

The Weather in the Icelandic Sagas

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The Enemy Without

By

Bernadine McCreesh

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0813-7

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0813-2

IN MEMORIAM

MICHAEL W. SUTTON

1945-2011

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Greatest thanks are due to Margaret Cormack and Andrew Hamer, who read through and commented on the entire manuscript. Any errors and omissions are entirely my own. I am also very grateful to Betty Turner, who read through the manuscript and pointed out things which would be unclear to the non-specialist reader. Thanks are also due to Sister Margaret Atkins, Alison Finlay, Siân Grønlie, Alaric Hall, Pernille Hermann, Carolyne Larrington, John McKinnell, Rory McTurk, Elise Mitchell, Heather O'Donoghue, Gillian Rudd and Meg Twycross. In addition, I would like to thank the staff of the English Faculty Library in Oxford who opened the door of the Turville-Petre Room for me on numerous occasions, and also the staff of the Rare Books Room at the MacOdrum Library at Carleton University. I am also grateful to my former colleagues in the Département des Arts et lettres at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, who supported my request for a sabbatical, thus enabling me to begin work on this project.

NOTE ON ICELANDIC SPELLING AND ON THE TRANSLATIONS

In many English translations of the sagas, Old Norse (Old Icelandic) names are anglicized to a greater or lesser extent. The Old Norse letters *þ* and *ð* are often replaced by “th” and “d” respectively, accents are removed, double consonants at the end of names are simplified, and final *-r* is often omitted; for example, Old Norse *Þórr* would be written “Thor” and *Óðinn* “Odin”. In body of this book, Old Norse forms are kept, but translations into English follow the translator’s usage.

Details of translations are given in the first part of the Bibliography, after the title of the original source. Wherever possible, translations have been taken from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders (CSI)*.¹ In other cases, if the name of the translation is not identical (or almost identical) to that of the original, the name of the translation is used (e.g. *Landnámabók, Book of Settlements*). If, on the other hand, the titles of the translation and the original are the same or very similar (e.g. *Heimskringla*), the name of the translator (e.g. Hollander) is given.

Wherever possible, Íslenzk fornrit (ÍF) editions are used for the Icelandic sources. Full publication details of these editions are given in the Bibliography, not in footnotes. References are given to chapters as well as pages to make life easier for readers who are using different versions of original sources (e.g. for *Sturlunga saga*) or translations other than those in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*.

¹ *Complete Sagas of Icelanders Including 49 Tales*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, 5 vols., (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997).

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AR</i>	<i>Annales Regii</i>
<i>BS</i>	<i>Byskupa Sögur</i>
<i>CSI</i>	<i>Complete Sagas of Icelanders</i>
<i>H</i>	<i>Hauksbók</i> version of <i>Landnámabók</i>
<i>ÍF</i>	Íslenzk Fornrit
<i>OA</i>	<i>Oddaverja Annals</i>
<i>OSTM</i>	<i>Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Sturlubók</i> version of <i>Landnámabók</i>
<i>SA</i>	<i>Skálholts Annals</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Sturlunga Saga</i>

PART ONE:

**HISTORICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL
APPROACHES TO THE WEATHER**

CHAPTER ONE

THE METEOROLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Nowadays, we hear a great deal about global warming, climate change and shifting weather-patterns. The words “weather” and “climate” are, in fact, so closely associated that many people believe them to be synonymous. However, they are not. “Weather” refers to day-to-day meteorological conditions, whereas “climate” refers to weather-patterns over an extended period.

Paul Edward Dutton adds a further dimension to the distinction between “weather” and “climate

“Weather” is human, but “climate” is not necessarily so. Weather, in other words, is the atmosphere in contact with us, and exists when we engage it physically and think about it.... If “climate” is ahistorical and ahuman, “weather” is properly historical and stubbornly subjective, since it involves humans in time thinking about it and how it affects their lives. By reversing the process, we can, by studying “their weather”, also study them, their preoccupations, economic and social concerns, and cosmological and religious ideas.¹

The people whose weather will be studied in this book are the Norse warriors and farmers who settled in Iceland from the ninth century onwards and whose deeds were recorded in written form some three to four hundred years later. “Weather” will be discussed in its broadest sense, encompassing not only weather and climate but the consequences of meteorological events, such as floods and landslides. Celestial phenomena,

¹ Paul Edward Dutton, “Observations on Medieval Weather in General, Bloody Rain in Particular,” in *The Long Morning of Medieval Europe: New Directions in Early Medieval Studies*, ed. Jennifer R. Davis and Michael McCormick (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 168.

which fell under the heading of meteorology in the Middle Ages, as well as volcanic eruptions and their consequences, will also be included.²

From a meteorological point of view, most people nowadays would not consider Iceland a destination of choice. The country is situated in the North Atlantic just south of the Arctic Circle. It is saved from extreme cold in winter by the moderating influence of an offshoot of the warm Gulf Stream, which helps to keep daytime highs around zero. On the other hand, the average summer temperature is only 12°C, with approximately six hours of sunlight per day, which is not much when one considers the length of the days at such a northerly latitude. When the cold East Greenland Current, with its attendant drift-ice, approaches the north and east of Iceland, temperatures drop, adversely affecting the harvest for that year. The country is also wet, with a measurable amount of rain falling two days out of three in winter and one day out of two in summer.³

Despite its apparently unappealing climate, Iceland attracted a number of settlers from AD 874 to AD 930. Although written sources state that these first colonists were mainly Norwegians who arrived either directly from the mother-country or by way of the British Isles, genetic research has revealed that, whereas approximately two-thirds of Icelandic men have Scandinavian ancestry, this is the case for only one third of the women.⁴ Those who passed through Ireland or the Western Isles of Scotland must have brought with them a fair number of Celtic women as wives or concubines, as well as a few male slaves or servants. In addition, a small number of Swedes also made their way to Iceland, settling mainly in the north.⁵

A warming trend in the North Atlantic may have been a factor in the discovery and settlement of Iceland and Greenland.⁶ With better growing

² Vladimir Jankovic points out that, as recently as the seventeenth century, meteorology encompassed “tides, earthquakes, meteors, volcanic eruptions and the ‘unusual agitations of the sea’” (*Reading the skies: A cultural history of English weather 1650-1820* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000], 33).

