

A Snapshot of Icelandic Culture

Created by: Jennifer Broders
Pleasant Valley CSD

Grade Level (Req.): 6-8 grade	Content Area (Req.): Social Studies	Unit (Opt.):
Connections to Other Disciplines (Opt.): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History • Culture • Geography 		
Time Frame (Req.): 3 class periods	Goal (Req.): Students will apply what they have learned about culture in other parts of the world, specifically their own culture, and compare it to that of Iceland.	
	Objective (Req.): Students will understand how language has played an important role in the culture of Iceland and draw comparisons with language in American culture	
Materials Needed (Req.): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article “Icelandic Girl Fights for Right to Her Own Name” • Copy of the chapters “Language & Ideas” and “Custom & Tradition” from the book Xenophobe’s Guide to the Icelanders, e-book, Xenophobe’s Guides, Oval Projects 2011 which includes the poem “The Icelandic Language” by William Jon Holm • <i>National Geographic article entitled “Sagas’ Portray Iceland’s Viking History” and corresponding question sheet</i> • Power Point presentation on Iceland, covering history, physical features, climate and plants/animals • Graphic organizer to be completed during the Power Point presentation • • 	New Vocabulary (Opt.): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • • 	
Anticipatory Set/Introduction [Inquiry Question is required] (Req.): Each day’s anticipatory set is called “bellwork” in my room. It is on the board when students enter and they know that when the bell rings, they look at the board and follow the bellwork directions		
Instructional Sequence/Procedure (Req.): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. DAY 1: Bellwork: (On the board there will be a list of the 10 most popular boys and girls names from the year most of these students were born). Does your name appear on 		

one of these lists? If your name does not appear on the list, you will need to change your name to one of those listed. Please write down your new name in your journal and tell me what you think about having to do this.

2. Discuss student responses to this task. Does it seem fair to them that they have to have a name only from a given list? Why/why not? Should there be a list of names like this, or should people be allowed to choose their children's names? Discuss some famous baby names and ask if those names should be allowed or not.
3. Explain that there are some places in the world where the government steps in and may not allow parents to give certain names to their children. Do students think something like this could happen in the United States? Why/why not? (Hopefully, students will use their prior knowledge of U.S. government and the Constitution to bring up the idea of freedom of speech).
4. Tell the class that Iceland is among the countries that does this. Why do you think the government of Iceland does this? Then hand out the article on the Icelandic girl, Blaer, who had to go to court to get her name to be legally allowed. Read aloud as a group and discuss.
5. Explain to students that in Iceland, names are much different than in America. Show how names are written in the traditional Icelandic form, with the father's name as part of the child's last name. For example, my name would be Jennifer Geraldottir or Geraldottir, as I am the daughter of Gerald. Ask students to write what their names would be. You may want to give them a folded notecard they could use as a nameplate for the remainder of the lesson. A quirky example the kids might find interesting is the handout entitled "Custom & Tradition" from the book *Xenophobe's Guide to the Icelanders*. As a class, read aloud and discuss this piece and see if students can make connections to the first piece we read about Blaer.
6. So, where did all this concern about language come from in Iceland, anyway? Explain that we will next look at a slide show about Iceland which gives an overview of who settled Iceland (the Vikings), what they found when they got to the island and also look at some of the basic geography, such as land features, climate and plant and animal life. Hand out copies of the graphic organizer, one per student, and explain that as they watch the slide show they will need to complete the graphic organizer with specific examples. Also explain that they will be writing a comparison/contrast using this information and their prior knowledge of the United States in order to compare the two countries.
7. DAY 2: Bellwork: In your journal, answer the following: Who were the first settlers of Iceland? What was the land like? How does Iceland's climate compare to ours here in Iowa? Give specific examples if you can.
8. At this time, hand out copies of the National Geographic article "Sagas' Portray Iceland's Viking History" as well as a copy of the question sheet for each student. In their pods, have students take turns reading the piece aloud, and, as a group, have them locate the answers. After all groups have finished, we will discuss the answers as a class.
9. Next, pull up the website www.northvegr.org and look up *Burnt Nial's Saga*, which was the example in the article we just read. Either read the saga aloud to students or have students take turns reading it aloud. It is in an unusual form and may be difficult for students to read. Ask students to make note of what makes this writing different from what they are used to reading. They may make these notes in their journals as the reading is done. You may read the entire selection or just a portion, as you see appropriate. Then, as a class, see what the students think of the piece. You may also wish to mention that there is another saga that is famous and is over 1200 years old called *Beowulf*, which was made into a movie in 2007 (this was the American version; a British/Canadian version

was made in 2005).

