

Viking Age rune-stone
repainted in its original
colours. Historiska museet,
Stockholm. Cover image
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The King's Amulet

Rosalind Kerven

The voyage from Norway west-over-sea to Iceland takes at least four days. Even in summer it can be rough sailing, with heavy rain all the way. Many ships that set out never even arrive. So what made people emigrate there?

Everyone had their reasons. A lot left because of King Harald Finehair overrunning his rivals and beating down Norway into a single kingdom. Some were just desperate for a decent-sized plot of land, because there were too many heirs to their family farm. Others were feuding with their kin or neighbours and wanted to get away before they came to blows. Not many had stories as strange as Ingimund Thorsteinsson's.

Ingimund was a successful pirate raider with a huge store of treasure, a splendid house and a formidable reputation. He didn't need to emigrate, and he certainly didn't want to. While Harald Finehair was expanding his power, Ingimund carefully watched which way the wind was blowing – and joined Harald's side just in time to take part in his final victory. Afterwards, in the distribution of gifts, Ingimund was generously rewarded. King Harald granted him three full-size warships, complete with crew. He also gave Ingimund a more personal gift: a small silver amulet carved with the figure of Frey.

'This came from the corpse of Asbjorn the Flethy,' said King Harald. 'You know, that old arch-enemy of mine who you helped to kill. Keep it as a memento, my friend; and may it bring you luck.'

Ingimund stowed it in his purse and sailed home with his new ships. Shortly afterwards, his foster-father threw a feast. It was a grand affair, with many entertainers. The star turn was a Lappish enchantress who earned her living by telling fortunes. She was an impressive-looking woman, statuesque and splendidly dressed; she installed herself on the high-seat as if it had been set up just for her. Most people didn't take much persuading to go up to her, one by one, to hear their fates – even though they were all declared in full hearing of everyone else.

Ingimund thought her predictions were nonsense and refused to join in. But the enchantress worked by her own rules. She didn't care how high-status someone was, or what success they'd achieved; she wouldn't allow anyone to rebuff her.

'My lord Ingimund,' she called. 'I'm not leaving you out. Step up, let me reveal what your future holds.'

'No, no,' he said. 'I don't go along with this sort of thing.'

'Oh, don't you?' said the enchantress. 'Well, stay right where you are if you prefer, but you're going to hear what I have to say, anyway.' Then she turned to the other guests and announced: 'I foretell that Ingimund Thorsteinsson will found a great bloodline – not here, but in Iceland.'

'Iceland?' Ingimund scoffed. 'Ha ha, lady, that proves you don't know what you're talking about. I'm one of King Harald's favourites. Why would I give up my good life here for that land of volcanoes and misfits? You won't find me emigrating – not now – not ever!'

'Are you sure, Ingimund?' the enchantress said. Her voice changed: it took on a sinister tone. 'I think you are wrong; for I see things that you are blind to, I know things that you can never guess. For example: that silver amulet of Frey – the one King Harald gave you – you always keep it in your purse, don't you? But where is it now?'

Everyone began to rib him: 'Go on, Ingimund, have a look!'

With a sigh of irritation, he pulled the purse from his belt and opened it. 'It's ... gone,' he said.

There was a burst of cheering and uproarious clapping.

But Ingimund flew into a rage. 'You thief!' he roared at the enchantress. 'You trickster! Foster-father, throw her out!'

The enchantress held up her hand to still the commotion. 'Hush, hush,' she said. 'Don't diminish yourself, Ingimund. I haven't got your precious amulet. It's nowhere in this hall – nowhere in Norway.' Then she paused, walked across to Ingimund and looked deeply into his eyes. 'It's in Iceland.'

Everyone started fidgeting uneasily. Ingimund's rage dried on his tongue.

'The amulet has gone,' the enchantress repeated. 'It is in Iceland, waiting for you. You may mock me, Ingimund. You may even choose to curse me. But you will have no rest until my prophecy is proved true. I swear this on my life: one day you *will* move to Iceland – and there you will find what you have lost.'

Months passed, then years. Ingimund sank even deeper roots into his home in Norway, even though his foster-brother and other relatives all emigrated westward. He spent an increasing amount of time in King Harald's court. He married a good woman called Vigdis, and they settled down to have a family.

Despite all this, the first part of the Lappish woman's prediction was definitely fulfilled. Because all through those years, Ingimund found he couldn't stop thinking about the strange disappearance of the amulet. It just didn't make sense.

Vigdis said, 'I wish you'd stop fretting about it. Perhaps you should get hold of that enchantress and ask her more about it.'

He made enquiries, but the enchantress had disappeared without trace.

'Well, find someone else to help you,' said his wife.

So Ingimund sent messengers into the far north.

One day, three Lappish wizards came to his farm. They offered to travel to Iceland on his behalf and find out if the amulet was really there. The only payment they wanted was butter and tin.

'But Iceland's a huge country,' Ingimund objected. 'Such a task could take you for ever.'

