



**Address by
the President of Iceland,
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson,
to the 17th International Saga Conference**

**Reykjavík
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Minister of Education, Culture and Science,
Vice-Chancellor,
organisers and participants in the International Saga Conference.
Dear friends, kære venner,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here at this conference. Over the coming days, the *Íslendingasögur* and the writing of the ancient laws will be in the limelight at this well-attended and ambitious gathering, this World Games of Iceland's saga literature. It is invaluable for us in Iceland to know that such a large number of scholars in all parts of the world are engaged in research on our ancient literary heritage from different points of view, bringing to bear the methods of unrelated disciplines.

Conferences and seminars are vital to academic disciplines. It is also important that specialists bear in mind, constantly, how best to make their work and opinions known to the rest of the community. Recently, Guðmundur Andri Thorsson wrote about a student who enrolled in the Scandinavian Studies department of the University of Iceland shortly before the middle of the last century, only to change his mind, fed up with analysing lexical particles in ancient poems. What might have happened had he not thrown in the sponge? Well, the writer Thor Vilhjálmsson could easily have become "... an Icelandic specialist in a bow tie and carpet slippers, making himself cups of tea in Árnagarður in between bouts of poring over the Saga of Vilmundur the Absent-Minded (*Vilmundarsaga viðutan*)."

The writer of these words was, of course, making a joke, and would be the last person to cast disrespect on the worthy activity of exploring the older levels of our culture. On the other hand, there certainly is a danger that those who do

this, even with the best intentions, will be tempted to be happy cultivating their garden and stop there, finding in a vanished world shelter from the cold winds of the present day with its bickering and superficiality, its narrow-mindedness and growing extremism.

It is important to be on guard against this danger. Scholars may not live solely in ivory towers, if we can put it like that; they must also go out into the bustle of the street and make their learning accessible to the public. There is no need to be afraid of how it will be received. The great majority of Icelanders are interested in our saga heritage, as are many people beyond our shores. Old Icelandic language and literature are taught in many universities overseas, and new translations find their way to an eager audience. Our ancient literature appears in various guises in present-day culture, probably in more ways than we realise at first glance. Intriguing echoes of the Legendary Sagas, the Eddic poems and the *Íslendingasögur* can be found in television programmes and historical novels, in computer games and cartoons, in heavy metal and rap lyrics. We should by no means turn our backs on the more traditional world of Old Norse studies – conferences and lectures being relevant examples of this. But specialists must be prepared to pass on their knowledge, in collaboration with others where this is appropriate, and in a variety of ways. Fortunately, there are many instances of this being done, and lots of them set examples that could be followed. And it is to be hoped that the scholarly community abroad will continue its interest in our saga heritage, this remarkable contribution by Iceland to the culture of all mankind.

It is also necessary that scholars should make their voices heard in public discussion about our history, heritage and origins, because those who wield power and form dominant interest blocs are constantly striving to enlist the past in the service of their own causes. Of course, there is nothing new in this. “History was a weapon of power, then as now,” said Guðrún Nordal recently about the historians of the *Sturlungaöld*. And then there are the well-known words in the prologue to one of the manuscripts of *Landnámabók*, saying that it will be easier to repudiate the allegations “that we are descended from slaves or evil-doers if we know our true ancestry.” Long after that, in the stirrings of the independence movement that began in mid-19th century Iceland, poets, intellectuals and other leaders gave people confidence and courage with images of an autonomous, unanimous and Nordic people who settled in new lands, building a Christian society and creating for us a rich cultural heritage. Elsewhere in the Nordic countries too, Iceland was regarded as the place where the original self-image of the Nordic people had been preserved, and this gave a boost to Scandinavian nationalism. Yes, it was here that the nations of the North saw their roots.

We ought to know better today than people knew back then about these roots, this society and the culture of the past. We should be aware that our origin was many-sided and that this applies also to our saga heritage, with its special features but also its international finish. Nothing comes into being in a vacuum. We should be aware that life was lived under injustice and difficult conditions, and that what was recorded and told was not necessarily the most truthful version, but rather what suited those in power. “The historians concentrate on the Norwegian origin of the first settlers in Iceland and try to keep those from other cultures out of the limelight,” wrote Bergsveinn Birgisson in his book *Leitin að svarta víkingnum* (The Quest for the Black Viking). Yes, ladies and gentlemen, if we want to use our saga heritage to fuel Nordic nationalism, then we must draw attention to all of this, the plurality of our roots and our multi-cultural mix and the pitfalls to avoid; let us stress the importance of tolerance and humanity instead of intransigence and prejudice. Nationalist sentiment of this type would meet the needs of our times, the obligations we have undertaken and the human-rights conventions by which we are bound in the community of nations, and in fact also the centuries-old Christian values.

Dear friends: Let us enjoy our ancient sagas, admire the artistry of those who committed their wisdom and narratives to parchment; let us celebrate this great and unique cultural heritage. But let us also point out the context from which they sprang, their aim and the way they have been used – and even abused – over the centuries. In this spirit, I hereby declare the Seventeenth International Saga Conference open. I congratulate the organisers and wish all participants a pleasant and creative time in the fascinating world of research and learning.