10. DAY 3: Bellwork: : In your journals, please respond to the following questions: So, just what were sagas, anyway? Who did they profile and why were they important to Icelanders? If we had sagas in America, who do you think they would or should be about? Do you think we have something in our literature today that might be like the sagas of old? What would those be?
11. Hand out copies of the chapter “Language & Ideas” from Xenophobe’s Guide to the Icelanders. Asking students to work in their pods, have them take turns reading the article aloud, and as they read, have them write questions the article could answer, remembering to create some questions that go deeper than just seek and find for the answers. They may also wish to include some questions that ask readers to state an opinion about some aspect of the reading. Each group should have five good questions they will share with the class when everyone is finished.
12. After groups have completed the task, have individual groups ask one question at a time from the list they created and see if other groups can answer. Also have other groups critique the questions – were they too easy, too hard? What makes a question a good one?
13. Following this discussion, put the Icelandic alphabet on the document camera for students to see. Then read aloud the poem by William Jon Holm and ask students reaction. What do they think the poem says about the Icelandic language? Why did the author write it? What are some elements of the poem that stand out to them? What images/metaphors do they see? Why do they think the author of the book included this poem in his chapter on language? What other elements of Icelandic culture appear in the poem?
14. To finish the unit, ask students to answer the following on a notecard as an exit ticket for this unit: How and why is the Icelandic language so important to the culture of Iceland? Give no fewer than two and no more than four specific reasons from what we have learned in the past three days.
- 15.
- 16.
- 17.
- 18.
- 19.
- 20.

Formative Evaluation (Req.): Class discussions, bellwork written responses, the slide show, and as students are answering questions based on the readings.

Assessment (Req.): *Discussion/guided reading sheets with a variety of question types included
*A short written response comparing/contrasting Iceland with the United States based on the graphic organizer and information collected during the Power Point
*An exit card when students leave at the end of the final class of the unit answering a question centered on the learning target.

Iowa Core Curriculum Standards Used (Req.):

- Geography 1., Grades 6-8: Understand how physical processes and human actions modify the environment and how the environment affects humans
- Behavioral Sciences 1., Grades 6-8: Understand the changing nature of society
- Behavioral Sciences 2., Grades 6-8: Understand how personality and socialization impact the individual.
- Behavioral Sciences 4., Grades 6-8: Understand the process of how humans develop, learn,

adapt to their environment, and internalize their culture

- History 1., Grades 6-8: Understand historical patterns, periods of time and the relationships among these elements.
- History 3., Grades 6-8: Understand the role of culture and cultural diffusion on the development and maintenance of societies.
- History 8., Grades 6-8: Understand cause and effect relationships and other historical thinking skills in order to interpret events and issues.
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Common Core Curriculum Standards Used (Opt.):

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NGS Standards Used (Req.):

- 4. The physical and human characteristics of places.
- 6. How culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions.
- 10. The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics.
- 15. How physical systems affect human systems.
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Five Themes of Geography Used (Req.):

- Location
- Place
- Human-Environmental Interaction
-
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School District Standards and Benchmarks (Opt.):

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-
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21st Century Universal Constructs (Opt.):

Other Disciplinary Standards (Opt.):

