In Search of the Black Viking
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Chapter 1: Hunting in the Ginnungagap of the Past

Geirmundur heljarskinn Hjörsson

Ýri Geirmundardóttir	875
Oddi Ketilsson	920
Hallveig Oddadóttir	980
Snorri Jörundarson	1012
Gils Snorrason	1045
Þórður Gilsson	1070–1150
Sturla Þórðarson	1115–1183
Helga Sturludóttir	1180
Gyða Sölmundardóttir	1225
Helga Nikulásdóttir	1240
Einar Þorlákssson	1280
Ónefnd (Unnamed) Einarsdóttir	1340
Narfi Vigfússon	1365
Anna Narfadóttir	1475
Loftur Guðlaugsson	1500–1564
Arnór Loftsson	1540–1610
Anna Arnórsdóttir	1590
Halldóra Björnsdóttir	1620
Ásgeir Jónsson	1650–1703
Guðmundur “yngri” (“the younger”) Ásgeirsson	1687–1739
Ólöf Guðmundsdóttir	1723
Bjarni Pétursson	1745–1815
Jón Bjarnason	1793–1877
Halldór Jónsson	1831–1885
Ragnheiður Halldórsdóttir	1876–1962
Guðjón Guðmundsson	1917–2010
Birgir Guðjónsson	1940
Bergsveinn Birgisson	1971

In the early 1980's, a certain old man was a frequent guest at my childhood home in one of the suburbs of Reykjavík. His name was Snorri Jónsson, and he was a friend of my parents. Snorri had grown up in Hornstrandir, a rugged peninsula in the northernmost part of Iceland. Like many others, Snorri moved away from the Strandir area in the 1950's, but he left his heart there, and often spoke warmly about his former haunts. He was a slender man, but had a voice powerful enough to cut through the screeching of seabirds and thundering surf. He was a renowned egg-hunter, lowering himself on a rope down cliffs to gather seabird eggs, hanging there in mid-air and pushing off from nest to nest.

The greatest hero in Snorri's imaginative world was a Viking named Geirmundur heljarskinn. Snorri spoke of no one with as much respect, not even the newly elected president of Iceland, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. I was ten or twelve years old and didn't fully grasp all the stories that Snorri told of Geirmundur and his kin. I have forgotten most of those stories, but one of them made such a strong impression on me that I remember it to this day. It went like this:

Geirmundur kept a number of Irish slaves at Hornstrandir. They lived under miserable conditions, laboring away while given only meager provisions. One day they decided to flee, and stole a small boat and rowed away. They knew little about sailing, but were desperate to get as far away as possible. They rowed a great distance on the open sea until finally reaching a large islet, which still bears the name *Íraboði*— the islet or reef of the Irish. If those poor slaves had sailed any farther, they would doubtless have ended up at the North Pole.

This story is so vivid in my mind's eye. For some reason, I always envisioned the slaves as monks, tonsured and clad in gray cowls of homespun cloth. Their faces dirty, their eyes either serious and staring, or revealing their fear. Some of them have oars, but others only planks of wood that they try to use to row. Their eyes are white in their sooty faces. They row for their lives. Away, away from all of it. Any place must be better than this. They reach the islet in the vastness of the ocean. Perhaps they think: if we keep going, where will we end up? Will we sail off the edge of the world? I envision them on the islet, shivering with cold as the breakers crash around them. Their water and food supplies are used up; they are gripped by deadly cold. Gradually, their limbs grow numb. Perhaps they sing sad Irish folk songs or hymns (in my imagination, they were Christians), and lie close together to try to keep warm. One can only imagine the horror of such a slow death. Did they help each other die?

Back on the mainland, Geirmundur heljarskinn has discovered that his slaves have run off and he sets out to sea to find them. When he finally found them on the islet, were they alive or dead? Did they see the sail of their master's ship drawing nearer?

All that is certain is that they perished, every last one of them. The waves washed away their earthly remains, shredded the rags of homespun cloth that had once kept them warm and stripped the flesh from their bones, which later crumbled to dust in the crashing breakers of the Artic Ocean, leaving no trace of them whatsoever. They died. All of

them. But at least they died as respectable men on their own islet, where no one could push them around or humiliate them.

