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Mythic Iceland

Sample file

by Pedro Ziviani

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ISLANDIA.

Septentrio.

Occidens.

ILLYSTRISS.AC POTENTISS.
REGI FREDERICO II DANIAE,
NORVEGIAE, SLAVORVM GO-
THORVAQVE REGI ETC PRIN-
CIPi SVO CLEMENTISSIMO
ANDREAS VELLEIVS
DESCRIBEB.ET DEDICABAT.

Meridies



INTRODUCTION

*On the west of Norway comes the island called Iceland, with the mighty ocean washing round it:
a land very squalid to dwell in, but noteworthy for marvels, both strange
occurrences and objects that pass belief.*

— *The Danish History*, by Saxo
Grammaticus, 12th Century



This book aims to help gamers bring to life the world of the Icelandic Sagas and fairy tales.

The Nordic and Celtic peoples who settled Iceland in the 9th century came from lands with rich traditions of folklore, where the mythical and supernatural were part of daily life. They found an island of striking beauty, with inland valleys, richly grassed and forested lowlands, massive glaciers and impressive volcanic mountain ranges. They also found the land to be teeming with spirits of nature and mythic creatures.

Iceland is unique in many ways. Even though it is roughly the size of England (103,000 square kilometers or 39,768 square miles), and bigger than Ireland, its geographic isolation meant that it was uninhabited until the Middle Ages. Being a geologically young island, it features volcanoes, earthquakes, and geysers. There are no native animals apart from the arctic fox and birds. The first settlers arrived fleeing high taxes imposed by the king of Norway, and built a unique form of government where no one man would rule the land and its people, but rather an assembly of free men would deal of matters of government and law. It is the only country in Medieval Europe to be ruled not by a king, but by law.

An important aspect of Icelandic culture, one that has defined it at a later age, is the strong literary tradition found in Iceland in the Middle Ages. This small country has produced the biggest body of medieval literature anywhere in Northern Europe — not bad going for an isolated island with a population numbering only few tens of thousands. Most important among those writings are the Sagas and the Eddas. The Sagas were written in the thir-

teenth and fourteenth centuries from stories passed down the generations about brave men, mostly living in the years between 850 and 1050, who went abroad in search of fortune as Vikings and who, at the same time, built in Iceland a unique system of democratic self-government. These men also fought and died in Iceland in the many inter-family feuds. Other important works of Icelandic Medieval literature are the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*, which tell stories about the Nordic gods and myths of pagan times, and are the main source for what we know today about these subjects.

Mythic Iceland is based on the period described by the Icelandic Sagas, a period full of adventure and wonder. The Iceland described in this book presents the common beliefs of Viking-Age Icelandic people as true, including the myths and fairy-tales they believed in.

Welcome to *Mythic Iceland*, land of myth and adventure.

Sagas of Icelanders - Íslendingasögur

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, anonymous Icelandic writers produced remarkable works of literature describing events mainly taking place in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Written as a unique blend of historical information and fantastic story-telling, literary endeavor and family pride, these prose narratives are collectively known



as *Íslendingasögur*, “Sagas of Icelanders” — also frequently referred to in English as “Family Sagas.”

The Icelandic word “saga” means simply “a story,” long or short, old or new, true or fictitious. In this book, whenever the word “Saga” is used, however, it is as a short form of *Íslendingasögur*.

While Saga heroes may travel to foreign lands, the main action is centered in Iceland and is rooted in the ways that men feuded and resolved their conflicts, sometimes in bloody battles, and other times through Iceland’s unique judicial system.

There are some forty or so of these Sagas, and the aspiring gamemaster of a *Mythic Iceland* campaign is encouraged to read at least a few of them to get a better understanding of the flavor and pace of those stories. At the very least, it is recommended that the GM is familiar with *Njáls Saga* and *Egils Saga*.