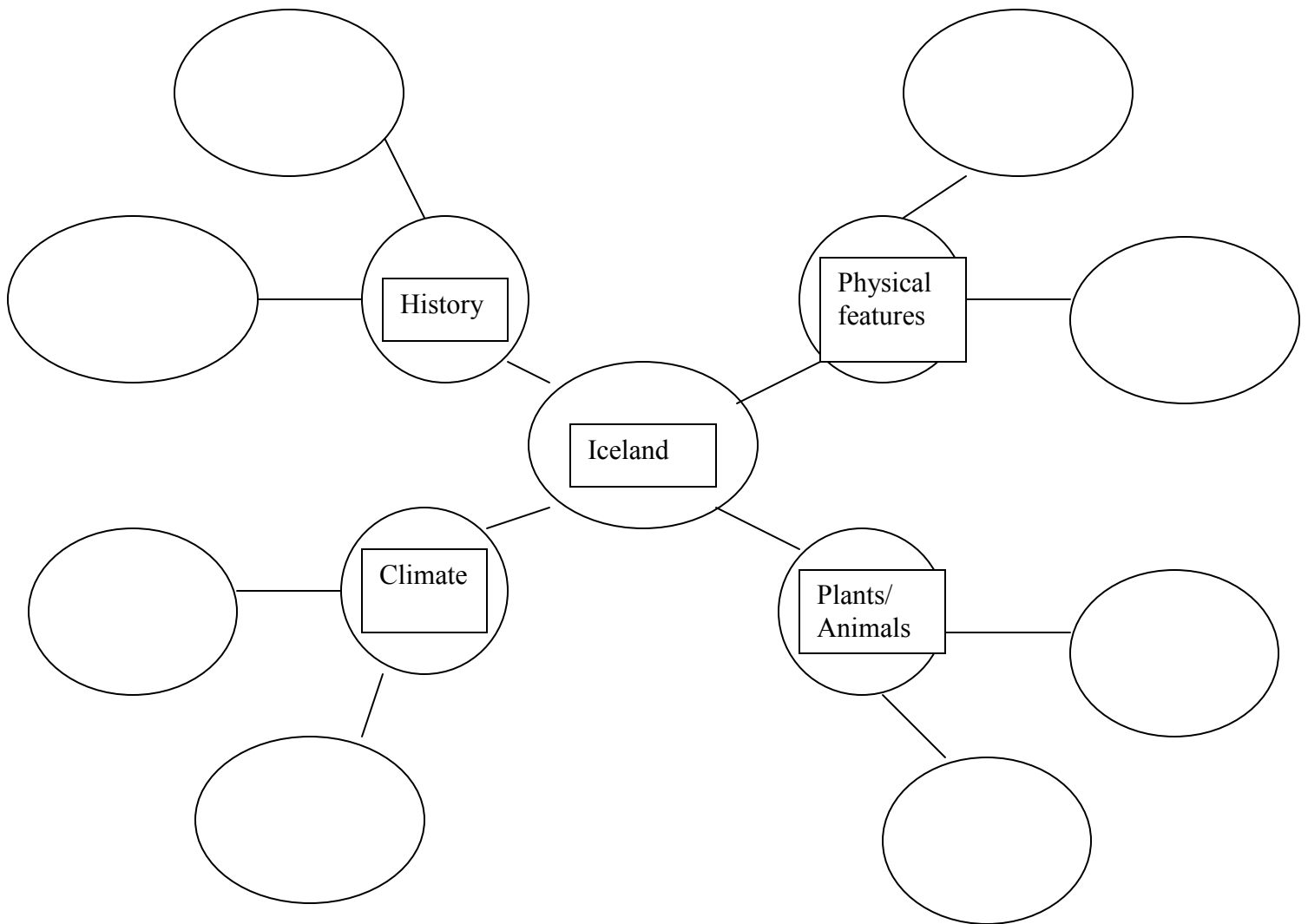
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Other Essential Information (Opt.):

Other Resources (Opt.):

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Iceland Graphic Organizer
**While watching the PowerPoint on
Iceland, fill in two examples for each of
the four areas.**



Now that you have completed your Icelandic snowflake (that's what's right above these directions – I know, it's not so snowflake-ish, but work with me here), choose two of the subject areas, then, using the examples you filled in, on the back of this sheet, compare/contrast Iceland to the United States, or you can more specifically compare/contrast Iowa if you like. Remember, your grade will be based upon specific examples and how well you can compare or contrast.

The Icelandic alphabet is a combination of the Roman alphabet (without the c, q, and w) and a few Runic characters. Each vowel can be normal or have an acute accent over it. In addition, the O can have an umlaut over it. The characters in alphabetic order in upper and lower case are:

**Aa Áá Bb Dd Đđ Ee Éé Ff Gg Hh Ii Íí Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn
Oo Óó Pp Rr Ss Tt Uu Úú Vv Xx Yy Ýý Zz Þþ Ææ Öö**

Translation and Pronunciation

The normal Roman characters are pronounced about as they are in English. The letter j is pronounced like the y in yes. The letter r is trilled. The following table shows how the special characters are usually translated into English and how they are pronounced.

Character	Translation	Pronunciation
Áá	Aa	ow in cow
Đđ (eth)	Dd	th in father
Éé	Ee	ye in yes
Íí	Ii	ee in tree
Óó	Oo	o in sole
Úú	Uu	oo in moon
Ýý	Yy	ee in tree
Þþ (thorn)	Th th	th in thick
Ææ (ae ligature)	Ae ae	i in line
Öö	Oo	i in bird

How to enter Icelandic characters

Entering the special characters in the Icelandic alphabet can be a problem for those without an Icelandic keyboard. In *Microsoft Word* you can use the **Insert Symbol** menu item to insert special symbols. There are shortcut strokes provided for most characters. They are listed at the bottom of the insert window when you select a character. Thus you can insert **á** by entering Ctrl+',A. That is press ' while holding down the **Ctrl** key, then press **A**.