The islet became these Irishmen's country, and was given the name that ensures they will never be completely forgotten: Íraboði.

* * *

Snorri is gone now, but his story lives on.

In the summer of 1992, around ten years after I heard his story of the Irish slaves, I am in a remote fjord in Iceland's Westfjords region: Norðurfjörður, just south of Hornstrandir. At that time, I spent my summers fishing on a small fishing boat that I rented from a relative of mine. The local wags called it a tub— but with it, I was able to earn enough money to pay for my studies in Reykjavik during the winter. I remember that summer of '92, sitting there scrutinizing the sea map to try to determine where I should fish the next day. Suddenly my eye catches a familiar place-name on the map, standing out from all the other names of islets and reefs, a little over six nautical miles from shore: Íraboði.

The images come streaming back to me. The cowls of homespun cloth. The white eyes bulging from black faces. Men using planks for oars, rowing far away from horrendous slavery. Their bodies shivering on the reef. Waves breaking on the rocks.

I think it's the story that Snorri told me, or rather, his enthusiasm in telling it that I have most to thank for enabling me to finish writing this book. Not least because long afterward, I learned that scholars in the Middle Ages, those who first wrote the history of Iceland, were not as interested as Snorri in telling the story of Geirmundur. Where did Snorri get the material for his stories? Had I been granted insight into the dying embers of a saga tradition— accounts that had, since the earliest times, survived in oral form on Hornstrandir? Again and again, the same questions plagued me: *Who was Geirmundur heljarskinn*? Why did he keep slaves here in the far north? Why is there no saga about him— who was said to have been "the noblest of all the settlers in Iceland"? Why is he described as black and ugly, when that description was usually used for slaves? Did he really have roots in Bjarmaland? Where did he get his Irish slaves? Did he abduct them himself, or did he buy them? With what money? Wasn't his wealth just a rumor? That is, considering that he lived in rugged, remote Iceland? Was this really not sufficient material for an Icelandic saga?

Such is the irony of fate, that, after having sunk myself deeper into the story of Geirmundur heljarskinn, and having researched, among other things, the place names connected with him, I have come to the conclusion that the story of the slaves on Íraboði is most likely latter-day fiction. It is quite common for tales to be spun to explain old place-names. However, the place-name Íraboði might very well date to the time of Iceland's settlement, and could suggest that Irishmen came ashore there, either voluntarily or under duress.

In people's hands, experience and memories become the stuff of stories— and then it is not necessarily a question of whether a story is true or not, but whether it is good or not. Geirmundur owned numerous farms in Iceland, and apparently kept hundreds of Irish slaves. Many of the slaves ended up in Geirmundur's territory at Hornstrandir when

natural resources in Breiðafjörður, where he first settled, began to dwindle. Most of the slaves came from places with milder climates, and their lives must have been difficult under the harsh conditions that prevail on Hornstrandir. It is, therefore, not unthinkable that some of them may have attempted to flee— most of the accounts of slaves in Old Norse writings tell of them fleeing from their masters. It is from this same soil that the story of Íraboði may have later sprung. Perhaps some of Geirmundur's slaves brought the bones to Íraboði. Perhaps not.

In the past, someone combined the snippets of information about Geirmundur heljarskinn found in the oldest texts with place-names in his part of the country in order to provide his story with context. The current narrative is an attempt to celebrate the memory of this mysterious man, Geirmundur heljarskinn, bring him closer to us, recall his curious activities at the edge of the Arctic Ocean and lend weight to his position as a wealthy and to some extent merciless slave-keeper.

* * *

This book is about a man who lived 1,100 years ago. His story has been preserved only in fragments that lack all the details necessary for a name from the past to become a living person in readers' minds. The sources say nothing about Geirmundur heljarskinn's personality. Nothing about whether he had a broad smile that revealed his worn teeth, nothing about whether he was merciless or fair to his subordinates, or whether he saw the comical sides of life. Nothing about whether he smiled when he grew angry or anxious and turned to face adversity, whether he used big words when he drank, whether he walked with a limp or had scars, whether he ever cried, whether he kept bad feelings locked up inside or took them out on those closest to him.

