

A
Scandinavian History
Settlement of Iceland - *Landnámabók*
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or

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B
Scandinavian History
Settlement of Iceland - *Landnámabók*
Essay

Discuss how *Landnámabók* can be described in relation to historical investigation. You may use some or all of the texts below as starting points for your essay.

1.

'I think it right to assume that most people [in thirteenth-century Iceland] were relatively well informed about their forebears, and that there was a high level of social stability in most areas; changes were primarily linked to politics and religion. It is much more difficult to argue that a group of authors in the thirteenth century agreed to invent a glorious past for the Icelanders living in the period roughly covering the years 870-1030 and decided amongst themselves how society, culture, religion and a number of important individuals and their genealogical tables were to be described'.

Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans. by Jean Lundskaer-Nielsen, The Viking Collection, 12 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1999), p. 31

2.

'It is not a new idea to reject the historicity of medieval Icelandic sources. The book-prose school has stressed the literary nature of the Sagas of Icelanders, seeing them as the creative efforts of individual artists than the result of centuries of oral tradition. ... However, it must also be accepted that this material is not entirely without basis in earlier tradition. Individual names, anecdotes, and events may well have been brought unaltered through generations of storytellers, representing genuine data of a sort. The problem lies in the fact that it would be next to impossible to differentiate historical information (e.g. a primary settler called Þórðr did really exist) from spurious or distorted evidence (e.g. Þórðr did not exist, but some of the deeds attributed to him were real events carried out by another person). Historical evidence of this type is of little use in scholarly enquiry as it cannot be identified with any certainty. Traditional stories may have been plentiful in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and used as raw material in saga composition. Nevertheless, the overall view of the *landnám* and Icelandic society in these early sources was clearly a scholarly construct'

Friðriksson, Adolf and Orri Vésteinsson, 'Creating a Past: A Historiography of the Settlement of Iceland', in *Contact, Continuity, and Collapse: The Norse Colonization of the North Atlantic*, ed. by James H. Barret, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 5 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), pp. 139-61 (p. 141)

3.

'While a text revealing a thirteenth-century view of the past may, and probably can, tell us something about the writer's own time, it must also tell us something about that past itself'.

Peter Foote, 'Historical Studies: Conversion Moment and Conversion Period', in *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary Symposium 14-15 May 1992*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1993), pp. 137-44 (p. 141).