

ICELAND'S TRUE NORTH

It was not supposed to be. It was written in stone, so we all thought, or perhaps even *on* stone, or somehow chiseled in Runic. In our southerly cognitive map, Iceland was a windy, rock-hewn place somewhere near the north Atlantic or the Arctic Circle. The island was inhabited by a sturdy, independent, egalitarian, and highly educated folk whose ancestors invented the Althing, the first democratic European parliamentary mechanism. And they were accustomed to surviving well amidst the remnants of volcanic activity and in icy temperatures in habitats fueled by local underground, geothermal energy sources. Although in the process of diversifying its economy, Iceland was always one of the world's most successful navigator of ocean fishing stocks, replete with a booming mariculture based on the harvesting of redfish, herring, cod, and haddock. There was, in addition, its welcome Atlantic salmon whose contribution to the New York Area's Sunday breakfast table of smoked salmon, bagels, and cream cheese, often appeared in place of the Pacific Northwest Coast's customary varieties.

What the island was not supposed to be was approaching bankruptcy, its householders still calm but teetering on the edge of mounting, seemingly unending indebtedness largely brought about by mortgages derived from the EU's euro currency all the while the Krona shrunk in value and local banks, caught in a credit crunch, ceased lending to both individuals and businesses. The island nation was also not supposed to be one that turned a grudging, disaffected eye eastward towards Russia for a \$4 billion loan, or despite prior disputes over fishing rights with other countries to the south during the 1950's and 1970's, a contemporary nation of 300,000 that froze customers' accounts in its own banks that had become attractive and entrenched abroad. (1)

Iceland, in short, was not supposed to be so integrated into the rest of the world that its own actions would react on themselves and end up getting caught in a financial meltdown that traditionally pertained to others not securely anchored to the EU's official Northern Periphery Programme, 2007-2013. Yet facing a new reality, the island may now turn to the International Monetary Fund for aid and rescue. As one local professor stated in light of declining national options: our country seems increasingly powerless; the "Icelandic Krona is history." (2)

It is history itself that reminds us that Iceland has not always emerged as a meager guest in somebody else's failing multinational club. Land of the treasured Icelandic Sagas, it was a critical part of the age of Viking expansionism that moved people and goods throughout less northerly nations and therefore brought the world of the 10th to the 12th century together in ways unknown before the advent of the sturdy longboat, or the less than felicitous combination of plunderer, trader, and raider. Artifactual evidence has it that Viking art, crafts, architecture, and coins, made their appearance in Russia as early as the 10th century. Similar coinage existed in the New World and speaks to trade practices with the Mandan-Hidatsa, a Native American tribe the Vikings were known to have otherwise kept at a cultural arms' length. (3) Viking settlements abound along the Volga, throughout the UK, as well as in and among the cities of the Baltic Sea States. Added to these is the settlement of L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, a vital testimony to the fact that the age of Nordic geopolitical enlargement cascaded decisively westward as well, and had occurred at least 500 years before the Columbian Voyages of Discovery.

The Sagas themselves were written more than 2 centuries after this globalizing impact and thus continue to remain open to clarification. This fact, however, has only allowed a creative addition to the modern Icelandic cognitive map, namely a quest to locate the Sagas' famous Vinland settlement in the New World, in order to reinforce the suggestion that the Nordic discovery of North America predates, and thus preempts, Columbus' historic landing in San Salvador. Much now rests not on trade, coinage, or other real evidence of ancient financial exchanges or practices, but rather on etymological interpretations of the meaning of similarly ancient words -- such as whether "Vin" as in Vinland, means land where wine grapes grow, a definition that hints at a more southerly outpost, or pastureland, a location that might place the first settlement in the New World anywhere along Canada's coastlands or the northern Atlantic seaboard of the US. As a consequence, exciting but unproved claims of a Viking influence still abound. These include legendary forts, towers, and etched stone works, which might attest to voyages that stretched well below Newfoundland and down the Charles River as far as Cambridge, Massachusetts, or in the direction of the historic university town and its venerable Harvard Yard. (4)

Reasons for the initial global outreach point to an apparent shortage of land as well as an early and energetic desire to expand into new markets. Reasons for the lack of Viking sustainability relative to Europe's more southerly expansion are equally complex. But an inability to politically control entrepreneurial designs, along with the appearance of the type of boat construction that favored the transport of increasingly larger cargoes, are often cited. Whatever the reasons behind the disappearance of the Viking Age and its transformation into the intangibility of the contemporary geographic consciousness, the era of enlargement was followed by a definite contraction northward, its energies depleted but its people content for a long while with a decline in economic dynamism nonetheless.

Iceland and many of its southerly neighbors now face national emergencies and a need to resolve the debilitating foreign consequences of its latest regional outreach. Current international negotiations now appear aimed at recovering bank customers' deposits. There is some discussion of Iceland's joining the EU and the eurozone though a long-standing restraint remains everywhere apparent due largely to fears about loss of control over ocean rights and regulations. (5)

History suggests that a settlement will eventually be made. Contemporary facts more than underscore a series of lasting strengths that exist quite apart from the living legends of the past. Iceland does have one of the most educated labor forces in the world, and therefore remains attractive to investment in a growing manufacturing and service sector. Its aquaculture is advanced, coordinated in order to replenish stocks, and relative to its modest population, one of the world's most productive given the dependence of that world below on its abundant exports. History also prompts the conclusion that Iceland may eventually retreat once again within its own and others' imagination, and after another adventurous but ambiguous period of expansion, leave it to the future to sort out both blame and contribution.

(1) For the UK and the Netherlands see Radio Netherlands Worldwide, "Iceland PM Wants The Hague To Guarantee Deposits." 10/9/2008. (2) Quoted in Pfanner, Eric, "Iceland Is All But Officially Bankrupt." International Herald Tribune Online, 10/9/2008. (3) A standard history is Jones, Gwyn, A History of the Vikings. Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press (1984). (4) A more modern update can be found in "Did Leif Erikson Once Live in Cambridge, Massachusetts?" The Straight Dope Online, 4/30,2002. (5) Phillips, Leigh, "Iceland Unions Push Government to Join Euro." EUobserver, 10/6/2008.