception of the church owners who, following the old idea of ðel as family land, had only meant to lease property out to the church. Lasting more than one hundred years that conflict finally led to a complete change in the common definition of land ownership. Henceforth the power traditionally associated with land ownership no longer rested with the family clans but became the personal and freely transferable belonging of an individual. In the end we find social structures that had not much in common with the conditions during the beginning phase. The particular Icelandic social contract has become invalid; there are hardly any partners left with equal rights. The fríðar öld is superseded by an era of discord. A handful of families now moves into the focus of history, becoming new factors of influence. That is the prelude to the age of the Sturlungar.

Due to an active marriage policy the five or seven important family clans would be so interwoven around the year 1220 that traditional conceptions of family no

About the author:
Michael Neiβ has studied Archaeology and Scandinavian studies at the Humboldt University of Berlin. In 1998 he continued his studies of Archaeology at the University of Stockholm and now he is a student of comparative religion at the same University. His special interests are: later Iron Age, ornamental art and iconography interspersed with religion and society.

E-mail: michaelneiss@hotmail.com
The powerful aclttir of the Sturlunga-age.

longer had any practical meaning. Instead territorial bonds became more important, making the aclttir reside in their own separate territories, so to say. Putting the total breakdown of traditional structures in the context of the individualization of power gives us a key to a new understanding of the bloody conflicts of the Sturlunga-Age. Consequently it was more likely a matter of personal battles than just cruel feuds between family clans.

A remarkable characteristic of Icelandic culture is the strong connection between ecclesial and profane erudition. It all began when the first bishop was ordained in 1056. However its real heyday came when the first monasteries were founded on the island. In that context we ought to remember that pupils to be educated here also were members of the leading families. That is why education undoubtedly had to pay some respect to the specific interests of that social class. As a matter of fact, most sagas are supposed to originate from or at least have been written down in the monasteries. As far as can be determined that specific Icelandic erudition is considered to have reached its climax in the stormy days of the Sturlunga-Age. With reference to that one might wonder to what extent the Sagas reflect the ideal of a better society. Most Sagas are placed in the days of the frithar old, between the years 930-1050. Despite the fact that they were written down at a time when slavery had disappeared for centuries these pieces of literature show an astonishingly uniform stereotype picture of the conditions of slavery. In any case we have to deal with a deep gap in tradition between the time the when the Sagas were believed to have taken place and when they were recorded on parchment. Accordingly we need to wonder about the ways in which that picture of slaves could have been handed down to the Icelandic Sagas.

In the next issue, the article will continue under the title: How credible is the picture of slavery in Icelandic literature?

Literature sources:
Hastrup, Culture and society on medieval Iceland, 1985; Wilde-Stockmeyer, Sklaveri auf Island, 1978