On the Word *Viking*

The early Icelanders themselves used the word “Viking,” but they did not employ it in an ethnic sense, as it is popularly done in modern times. Almost surely they would have understood the concept of a “Viking Age,” but to them the idea that Nordic society was a “Viking Society” would have been a misnomer. Throughout the Nordic world, a *vikingur* (pl. *vikingar*) meant a pirate or freebooter, and *Vikingar* were men who grouped together in

bands to raid from boats. The term applied both to those who honorably (in Norse eyes) sailed across the sea to raid and to those who robbed neighbors closer to home. It was common to say that one was to “go viking,” meaning to go abroad to raid towns and monasteries.

The word “Viking” is used in this book to indicate its original meaning as explained above. The term “Viking Age” is used to describe the time roughly corresponding to the period described in the best-known Icelandic Sagas, from the year 850 to around 1050.

Mythic or Historical?

This book is written to provide players with the experience of living and adventuring in the Iceland described in the Sagas and in the Icelandic fairy-tales.

In mythic Iceland, all the creatures of myth and all the magical aspects of life, which the early Icelanders believed in, really do exist, and they play a major role in people’s life. The elves, or hidden folk, exist hidden from the eyes of the common folk, but sometimes meddle in their affairs. Those travelling through the highlands risk being



WELCOME TO VIKING AGE ICELAND, LAND OF MYTH AND ADVENTURE!



Language

Names of people, places and texts are presented here in the Icelandic nominative case form and using the letters of the modern Icelandic alphabet. You will find in this book names such as Snæbjörn, Njál, Guðrún and Óðinn, rather than Snaebjorn, Njal, Gudrun, and Odin.

In instances where the syntax of Old Norse and modern Icelandic words diverge, the modern Icelandic syntax has been chosen. One example is the name Leifur, which used to be written as Leifr in Old Norse, and as Leifur in Modern Icelandic — in this book you will find the latter. This choice is made because modern Icelandic syntax is easier for the uninitiated reader to pronounce, and also because the author cannot claim to be an expert in Old Norse linguistics.

The special letters of the Icelandic alphabet are easy to learn. The table below shows the sounds of Icelandic special letters and letter combinations.

Icelandic Alphabet

A	Á	B	D	Ð	E	É	F	G	H	I	Í	J	K	L	M
N	O	Ó	P	R	S	T	U	Ú	V	X	Y	Ý	Þ	Æ	Ö
a	á	b	d	ð	e	é	f	g	h	i	í	j	k	l	m
n	o	ó	p	r	s	t	u	ú	v	x	y	ý	þ	æ	ö

Special Vowels

Letter	Phonetic (IPA)	Sound
á	[aʊ]	like “ou” in “house”
é	[je]	like “ye” in “yet”
í	[i]	like “ee” as in “peel”
ó	[ou]	like “o” in “sole”
ú	[u]	like “oo” in “moon”
ý	[ʏfɪlɔn i]	like “ee” in “feet”
æ	[æ]	like “i” in “fight”
ö	[oe]	like “ur” in “urgent”

Special Consonants

Letter	Phonetic (IPA)	Sound
ð	[eð]	like “th” in “the”
j	[jɔð]	like “y” in “yes”
þ	[θɔrɪ]	like “th” as in “thing”

Special Combinations

Letter	Phonetic (IPA)	Sound
au	[oey]	like the vowel in french “feuille,” similar to “oy” in “boy”
ey, ei	[ei]	like “a” in “pale”
fn	[mt]	like bn
hv	[xv]	like “qu” in “quick”
ll	[tl]	like “ttl” in “settle”

attacked by trolls, and often curses and spells are laid on neighbors and enemies. That doesn’t mean, however, that these fantastic elements should always be the central points of your adventures. There is plenty of potential for conflict among the

Icelanders themselves, without the need of the supernatural to come to the foreground of your stories. Your adventures don’t always have to involve elves, trolls and magic.





A BURNING LAKE AND VOLCANO, DEPICTED BY OLAUS MAGNUS IN *History of the Nordic Peoples*, 1555

If you would rather like to base your mythic Iceland adventures on a historical view of Viking Age Iceland, without any magic or mythical creatures, this book is written with that in mind. At the end of many of the chapters, guidance can be found on how to use that chapter's information without mythical aspects.