³ Data from www.climatetemp.info/Iceland. The amount and type of precipitation vary depending on where one is in the country, with the north and the central highlands receiving more snow in winter and the south more rain.

⁴ Bryan Sykes, *Blood of the Isles* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 194-96.

⁵ Barði Guthmundsson, *The Origin of the Icelanders*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

⁶ The contents of marine sediment cores suggest that there were “relatively warm and stable conditions” without much drift-ice near Iceland from approximately AD 730 to AD 1100 (A.E.J. Ogilvie, L.K. Barlow and A.E. Jennings, “North Atlantic climate c. AD 1000: Millennial reflections on the Viking discoveries of Iceland, Greenland and North America,” *Weather* 55 [2000]: 38).

conditions in Scandinavia, fewer people would have been needed to produce the same amount of crops and fodder, which would have freed up farm-labourers for other pursuits. In fact, the start of the Viking expansion (AD 750-800) coincides with the start of the postulated improvement of the climate in the north.⁷ As food supplies increase, so too, in many cases, does the population; in a mountainous country like Norway in which arable land is limited, an increase in population would encourage emigration.⁸ Warmer temperatures and a decrease in sea-ice in the north would also encourage exploration in the area.⁹

Although some of the Norse settlers who arrived by way of the British Isles were Christians, most early Icelanders were not and put their trust in gods of the Nordic pantheon. As far as we can gather from later writings, Óðinn (Odin) and Þórr (Thor) were thought to be the main gods in charge of the weather. In AD 999, Iceland adopted Christianity by a decree of the *Alþingi* or general assembly. For a generation, people were probably Christian in little more than name: they were still allowed to continue many of their pagan practices, such as eating horsemeat, exposing sickly infants and worshipping their old gods in private. Even so, Christian teaching seems to have become well established within two or three generations. Iceland acquired its first bishop – and also first known native-born priest – in 1056, and by 1106 there were two dioceses, one for the north and one for the south of the country. In 1199, Þorlákur Þórhallsson (bishop from 1176 to 1193) was declared to be a saint by the *Alþingi*,¹⁰ and Christian miracles became a fact of life in Iceland.

With Christianity came education. Unlike many European countries in which literacy was synonymous with Latin, Iceland developed a tradition of writing in the vernacular. Works produced range from strictly historical

⁷ For a discussion of other factors influencing the Viking expansion, see John Haywood, *The Vikings* (Phoenix Mill, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 29-36.

⁸ This is the point of view of, e.g., Neville Brown, *History and Climate Change: A Eurocentric perspective* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 138-39. The view of Emmanuel LeRoi-Ladurie is more nuanced: “The mildness of the climate, stimulating agriculture and thus also population growth, is said to have led [italics mine] to the departure of surplus male warriors” (*Times of Feast, Times of Famine: A History of Climate since the Year 1000*, trans. Barbara Bray [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971], 293).

⁹ H.H. Lamb suggests that that the decrease in sea-ice was accompanied by a “relative immunity” from severe storms (*Climate, history and the modern world* [London and New York: Methuen, 1982]), 165.

¹⁰ Until 1234, canonization was a local affair. St. Þorlákur’s sanctity was finally ratified by the Vatican in 1984, when he was declared the patron saint of Iceland.

annals to fantastic and clearly fictitious tales of heroes of doubtful historicity. In between these extremes are records of contemporary happenings (*samtíðarsögur*), such as *Sturlunga saga* – an account of events in thirteenth-century Iceland – and the Bishops’ Sagas – biographies of Iceland’s early bishops – as well as semi-historical accounts of what happened in great families between the time their ancestors decided to leave their homes in Norway, Sweden and the British Isles to settle in Iceland and the early decades after the arrival of Christianity. These latter works, known as the Sagas of Icelanders or *Islendingasögur* (sometimes called Family Sagas), are anonymous and probably contain traditions handed on from generation to generation before being set down in writing from the early thirteenth century onwards.

Between the time Iceland was settled and the time at which historical records started to be kept and sagas written, the weather worsened. The climate of Iceland in the Settlement Era is thought to have been more or less as mild as it is today. However, by the middle of the thirteenth century it had started to deteriorate noticeably, leaving Icelanders with just memories of a time when animals could fend for themselves out of doors in the winter and food supplies were sufficient for people’s needs.

A contributing factor to the cooling trend was volcanic eruptions.¹¹ Such events can adversely affect the weather: in the year after an eruption, volcanic ash and sulphuric acid particles suspended in the atmosphere block out some of the sunlight, resulting in abnormally cold weather and a shorter growing season.¹² Particularly violent eruptions can even affect the weather in countries far beyond their point of origin. If rain carries the sulphuric acid particles back to earth, crops can be damaged and livestock poisoned.¹³ Although there were volcanic eruptions in Iceland between the ninth and twelfth centuries, they were not particularly violent with a high sulphur content, unlike those of the late thirteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries.¹⁴

¹¹ Although eruptions are mentioned in religious and historical literature, they are absent from the Sagas of Icelanders. For possible explanations, see Oren Falk, “The Vanishing Volcanoes: Fragments of Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Folklore,” *Folklore* 118 (2007): 1-22.

