

(Chapter IX, Section 5)

Iceland

Iceland⁴⁶ was first discovered by the Irish, but when this event took place we do not know. Our first reliable account of their voyages to Iceland is the book of the Irish monk Dicuil, written in 825 A.D. At that time, and presumably for some years before, the only occupants of the island had been Irish hermits, who found their arctic retreat an excellent asylum from the ills of the world. It was probably from the Irish that the Norsemen obtained their knowledge of this island, before the motive had arrived for them to go there and live in it.

Toward the end of the ninth century King Harald Fairhair united Norway under his own command, and then tried to extend his authority to the Norsemen living in the Orkneys and other outlying regions. As a result of his activities the noblemen who refused to submit sailed forth on Viking expeditions, and the Norse population in the British Isles increased. Iceland, however, being a country which was practically uninhabited, offered a ready refuge to these political malcontents, who comprised, it is said, the highest nobility of Norway.

In 870 A.D. Ingolf Arnarsson first settled in Iceland, and a period of intensive colonization followed which lasted from 874 A.D. to 930 A.D. The high nobles, including kings, jarls, and peers of lesser rank, brought with them their entire households, consisting of wives, concubines, housecarls, and slaves. Four hundred such chiefs are mentioned in the *Landnamabok*, the unique document describing in detail the settlement of Iceland and the partitionment of its land. Various estimates reckon the population at the year 950 A.D. between the figures of 20,000 and 50,000. The lower figure is probably more nearly correct than the higher. At any rate, the chances are that the servants and other undistinguished persons made up the majority, and that although the proportion of noblemen was high, it was not high enough to predominate in a numerical sense.

The *Landnamabok* names the homes of 1003 of these immigrants. Of them 846 came from Norway, 30 from Sweden, 1 from the Faroes, and 126 from the British Isles. Of those coming directly from Norway, the homes of 461 are known, as follows: Nordland, 51; Trøndelag and Møre, 95; Sogn og Fjordane, 128; Hordaland, 77; Rogaland 10 (3 from Jaeren); Agder, Telemark, Vestfold, 67; the eastern valleys, 33. Of 113 known homes in the British Isles, the list is: Ireland, 52, Scotland, 31, Hebrides, 26, and Orkneys, 4. Thus the Norsemen who came from Norway came mostly from the coastal regions, and especially from Hordaland, Sogn og Fjordane and points northward. Few were from the eastern valley region and fewer from the brachycephalic nucleus in Rogaland. Those from the British Isles were presumably Norse who had not occupied their new homes long enough to lose their Norwegian identity.

The Vikings who came from the British Isles brought with them Keltic-speaking slaves and concubines, who formed a considerable community and who are frequently mentioned in the sagas. Some of the leaders undoubtedly had Irish mothers. The exact ratio of these people to the total population is, however, a matter of controversy. Hannesson, who has measured the living Icelanders, estimates the Irish and other Keltic elements to have formed some 13 per cent of the whole. At any rate, since the tenth century no new immigrants have entered Iceland in any numbers, and hence the living Icelanders are the direct and unassimilated descendants of the Viking settlers and of their retainers.

In a total of 33 of the longer poems,⁴⁷ the bards who composed the sagas gave physical descriptions of 67 early Icelandic persons, all important and drawn mostly from the noble class. Of these 54 were called large or tall, and only 3 medium sized. In regard to hair quantity, 8 out of 9 men were said to have long hair, and one thick. Six out of seven men had curly hair, and one straight. The following hair colors were observed for 19 males: gray 2, white 1, golden blond 2, blond 3, red 3, light brown 1, brown 4, black 3. One female was given black hair. Of three beard colors noticed, two were red and one gray. One man had blue eyes, and two women black. Although these observations do not form a statistically valid series or a random sample, yet they may be regarded as ample proof that the ancestors of the Icelanders were of variable pigmentation. Since the persons described were all of high rank, the chances are that most of them were pure Norwegians, and that the pigmentation map of western Norway was not very different a thousand years ago from what it is today.

The modern Icelanders, with a mean stature of 173.6 cm., are taller than most Norwegian groups, and come closest in general bulk to the Valle and Trøndelagen populations. In bodily proportions, too, they seem to be moderately thick-set and heavily muscled, and to be long spanned and relatively long bodied. In these general somatic characters they reveal the fact that their ancestors came more from the coast than from the interior of Norway.