Viking Age Iceland, and the wider Viking world, is rife with adventures, feuds, conflicts, and exploration to fuel many strictly historical adventures as well as those including elements from Icelandic fairy-tales.

What Time Period Does This Book Cover?

Mythic Iceland focuses in the period starting in the year 930, when the first session of the Icelandic National Assembly was held, to the year 1050, when the first Christian Bishop of Iceland was chosen. This is the so-called "Icelandic Pagan Commonwealth Period."

However, those looking to base their campaigns in the earlier Settlement Age, or in the later Christian Age up to the Icelandic civil war years of the mid-13th century, will also find valuable information on this book that remains mostly accurate for the extended time period. Specific information regarding playing in those other eras can be found on the chapter **Running a Game of Mythic Iceland**.

Historical Accuracy

This book does not try to be historically accurate in every aspect. This is not a course-book on Icelandic history by any means. In addition to the inclusion of magic and supernatural creatures, there are other elements in the mythic Iceland setting, which do not fit a strictly historical view of the period.

Enjoy *Mythic Iceland* as a fantasy setting with its roots in how Viking Age Icelanders saw themselves and the world around them. Feel free to make *Mythic Iceland* your own, changing or removing any elements in any way you like.

I hope you have as much fun gaming in the world of *Mythic Iceland* as I had writing this book.

History of Mythic Iceland



Many men say that writing about the settlement is unnecessary. But it seems to me that we would be better able to answer foreigners who censure us for our descent from scoundrels and slaves if we knew our true origins for certain. Similarly, for those men who want to know old lore or to reckon genealogies, it is better to begin at the beginning rather than to jump right into the middle. And of course all wise people want to know about the beginnings of their settlement and of their own families.

— *The Book of Settlements*, Iceland, 13th century

Mythic Times

*Of old was the age when Ýmir lived;
Sea nor cool waves nor sand there were;
Earth had not been, nor heaven above,
But a yawning gap, and grass nowhere.*

— *Poetic Edda*

In the beginning, before the heaven and earth and the sea were created, the great abyss Ginnungagap (“yawning abyss”) was without form and void. In the northern region of that huge emptiness was a realm called Niflheimur (“Mist World”), packed with ice. In the south, there was Múspellsheimur (“Flame World”), a region that flickered with dancing flames. In the middle of Ginnungagap, where

the icy rivers that flowed from Niflheimur met the warm breath drifting north from Múspellsheimur, thawing drops appeared. From those drops was formed Ýmir, the first of the race of frost giants. Ýmir slept, falling into a sweat. Under his left arm there grew a couple, male and female giants.

As more of the ice in Ginnungagap melted, it became a cow called Auðhumla from whose udders ran four rivers of milk that fed Ýmir. After one day of licking salty ice blocks, the cow freed a man’s hair from the ice. After two days, his head appeared. On the third day the whole man was released from the ice. The man’s name was Buri, and he had a son named Borr. Borr married Bestla, the daughter of a giant, with whom he had three sons. Óðinn was the first, Vili the second, and Vé the third.

The sons of Borr grew to hate the brutal frost giants. At last they attacked Ýmir and killed him.

From the body of Ýmir the brothers made the world. They shaped the earth from his flesh, the mountains and rocks from his bones, and the seas from his blood. The skull of Ýmir was raised by the three brothers to make the sky, placed so that each of its four corners would touch the ends of the earth. The gods called this world Miðgarður.

From the flesh of Ýmir magical creatures appeared, crawling out over the earth. Those were the Elves, Trolls, and other mythical creatures both big and small.

The Gods gave the Elves a separate world for them to live in, shaped to have the same lands and seas as Miðgarður, but where magic forces remained strong and wild. They called that world Álfheimur (“World of the Elves”).



Mythic Iceland is Created

When Miðgarður was still young, it was populated by great mythical creatures. One of the biggest and most powerful of those was the great dragon Svafnir, a gigantic fire-breathing beast that lived in the very bowels of Miðgarður, swimming in the molted rock.