For other programs, you can always use the PC hex codes listed below.

Just press the ALT key and enter the numbers using the numeric keypad instead of the number keys above the letters.

Character	Key Strokes	Character	Key Strokes
Á	ALT-0193	á	ALT-0225
Æ	ALT-0198	æ	ALT-0230
É	ALT-0201	é	ALT-0233
Í	ALT-0205	í	ALT-0237
Ð	ALT-0208	ð	ALT-0240
Ó	ALT-0211	ó	ALT-0243
Ö	ALT-0214	ö	ALT-0246
Ú	ALT-0218	ú	ALT-0250
Ý	ALT-0221	ý	ALT-0253
Þ	ALT-0222	þ	ALT-0254

Hálfðan Helgason - Reykjavík - Iceland
halfdan@itn.is

Icelandic (Íslenska)

Icelandic is a Northern Germanic language with about 300,000 speakers in Iceland (*Ísland*), Canada (*Kanada*) and the USA (*Bandaríki Norður-Ameríku*). Icelandic is the closest of the Northern Germanic languages to Old Norse and it is possible for Icelandic speakers to read the Old Norse sagas in the original without too much difficulty.

The first permanent settlement in Iceland was established by Vikings from Norway and Celts from the British Isles in 870 AD. The main language of the settlers was Old Norse or the *Danish* language). A number of great literary works - the sagas - were written by Icelanders during the 12th and 13th centuries. These sagas, many of which were the work of unknown authors, were written in a language very much like Old Norse. The greatest known authors from this period were Ari the Learned (1068-1148) and Snorri Sturlson (1179-1241).

From 1262 until the 15th century, Iceland was governed by Norway, then the Danes took over. During the periods of Norwegian and Danish rule, Norwegian and Danish were used in Iceland, to some extent.

In 1944 Iceland gained its independence and Icelandic was revived as an official and literary language. Today there is a flourishing publishing industry in Iceland and Icelanders are probably the keenest readers and writers in the world.

Icelandic alphabet (íslenska stafrófið)

A a Á á B b D d Ð ð E e É é F f G g H h I i
a á bé dé eð e jé eff ge há i
Í í J j K k L l M m N n Ó ó P p R r S s
í joð ká ell emm enn o ó pé err ess
T t U u Ú ú V v X x Y y Ý ý Þ þ Æ æ Ö ö
té u ú vaff ex ufsilon y ufsilon ý þorn æ ö

The letters C (se), Q (kú) and W (tvöfalt vaff) are also used but only in foreign loanwords. The letter Z (seta) is no longer used in Icelandic, except in the newspaper *Morgunblaðið*

Icelandic Pronunciation

Vowels & diphthongs

a	á	au	e	é	ei/ey	i	í
[a/a:]	[au/au:]	[øɥ]	[ɛ/ɛ:]	[jɛ/jɛ:]	[ei/ei:]	[i/i:]	[i/i:]
o	ó	u	ú	y	ý	æ	ö
[ɔ/ɔ:]	[ou/ou:]	[y/y:]	[u/u:]	[ɪ/ɪ:]	[ɪ/ɪ:]	[ai/ai:]	[œ/œ:]

Consonants

b	d	ð	f	g	gj	h	hj	hn	j
[p]	[t]	[ð]	[f/v]	[k/ɣ]	[c]	[h]	[ç]	[ŋj/ŋ]	[j]
k	kj	kk	l	ll	m	n	ng	p	pp
[kʰ/kj]	[kj/c/cʰ]	[ʰkj/ʰk]	[l/ɹ]	[tɹ]	[m/mŋ]	[n/ŋ]	[ŋ/ŋʰ]	[p/pʰ]	[ʰp]
r	rl	s	t	tl	tt	þ	v		
[r/ɹ]	[tɹ]	[s]	[t/tʰ]	[ʰtɹ]	[ʰt]	[θ]	[v]		

Notes

- Stressed vowels are long:
- in one-syllable words where the vowel is word-final;

- before a single consonant;
- before the consonant clusters pr, tr, kr, sr, pj, tj, sj, tv or kv
- Elsewhere stressed vowels are short
- Unstressed vowels are always short
- nn = [tn] after an accented vowel or a diphthong

Sample text in Icelandic

Hver maður er borinn frjál og jafn öðrum að virðingu og réttindum. Menn eru gæddir vitsmunum og samvisku, og ber þeim að breyta bróðurlega hverjum við annan.

