



Are we Unique?

The Need for National Identity in the Age of Globalization

Speech by
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Your Majesty,
Your Excellencies,
Dear academics,
students
and other guests:

Two years ago, the Icelandic men's football team beat all odds and qualified for the European finals in France. During the event, we Icelanders received much praise and attention, not only due to some excellent results on the field but also for noteworthy performances by fans in the stands – including myself and my wife Eliza.

The so-called “Viking clap”, also known as the “Viking war chant”, gained international fame, and as one foreign newspaper put it, “most people assume the song comes from an ancient pre-battle ritual”. Last year, Icelandic supporters also performed the “Viking clap” at the women's European football finals in the Netherlands, and you can be sure that it will be executed at the men's World Cup finals in Russia this summer.

These days, we seem to be experiencing a general fascination with Vikings and the Viking era. Late last year, the fifth season of the series “The Vikings” premiered on the History Channel. One of the main characters, Flóki – played by Swedish actor Gustaf Skarsgård – has by then reached an unknown land, uninhabited and rough. “Alfaðir, ég skil ekki, af hverju hefurðu fært mig hingað”, Flóki or Skarsgård asks his god, Odin in well-pronounced Icelandic; “Supreme god, I do not understand, why have you brought me to this place?” Then he realizes that he has been brought to Ásgarður, Asgard, the land of the gods.

The knowledge we have of Raven Flóki derives from the Book of Settlements, a catalogue compiled in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, describing where the original Norse settlers established themselves some three centuries before. We also have the Book of Icelanders, which Ari the Learned wrote in the early eleventh century, partly to refute claims that the people of Iceland were descended from “thieves and thugs”. A short while later, the famous chieftain and writer Snorri Sturluson composed Heimskringla, a collection of tales about Norwegian kings from times immemorial up to this present day. In this era, the Icelandic Sagas were also created, powerful stories of kings and chieftains, family feuds, adventures and battles.

I think it is safe to say that for the next few centuries, this literary output was of absolutely no use, except for its entertainment value. Then, however, the two states on each side of the Öresund grew in strength. And a strong state needs strong roots, a strong history with strong heroes. Thus, when Sweden became a great power in the seventeenth century, Swedish scholars were assiduous in creating a great past as well, finding the necessary material in old Icelandic manuscripts. In Snorri’s Heimskringla, for instance, we have descriptions of the Ynglings, the legendary clan of Swedish kings who could trace their ancestry to Odin himself. Rather suddenly, manuscripts from a distant island in the north became precious items, highly valued in Copenhagen and Stockholm and Uppsala. Likewise, Icelanders who could read and translate them were a precious commodity. Some of them made a name for themselves here in Sweden, either for their scholarly ability or other more negative attributes. One of them, Jón Jónsson, was on his way to Copenhagen in 1658 when he was captured by Swedish forces. Jón, known as Jonas Rugman, became an invaluable assistant to Olof Verelius and other academics in Uppsala but he earned an unfavourable reputation as well; Verelius did not give him just credit and Rugman was mostly remembered for his heavy drinking.

History can be cruel. History is a weapon. Through the old Icelandic tales, Sweden’s national identity was enhanced during the great power era. Meanwhile in Iceland, the stories were still cherished. In the late eighteenth century, a young aristocrat, Uno von Troil, later archbishop of Uppsala, travelled to the island and wrote wonderful letters about this strange country with its poor but intellectual people. “Most of all they enjoy reading their ancient Sagas,” he wrote, adding that “there never has been an Icelander who did not know the country’s history”. Furthermore, words could not begin to describe the depth of Icelandic patriotism.

In an interesting footnote, von Troil added his reflections on the issue of patriotism, wondering whether providence had installed an especially large dose of this sentiment in people who live in bleak lands so that they accepted such dire fate. Taking an example from his native Sweden, von Troil noticed that the inhabitants of Skåne found their porridge to be of equally good taste wherever they travelled, that is, they did not miss their plentiful home that much. Conversely, those born in Älvdalen and Särna in Dalarna preferred their simple barkbread to gourmet in other districts, because of their odd love for the home grounds.

But back to Iceland. The passion for the past did not change the fact that the island was firmly within the Danish realm. Then, however, the age of nationalism swept across Europe, reaching the most distant shores. From the first decades of the nineteenth century, Icelandic intellectuals led the national awakening, a call for autonomy for Denmark, a call on the Icelanders to recall the heroic deeds of long gone days when Vikings and voyagers discovered new lands, established a society of free men, founded their parliament, the Althing, at Þingvellir, Parliamentary Fields. In other words, the leaders of the independence movement used history, just like so many others did in other countries at the time. There was nothing unique about people thinking that they were unique.

The enthusiasm of these intellectuals, and the feelings they could arise in their fellow compatriots, is well described in the poetry of the times. One of the movement's early leaders was Jónas Hallgrímsson, indisputably among Iceland's greatest poets. In one of his best-known prose, he praised the deeds of the forefathers, saw a glimmer of hope but lamented the sorry state in which the Icelanders now found themselves. Then there were heroes, Jónas recalled as he observed the ancient site of Þingvellir, overgrown ruins in solid silence.

The poem is called "Iceland", its background is Þingvellir, it is majestic in its beauty and brilliance, wonderfully translated into English by Dick Ringler:

Iceland, fortunate isle! Our beautiful, bountiful mother!
Where are your fortune and fame, freedom and virtue of old?
All things on earth are transient: the days of your greatness and glory
flicker like flames in the night, far in the depths of the past.