¹² Jelle Zeilinga de Boer and Donald Theodore Sanders, *Volcanoes in Human History: The Far-Reaching Effects of Major Eruptions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 113-14.

¹³ *Volcanoes in Human History*, 147-48.

¹⁴ “Summer cold and ice growth began abruptly between 1275 and 1300 AD, followed by a substantial intensification 1430-1455 AD. Intervals of sudden ice growth coincide with two of the most volcanically perturbed half centuries of the

The early interval of comparatively clement weather in the north of Europe is commonly referred as the “Medieval Warm Period”, and the cooling trend that followed it is known as the “Little Ice Age”. Although recent research has cast doubts on the extent and even the existence of these warming and cooling trends,¹⁵ the terminology is still in general use, and data from ice cores,¹⁶ lake sediments¹⁷ and early written records suggest that there was, at least in Iceland and Greenland, a period of warm weather around the first millennium.¹⁸ Temperatures seem to have been at their highest from the mid-tenth to the early twelfth century; there was then a dip in the second half of the thirteenth century, after which temperatures rose slightly again before dropping noticeably in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, culminating in what is popularly termed the “Little Ice Age”.

past millennium.” (Gifford H. Miller et al., “Abrupt onset of the Little Ice Age triggered by volcanism and sustained by sea-ice/ocean feedbacks,” *Geophysical Research Letters* 39, 2 [January 2012]. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1029/2011GL050168/epdf>.)

¹⁵ A.E.J. Ogilvie, “Historical climatology, *Climatic Change*, and implications for climate science in the twenty-first century,” *Climatic Change* 100 (2010): 33-47.

¹⁶ Marie-Alexandrine Sicre et al., “Decadal variability of sea surface temperatures off North Iceland over the last 2000 years,” *Earth and Planetary Science Letters*, 268, nos. 1-2 (April 2008): 137-142.

¹⁷ Áslaug Geirsdóttir et al., “A 2000 year record of climate variations reconstructed from Haukadalsvatn, West Iceland.” *Journal of Paleolimnology* 41/1 (2009): 95-115.

¹⁸ For further discussions of the climate in Iceland in medieval times, see A.E.J. Ogilvie, “The Past Climate and Sea-Ice Record from Iceland; Part I: Data to AD 1780.” *Climate Change* 6 (1984): 131-52, especially 140-42; A.E.J. Ogilvie, L.K. Barlow and A.E. Jennings, “North Atlantic climate c. AD 1000: Millennial reflections on the Viking discoveries of Iceland, Greenland and North America,” *Weather* 55 (2000): 34-45; Astrid E.J. Ogilvie and Thomas H. McGovern, “Sagas and Science: Climate and Human Impacts in the North Atlantic,” in *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, ed. William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 385-393; A.E.J. Ogilvie and T. Jónsson. “‘Little Ice Age’ Research: A Perspective from Iceland,” *Climatic Change* 48 (2001): 9-52.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WEATHER IN HISTORICAL WRITING

The Ninth Century: the Settlement Era

Landnámabók, or the Book of Settlements, is practically our only written source of information about the climate of Iceland at the time the country was colonised.¹⁹ This work is basically a list of who settled where, enlivened by occasional anecdotes. It was first compiled in the early twelfth century, nearly three hundred years after the earliest settlers arrived, and then revised or rewritten in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. None of these early versions still exist; the manuscripts that the printed texts are based on date from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

The extent to which *Landnámabók* can be trusted as a source of meteorological information is a moot point, since the data it provides refers to events which had taken place over three hundred years earlier. One climatologist dismisses the information as “unreliable”,²⁰ whereas another goes to the other extreme and uses an anecdote about a man swimming out to fetch a ram from an island off the coast of Greenland to calculate the probable temperature of the sea-water at that point.²¹ Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders presumably believed it to be an accurate record of what their ancestors noticed on first arriving in the new country.

Descriptions – or even mentions – of specific weather-conditions are rare in *Landnámabók*. Snow and ice are referred to in the naming of the

¹⁹ *Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968). S refers to the *Skalhótsbók* version, and H to the *Hauksbók* one. English translations are taken from *The Book of Settlements: Landnamabok*, Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1972).

²⁰ Markús A. Einarsson, “Climate of Iceland,” in *World Survey of Climatology: 15 Climates of the Oceans*, ed. H. van Loon (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1984), 679.

²¹ H.H. Lamb, *Climate, history*, 166.

country. According to one version of *Landnámabók*, Iceland was first called “Snowland” by some people who ended up there after being blown off course when sailing from Norway to the Faroes; as they were leaving in the autumn, they were impressed by the snow falling on the mountains and so named the country after it.²² The name “Iceland” is attributed to Flóki Vilgerðarson,²³ one of the first explorers:

The spring was an extremely cold one. Floki climbed a certain high mountain, and north across the mountain range he could see a fjord full of drift ice. That’s why they called the country *Iceland*, and so it’s been called ever since. (*Book of Settlements*, 18)

Vár var heldr kalt. Þá gekk Flóki upp á fjall eitt hátt ok sá norðr yfir fjöllin fjörð fullan af hafisum; því kölluðu þeir landit Ísland, sem þat hefir síðan heitit. (S5/H5, ÍF 1:38)

The only other reference to snow comes in a tale about a shape-shifter, in which a snowstorm seems to have been included to explain how a polar bear could come upon two men unawares. The shape-shifter’s father and brother had gone out to bring in their cattle when they were attacked,²⁴ the white bear having presumably been hidden by the blowing snow.

