



**Opening address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the 16th Viking Congress
in Iceland
17 August 2009**

Distinguished scholars,
Dear friends,

It gives me great pleasure to open the proceedings of the 16th Viking Congress in Iceland and welcome this distinguished gathering of scholars and academics from so many countries. I hope that your time of deliberation and dialogue in Reykjavik and Reykholt, the seat of the chieftain and author Snorri Sturluson, will be both fruitful and inspiring.

The Viking Congress has a long and remarkable history. The first of these interdisciplinary meetings was held close to 60 years ago in Shetland, and since then, they have been convened in many countries in northern Europe: Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Orkney and England, the Faroe Islands and in Iceland for the first time more than half a century ago, in 1956, at the invitation of the University of Iceland and the National Museum. The chairman of the organizing committee for that congress was Dr. Kristján Eldjárn, at the time Iceland's State Antiquary and later the third president of the Republic. I believe you will be following in the footsteps of participants at that congress by travelling to some of the same locations as they did on your excursions later this week.

The eminent Icelandic scholar Hermann Pálsson, professor in Edinburgh, who with Magnus Magnusson was so tireless in introducing the Icelandic sagas to

English readers in the last century, somewhere used the term *paper viking*. We could take this as meaning that the Icelandic vikings, unlike their Scandinavian relatives and ancestors, performed their heroic deeds not so much in reality as on vellum, in the medieval literature that flourished in Iceland.

When the war-weary Vikings sailed to our coasts in the 9th and 10th centuries, they had already conquered extensive regions. They had established their presence in Russia, the British Isles, France, Italy, including Sicily, and also traded with the Arabs in the East, but were yet to sail westward to discover a new world – and have the good sense to lose it again, as Oscar Wilde is said to have remarked.

The men who staggered ashore in Iceland, trembling after their long voyage, were full of curiosity and had with them various things apart from livestock, tools and weapons. They brought with them across the ocean tales of their forefathers and their glorious deeds all over Europe, mythological and heroic poetry in ancient meters, including the Eddic poetry that was later to be written down in the famous manuscript *Codex regius*; last but not least, they brought with them their vast collective experience of life.

All these elements shaped the society they formed and the unique literature that was to flourish in the new country where they settled down as farmers. We could say that Iceland became a kind of shelter for elderly Vikings: a sanctuary. Here, men like Skalla-Grímur and Egill took residence and became skilled farmers who also cultivated their poetic arts.

It is remarkable how vigorous and lively the interest in this heritage has been in the modern era, even now in our strange and fragmented times. Here in Iceland we have witnessed a keen popular interest in the new findings of archaeologists and historians, philologists and literary scholars; the excavations carried out in recent years here in Reykjavík and in Reykholt, Hólar, Mosfellsbær, Gásar, Skriðuklaustur and elsewhere in Iceland have drawn thousands of visitors every summer. The publication of the Complete Sagas of Icelanders a decade ago by Leifur Eiriksson Publishing House — the first complete publication of the sagas in English — was extremely well received by readers and critics on both sides of the Atlantic and led to the issue by Penguin of a special volume of ten sagas and also of individual sagas in seven new books.

One of the many events prepared for the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2011, where Iceland will be the Guest Country of Honour, is a comprehensive publication by Fischer Verlag of the Icelandic sagas and tales in new German translations. The

Icelandic publishing house, Saga Publishing, is also preparing new editions of the complete sagas and tales in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish translations.

All these editions will be similar in scope to the recent English publication, with translations that are true to the original, but at the same time readable and accessible to a modern audience. They will be a solid indication of the strong position of this heritage in our modern times.

I found it highly illuminating to witness the great interest in the legacy of the Viking explorations, when in the year 2000 the Nordic Countries, together with the United States and Canada, celebrated the millennium of the discovery of America. I had discussed some of the ideas for these celebrations with President Clinton in the White House in 1997, including the great Viking Exhibition which was subsequently opened at the Smithsonian in Washington, with Icelandic manuscripts on display, together with many artefacts from northern Europe and the North American continent. It was memorable to be present at the opening of that exhibition in Washington, and then in New York, and also, two years later, in Minneapolis, when the exhibition completed its journey to many cities across North America. It generated extensive coverage of the historical heritage of the Vikings in prestigious periodicals, magazines, newspapers, television and radio.