Their heads, being very long, with a mean of 197.3 mm., and rather broad (154.1 mm.), may be duplicated in size only in Valle, and in Ireland. A head height of 126 mm. likewise fits into the general West Norwegian picture, as does a mean cephalic index of 78.1.

The Icelanders, with a nasion-menton height of 130.1 mm., are very long faced, but their excess over the Norwegians in this character is partly a matter of technique.⁴⁸ They are actually not much longer in this character than the people of Valle. The breadths of the face, the minimum frontal, bizygomatic, and bigonial (106.5, 140.6, and 108.5 mm.) are all broader than the corresponding dimensions in Norway as a whole, but they are comparable to those found in the provinces from which the Icelandic ancestors came. The excess of the jaw breadth over that of the forehead may indicate an adaption resulting from rigorous dietary conditions,⁴⁹ as Mme. Schreiner also observed in northern Norway.⁵⁰ The noses are very high (58.8 mm.), and of moderate breadth, with a nasal index (60.2) on the lower border of leptorrhiny. One-half of the nasal profiles are straight, one-third concave; the remaining 17 per cent are mostly undulating, with a few convex. On the whole, less convexity is found here than in most districts of Norway or of Ireland.

Hannesson, although he used the Fischer chart, divides his hair color categories in such a way that one cannot distinguish the ash-blond from the golden class. Other evidence, however, clearly indicates that, of the two, the latter is in the majority. Of pure blond hair (Fischer #12-24) he finds but .8 per cent as against 13.1 per cent for Norway,⁵¹ and 5.5 per cent from Sogn og Fjordane, the province from which the largest number of settlers to

Iceland came. In his light brown class (Fischer #7-11, 25-26), which includes what other authorities usually call ash-blond, he finds 52 per cent of his series, as compared to 64.8 per cent for Norway and 59.8 per cent for Sogn og Fjordane.

Thus although the Icelanders are still prevailingly light haired, they are darker than any purely Norwegian population in Norway. In Norway black hair is everywhere, except among the Lapps, in a very small minority; in Iceland it rises to the figure of 9 per cent, while red hair accounts for 3 per cent more. The presence of these two colors in such quantities is an excellent indication of the persistence of a strong Irish strain.

This indication is strengthened by a study of Icelandic eye color. The ratio of light- and very light-mixed eyes (Martin #13-16) rises to 76 per cent, as high as the Trøndelagen ratios. But in Trøndelagen the majority are light-mixed eyes (Martin #13-14) while in Iceland, as well as in Ireland,⁵² over half of all eyes are pure blue.

On the whole, the Icelanders represent a racial population which is most closely related to the mediaeval inhabitants of the western Norwegian coast, from Hordaland to Trøndelagen; they fit typologically into a midpoint between the two extremes of the Trønder category. They show certain developments of their own, particularly in their excessive face length, and in what seems to be an Arctic modification of the palate and jaws. In some respects they show perceptible Irish affinities; as in the retention of an excessive head size, and in the disharmony between very light eyes and hair of but intermediate blondness. In this series, even more than in the living Norwegian material, the resemblance to Upper Palaeolithic cranial and facial types is manifest.⁵³

Notes:

46. The bulk of this section is derived from Hannesson, G., *Körpermasse und Körperproportionen der Isländer, and from Seltzer, C. C., The Physical Anthropology of the Mediaeval Icelanders*, unpublished MS. in Peabody Museum. Author's permission.

47. Heinzel, R., *SAWV*, vol. 97, 1881, p. 107.

48. In recruit material used in the Somatologie nasion is quite apparently located lower than is consistent with either Hannesson's or Mme. Schreiner's techniques. A series of Icelanders measured by Ribbing includes a face height mean of 122 mm.; cf. Ribbing, L., *LUA*, N. F. Afd. 2, vol. 8, #6, 1912, pp. 1-8.

49. Hooton, E. A., *AJPA*, loc. cit.

50. Schreiner, A., *Die Nord-Norweger*.

51. Recalculated from Bryn and Schreiner.

52. See Chapter X, section 2.

53. Seltzer, C. C., *op. cit.* Seltzer finds a Crô-Magnon-like type in a mediaeval cranial series from Haffiarderey, collected for the peabody Museum by Vilhjalmur Stefansson. His opinions as to this resemblance is substantiated by both metrical and morphological comparisons.