References to the weather are also found in two tales which explain how specific places got their names. One settler, Hjørleifr, was becalmed and ran short of water. To relieve their thirst, the Irish slaves on board his ship made some cakes called *minnpak*; when it rained, the mouldy cakes were thrown overboard and gave their name to the place where they landed, called Minnpakseyr.²⁵ Another family was shipwrecked and everybody on the boat perished except for the parents and their little daughter. Guðlaugsvík (Guðlaugr’s Creek) is named after the shipwrecked father.²⁶

The emphasis of *Landnámabók* is actually more on the fertility of the land than on meteorological conditions per se. For example, three

²² “Þeir fóru aprt um haustit til Færeyja; ok er þeir sigldu af landinu, fell snær mikill á fjöll, ok fyrir þat kölluðu þeir landit Snæland.” (S3, ÍF 1:34)

²³ According to Neville Brown, there were cold spells even during the Medieval Warm Period, and Flóki’s voyage c. 865 coincided with one of these, which explains why he saw drift-ice so close to the coast of Iceland (*History and Climate Change*, 129).

²⁴ S259/H223, ÍF 1: 286-87.

²⁵ S8/H8, ÍF 1:42-43. *Landnámabók* also mentions that another settler, Hrollaugr, had a rough crossing and ran short of drinking water (S310/H270, ÍF 1:317).

²⁶ S165/H134, ÍF 1:200.

anecdotes relate that fish was abundant at that time. One is a miracle-tale about a Christian hermit called Ásólftr, who was probably Irish. Ásólftr lived near a river in which there was a plentiful supply of fish. This abundance excited the jealousy of his neighbours, who drove him away so that they could take all the fish for themselves; however, when he left, the fish disappeared. This happened in three places, until Ásólftr finally took refuge with a kinsman.²⁷ Another story, which seems to be almost the pagan counterpart of the previous tale, is about a woman, Þuríðr, who was nicknamed *sundafyllir* (Sound-filler) because she filled every sound in Halogaland (in the north of Norway) with fish during a famine. Her ability to conjure up fish followed her to Iceland, where she exacted a ewe from every farmer who wanted to fish the fjord where she had settled.²⁸ In a third story, Flóki Vilgerðarson, who named the country, and his two companions were so delighted with the abundant fish that they forgot to lay in hay for their cattle, which perished that winter.²⁹

The story of Helgi magri (the Lean) also relates how the conditions were difficult for cattle: during his first winter in Iceland, his cows nearly died because of the harsh conditions.³⁰ On the other hand, a boar and a sow which he had released into the wild survived on their own and turned into a herd of seventy pigs three years later.³¹ Other chapters in *Landnámabók* also confirm that in certain places animals were able to survive the winter unaided: there are two references to cattle which were able to fend for themselves out of doors.³² One of Flóki Vilgerðarson's companions was very enthusiastic about the fruitfulness of the new country, but Flóki himself had a much more negative opinion:

When they were asked about the new country Floki had nothing good to say of it, but Herjolf described its merits as well as its faults. Thorolf said that in the land they'd found, butter was dripping from every blade of grass. That's why people called him Thorolf Butter. (*Book of Settlements*, 18)

Ok er menn spurðu af landinu, þá lét Flóki illa yfir, en Herjólftr sagði kost ok lqst af landinu, en Þórólfr kvað drjúpa smjör af hverju stráí á landinu,

²⁷ H21/S24, ÍF 1:62-63.

²⁸ S145/H116, ÍF 1:186.

²⁹ S5/H5, ÍF 1:38-39.

³⁰ Weather and the food-supply are still closely linked; for examples, see H.H. Lamb, *Climate, history*, 290-97.

³¹ S218/H184, ÍF 1:250-2.

³² S18/H 18, ÍF 1:58-9; H24, ÍF 1:67.

því er þeir höfðu fundit; því var hann kallaðr Þórólfr smjör (S5/H5, ÍF 1:38-9).

The Twelfth Century

From the late thirteenth century onwards, annals were kept in Iceland to record important historical events both at home and abroad.³³ The source of their meteorological data for the tenth to early thirteenth centuries is unknown; Jakob Benediktsson suggests that annalists may have used notes inserted into Easter tables,³⁴ and there is also a hint in the *Annales Regii* that some information may have come from a no longer extant work by Sæmundr the Wise (d. 1133).³⁵ The most comprehensive annals are the *Annales Regii* (AR). The *Skálholts Annals* (SA) are also detailed, but the years 1013-1180 are missing. The *Oddaverja Annals* (OA) are much briefer and rarely refer to weather-conditions.

All the annals mention astronomical phenomena, such as eclipses and comets, as well as natural catastrophes, such as earthquakes, landslides, and volcanic eruptions. A *sandvetr* (sand-winter) or *sandfallsvetr* (sand-fall winter), referring to volcanic ash falling back to earth, is normally recorded in the year following an eruption (1105, 1227); when Hekla erupted in 1300, a famine, caused presumably by the volcanic ash, is also mentioned. Epidemics (*sóttar vettr* literally “winter of sickness”) are recorded for several years (1152, 1181, 1192), as is the loss of livestock (1186, 1187).³⁶

In the *Annales Regii* and the *Skálholts Annals*, winters are named after the prevailing meteorological conditions, especially when they were worse than usual: 1078 was *Snévetr* (Snow-winter), 1134 *Múgavetr* (“Mob-winter” or wild winter), 1202 *Frost vettr* (Frost winter), 1291 *Jökul-vetr* (Glacier-winter). Especially cold winters are also mentioned in 1145, when there was *íss mikill* (a lot of ice), and 1197, when the annalist comments on the *óþlld mikil ok íslög* (bad season and layers of ice). In

³³ *Islandske Annaler indtil 1578*, ed. Gustav Storm (Christiania: Grøndahl & Søns Bogtrykkeri, 1888). Page numbers will be provided in footnotes only when the year is not mentioned.