Comely and fair was the country, crested with snow-covered glaciers,
azure and empty the sky, ocean resplendently bright.
Here came our famous forebears, the freedom-worshipping heroes,
over the sea from the east, eager to settle the land.

...

O it is bitter to stand here stalled and penned in the present!
Men full of sloth and asleep simply drop out of the race!
How have we treated our treasure during these six hundred summers?
Have we trod promising paths, progress and virtue our goal?

Comely and fair is the country, crested with snow-covered glaciers,
azure and empty the sky, ocean resplendently bright.
Ah! but up on the lava where Axe River plummets forever
into the Almannagorge, Althing is vanished and gone.

Snorri's old site is a sheep-pen; the Law Rock is hidden in heather,
blue with the berries that make boys – and the ravens – a feast.
Oh you children of Iceland, old and young men together!
See how your forefathers' fame faltered – and passed from the earth!

So wrote Jónas Hallgrímsson. But we can say that fortune and fame returned, freedom and virtue of old. Iceland regained its independence. It is now a wealthy state, the economy is growing, the banking collapse of 2008 is history, we are enjoying a boom in tourism and surveys indicate that the Icelanders are among the happiest nations on earth.

Does history have anything to do with this happiness? When Icelanders are asked to define their national identity they usually point to the country, the language and the cultural heritage, vital pillars of nationhood that need to be protected and acclaimed. And then enter the academics, the intellectuals, even the elite.

A number of years ago, my friends on the board of the Association of Icelandic Historians decided to have a session one evening on “the end of nationalism”, admittedly with a question mark. The event was advertised but then, on the day when it was due, an apologetic email was sent: The planned meeting on the end of nationalism had to be postponed because “our boys”, the men’s handball team, had a vital game in a tournament that evening and nobody was going to miss out on that, not even historians who were interested in the possible decline or end of nationalism.

Sports can certainly be a perfect venue for a healthy demonstration of patriotism and togetherness. Still, we certainly need to discuss the evils of excessive nationalism, the future of nationalism in a globalized world, and the potential pitfalls of using history for political and national purposes.

First: In Iceland, and probably the whole Nordic region, practically everyone should know that the “Viking” clap or chant is not some ancient Norse ritual before raids or battles. In 2014, the men’s football team from my local club Stjarnan, the Star, played Motherwell from Scotland. As it happens, the Scottish fans have been performing this chanting clap for years. The Stjarnan supporters unashamedly adopted it, the fan club for the Icelandic national team copied it onwards and the rest is history.

Second, historians can find it easy to criticize the storyline of the Vikings, this hugely popular TV series. Ravens-Flóki, as he is described in the Book of Settlements, is probably a fictional character to begin with. Ari the Learned does not mention him at all in his earlier Book of Icelanders and the story about ravens guiding him to land has biblical Noah’s Ark connotations. Scholars have also pointed out how Vikings were reborn in the nineteenth century in Scandinavia, with dissimilar attributes. In Norway, they were mostly portrayed as daring voyagers, in Denmark as diligent farmers, here in Sweden as skilled craftsmen and pioneering

merchants. Recently, one Norwegian historian concluded that the scarce and problematic sources from the Viking era should really prevent us from reaching any solid conclusions on how this period should be portrayed.

In Iceland, we can assume that as far as adventurous Vikings were concerned, the country was primarily a retirement home. Furthermore, the glowing image of a “golden age” for all which we can for instance see in Jónas Hallgrímsson’s poetry, is not historically accurate. There was cruelty and inequality, famine at times. Thus, we might as well decide that Halldór Laxness, Iceland’s literary giant in the twentieth century (recipient of the Nobel prize for literature in 1955), was closer to the truth when he described the first generations of people on the island in this unflattering manner: “At that time most men in Iceland were stunted and bow-legged, gaunt and swollen-jointed, knotty and twisted with gout, wrinkled and blue-faced.”

Where does this leave us? I believe that we should still look to the past for inspiration and entertainment, for warnings and wisdom. I fervently believe that history should be free from a single nationalistic purpose. History should be contradictory and controversial, because then it is liberating, multifaceted and exciting.

Therefore, I will of course continue to do the “Viking clap” even though there is nothing originally Icelandic or Viking about it, and I will continue to enjoy the Vikings TV series although I know that it is more fiction than truth, more entertainment than education – but having said that, the series is a perfect inspiration to learn more, for instance through academic but accessible works. Also, if such literature is not produced, others will find it easier to abuse history to their ugly advantage. Recently, we have seen, for instance how white supremacists try to make Norse mythology and Viking tales fit their distorted agenda. Asgard must not be taken over by racists.

And I will continue to visit Þingvellir like so many of my compatriots, be inspired, feel patriotic at this site of memory for us Icelanders. Still, we should keep in mind that Þingvellir can also be remembered for executions and injustice, a place where the authorities had poor men beheaded and innocent women drowned.

In Iceland today, immigrants comprise over ten percent of the population. Hopefully, these citizens, these new settlers, will sense the beauty of Þingvellir and its rich history. But of course, they should not feel unwelcome in society if they do not experience such sentiments. In a globalized world, nationalism must be tolerant towards those who are tolerant, emphasizing real diversity instead of imagined uniqueness.