About these things, we have no idea.

It is no simple task to trace the path of a Viking who lived thirty generations ago from the cradle to the grave. Geirmundur is a shadow, a voice in the darkness between prehistory and history, a darkness that holds many questions that no one has answered. Geirmundur has to be pulled up out of that Ginnungagap.

Is it possible to endow such a shadow with enough life for someone to care enough to read about him? Do readers have enough patience for a narrator who often fumbles in the darkness, like Dante in Hell?

I have often wondered— despite writing one draft after another, crumpling them up, tossing them aside and saying to myself, "This is IMPOSSIBLE!"— why I have nevertheless been as stubborn as a balky bull, grumbling like the men of Trøndelag when Haakon the Good preached them Christianity, and thinking that maybe it wasn't impossible to dig a little deeper here, a bit more there, despite having been fairly convinced that whatever I might find could never amount to much.

My work on this book has occasionally reminded me of a story about an old sailor, another relative of mine, who, like myself, is a descendant of stubborn ship captains and helmsmen who fear nothing. He was elderly when this story took place: He is on a fishing boat with a two- or three-man crew. A fog shrouds the sea. He stands at the wheel, thick glasses perched on his nose.

Standing in the prow of the boat, the other crewmembers spy what appears to be a reef ahead, and say, softly at first and a bit awkwardly, but then more loudly: "You're heading straight for a reef! You've got to reverse, now!" My relative shouts back, drowning out the others: "There's not supposed to be a reef here! I don't see any damned reef!" And he strands the boat on the reef.

* * *

I am writing a book about one of my paternal ancestors, twenty-six generations back from my great-great-grandfather. But let us look a little closer: most of us have probably met our grandfathers and grandmothers, and heard from them a few stories about our great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers, as well as a few details about their parents, perhaps. My grandfather often told the story of how my great-grandfather was conceived. My great-great-grandfather, who was thirty at the time and lived in Strandir, had to deliver a package to a farm in Steingrímsfjörður, two fjords to the north of Hrútafjörður. When he arrived, everyone was out doing the haymaking except for one woman, thirty-eight years old. By the time this story takes place, she had already been widowed twice and had four children, but lost them all. She had lost everything. But perhaps she noticed a gleam in the eyes of the young postman and recalled the old days; perhaps there was still hope? She invited him in and boiled blood sausage for him. He certainly deserved a bit of a rest before heading back over the heaths.

Nine months later, my great-grandfather was born, or, as my grandfather always said, we owed our lives and fates to one single blood sausage. Little else is known about my great-great-grandfather; he didn't admit to fathering my great-grandfather until the latter was an established, successful boatmaster with a family and a large farm. My great-great-great grandfather in this line, on the other hand, was a ship captain and harbor pilot in Breiðafjörður. He saved the crew of a Danish cutter from drowning, and was honored for it in Copenhagen. He overturned an old boat's hull and cut a door in it, creating a shelter that beggars could use during times of cold and hunger. At the same time, my ancestors rummaged through rubbish heaps on Strandir in search of shoes that they had thrown out a few years earlier. They hoped to find the soles and fry them over a fire, so intense was their hunger.

Then there were the ancestors of my great-grandmother from Skarðsströnd (where Geirmundur heljarskinn settled). People who were so splay-footed that if you spied their tracks in the snow or slush, it was impossible to tell whether they were coming or going. Beyond that, the threads begin to fray. All it takes is one century, some say, for all to be forgotten, and after a century and a half, history is covered by moss. At least that's how it is with my family. When I try to trace my ancestry back beyond the images that have stood the test of time, it's most often like fumbling around in the dark. From that point back, I have had to rely on written sources, sadly limited church records and genealogies, which, for example, note that my great-great-great-grandfather Guðbrandur died of exposure on Tröllatunga Heath and was "found next spring"; his father Hjálmar, priest and physician, was "a carouser and womanizer, like so many in his family"!; his grandfather Halldór was "impatient and a drinker"; whereas his father, Páll, was "a priest