One day, the dragon Svafnir decided to break out of the underground sea of molten lava. Again fly the skies of Miðgarður. His bursting out of the underworld was so violent that an enormous quantity of lava poured out behind him from the bottom of the ocean. So much lava flowed out to the surface that a large island was created in the northern sea.

The stone and the lava were charged with the inner magical energies of the young world of Miðgarður, and when they reached the surface they solidified and created an island rich in magic and mythical forces.

Svafnir flew around the whole of the world, but he found no better place to live than in that island formed in the very spot where he had burst out of the crust of the world. The lava had now solidified, but a great volcano still raged on that island. Svafnir entered the volcano and dove into the

lava. The dragon swam around in the molten rock under the island, forcing changes in the surface, molding the land to its like.

The violence of the great dragon's arrival to the surface of Miðgarður was so immense that it caused the very branches of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, to shake and its branches to shift position. With the new alignment of the worlds, now Svafnir's island now had pathways to other worlds, and among those worlds were Ásgarður, the home of the gods, and Álfheimur, the world of the elves.

The god Óðinn was enraged by the dragon's actions, and by the fact that his home world of Ásgarður was now accessible from Miðgarður by beings other than the gods. Óðinn saddled his eight-legged horse Sleipnir and rode down to Miðgarður intended on destroying this new island and its portals to the other worlds.

The great dragon learned from the serpents that Óðinn was very angry, and that he was coming to destroy his chosen home, his island. He knew that by himself he was no match for Óðinn.

Svafnir flew north and met with Hrym, the chief of the frost giants of the North. He asked Hrym's help in fighting Óðinn. The ice giant



MYTHIC ICELAND IS CREATED



agreed, with the condition that if they were victorious he could then bring his family of giants to live with him in Svafnir's magical island. The dragon then flew west, where he spoke to the mighty giant eagle Vindsvall, who also agreed to help the dragon fight Óðinn as long as it too could use the island as its home. Lastly, Svafnir flew south and spoke with the Giant Grey Bull, and it too agreed to help Svafnir in the battle for his island.

When Óðinn arrived in Miðgarður and rode his horse in the direction of the island, Svafnir roared a battle cry that summoned all mythical creatures on the island to prepare for a mighty battle. Óðinn was not afraid. The ice giant Hrym froze the north seas, created a fierce ice storm and readied his feared clan of giants for battle. Still, Óðinn was not afraid and rode on across the skies. Approaching the magical island, he saw the gigantic eagle Vindsvall and all its family of giant birds soaring into the sky over the island, with wings so long that they touched the mountains to each side of the fjord. Still, Óðinn was not afraid. Then the ground shook with a great earthquake caused by the hooves of the giant grey bull, anxious for battle. Seeing the dragon, the giant eagle, the ice giant and the giant grey bull united against him, Óðinn wisely decided to propose to the powerful land spirits that they could guard the island itself and the gates on the island that lead to Ásgarður and Álfheimur, for what worried him was that such gateways would be left unprotected.

The dragon Svafnir took home in the underground rivers of molten rock under the island. The great volcano Hekla is Svafnir's passage to the surface. An eruption always follows the dragon's wake, on the rare occasions when he visits the surface world. The ice giant and his clans live in the highlands in the center of the island. Once a year, in the winter, the ice giant chief walks around the island bringing blizzards and strong winds. The giant eagle protects the skies over the island. The Bull walks among the high mountains of the highlands.

This is the story of how mythic Iceland was created, how it became such a magical place, and how it came to be guarded by the Landvættir, the Land Spirits.



THE GUARDIANS OF MYTHIC ICELAND AND OF THE GATEWAYS BETWEEN WORLDS

The Creation of Man

The sons of Borr were walking along the sea coast, when they found two trees, and took up the trees and shaped men of them: the first gave them spirit and life; the second, wit and feeling; the third, form, speech, hearing, and sight. They gave them clothing and names: the male was called Askur, and the female Embla, and of them was mankind begotten, which received a dwelling-place under Miðgarður.

— Prose Edda, by Snorri Sturluson, Iceland, 13th century