³⁴ “Annals. 2 Iceland [and Norway] in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (New York: Garland, 1993), 15.

³⁵ “Svá segir S,émvndr (hin fróði) prestur at á þessv ári vórv svá mikil frost at vargar rvnv at ísi milli Noregs ok Danmarkar.” (*Islandske Annaler*, 108)

³⁶ The *Oddaverja Annals* record these deaths in 1185 and 1186, but the *Skálholts Annals* only in 1187, suggesting that the loss of animals was due to a disease which spread through the country rather than starvation.

1233 there was drift-ice all summer (*hafisar allt sumar*). The entry for 1104 in the *Annales Regii* even describes the effect of the bad weather on people's religious practices: "The weather was so bad on Christmas Day that people could not get to church."³⁷

Floods were also a problem: the writers of *AR* and *SA* talk of the *vatna vöxtr* (a rise in the water-level) in 1191 and *flóð hit mikla* (the great flood) in 1199. In 1234 the high water-levels led to shipwrecks, and 1209 was described as *far-sumar hart* (a hard summer for travelling). There are two other references to summers: 1181 was a *grasleysu sumar* (grassless summer), and in 1211 the *góðivetr* (good winter) was followed by a *vétv sumar* (wet summer). The *Skálholts* and *Oddaverja Annals*, but not the *Annales Regii*, both mention a wet summer for 1226, possibly the result of intermittent volcanic activity, for fire in the sea off Reykjanes is recorded for 1223 (*OA*), and 1226 (*AR* and *SA*) and "sand(fall)-winters" are mentioned in 1225 and 1226 (*OA*) and 1227 (*AR* and *SA*).

Sometimes bad weather may have affected only part of the country – or one of the annalists may not have considered it serious enough to be recorded. In 1183, *SA* mentions an *ofara sumar* (bad summer for travelling), but not *AR*; the situation is reversed in 1234. On the other hand, *SA* does not talk about the ice and bad season in 1197. This lacuna is, however, understandable: drift-ice carried to Iceland by the East Greenland Current normally hits the north of the country and makes its way along the east coast; the area around Skálholt, in the south-west, would, therefore, be one of the last parts of the country to feel the effects of the ice. It does, however, seem to have been affected in 1233, because not only is drift-ice mentioned, but the winter is also called *jokul vetr hinn mikli* (the great glacier winter), a name it is not given in the *Annales Regii*. The area around Skálholt also seems to have been seriously affected by epidemics in 1246 and 1247: 1246 was another *sóttar vetr* (winter of sickness), and in 1247 *sott mikill(!)ok manndauðr* (great sickness and mortality) is recorded. On the other hand, the Easter snow (*Páska-snjór*) recorded in 1310 in the *Annales Regii* seems to have missed Skálholt.

The aurora borealis may have been particularly impressive – or people's imaginations particularly vivid – in 978 and 1118, and in 1156-57. According to the writer of the *Annales Regii*, a fiery battle-array (*elldligar fylkingar*) was seen in the heavens for one whole night in November 978.³⁸ If the other two annalists knew this story, they may have

³⁷ "En Jóladaðag var veðr svá grimt at men máttv eg' komaz til kirkiv."

³⁸ Armies in the skies continued to be seen in England up to 1680. For a reproduction of a broadsheet with illustrations of such "providential visitations", see *Reading the skies*, 57.

had doubts about its authenticity, because they do not mention it. Once the country converted to Christianity, what people saw in the skies were religious symbols. This is particularly obvious in 1118, the year of the death of Gizurr Ísleifsson, the second Bishop of Þingeyrar, when the heavens appeared to open on Easter Day with such a bright light that the sun was dimmed; people also saw a cross decked with gold and jewels as well as other *seónhverfingar* (optical illusions). In 1156 a cross was seen in the sun and in 1157 there were three suns, with a cross in the middle one. These years are unfortunately missing from the *Skálholts Annals*, but the sober and elliptical *Oddaverja Annals* do record the crucifix in the sun in 1157.

The twelfth century was the time when efforts were being made to eliminate references to pre-Christian gods, which may explain why religious symbols were seen in the sky. Jón Ögmundarson, who was Bishop of Hólar from 1106-21, is credited with fighting traces of paganism, such as naming the days of the week after the old gods.³⁹ Whether or not this initiative is due to him is a moot point; his biographer must, however, have had reason to believe that the eradication of pagan names started during his episcopate. In traditional poetry, there was a steady drop in the use of names of the pagan gods to create kennings (poetic metaphors) in the second half of the twelfth century, suggesting a certain Christian fervour.⁴⁰ In addition, the Benedictine monastery of Munkþverá in the north of Iceland was founded in 1155, shortly before the second set of visions was seen.

Although political events in Europe are recorded regularly, remarkable meteorological conditions beyond Iceland are mentioned only three times. 1047 was so cold that the sea froze and wolves crossed the ice between Norway and Denmark. All three sets of annals state that, on the feast of St. Lawrence in 1275, giant hailstones fell on Trondheim, the biggest of which measured 15 *áura* or ounces (18 according to *SA*). 1306 – added in a different hand from that of the usual annalist in *AR* – was apparently a terrible year throughout Europe, with freezing temperatures in France and

³⁹ Even today, the days in Icelandic are descriptive rather than commemorative; for example, Tuesday is *þriðudagur* (“third day”) and Friday *föstudagur* (“fasting-day”). English has kept the names of the old gods; Wednesday, for instance, takes its name from Woden, and Thursday from Thor.