[A recording of this text by Marc Volhardt](#)

[A recording of this text by Alexander Jarl](#)

[A recording of this text by Stefan Steinsson](#)

Translation

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

(Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/icelandic.htm> for alphabet, pronunciation information and a link to a recording of a sentence in Icelandic.

Icelandic girl fights for right to her own name

Name isn't on Iceland's list of 1,853 female names that fit grammar and pronunciation rules

The Associated Press

Posted: Jan 3, 2013 9:49 AM ET



Blaer Bjarkardottir, 15, left, seen with her mother, Bjork Eidsdottir, in Reykjavik, is bringing legal action against the Icelandic government to allow her to use her name, which is not on the list of 1,853 government-approved female names. (Anna Andersen/Associated Press)

Call her the girl with no name.

A 15-year-old is suing the Icelandic state for the right to legally use the name given to her by her mother. The problem? Blaer, which means light breeze in Icelandic, is not on a list approved by the government.

'They can allow Elvis, but not Blaer. It's ridiculous.'—*Blaer, 15-year-old Icelandic girl*

"I want to keep it so bad because it's so beautiful," Blaer told Carol Off from CBC Radio's *As it Happens*.

Like a handful of other countries, including Germany and Denmark, Iceland has official rules about what a baby can be named. In a country comfortable with a firm state role, most people don't question the Personal Names Register, a list of 1,712 male names and 1,853 female names that fit Icelandic grammar and pronunciation rules and that officials maintain will protect children from embarrassment. Parents can take from the list or apply to a special committee that has the power to say yea or nay.

In Blaer's case, her mother said she learned the name wasn't on the register only after the priest who baptized the child later informed her he had mistakenly allowed it.

"I had no idea that the name wasn't on the list, the famous list of names that you can choose from," said Bjork Eidsdottir, adding she knew a Blaer whose name was accepted in 1973. This time, the panel turned it down on the grounds that the word Blaer takes a masculine article, despite the fact that it was used for a female character in a novel by Iceland's revered Nobel Prize-winning author Halldor Laxness.

Blaer said she loves her name, because it comes from the famous Icelandic writer's book. The book is about a young boy who is an accomplished pianist, she said, but forgets everything when he meets the beautiful Blaer.

Given names are even more significant in tiny Iceland than in many other countries: Everyone is listed in the phone book by their first names. Surnames are based on a parent's given name. Even the president, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, is addressed simply as Olafur.

Blaer is identified as "Stulka" — or "girl" — on all her official documents, which has led to years of frustration as she has had to explain the whole story at the bank, renewing her passport and dealing with the country's bureaucracy.

First legal challenge

Her mother is hoping that will change with her suit, the first time someone has challenged a names committee decision in court.

"It's pretty scary," said Blaer, referring to being a teenager challenging the government.

Though the law has become more relaxed in recent years — with the name Elvis permitted, inspired by the charismatic rock and roll icon whose name fits Icelandic guidelines — choices like Cara, Carolina, Cesil, and Christa have been rejected outright because the letter "c" is not part of Iceland's 32-letter alphabet.

"They can allow Elvis, but not Blaer," she said. "It's ridiculous."

"The law is pretty straightforward so in many cases it's clearly going to be a yes or a no," said Augusta Thorbergdottir, the head of the committee, a panel of three people appointed by the government to a four-year term.

Other cases are more subjective.

"What one person finds beautiful, another person may find ugly," she acknowledged. She pointed to "Satania" as one unacceptable case because it was deemed too close to "Satan."

The board also has veto power over people who want to change their names later in life, rejecting, for instance, middle names like Zeppelin and X.

When the artist Birgir Orn Thoroddsen applied to have his name legally changed to Curver, which he had used in one form or another since age 15, he said he knew full well the committee would reject his application.

"I was inspired by Prince who changed his name to The Artist Formerly Known As Prince and Puff Daddy who changed his to P. Diddy and then Diddy with seemingly little thought or criticism," he said. "I applied to the committee, but of course I got the 'No' that I expected."