'No it won't,' said the wizards, 'for we'll not be travelling in the flesh like normal men, but making a spirit journey. That way, the amulet's magic will quickly draw us to it.'

They refused to explain anything. They even refused to reveal their names or answer any questions.

'Well,' said Vigdis, 'since you've brought them all the way here, you might as well give them a try, especially as they're not asking for much in the way of payment.'

So Ingimund followed the wizards' instructions. He locked them in an outbuilding and left them there undisturbed for three nights and days. When they finally emerged, they looked dishevelled and exhausted.

'Master,' they said, 'Our spirit journey is complete. We successfully overcame many hazards and weird powers.'

'And did you locate my amulet?'

They answered, 'Yes indeed, in the north of Iceland.'

'Where?'

'In a valley that opens into a lake,' they said. 'At the foot of a mountain, within a wood.'

Ingimund held out his hand eagerly. But the wizards shook their heads and looked grim.

'Master,' they said, 'you already know that this amulet is filled with strange sorcery. We saw it, yet could not seize it. We coveted it, yet could not control it. The amulet was drifting above the ground, floating away through trees, ahead, always ahead of us. We were severely weakened by the arduous journey out of our bodies; our spirits were draining away. To save our lives, we were compelled to return here, in haste – and empty-handed.'

Was this merely a deception? Or is Lappish magic truly stronger than reason? Whatever the truth, it made Ingimund more disturbed than ever. He said to Vigdis, 'I'm one of King Harald's staunchest supporters. Yet by giving me that amulet, he seems to have fated me to leave his kingdom to go west.'

'No one can fight against destiny,' she said sagely. 'If something seems to be inevitable, what's gained by trying to resist it?'

In the end, Ingimund was so unsettled that he put aside his old protests, packed up and transported his entire household to Iceland, just as the enchantress had foretold. He made his home in Vatnsdal – an area uncannily similar to the one described by the Lappish wizards. Despite his misgivings, it turned out to be an excellent move. Ingimund became a great chieftain. His sons established thriving farms and admirable reputations of their own. His daughters made strong marriages.

Now, here's the final twist. Once his family had built their houses and stocked their farms, Ingimund decided to formally bless his new estate with the promise of ongoing fertility. Also, he wanted to celebrate how the king's gift had indeed led him to his true destiny. So he decided to build a temple to Frey.

As his men were digging holes deep in the ground to sink the temple pillars, their tools struck metal. This was odd, since the soil in this place had never been disturbed by any human hand before. They investigated and pulled out a small silver object.

It was the lost amulet.

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Notes

This story comes from *Vatnsdaela Saga* (*The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*). Vatnsdal (Water Valley or Lake Valley) is a long valley in northern Iceland, south of the town of Blönduós; there is a lake at its mouth and two more lakes nearby. The saga follows several generations of inhabitants centred on a family of local chieftains all descended from the original settler there, Ingimund Thorsteinsson, who is believed to have lived in the early 10th century. The same story is told more briefly in *Landnamabok*. According to the saga, Ingimund established a long dynasty of chieftains in the valley, and the temple he built to Frey was a hundred feet long.

The sailing time from Norway to Iceland is taken from *Landnámabók* (*Book of Settlements*), a 12th-century work which tells the same story more briefly and describes the original settlement of Iceland and the establishment of farms there. Viking Age ships were completely open to the weather, and passengers were crammed in beside goods and livestock, so such a voyage must have been not just dangerous but also most uncomfortable. In the early Viking Age, the woods described by the wizards did indeed extend much further over the Icelandic landscape than the sparse, scrubby remnants that can be seen there today. In the saga, Ingimund's occupation as a pirate raider is described without shame and in a very positive light. Despite the distress caused to its victims, the sagas describe many other prominent men routinely engaging in this activity, in order to swell their coffers – including King Harald Finehair himself.

In the sagas the Lapps (also known as Finns) are usually associated with the magic arts. Their traditional drums, made of wood and reindeer hide and engraved with esoteric figures, were claimed to enable those with shamanistic gifts to go on 'out-of-the-body' spiritual journeys – a practice in common with other traditional Arctic cultures.

However, skills of prophecy were not exclusive to them. Another story of the Viking Age, *Eirik's Saga*, contains a vivid description of a fortune-telling session in Greenland at a time of great famine. Here the prophetess is a young Norse woman known as 'the little sybil', raised in a family where her nine late sisters had shared the same talent. Before beginning work for the householder, she is given a special meal of goat's milk gruel and animal hearts, and must sleep in the house overnight. In order to perform her ritual the following day, she calls for a group of women to stand in a circle around her, while one of these sings a 'warlock song' that she had learned in Iceland from her foster-mother. Following this, the prophetess says that the invisible spirits have now arrived, and makes a series of predictions, both general and personal. Most of these, the saga writer adds, turn out to be true.

Taken from Rosalind Kerven's *Viking Myths and Sagas, retold from ancient Norse texts* (Talking Stone, 2015), www.vikingmythsandsagas.blogspot.co.uk.