⁴⁰ Bjarne Fidjestøl notes that there is “a rapid decrease in mythological allusions in the kennings in these poems, from 25% in the latter half of the 10th century to 2-3% in the latter half of the 12th century” (“Pagan Beliefs and Christian Impact: the Contribution of Scaldic Studies,” in *Viking Revaluations*, ed. Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins [London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1993], 102.

Germany, the sea again frozen between Denmark and Norway, and drift-ice fifteen ells high off the north coast of Iceland all, or nearly all, summer long. The approaching “Little Ice Age” was starting to make its presence felt.

It is hard to say whether or not the annalists were aware of a deterioration in the climate. In the first half of the twelfth century there are only two references to bad weather: the “mob [wild] winter” (*mígavetr*) of 1134 and the “much ice” (*iss mikil*) of 1145. For fifty years after that, the annalists record earthquakes and landslides and illness of men and beasts; in 1181 there was a “grassless” (*grasleysu*) summer but, if the problem was due to drift-ice, the annalist does not say so. In the last decade of the twelfth century, the problem seems to have been high water-levels. In 1202 frost is mentioned, and 1209 was a difficult summer for travelling, although the reasons for this (too much wind? too little wind? drift-ice?) are not specified. 1211 was a good winter (*góðivetr*); if the annalist went to the trouble of noting this, either the weather was exceptionally good, or bad weather was by now the norm, so that a winter with less snow and less rain than usual, higher than average temperatures and a fair amount of sunshine would be noteworthy. For eighty years the annalists fall silent again about weather-conditions in Iceland, and then 1291 and 1306 are recorded as exceptionally bad years.

The Thirteenth Century

Even in the thirteenth century, the climate of Iceland was deteriorating noticeably, culminating in a series of disastrous summers from 1230-70. Although the weather improved a little after 1270, by 1330 the “Little Ice Age” had set in for good.⁴¹ These worsening weather conditions are reflected in contemporary writings, such as the Bishops’ Sagas (*Biskupa sögur*), which were written to commemorate Iceland’s first bishops and to advance the cause of canonization of some of them.

The early part of one of these sagas, *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, is written like a series of annals. The bishop it commemorates, Guðmundr Arason, was Bishop of Hólar from 1203 to 1237, but this version of his life only goes up to 1203, when he was chosen to be bishop.⁴² In it there

⁴¹ According to Markús A. Einarsson, “About 1200, the climate deteriorated, temperature decreased and from that time the climatic conditions were more or less unfavourable” (“Climate of Iceland,” 679).

⁴² *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, in *Byskupa Sögur 2*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1953), 167-389, referred to from now on as *BS 2*. The saga has been translated into English as *The Life of Gudmund the Good, Bishop of*

are references to the “portentous winter” (*býsna vetr*), when nearly eighty people died in avalanches,⁴³ the “winter of sickness” (*sóttarvetr*) when epidemics claimed many lives,⁴⁴ the “summer that was disastrous for travelling” (*ófarasumar*), when five hundred men were lost at sea⁴⁵ and the “hard winter when cattle died” (*felli vetr*), which was followed by a shortage of grass (*grasleysi mikit*) in the summer and another bad season (*óáran*).⁴⁶

The Bishops’ Sagas reflect other harsh realities of life in medieval Iceland. For example, when Guðmundr attempts to go abroad to study, he is left with a badly injured leg after being in a shipwreck which nearly costs him his life.⁴⁷ Another time, he and his party are caught in a sudden snowstorm in which most of the people perish.⁴⁸ Páll Jónsson (Bishop of Skálholt 1195-1211) loses his wife and one of his daughters to a river in flood.⁴⁹

A similar picture is presented by the sagas of the *Sturlunga* compendium.⁵⁰ This is a vast compilation which records the fights and feuds of the powerful Sturlung family. Each saga is the work of a different author, but, around the year 1300, they were all put together and edited to remove overlapping episodes.⁵¹ The longest piece in the compilation is *Íslendinga saga*, which is believed to have been written by Sturla Þórðarson (1214-84) and relates what happened between 1183 and Iceland’s loss of independence to Norway (1262-64).

Holar by G. Turville-Petre and E.S. Olszewska (Coventry: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1942), referred to from now on as *Life of Gudmund*.

⁴³ *BS* 2:183, chap. 6.

⁴⁴ *BS* 2:194, chap. 8.

⁴⁵ *BS* 2:197, chap. 10.

⁴⁶ *BS* 2:204, chap. 14.

⁴⁷ *BS* 2:187-92, chap. 8. See pp. 29-30 below.

⁴⁸ *BS* 2:216-19, chaps. 22-23. See p. 87 below.

⁴⁹ *Páls saga byskups*, ÍF 16:316-18, chap. 13.

⁵⁰ *Sturlunga Saga*, ed. Jón Johannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), referred to from now on as *SS*. English versions are from the translations by Julia H. McGrew and R. George Thomas, *Sturlunga Saga*, 2 vols. (New York: Twayne, 1970-c.1974), referred to from now on as “McGrew” or “Thomas,” depending on the person responsible for the translation in question.

⁵¹ The compilation may have been made at the instigation of – or even by – Þórðr Narfason the Lawman (d. 1308). See Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland’s Medieval Literature*, trans. Peter Foote (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1988), 188.