On his thirtieth birthday, he bought a full-page advertisement that read, "From February 1, 2006, I hereby change my name to Curver Thoroddsen. I ask the nation, my friends and colleagues to respect my decision."

"I can understand a clause to protect children from being named something like 'Dog poo,' but it is strange that an adult cannot change his name to what he truly wants," he said.

Blaer said she understands wanting to protect children from having names that may subject them to bullying, but she never hears anything negative about her name.

"Everybody thinks it's so normal," she said.

Thoroddsen is keeping his protest to the media. But Eidsdottir says she is prepared to take her case all the way to the country's Supreme Court if a court doesn't overturn the commission decision on Jan. 25.

"So many strange names have been allowed, which makes this even more frustrating because Blaer is a perfectly Icelandic name," Eidsdottir said. "It seems like a basic human right to be able to name your child what you want, especially if it doesn't harm your child in any way."

Blaer said her lawyer is optimistic about the case — and he has told her he's not frequently optimistic.

"I am optimistic," she said. "But I don't want to be."

"Sagas" Portray Iceland's Viking History

Stefan Lovgren
for National Geographic News

May 7, 2004

Filled with larger-than-life heroes and epic battles, they may be the most accessible of all medieval literature and a source of inspiration to classic authors like J.R.R. Tolkien.

Yet many people have never heard of the Icelandic sagas.

Written by unknown authors in Iceland in the 13th and 14th centuries, the sagas contain 40 narratives, describing the life of Icelanders in the Viking age immediately before and after the year 1000. This was a time when they abandoned ancient gods and adopted Christianity.

The early Icelanders also traveled westwards, culminating in what many believe is the true first voyage by a European to North America: Leif Eiriksson's expedition, described in the sagas as having taken place a thousand years ago.

Although the Vikings themselves did not write the Icelandic sagas—the stories were constructed centuries after the end of the Viking age—the sagas may provide the most detailed accounts of Viking life.

Today the sagas are part of Iceland's daily consciousness, and they are celebrated both for their historical record and their narrative artistry.

"The sagas of Icelanders, being renowned as outstanding masterpieces of literature, rank with the world's greatest literary treasures, such as the epics of Homer, the Greek tragedy, and the plays of William Shakespeare," said Alma Gudmundsdottir, curator of the Icelandic Saga Center in Hvolsvöllur, a village in southern Iceland.

Fact and Fantasy

Iceland has no pre-historic era. It was not settled until around A.D. 900, when the Scandinavians arrived in search of new farmland. Shortly after, an influx of people from the British Isles brought Celtic influences to Iceland, though the language remained predominantly Nordic. Before long, the Icelanders saw themselves as a separate nation.

The only written monuments of the Vikings themselves are runic inscriptions, which are often brief and laconic, and not very informative. British and French clergy, who were attacked by the Vikings, described the raiders as savages.

The sagas, on the other hand, portray the settlers in a favorable light. A blend of fact and fantasy, their actions span the whole world known to the Vikings, but center on the unique settler society they founded in Iceland.

Steeped in Viking lore, the "heroic sagas," which gained popularity in Europe in the 19th century, chronicle the actions of powerful Viking warriors. Honor, glory, and revenge are central features in these narratives.

But the stories of Viking exploits are just one part of medieval Icelandic literature. The "family sagas" involve ordinary people, though the central characters even then tend to come from the ruling class.

"The vast majority of the settlers were farmers, who wished to live in peace, free from pirates and taxation by kings in their homes," said Arni Björnsson, the former head of the ethnological department of the National Museum in Reykjavik and an expert on the sagas. "In the Middle Ages, Icelandic society was highly unusual. The main class of society comprised independent farmers, rich or poor, and there was no king, no government, no hereditary aristocracy and no taxes."

Wealthy Farmers

A distinctive characteristic of the sagas is the objective narrative approach. Often the sagas describe events in great detail, including what was said by those involved. But they do not describe their inner life. Instead, the characters of the sagas reveal themselves through their words and actions.

"This narrative technique was unknown in the literature of other countries, until the great European novel of the 19th century," Gudmundsdottir said.

The art of writing arrived in Iceland with the Christian Church in the 11th century. Most priests were employees of wealthy farmers, who were interested in writing both for practical purposes and for entertainment. They did not understand Latin, the language of the learned at the time, so most books came to be written in the Icelandic vernacular.

"The difference in social status between farmers in Iceland and in Europe appear to be the main reason for Iceland's unique medieval saga tradition," Björnsson said. "Another reason for the sagas might be that [in a young country] there was a need to preserve the story of how Iceland was settled."

