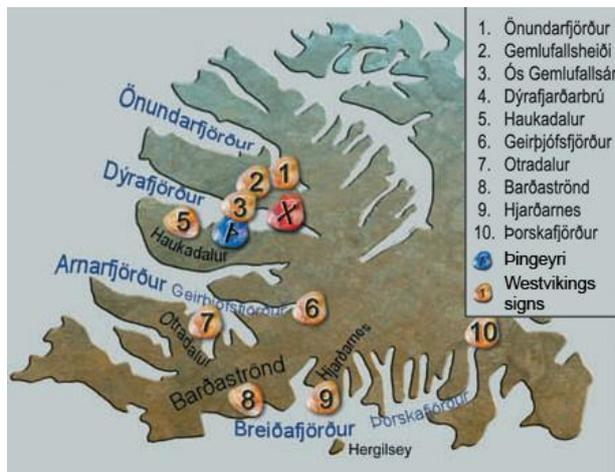


Vikings in the Westfjords of Iceland

In Iceland, the country's history has been one of a hard struggle for independence and a harder struggle against the elements; then in the latter half of the 20th century, a great economic expansion through fishing and then the production of cheap electricity from geothermal and hydro-power. Although most of Iceland's income still comes from those sources, the development of eco and cultural tourism has been a dramatic success. Perhaps because of the struggles with nature and colonialism, the Icelandic people do not embrace 'volunteering' – it is not an automatic part of their culture. Like most hard working people, they still think where the next money and food will come from. Of course they are kind, thoughtful and sincere and will help each other and visitors as much as anyone else but providing free labour is not a usual tendency. Because of this, the EVEHD project is an important step for NAVE, the Icelandic partner. This short story focuses on one local group of volunteers who are 'willing' due to national pride and an interest in their history.



One of the most valuable sources of cultural heritage in Iceland is the old literature. The Saga of Gísli Súrsson describes the life and history of the local Icelanders from the first settlement of around 870 until 1100. Each region of Iceland has its own saga or sagas. There are three sagas that take place in Westfjords, and the saga of Gísli Súrsson is the most popular one. It is a story about the destiny of Thorbjorn Thorkelsson and his family. The saga is rather short but retains everything that a good story needs.

Above: Westfjords and place names in the story. Picture: Steinar Jónasson.



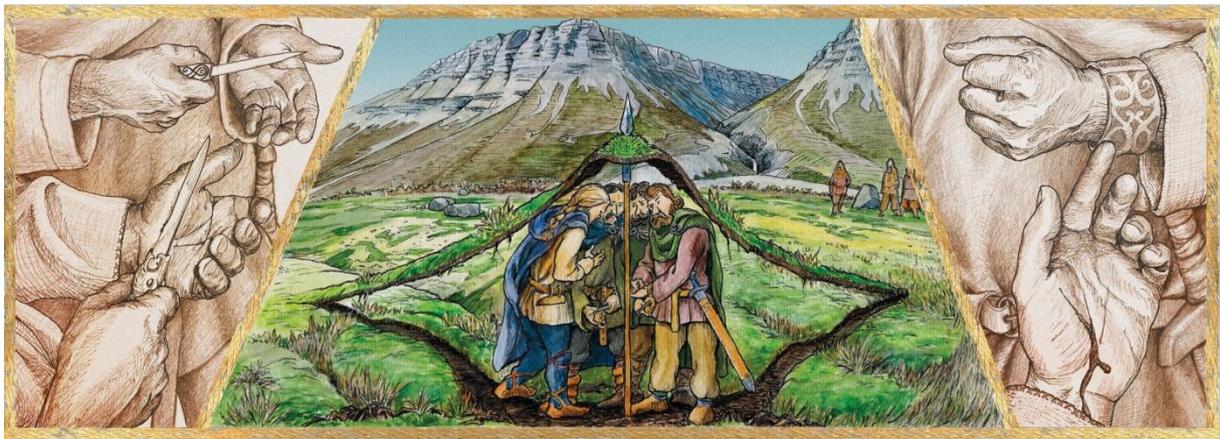
The story of Gísli is a typical outlaw story, one of drama with elements of evil deceit and cruelty but also about love, friendship and loyalty. The saga begins in Norway in the Surnadal valley area south of Trondheim and the nearby islands, but moves to Iceland early in the story. Gísli and his family make their home in Haukadalur valley in Iceland's Westfjords

Left: Haukadalur Valley.

Action takes place in the western part of the Westfjords stretching all over the southern and northern fjords of the region. Gísli's Saga is one of the better-known sagas of Iceland and is part of the curriculum in many Icelandic schools. As in most of the Icelandic sagas, many place names are today exactly the same as the places named in the saga.

This saga- heritage is very much alive to those who live in the Westfjords, making it a good theme for developing a spirit of volunteering.

The saga begins by telling of Þorbjörn Þorkellsson's family, his wife Þóra and their children Þordís, Þórkatla and Gísli. Þorbjörn's family was from the Surnadal valley in Norway and had lived there for many years. Þorbjörn ordered Gísli to defend the family's honour by killing the man who had tried to seduce his sister Þordís. This led to many battles and in the end the family had to leave Norway. They sold everything they owned and sailed to Iceland to make a new home. The voyage took a long time, but they decided eventually to go ashore at the mouth of Haukdadalur's river, which is located on the south coast at Dýrafjörður in Westfjords. They bought land in the valley and built a farm, claiming it by mixing their blood and letting it flow into the earth (below).