Like *Guðmundar saga*, *Íslendinga saga* refers to the winter in which cattle died, but, in addition, it also mentions two volcanic eruptions and their consequences: “That summer was poor and very wet. Fire erupted at sea off Reykjanes.”⁵² “This year was known as the Sand-Winter and was a very hard winter for the livestock.”⁵³ “It was called the Sand Summer, because fire erupted in the ocean off Reykjanes and there was a great fall of volcanic ash [literally ‘much grasslessness’].”⁵⁴ A more detailed description of a volcanic eruption is found in another saga, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*. A priest called Eyvindr and his companions see “a fire flaming up from the sea beaches, as broad as a hayfield.”⁵⁵ At the same time, “some men from Selárdal had rowed out to sea; they saw the fire out on the water and a little later they saw blood on their clothing but did not know where it came from.”⁵⁶ Similarly, “men saw blood then in many places where they did not expect to.”⁵⁷ What seems to have happened here is that the volcanic eruption has sent red dust up into the sky, colouring the rain and giving it the appearance of blood.

The author of *Íslendinga saga* often comments on the harsh weather conditions. “That was a harsh, severe winter and throughout the countryside men found conditions very hard on their livestock.”⁵⁸ “[Órækja] reached Bjarnarhöfn in abominable weather.”⁵⁹ “That was a harsh winter and men had to kill much of their livestock.”⁶⁰ One year the spring seems to have been late coming: “He and Sturla were both snowbound at Sælingsdalstunga for three nights after the Sunday that begins summer.”⁶¹

⁵² “Sumar þetta var illt ok vátviðrasamt. Kom upp eldr ór sjónum fyrir Reykjanesi.” (SS 1:311, chap. 58, McGrew, 1:208)

⁵³ “Þessi vetr var kallaðr sandvetr ok var fellivetr mikill.” (SS 1:314-15, chap. 60, McGrew, 1:212)

⁵⁴ “Þetta var kallat sandsumar, því at eldr var uppi í sjónum fyrir Reykjanesi, ok var grasleysa mikil.” (SS 1: 346, chap. 82, McGrew, 1:246)

⁵⁵ “Sáu þeir eld brenna ór sævarbökkunum, svá viðan sem stakkgarðsvídd.” (SS 1:223, chap.18, McGrew, 2:220)

⁵⁶ “Menn váru rónir á sæ í Selárdal. Þeir sáu eld á sænum út til hafs. Ok litlu eftir þetta sáu þeir blóð á klæðum sínum ok vissu eigi, hvaðan at var komit.” Ibid.

⁵⁷ “Blóð sást víða þar, sem menn vissu ván til.” Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Þessi vetr var harðr ok illr, ok heldu menn illa víða um heruð.” (SS 1:361, chap. 89, McGrew, 1:262)

⁵⁹ “Órækja ...kom í Bjarnarhöfn í foraðsveðri.” (SS 1:378, chap.103, McGrew, 1:281)

⁶⁰ “Þá var mikill vetr, ok felldu menn mjök fé sitt.” (SS 1:527, chap.196, McGrew, 1:440)

⁶¹ “En þeir Sturla sátu báðir í Sælingsdalstungu hriðfastir sumar-mála helgi þrjár nætr.” (SS 1:447-48, chap.146, McGrew, 1:353)

In another case, a good winter is followed by a disastrous spring: “That was a hard spell because the spring was bad, although in the winter there had been good weather. Fourteen horses died at Æðey on Ascension Day while men were at table, and there was every prospect of devastation in Ísafjörð before the fish would be coming in at Kviarmið.”⁶² In this last instance we can see famine looming as a consequence of bad weather.

We are sometimes told how the weather affects individuals rather than the country as a whole. On one occasion the author feels it necessary to mention that a man’s teeth were chattering with cold rather than fear, and adds that another man did actually die from the cold.⁶³ Another time, a man who was hiding in a whey-vat “was shaking so with cold that ripples were made in the whey vat”.⁶⁴ Yet another time, some men who had been travelling made a big fire to dry themselves out, from which it can be deduced that they had been riding in heavy or prolonged rain.⁶⁵

Other references to bad weather are in connection with shipwrecks. “But the weather blew up a gale as the night wore on. The gale continued Monday and the ship broke up beneath it.”⁶⁶ “They soon met harsh headwinds and so severe a storm that they were driven back and the ship was broken up.”⁶⁷ In both these cases there were few survivors.

References to good weather are few and far between. In chapter 129 we are told: “Men put their horses out to graze, for there was no shortage of pasture there. It was before Holy Week, and was one of the best of springs.”⁶⁸ It seems from the passage that the plentiful grass was the result of the good spring but the land in that place may simply have been fertile. In chapter 76, there is a brief remark about the bishop “sitting at the south of the church on a day of good weather” shortly before midsummer.⁶⁹ One year the winter seems to have been characterised by bright, sunny weather

⁶² “Þar var hörð vist, því at vár var illt, en vetr allgóðr. Fjórtán hestar dóu í Æðey uppstigningardag, meðan menn váru at mat. Til landauðnar horfði í Ísafirði, áór fiskr gekk upp á Kviarmið.” (SS 1:391, chap. 113, McGrew, 1:295)

⁶³ SS 1:288, chap. 42.

⁶⁴ “Hann skalf af kulda, svá at svaglaði í kerinu.” (SS 1:493, chap.174, McGrew, 1:402)

⁶⁵ “En gerðu elda stóra ok þurrkuðu sik.” (SS 1:325, chap. 70)

⁶⁶ “Hvessti þá svá veðrit, sem á leið nóttina. Ok þat veðr gerði mánadag, svá at skipit leysir undir þeim.” (SS 1:474, chap.161, McGrew, 1:382)

⁶⁷ “Þeir fá brátt mótviðri ok storm mikinn ok verða aftreka ok brjóta skipit.” (SS 1:481, chap.169, McGrew, 1:390)

⁶⁸ “Létu menn hesta sína á gras, því at eigi skorti áifanga, ok var þat fyrir helguviku. Þat vár var allra vára bezt.” (SS 1:412, McGrew, 1:318)

⁶⁹ “Þá sat biskup sunnan undir kirkju einn góðan veðrdag.” (SS 1:337, McGrew, 1:237)

with exceptionally low night-time temperatures: “The winter was so good that men knew of none like it.”⁷⁰ “It was frosty at night and cold weather.”⁷¹ “[Gizurr] had wool-lined calfskin shoes on his feet because it was very frosty and cold.”⁷² From the comments the author makes, it seems reasonable to conclude that cold, bright, sunny winter-days were the exception rather than the rule in thirteenth-century Iceland.