At the Icelandic Saga Center in Hvolsvöllur, which was established in 1997, visitors learn about the creation of a parliament in 930; about the conversion to Christianity; and the strong role of the women in medieval Iceland.

The exhibition focuses on Njal's saga, or the story of Burnt Njal, perhaps the greatest and best known of the Icelandic sagas. The epic story of a 50-year-old blood feud, Njal's saga features memorable characters like Gunnar Hamundarson, a brave and noble hero.

Guided tours from the Saga Center take visitors to the places of special historical interest in Njal's saga.

Archaeological Support

Historians in the 19th century accepted the sagas as more or less accurate accounts, except where they clearly ventured into mythology and fantasy. But in the 20th century many historians began looking at the sagas more critically. Some dismissed them as fiction, and would not accept that they had any historical value at all.

Today, many historians view the sagas as a romanticized but crucial piece of history. Some say they are basically family stories relating the ancestry of individual characters.

"But archaeology is actually proving that a lot of these stories have a good basis in fact, so much so that [archaeologist] Helge Ingstad could use them to find the L'Anse aux Meadows site," the archeological site in Newfoundland believed to have been a Viking settlement around in the 11th century, said William Fitzhugh, the director of the Arctic Studies Center at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. and the curator of a major Viking exhibit at the museum in 2000.

Among Icelanders, the sagas remain enormously popular.

"Excerpts from [the sagas] are part of our curriculum in primary school," Björnsson said. "Pagan gods ... were like our personal buddies, similar to Tarzan or Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*."

For links to related sites and stories about Iceland, the Vikings, and the Icelandic sagas, please scroll to the bottom of the page.

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“Sagas’ Portray Iceland’s Viking History” Question and Response sheet

For each question below, please write out a complete sentence response. Most answers will be found within the reading, but some may ask your opinion. Try to give a well-reasoned, logical response based upon what you’ve read and heard on this topic.

1. Who wrote the Icelandic sagas, and when? Authors unknown; 13th, 14th centuries

2. The sagas provided detailed accounts of whose lives? Vikings

3. When the article says “Iceland has no pre-historic era,” what do you think that means? You may discuss this with your group to see what others think.
Answers may vary (basically pre-history is before writing, so they may respond that it is a young country because the first settlers could write, even if it was only in runes)

4. Who are the main characters of the heroic sagas and what main features are given?
Powerful Viking warriors; honor, glory, revenge

5. Why do you think the stories are told? Answers will vary

6. Who did the “family sagas” center around? Ordinary people (could say ruling class)

7. What was highly unusual about Icelandic society? How do you think this compared to early colonial times in places like the United States? Main class was independent farmers, no king, no govt, no aristocracy, no taxes

8. Who brought writing to Iceland, and why was it considered important by regular people? The Christian church; for practical purposes and entertainment

9. Two reasons are given for why the sagas may have been written. Name one of them. Difference in social status between farmers in Iceland and I Europe; a need to preserve the story of how Iceland was settled

10. What do archaeologists and historians (just pick one group) think about the sagas? Some thing they helped find the site in Newfoundland that may have been a Viking settlement, but historians don’t really thing they have valid facts

“Sagas’ Portray Iceland’s Viking History” Question and Response sheet

For each question below, please write out a complete sentence response. Most answers will be found within the reading, but some may ask your opinion. Try to give a well-reasoned, logical response based upon what you’ve read and heard on this topic.

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2. The sagas provided detailed accounts of whose lives?

3. When the article says “Iceland has no pre-historic era,” what do you think that means? You may discuss this with your group to see what others think.

4. Who are the main characters of the heroic sagas and what main features are given?

5. Why do you think the stories are told?

6. Who did the “family sagas” center around?

7. What was highly unusual about Icelandic society? How do you think this compared to early colonial times in places like the United States?

8. Who brought writing to Iceland, and why was it considered important by regular people?

9. Two reasons are given for why the sagas may have been written. Name one of them.

10. What do archaeologists and historians (just pick one group) think about the sagas?

“Custom & Tradition”

From *Xenophobe's Guide to the Icelanders* by Richard Sale
e-book, Xenophobe's Guides, Oval Projects 2011.

Sons and dottirs

The majority of Icelandic Christian names are as old as the sagas. There you find Harald of the Grey Cape and Bork Blue Tooth Beard. Today it is possible to have a drink with Stone, son of Wolf (Stein Ulfsson) , or with Eagle, son of Bear (Orn Bjornsson). And what is more, it is possible to do so without having your head cleaved in twain and your wife broached.