Gísli married Audur Vésteinsdóttir, while his brother Þorkell married Ásgerður Þorbjörnsdóttir. Their sister, Þordís married Þorgrímur Þorsteinsson, who later became the Westfjords priest. The whole family lived together in Haukdalur until Vésteinn became envious of other people. When Gísli heard that somebody was planning treachery against his blood brother and his brother-in-law Vésteinn, he tried to calm things down. But Vésteinn was proud and decided to meet his destiny. Finally he was killed at the farm of Hóll (Hill), which was Gísli and Auður's home. Gísli was also a very proud man and decided to get his revenge for Vésteinn's death, even though he knew that the murderer might have been his brother Þorkell. He could not kill his brother because that was against the code of all reputable men. Revenge was still required so Gísli finally decided to kill his brother – in – law and neighbour Þorgrímur. The widow, Þordís, also Gísli's sister, later married Þorgrímur's brother, Börkur. Þordís overheard Gísli say that he had killed Þorgrímur, and she told Börkur, who now had to revenge his brother's death. Gísli was sentenced to exile.

Gísli did not want to leave Iceland because he loved his wife Audur very much. Gísli built a house for Auður in Geirþjófsfjörður, and they lived there secretly. Börkur tried many times to kill Gísli but was unsuccessful. He then hired his uncle Eyjólfur the Grey from Otradalur valley in Arnarfjörður to do the job. Gísli moved around constantly to avoid potential killers. He searched diligently for help in getting his case retried, but nobody wanted to stand against Börkur. Gísli was in exile for 13 years but spent seven of those years with his wife Auður. He became tired of running away and decided to face the men who were looking for him. Finally Eyjólfur and 15 men found him in Geirþjófsfjörður. Gísli defended himself on a cliff called Einhamar, killing 6 men. The saga tells that Gísli was as strong with his last blow as with his first. Gísli's single-handed defence in this battle was remembered in Iceland as being very heroic. (source: Gísla Saga Súrssonar. Icelandic Old writings. Re-published 1943 and reprinted 1972).

The Westfjords is the most remote area of Iceland and probably the most exciting. Virtually separated from the rest of Iceland, this region has remained in many ways a world apart. Therefore the local people have a deep understanding of their environment. Most of Gísli's saga takes place in Dýrafjörður that is a fjord in the Westfjords.

The West Viking site in Þingeyri



The value of the cultural heritage of Gísli's saga has been realised, and the saga has been taught in elementary schools in Iceland for more than 30 years. It has also been translated into several languages. The idea of using the saga and make it visible in the region was born. The Regional Development Agency of the Westfjords initiated a development process which included research on how to use the saga for future regional development. Many ideas were generated and regional group which calls itself the West Vikings was established in the village Þingeyri.



Part of the saga trail



West Vikings

The main objective is to find effective ways to help people remember the story and relive the events that took place. Although contractors did much of the work, the local people joined in voluntarily and the group co-operated in the establishment of a trail promoting the saga along the road and at the most important saga sites. The saga is represented with both words and pictures.

In the summer of 2004 they created a Viking site in traditional turf style in Þingeyri and the volunteer group really began to take-off. They use this site for festivals and all kinds of events where over 300 people can be seated in the circle and a big stage offers the necessary framework for all kind of events. A large hearth in the middle of the circle offers a good atmosphere for storytelling, singing and gathering. A marked place will be added to the area as well as a Viking playground and eventually a longhouse. A big effort has been made to involve the local population. Different craft

courses have been held, and more than 10% of the village's people own their own Viking clothes. Many children are involved and will take part in all kinds of events in the future. The West Vikings are popular in town festivals all around the country. They are known for good handcraft and well made clothes.



Local craft workers were involved in building the Viking ship Vésteinn (left) in Þingeyri in June 2008 and this is another milestone in the development of the volunteer group because much time was given freely. The ship is 12 m long and 3 m wide. The building of the ship took four and a half months.

Importance for EVEHD

For our project, this story shows the importance of putting local history to use and engendering and building on a sense of pride. Because Iceland is a small country with a small population, everybody

can feel their place in the history and the non-profit NGO 'Icelandic Roots', has helped local people and those who emigrated to discover their ancestors. The West Vikings group are justly proud of their stories, costumes and crafts and this creates an atmosphere for volunteering and ensures new membership. Although volunteering is not really in the Icelandic culture, it is common in the USA and Canada and by involving their Atlantic cousins, the group has been boosted, including through financial support. Partnering with the NGO 'Icelandic Roots' has provided opportunities for North American volunteers with the West Vikings. Long and short-term placements are available and

volunteers can undertake a range of activities commensurate with their experience and skills. Incoming American volunteers contribute in a meaningful way to the work of locals and further encourage local volunteering – for example with the *Cousins Across the Ocean* project.



Also of major importance is the link to crafts. Some volunteers are very skilled in metalworking (blacksmithing), carpentry, boat building, felting, knitting and Norse sprang. They are pleased to pass on these skills to the next generation of locals for free and demonstrate them to visitors. There is also the opportunity for volunteering to lead to sales of handmade goods and create meaningful employment; in this way, the act of volunteering has a tangible link to future income earning – another good reason to become a volunteer.

EVEHD visit to the West Vikings – welcoming visitors, encouraging

volunteering and keeping traditional crafts of the Viking-Age alive