who stood in the vanguard of the witchcraft persecutions of the 17th century..."; thus do the sources trace the story of my family, back through the lawspeakers at Skarð.
At that point, something remarkable happens. The characters become more familiar, better endowed with life, appearing as they do in various old sagas. My family tree includes well-known individuals such as Skarð-Snorri (d. 1260) and Þorkell Eyjólfsson, who married Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir and later drowned in Breiðafjörður. According to *Laxdæla Saga*, this Þorkell returned as a ghost, appearing to Guðrún with his clothes dripping wet, and saying to her: "Great tidings, Guðrún." In the saga, she replies, without the slightest trace of compassion: "Keep them to yourself then, you wretch." This ancestral line ends at Auður the Deep-Minded and her husband Ólafur the White, the king of Dublin; the current author is a descendant of these two in the thirty-second generation.
How much easier it would have been to choose as my subject someone closer to us in time; or at least someone who lived after parchment— let alone paper— came into wide use for recording history. At least then I would have had a slight hope of uncovering something palpable, something that might resemble a living person.

But "the first" is undeniably more tempting than those who follow in his wake. Geirmundur lived at the very start of the Icelandic nation. The start of a nation that gathered memories of the first settlers in the country, pieced together fragments of stories and wrote them down, although this is in fact the precise reason why we know, paradoxically, more about many of the first individuals in Icelandic history than people closer to us in time. Recollections of Iceland's first settlers do not just indicate how far back we can trace history, they also give us an idea of what Iceland's first historians found noteworthy.

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Several fragments of narratives concerning Geirmundur heljarskinn still exist— actually providing far more material about him than, for example, Njáll Þorgeirsson, who was burned in his farm in southern Iceland. The difference is that Njáll has his "own" saga: *Njál's Saga*. A remarkable historian, most likely in the 13th century, took it upon himself to gather both written material and oral accounts concerning Njáll and his family, and then added various ingenious details that endow Njáll with life. Njáll and the others who appear in his saga have been re-imagined and discussed by many generations of people, both in Iceland and abroad. Geirmundur heljarskinn, on the other hand, is a shadow, since no one chose to write his saga. Or, if anyone did, the saga has not survived. Nevertheless, by gathering the existing fragments concerning Geirmundur and delving into what they are telling us, we can develop the basic outline of a captivating biography. Geirmundur heljarskinn Hjörsson began life as a neglected child. He was raised with slaves. Later it turned out that he belonged to one of the greatest royal families in Norway. By the end of his life, he had become the greatest nobleman in the history of Iceland: "…the noblest of all the settlers."

In his prosperous days, Geirmundur rode between his estates in Iceland with an

eighty-man entourage; in comparison, Harald Fairhair's entourage consisted of only sixty men during peacetime. The value of Geirmundur's slaveholdings would amount to enormous sums by today's monetary standards. He owned numerous farms on Strandir and Hornstrandir and had liegemen and tenants in Breiðafjörður and throughout the Westfjords. According to the sources, Geirmundur had links to four different countries: Rogaland in Norway, where he was born and raised on a royal estate; Bjarmaland, which appears to have been somewhere in Siberia, his mother's homeland; Ireland, where he settled in the vicinity of Dublin; and finally Iceland, where he appears to be among the very first settlers.

All of the sources agree that Geirmundur was dark and ugly of appearance; "heljarskinn" means "dark-skinned." Furthermore, the sources say that he was the greatest of "sea-kings" and had a large fleet of ships; the entire Atlantic Ocean was his to roam. He fled his father's estate in Rogaland during Harald Fairhair's rise to power, choosing not to resist him, even though he was urged to do so. In *Grettir's Saga*, Geirmundur is said to be "the most famous Viking in the west." At the same time, it is clear that he did not acquire his wealth through pillage, as the Vikings are generally thought to have done. Some sources state that he treated his slaves clemently, but according to others, he was ruthless to those who got in his way. He was possessed of supernatural abilities, like many of those from northerly regions. At least two to three women are connected with his name, and although the sources mention his having several children, they all agree that he had only one daughter, Ýri— whose name is not Norse. Geirmundur was a nobleman with numerous subordinates, and, if the sources are to be trusted, he brought in Irish slaves on a large scale.