Icelanders take great pride in being the only Viking country to maintain patronyms, the use of the father's given name as the child's surname. The usage produces the oddity of a standard family of father, mother, son and daughter having four different surnames. If Petur, the son of Bjorn, married Gudrun, daughter of Vilhjalmur, and they have two children, Marta and Einar, at a European hotel the family will sign in as Petur Bjornsson, Gudrun Vilhjaldottir, Marta Petursdottir and Einar Petursson. Hotel receptionists have been known to weep.

The use of patronyms has the potential to make the telephone directory one of the most difficult books in the world to follow. To counter the problem, it lists everybody by both Christian and surnames. But this is only a partial solution as there is a limited number of Christian names so there are always several people with the same names. So here the Icelanders add the profession of the person. Only then is the address given. Almost as an afterthought the telephone number is listed, although by the time they have waded through all the earlier information most folk have forgotten why they wanted to make the call.

“Language & Ideas”

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The Dane, Rasmus Christian Rask, claimed in the early 19th century that he had learned Icelandic in order to be able to think. This was a wonderful, some would even say moving, compliment. But he also predicted that Icelandic would be dead in 100 years, killed off by Danish, the language of the island's rulers. The rulers did not ban Icelandic (merely ignored it) and the language survived. Danish was the language of commerce and government. It was also the language of snobbery, used by the Icelandic 'gentry'. It is ironic that the Icelanders' dislike of pretension and the working man's dislike of the upper class saved the language from extinction.

Similar predictions are now being made about the death of Icelandic at the hands of English. The particular problem is the number of English-speakers who come to Iceland to study, drawn by its uniqueness. If a class has ten Icelanders and one non-Icelandic-speaking foreigner then the lecture will be given in English. The Icelanders have a term for this – 'Ignorance is Strength' – which illuminates their concern for their language.

To the list of obsessions, another could have been added – Icelandic. Icelandic is an exotic language based on an alphabet with 33 letters, the extra ones being extremely picturesque and completely unpronounceable. A poem in Icelandic by William Jon Holm entitled *The Icelandic Language*, [sic] expresses it thus:

In an airconditioned room you cannot understand the grammar of this language,
The whirring machine drowns out the soft vowels,
But you can hear these vowels in the mountain wind
And in heavy seas breaking over the hull of a small boat.
Old ladies can wind their long hair in this language
And can hum, and knit, and make pancakes.
But you cannot have a cocktail party in this language
And say witty things standing up with a drink in your hand.
You must sit down to speak this language,
It is so heavy you can't be polite or chatter in it.
For once you have begun a sentence, the whole course of your life is laid out before you,
Every foolish mistake is clear, every failure, every grief.
Moving around the inflections from case to case and gender to gender,
The vowels changing and darkening, the consonants softening on the tongue
Till they are the sound of a gull's wings fluttering
As he flew out of the wake of a small boat drifting out to open water.

Most Icelanders are as proud of their language as they are of their country and protect it fiercely from what they view as external invasion. Committees set up for its protection go to great lengths to avoid absorbing foreign words, and when a new concept or invention is imported into Iceland, set about producing an Icelandic equivalent. The sagas are

scoured for a word no longer in common usage that can be pressed into service. To avoid 'telephone' the word *simi* was dredged up, an ancient word for a thread. 'Satellite' – *gervitungl* – was tricky, but was manufactured from the words for 'artificial' and 'moon'. Television is *sjonvarp*, combining the words for seeing and casting out (as in fishing), while computer combines *tala* – the word for number – and *volva* – soothsayer or prophetess – to create *tolva*. Despite the concocted nature of these words and the Icelanders' love of the very latest technology, they are readily accepted and used by everyone.

Very occasionally, something comes along that creates a real problem: what to do, for instance, with 'inter-continental ballistic missile'? The sagas did not offer a word for 'spear thrown from a great distance' so a new one had to be made up which means 'long distance fiery flying thing'. Most Icelanders say ICBM. To the concern of older folk the young seem more willing to assimilate words from other languages, chiefly English, again raising the fear that a language with such a small number of users is under threat.

No Icelandic words inhabit the international lexicon, though the Icelanders do lay claim to several of Viking origin that have found their way into English. Best of all they like *berserk*, probably deriving from 'bear-skin' and used as a term for warriors who fought with the strength of ten men and were immune to pain.....