

## *Can't remember to forget you: Icelandic statues and negative memories of the eighteenth century*

*Arnór Gunnar Gunnarsson & Jón Kristinn Einarsson, Reykjavík*

The BLM movement did indeed enter Icelandic discourse in various ways in the summer of 2020. Contrary to the heated protests against problematic monuments in many countries, however, debates over Icelandic statues were not prominent. Some ideas surfaced, though, and in June, the former newspaper editor and prominent socialist Gunnar Smári Egilsson called for removing the statue of Ingólfur Arnarson, the man purported to have been the first permanent settler of Iceland in the ninth century.<sup>1</sup> The reason was that Ingólfur is usually said to have owned slaves when he arrived in Iceland. Around the same time, a University of Iceland student wrote a tweet criticizing that same statue. How can Icelanders, according to the tweet, condemn Confederate statues of U.S. slaveholders while having their very own slaveholder statue in a prominent place in the centre of Reykjavík?<sup>2</sup> This was liked and retweeted by a number of people, including historians and other academics.

Of course, there are vast differences between this Icelandic statue and the controversial U.S. monuments. While Confederate monuments commemorate nineteenth-century men whose claim to fame is committing treason to fight for slavery, Ingólfur is celebrated for supposedly settling in Iceland sometime around 870.

<sup>1</sup> Gunnar Smári Egilsson, "Nú þegar þjóðir heims eru að fella stytur," Facebook, 10 June 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/gunnar.smari.egilsson/posts/3339222412762900>. Accessed 17 February 2021.

<sup>2</sup> @Sjomli, "Íslendingar: va Bandaríkin eru rugluð," Twitter, 8 June 2020, 4:41 p.m., <https://twitter.com/Sjomli/status/1270033270638555136?s=20>. Accessed 17 February 2021.

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The earliest mention of his name dates back to the twelfth century, more than two centuries after he possibly lived in Iceland. Thus, in recent years, historians have questioned whether Ingólfur existed at all and, if he did, they have downplayed details of his life as unreliable, even fictional. Even if Ingólfur existed, he is not remembered mainly for being a slaveholder and there is no group of people that sees themselves as descendants of Ingólfur's slaves. Nevertheless, if a large number of people associate Ingólfur's statue with slavery, that criticism may very well be valid, despite academics pointing out inaccuracies in the reasoning. Perhaps this serves as a reminder that statues do not only represent the consensus of academic historians, but other ideas as well. Without any polling on Ingólfur's statue, however, these two social media posts cannot be regarded as representative of public opinion.

In another incident, people discussed not removing but erecting a new statue. The subject was to be Hans Jónatan (1784–1827), a Danish-Caribbean man who was born into slavery on the Caribbean island of St. Croix but served in the Danish navy and moved to East-Iceland where he ran a trading post. Thought to be the first Black man to move to Iceland, Hans Jónatan has generated much interest in the past decade or two, becoming the subject of a popular book, a movie, and genetic research.<sup>3</sup> Vilhjálmur Bjarnason, at the time an alternate member of parliament, sponsored a resolution in June 2020 for the government to erect a monument in Hans Jónatan's honour. In support of the resolution, Vilhjálmur made references to the ongoing debates over public memory of slavery.<sup>4</sup> The idea was picked up by the media, with the anthropologist and Hans Jónatan biographer Gísli Pálsson encouraging MPs to approve the idea.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, the government adopted the idea and decided in February 2021 to commission the monument.<sup>6</sup> To mention another instance, 700 people signed a petition for the Reykjavík city council to erect a bust of U.S. musician Kanye West outside a public swimming

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Gísli Pálsson, *Hans Jónatan: Maðurinn sem stal sjálfum sér* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> "Tillaga til þingsályktunar um minnisvarða um Hans Jónatan," Þingtíðindi, Alþingi, accessed 18 February 2021, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/150/s/1751.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Júlía Margrét Einarsdóttir and Anna Marsibil Clausen, "Vilja reisa minnisvarða um fyrsta svarta íbúa landsins," RÚV, 25 June, 2020, <https://www.ruv.is/frett/2020/06/25/vilja-reisa-minnisvarda-um-fyrsta-svarta-ibua-landsins>, accessed 17 February 2021; Larissa Kyzer, "Statue to Honour the First Black Man to Settle in Iceland, Iceland Review," 26 June 2020, <https://www.icelandreview.com/society/statue-to-honor-hans-jonatan-the-first-black-man-to-settle-in-iceland>, accessed 17 February 2021.

