

Axel Kristinsson, *Hnignun, hvaða hnignun?*
Goðsögnin um niðurlægingartímabilið í sögu Íslands [Decline, What Decline? The Myth of
the Depressed Era in the History of Iceland].
(Reykjavík: Sögufélag 2018). 280 pp.

Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, University of Iceland

Axel Kristinsson, an independent historian, has published work on Icelandic history as well as international or comparative history, in both Icelandic and English. As a self-confessed macro-historian, inspired by evolutionary theory and complexity theory, his approach is analytical rather than empirical or descriptive, as witnessed by his most ambitious work, *Expansions: Competition and Conquest in Europe since the Bronze Age* (Reykjavík: Reykjavíkur Akadémían, 2010). In his recent book, written in Icelandic on Icelandic history, he sets out to debunk the established view that protracted economic decline characterized the period from the fourteenth century (or earlier) until around 1800.

As Kristinsson points out, this view gives the history of Iceland an appealing narrative structure, like any good story where trials and tribulations separate blissful beginnings from the happy ending. And by blaming foreign rule for the decline it served the purpose of Iceland's independence movement. While the nationalistic interpretation may linger in popular history, in academic history the decline is no longer explained by political factors but natural ones: colder climate (the Little Ice Age) and land degradation, hastened by over-exploitation. What remains of the political interpretation is the blame for a delayed recovery, pinned

Recommended citation: Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, review of Axel Kristinsson, 'Hnignun, hvaða hnignun? Goðsögnin um niðurlægingartímabilið í sögu Íslands' (Reykjavík, 2018), *1700-tal* 16 (2019): 149–151. <https://doi.org/10.7557/4.4890>

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

not so much on negligent Danish rule as on the self-serving politics of conservative elites, domestic no less than foreign.

The author accepts none of this, refuting point by point both the factual basis and the ideological implications of the «myth» of decline. He draws on various sorts of theory, with Boserup looming large, for instance. World history serves for comparison, both in broad outline (e.g. the changes in living conditions following the agricultural revolution) and in specific detail (e.g. the disputed «collapse» of Easter Island society).

Axel Kristinsson's use of terms like «under-populated» and even «population crisis» may suggest that he sees Iceland's shrinking population as a negative development – not one caused, however, by any general «decline» in the economy but exclusively by epidemiological factors. Being under-populated, in turn, serves as the author's explanation of various developments traditionally seen as part of the «decline», including the relatively modest status of domestic elites.

The approach of this book is deliberately challenging, even adversarial. Axel Kristinsson is making the best case he can, rather than dwelling on possible counterarguments. His book is well suited to stimulate debate and as such a most welcome contribution to Icelandic historiography.

As an Icelandic historian of a more descriptive bent and, I am afraid, of a more insular outlook, I find this work fresh and inspiring. Conclusions with which I would agree anyway are presented from a new perspective, supported by novel arguments. Even more useful is being challenged by conclusions with which I less readily agree. Two examples, both concerning the eighteenth century, may serve as illustrations.

The allegedly harmful consequences of the Danish trade monopoly Axel Kristinsson dismisses out of hand, pointing out the limited volume of foreign trade and thus its scant importance. To this it is easy to respond that the small volume of trade just goes to show how unfavourably it was arranged; it would have been greater under a more efficient system. Which is what happened during the nineteenth century – but only after the industrial revolution had transformed both import and export markets, a situation that cannot be superimposed on the eighteenth century. Suggesting that Axel Kristinsson considers the potential rather than the actual volume of eighteenth-century trade is, I have to admit, advocating a counterfactual approach, with its obvious weaknesses.

A second and more central issue concerns the supply and productivity of labour. Axel Kristinsson is realistic about colder climate and land degradation reducing the productivity of agricultural labour. However, he does not see lower productivity as a problem, let alone a «decline». People are adaptable and would

compensate for lower productivity with more labour. The author is equally realistic about the inverse relationship between population size and labour productivity. Yet he does not see a shrinking population as significant in mitigating the decline of labour productivity. In his view, a larger population would have compensated for lower productivity by labouring even more. If required, people could also have worked more in order to pay higher rents or taxes. But they did not need to and therefore only provided more labour and increased production when the nineteenth century offered new opportunities to buy imported goods.

This whole perspective is, to me at least, new and unexpected. I agree with Axel Kristinsson's assumptions about labour productivity. I also agree that working people in medieval Iceland (working men at least) seem to have enjoyed much more leisure than their nineteenth-century counterparts. But I wonder if there was still, as late as the eighteenth century, plenty of scope for a more intense use of the labour force. Not only in the hypothetical situations of a larger population or a heavier burden of rent and taxes but in the real eighteenth century I get the impression of a labour force «bottleneck» during the late summer hay harvest, with most people already working long hours and unable to work any harder to offset any further reduction in productivity. But an impression is no conclusive evidence, and again I must avoid projecting too much nineteenth century back onto an earlier period.

On these two issues, as on several others, Axel Kristinsson may or may not have given the final answers but his challenge is most definitely helpful in clarifying the questions.