Furthermore, one of the great attractions in that celebratory year was the voyage by the replica viking ship *Íslendingur*, "the Icelander", built by Gunnar Marel Eggertsson, an idealistic sailor who created this remarkable enterprise on his own and was also the captain on the voyage. The ship sailed from western Iceland to Brattahlíð in Greenland, and then onwards to Canada and the United States to commemorate the journeys made a thousand years earlier by Leifur Eiríksson, Þorfinnur *karlsefni*, Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir and other Icelandic explorers. It was truly memorable to be present at the arrival of the ship in Greenland together with Queen Margaret of Denmark and Jonatan Motzfeld, the Premier of Greenland, but even more remarkable was to see it reach New York and go for a short cruise on the Hudson River where we offered a group of famous and distinguished American passengers some traditional Icelandic cuisine: dried haddock, smoked lumpfish and of course rotten shark.

When the *Íslendingur* finished its journey the ship returned to Iceland and the town council of Reykjanes decided to build a special museum, designed by one of our best architects, to house the vessel together with the core of the Smithsonian exhibition. To close the circle, one of the creators of the display in Reykjanes is

Elisabeth Ward, who also was one of the main curators of the Viking Exhibition in the Smithsonian in Washington.

I strongly recommend that you visit this new museum and also the other interesting exhibitions and new museums that have recently been opened in different parts of Iceland. In Borgarnes Kjartan Ragnarsson, one of our leading playwrights and theater directors, and Sigríður Margrét Guðmundsdóttir have created an original and lively exhibition which focuses on the Saga of Egill Skallagrímsson and the Settlement of Iceland. In the same way many other communities, for example in the West Fjords, the northwestern region and on the south coast, have been drawing on the sagas and this medieval heritage to create new types of celebrations, exhibitions and replica houses, thus hoping to make the Viking heritage a pillar in their regional culture and their share of the 21st Century tourism.

On the many occasions where we commemorated the millennium anniversary of the Viking explorations in America, I often referred to Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, who was surely the most widely travelled person in the world around the year 1000 — and would remain so for another five hundred years. She was born in Iceland, married in Greenland, gave birth to a son in North America, then came back to Iceland, made a pilgrimage on foot to Rome, and ended her days as a nun and anchoress on her farm in Skagafjörður in Northern Iceland. Her life spanned almost the whole known western world at that time. She was an independent woman, the architect of her own fate, who with characteristic modesty took her place among the great explorers and female heroes of history.

Ten years ago, when I visited the Vatican and met His Holiness Pope John Paul the Second, I explained that five hundred years before Christopher Columbus, Guðríður, this remarkable Icelandic woman, had become the first person and also the first Christian in world history to visit both Rome and America. Since she brought priests with her, as is described in the Saga of Eirik the Red and the Saga of the Greenlanders, her missionary journey had brought Christianity to the shores of the American continent five hundred years before Christopher Columbus set out to sea.

It was memorable to witness the reaction of His Holiness when he realized that through the Viking journeys, Christianity had indeed arrived in North America at the end of the first millennium, and that it could be argued that the Vatican's mission had thus received critical support from the Vikings. Earlier this year, on my visit to Guðríður's home district on Snæfellsnes, I discussed with enthusiastic

local leaders the idea of taking a small statue of Guðríður, a replica of the one which now stands at her birthplace, to the Vatican and thus allowing her finally to take her proper place within the walls of the Holy See.

Yes, the Viking heritage indeed offers many opportunities for interesting endeavours and enterprises in the modern era. But in all of those undertakings it is important that the foundations be strengthened by vigorous research and scholarly debates. Therefore, people at many different levels of society share an interest in your work and deliberations; local communities and public associations, study-groups and individuals continue to turn to the Viking era for both wisdom and enjoyment.

This Congress is thus an important contribution to our modern mission and it is in that spirit that I welcome you again and wish you success in your dialogue and deliberations.