



Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of the exhibition
Vikings: A North Atlantic Saga
Science Museum, Minneapolis U.S.A.
22 November 2002

Distinguished Nordic representatives,
Descendants of the Viking explorers,
Ladies and gentlemen

Sýningin sem við opnum hér í kvöld er áhrifaríkur vitnisburður um að Bandaríkin fagna nú hinn norrænu arfleifð, sögunni um landafundi víkinganna fyrir þúsund árum.

It would indeed be a pleasure to continue to address you in Icelandic here tonight – and that almost could have happened. If Leif Eiríksson and the other Nordic seafarers who came to these shores a thousand years ago had not decided to leave soon after their arrival we would indeed all be speaking Icelandic here tonight. And former Vice-President Mondale and senator-elect Coleman, in the recent campaign, would have quoted the Icelandic sagas to prove their wisdom and learning.

Even though Leif was called the Lucky we have to admit that Christopher Columbus had a better PR firm – in the Vatican. But mark my words. We are getting there. It has admittedly taken us a thousand years, but as all of us who have lived through the cold Nordic nights know, all good things are worth waiting for.

The Vikings: A North Atlantic Saga is indeed a remarkable exhibition. In an enlightened and informative way it celebrates the millennium of the Viking discoveries and gives not only Leif the Lucky his due but also his sister-in-law, Guðríður Thorbjarnardóttir, who shortly after Leif's historic journey followed his course, settled here for a while, gave birth to her son Snorri, the first child of European origin to be born in this great continent, then travelled back to Iceland and went on foot

and horseback all the way down to Rome to report to the Pope on the vast new territory discovered across the ocean.

Five hundred years before Christopher Columbus even appeared on the scene with his idea of setting sail, Guðríður, this remarkable Icelandic woman, became the first person in world history to visit both Rome and America. She is indeed the greatest woman explorer of all times, a symbol and an inspiration to all her sisters, the ultimate victor in the macho test between Columbus and Leif, because who would dare to challenge an Icelandic woman? Certainly not us, and heed my advice: You are better off never to try.

Apart from the native Americans, the people from the Nordic countries are the only settlers in this great land who can justly celebrate anniversaries measured in thousands of years. Others, with all due respect, must make do with some decades, at the most a couple of hundred of years.

Since this exhibition opened in Washington two years ago it has travelled widely in the United States and in Canada and we assemble here tonight to celebrate its outstanding success and how it has inspired extensive media coverage of the Viking discoveries and of the Nordic heritage.

At the opening here tonight, I want to thank all those who have worked solidly to bring the exhibition to Minnesota and also all those who on the way have made the exhibition into the most successful cultural event in the long history of Nordic-American relations.

I would also like to thank in particular the generous support from various Nordic companies operating in North America, the Nordic Council of Ministers and last but not least the National Museums of the Nordic countries for entrusting the Smithsonian Institute with some of their most precious objects over the last two years. The unique success of this exhibition and the vast numbers of visitors who now have some idea about this remarkable history inspires us to ponder whether there is not good reason to move the exhibition on to Russia, not least in light of the great contact between the Vikings and the peoples of Eastern Europe in times of old.

Together with the United States, the Nordic countries have been beacons of democracy and human rights, signifying how the rule of law can be the foundation of civilised society.

In times of violence, terror and the threat of war it is indeed a noble endeavour to bring hope and inspiration, to show that together we can

create a world which is both open and free, where every child enjoys the birthright to prosperity and a peaceful and secure way of life.

The Nordic experience is a lesson in democracy and truly decent and civil society, an example of how it is possible to bring education and healthcare to all, an inspiration to others of how to make a significant contribution to peace, security and economic progress in the rest of the world.

The roots of our democratic tradition are to be found in the heritage of the discoverers who crossed the Atlantic from Norway, settled in Iceland and then journeyed further to Greenland and the new continent they discovered in the west.

In Iceland they established a legislative assembly which has survived to become the oldest parliament in the world, and their culture was so rich in poetry and verse that in our times it is still inspiring writers and scholars.

Our Viking ancestors were clearly the most widely travelled people of their times and Leif Eiríksson, Guðríður Thorbjarnardóttir and the other settlers who came to this great continent a thousand years ago brought with them the democratic tradition of the Icelandic parliament and the Christian faith which was then taking root in the Nordic countries.

They were in fact Christian missionaries who had learned to respect the rule of law and were inspired by the democratic experience. They carried with them values which are of fundamental importance to our modern way of life.

The Vikings: A North Atlantic Saga is therefore also a modern story, it carries a message of discovery and democracy, religion and the rule of law. It inspires us to excel in our times as our ancestors did more than a thousand years ago.

I bring you greetings from your families and friends in the Nordic countries and it is with great respect that I convey to you how deeply moved we always are by the sense of kinship we experience here in Minnesota.

I hope you will all enjoy this magnificent exhibition and I congratulate all who have so successfully brought it to this magnificent state.