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The strikingly meager sources provide us insight into a compelling, wide-ranging saga. Quite a few things stirred my curiosity as I undertook this project of mine. Every time I stumbled onto something that resembled an answer, new questions arose, leading to even more puzzles. Whenever I felt I had gotten a grasp on Geirmundur, he slipped from my hands. There was no clear path to the man— if I were going to find him, I had to do so in a roundabout way, and at that time, I felt anxious about treading paths that did not lie within my field of expertise. When I gave up the first time, I was left with numerous questions for which I had no answers.

In the first place, it was a very depressing idea to write a book about a person about whose origins I knew nothing; would I ever discover where in Rogaland Geirmundur grew up? Why on earth was he described as dark and ugly, like a slave in appearance, when he was, according to the genealogies, a king's son and nobleman, the noblest of all? Were there any explanations for his appearance? I saw that the Norse in Ireland had, as early as the ninth century, visited North Africa and taken black men from there (called *gorma* in Irish) and made them their slaves— was that a clue?
Then there was Geirmundur's connection to Bjarmaland. While investigating the sources, I realized that Bjarmaland must have meant someplace on the White Sea or Kola Peninsula. Might the reference to Bjarmaland have been an error on the part of a

medieval scribe who had copied the original text? Why would people from Rogaland travel all the way there in the ninth century? And then there was Ireland. Was there any truth in Geirmundur's having established himself so well in the British Isles, when nothing suggested that he undertook Viking raids and engaged in warfare and pillage? Where did this refugee from Rogaland get the money to buy all the slaves that the sources ascribe to him? Did he get it in Iceland? And why on earth did no one write the saga of the noblest of all the settlers in Iceland? Yet one thing is completely clear: such information would hardly have been put into writing in the 12th or 13th centuries without its having already existed in some form in an older tradition.

These questions were among those plaguing me when I gave up.

Nevertheless, I could not simply abandon my speculations. Sometime around 1990, during my university studies, I made a copy of a large map of the Westfjords and hung it on a corkboard. For fun, I started marking places on the map with thumbtacks whenever I discovered that people lived there who were, according to the sources, associated with Geirmundur.

Soon, an interesting pattern began to emerge, a pattern that I started doubting the medieval historians ever noticed: the locations of the farms belonging to Geirmundur clearly served a practical purpose. These farms were located on various roads and old mountain tracks out of Hornstrandir, but they all led to the same place: Geirmundur's estate at Breiðafjörður! It occurred to me that the roads had likely been used for transporting goods, and the fact that the roads were numerous and used by large numbers of people suggested that the goods themselves were valuable. I began to suspect that this might explain why Geirmundur was able to establish himself so quickly and well in Ireland, and I began to ponder what business he had in Iceland: could it be that the same reason lay behind Geirmundur's trip to Iceland and the travels of his family to Bjarmaland in the past?

This was a turning point: my curiosity overcame my doubts. The map that I made backed up the sources that stated that Geirmundur was rich and powerful; he must have had extensive economic pursuits in Iceland. At the same time, I began to have serious doubts about the explanation given by the learned men in the Middle Ages for Geirmundur's wealth: that he owned a large amount of livestock; for me, this explanation held no water. I went and sailed around Hornstrandir with an uncle of mine who organized boat trips for tourists. The area was rugged and sparsely vegetated. Agricultural conditions there were poor; hardly enough grass grew there to feed a single cow. Nevertheless, the sources claim that Hornstrandir supported all of Geirmundur's farms, including those he established after first settling in Breiðafjörður. Had Geirmundur devoted himself to agriculture on Hornstrandir, the yield would hardly have sufficed for him to buy large numbers of slaves at the market in Dublin— at that time, there was a shortage of slaves in Muslim lands, and the price on them was thus high. In other words: it was impossible to write off the medieval accounts, but their explanations could never stand up. The 12th- and 13th-century scholars had lost their perspective; they referred to saga traditions of Geirmundur's wealth, but no longer had any explanations for it— or, if they did have a valid explanation, they decided not, for some

reason, to share it with latter-day readers.