On the other hand, references to rivers in flood or treacherous ice conditions on their surfaces are frequent. A flash flood is described in *Porgils saga skarða*, another saga in the *Sturlunga* compendium:

They found the roads in good condition. But when they were riding down through Haukadal there was a thaw, and as they rode across Haukadalsá the river suddenly rose so high that those who were in the middle were swept off their horses...Men wondered greatly at this because all the watercourses were very low both before and afterwards. (McGrew, 2:465)

Först þeim vel ok fengu færðir góðar. En er þeir riðu ofan eftir Haukadal, var á þeyviðri. Ok er þeir riðu á Haukadalsá, hljóp áin ofan svá ákafliga, at þá rak af baki, er á ánni váru....Þótti mönnum þetta kyn mikil, því at vötn öll váru lítil bæði áðr ok síðan. (*SS* 2:209, chap. 66)

Two sagas, *Íslendinga saga* and *Porgils saga skarða*, both give independent accounts of how, on one occasion, the same band of warriors give up and go home because they cannot ford a river:

At that time the river was filled with ice floes so that they could find no way to cross it. In this situation they decided to turn back and ride home. (McGrew, 1:386)

Ok var áin þá í leysingu, svá at engan veg máttu þeir yfir hana komast. Verðr þat þeira ráð, at þeir snúa aftir við svá búit ok ríða heim vestr. (*Íslendinga saga SS* 1:478, chap. 165)

The skies now began to darken and there was a beating rain, a severe storm with gales of wind. They rode until they came down into Stýfingadal by Ölfusvatn. Their spies came up to meet them and reported that the ice was

⁷⁰ “Þá var vetr svá góðr, at menn mundu eigi slíkan.” (*SS* 1:496, chap. 175, McGrew, 1:405)

⁷¹ “Frostviðri var á um nóttina ok kalt veðr.” (*SS* 1:497, chap. 176, McGrew, 1:407)

⁷² “... ok kálfskinnskúar loðnir á fotum, því at frost mikit var ok kuldi.” (*SS* 1:499, chap. 176, McGrew, 1:408)

high in the Ölfusá and that it could nowhere be crossed, so they decided to turn back. (McGrew, 2:388)

Tók þá veðr at þykkna, gerði á barviðri ok regn mikit ok it mesta illviðri með áköfum stormi. Riðu þeir, þar til er þeir kómu ofan með Ölfusvatni í Stýfingadal. Kómu þá í moti þeim njósnarmenn þeira ok segja, at Ölfusá er ofan hlaupin með ísi ok væri langt um ófæra.

Tóku þeir þar ráð, at þeir snúa aftr. (*Þorgils saga skarða*, SS 2:140-41, chap. 20)

Þórðar saga kakala has two accounts of river related accidents. In one case, a man who tries to cross a river in flood is drowned.⁷³ In the other case, unsafe ice gives way below a man, but he and his horse still manage to pull themselves out of the water. At that point the author informs us: “When he came out on firm land again he was wet through,”⁷⁴ and a little later we learn that he is given a change of clothing by a friendly farmer.

Describing how the weather affects people is, in fact, one of the features of *Þórðar saga kakala*. On another occasion, a certain Kolbein and a company of some six hundred men are caught out in bad weather. The author mentions that before long they are “wet through” (*alvatir*); as the storm persists, they become “exhausted by the cold”.⁷⁵ Kolbein tells his men to dismount and wrestle to warm themselves up; even so, many are so cold that they are unable to hold on to their weapons. Some warriors on the opposing side want to attack them at that time, on the grounds that “many of the men there would not defend themselves well on account of the cold”,⁷⁶ but their leaders are unwilling to do so because, even disabled by the cold, Kolbein’s troops are too numerous. The author sums up: “Some men died at that time and others were permanently affected.”⁷⁷

The emphasis in *Þorgils saga skarða*, on the other hand, is on how weather-conditions affect travel. One winter appears to have been particularly wet, although at first, as the Winter Nights (end of October) were approaching, the weather was relatively dry and cold: “The moors were not solidly frozen but even so one could cross the winter-routes with a light step.”⁷⁸ Then, just before the feast of St. Páll, Bishop Heinrekr, who

⁷³ SS 2:42-43, chap. 21. See p. 118 below.

⁷⁴ “Ok er hann kom á land, var hann alvátr.” (SS 2:20, chap. 10, McGrew, 2:250)

⁷⁵ “Dróst þá liðit mjök af kulda.” (SS 2:18, chap. 9, McGrew, 2:249)

⁷⁶ “Kölluðu þar marga mundu vera lítt til færa at verjast fyrir kulda sakir.” (SS 2:20, chap.10, McGrew, 2:249)

⁷⁷ “Gengu þá þegar nökkurir menn til heljar af, en margir meiddust til örkumla.” (SS 2:18, chap. 9, McGrew, 2:249)

⁷⁸ “Mýrar lágu illa. Mátti þá tyllast á vetrarbrautum.” (SS 2:123, chap.14, McGrew,