Following my discovery, I continued my research by tracing all of Geirmundur's trails in Iceland, Rogaland, Bjarmaland, and Ireland and reading as much as I could in academic journals. This work often led me to seemingly dead ends, while other, apparently open paths made it impossible for me to abandon the project. I hope that the reader will follow me on this journey. In order to find an answer to the question of Geirmundur's origins, we need to detour into place-name research; to help us understand the purpose of his trip to Bjarmaland and his activities in Iceland, we need to familiarize ourselves with the construction and upkeep of Viking ships; to determine how much of the medieval source material was old and how much new, we need to have a knowledge of the working methods of medieval historians.

At some point many years ago, I felt that there was no way back. Perhaps I resembled that stubborn relative of mine who said he didn't see any reef when I found myself stranding at one problem after another, only to push off from shore once more and sail through those exotic regions, through the darkness of the ages, in search of my ancestor thirty generations back.

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As far as I know, there are no historical works about the Viking Age that trace the entire life of a single individual. Most books on the Vikings commonly adhere to traditional standards of academic objectivity; they inform us about historical personages, rather than present us with living, breathing images. Is it possible to bring a person from the Viking Age closer to us, waken him to life?

Medieval historians usually followed individuals from the cradle to the grave in works that were combinations of history and literature. Proper historians gathered and combined all existing fragments of information about an individual before contributing their own touches to bring an individual's story to life— these historians uncovered probable causal connections, invented conversations, and added details to endow their main characters with unique personalities. The result was a saga. However, whereas the old historians do their best to conceal their personal touches, I, on the other hand, make an effort to make my readers aware of my handiwork.

Regarding the Viking Age, there is a long, interdisciplinary research tradition that needs to be taken into account, and in certain cases the methods utilized within that tradition can act as guiding principles and provide overview that the learned men of the past lacked. I have chosen to follow this path and apply scholarly methods, mainly out of fear that my book would otherwise be grouped with countless other novels and fantasy books about the Viking Age, casting a shadow over the research behind it. Going so far back in history is difficult to do without a guide, someone who can interpret the story and shed light on various things still hidden in the dark. Since little of what I have discovered is entirely certain, I use what might be called reasoning, or "imagination based on knowledge." In medieval history, this was called *argumentum*; that is, what is assumed from the sources to have happened. I tell the story, and at the same time explain what it is we know and what we need to make guesses about. The evidence for my *argumenta*

are given in endnotes.

While working on this book, I gradually became convinced that it could hardly be coincidence that no one had written a saga about Geirmundur. The outlines of the Icelandic foundation myth began to grow clearer, and it became ever more apparent that Geirmundur heljarskinn did not fit within it. Foundation myths generally display ideals that modern societies lack. At the time that the majority of the narratives about the start of Iceland's habitation were written down, the country was practically embroiled in civil war. Then, it was sensible to recall the opposite— the good old days when everyone was equal and all the power was not in the hands of a few chieftains, as it was when the narratives were put down on parchment.

We have often heard the story of Iceland's settlement: a group of wealthy landowners flee the despotic rule of Harald Fairhair in order to live freely and independently; they herd their livestock into ships, set out to sea and come to an island, then settle wherever their high-seat pillars wash up on land and conduct themselves like "honorable heathens," or even Christians, despite knowing nothing about Christianity. It is said that society in the new Iceland was based on equivalence between people and families— the wealthy farmers were independent and kept only a few slaves; they worked the land and tended their livestock, each on his own farm.

The story told here will be completely different.

Ginnungagap: in Old Norse mythology, Ginnungagap ("yawning chasm") is the name of the primordial void.

Haakon the Good (c. 920-961), a king of Norway who attempted to introduce Christianity to that country.

Laxdœla saga: One of the great Icelandic family sagas, likely composed in the 13th century.

Auður the Deep-Minded settled in the Dalasýsla area of Iceland, journeying there following the deaths of her husband, Ólafur the White, in Ireland, and her son Þorsteinn, in Scotland.

The saga of the burning of Njáll Þorgeirsson and his family in their home in southern Iceland is one of the most renowned of all the medieval Icelandic sagas.

Harald Fairhair (c. 850- c. 932), a Norwegian king, regarded as the first ruler of a unified Norway.

Grettir's Saga: another of the medieval Icelandic sagas, focusing on the life of the renowned outlaw Grettir Ásmundarson.