<sup>6</sup> "Ríkisstjórnin styrkir kaup á minnisvarða um Hans Jónatan og gerð afsteypu af styttnu Nínu Sæmundsson," Stjórnarráð Íslands, 26 February 2021, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/efst-a-baugi/frettir/stok-frett/2021/02/26/Rikisstjornin-styrkir-kaup-a-minnisvarda-um-Hans-Jonatan-og-gerd-afsteypu-af-styttu-Ninu-Saemundsson>. Accessed 28 March 2021.

pool.<sup>7</sup> Notably, there are no public statues commemorating people of colour in Iceland and very few, if any, of immigrants — and the first full-size statue of a non-anonymous woman, the first female MP Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason (1867–1941), was only erected in 2015. Aside from this discussion about commissioning a new statue of Hans Jónatan and the brief mention of Ingólfur Arnarson, Icelandic statues did not seem to garner much attention in connection to the BLM movement and calls for changes in 2020.

One reason for Iceland’s virtual absence from the statue debate, especially in terms of the eighteenth century, is the negative status early modernity has in national public memory. The period has generally been seen as a time of stagnation or even decline in both economic and cultural terms, with the eighteenth century, characterized by harsh weather, natural disasters and pestilence, being the nadir of this development. This can be traced to the leaders of the independence movement of the nineteenth century, who wanted to emphasize the negative effects of Danish rule, and especially the Danish-Icelandic trade monopoly of 1602–1786, on the nation. Although many historians in recent decades have done much to revise this downbeat historiography of the early modern period<sup>8</sup>, statues and other “lieux de mémoires” remain a potent relic of the old view. Thus, many Icelandic statues and places of memory either celebrate the “golden age” which ended in 1262–4 when the island became subject to foreign rule, or nineteenth- or twentieth-century figures – politicians and artists – who represent the country’s supposed renaissance upon breaking free from Danish rule at the turn of the twentieth century.

For example, arguably the most famous statue in Iceland is of the nineteenth-century nationalist Jón Sigurðsson (1811–1879), located in Austurvöllur in front of the parliament building. A statue of the Danish-Icelandic sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844) had occupied that prominent location until it was replaced by Jón’s statue in 1931. Commenting on the ongoing debates about Confederate monuments in the U.S. in 2017, the Icelandic comparatist Kjartan Már Ómarsson referred to the 1931 change as an example of how statues reflect the spirit of the times. In the 1930s, Iceland was cementing its status as an independent nation, after having mostly broken its ties with Denmark in 1918.<sup>9</sup> Having a statue of a

<sup>7</sup> Kristín Sigurðardóttir, “Vilja Kanye West við Westurbæjarlaug,” RÚV, 21 January 2021, <https://www.ruv.is/frett/2021/01/21/vilja-kanye-west-vid-westurbæjarlaug>. Accessed 16 February 2021.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Axel Kristinsson, *Hnignun, hvaða hnignun? Goðsögnin um niðurlægingartímabilið í sögu Íslands* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Björn Malmquist, “Styttum skákað til eftir tíðaranda”, RÚV, 22 August 2017, <https://www.ruv.is/frett/styttum-skakad-til-efir-tidaranda>. Accessed 17 February 2021.

man who never came to Iceland in his lifetime in front of parliament was understandably not ideal in that context.

Early modern places of memory can of course be found but they serve, quite often, as a reminder of suffering, violence, or acts of resilience in the face of extreme hardships. That is the case of the memorial chapel of Reverend Jón Steingrímsson (1728–1791) in Kirkjubæjarklaustur, who is known for his valiant actions during the catastrophic Laki eruption of 1783–1784. Other examples include places which were used to execute people for moral crimes from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, when harsh punishments were carried out on Icelandic citizens by the executive<sup>10</sup> And yet another instance is a newly erected memorial plaque in Northwest-Iceland about the “Slaying of the Spaniards” in 1615, when a group of Basque whalers were massacred by Icelanders after stranding in the Westfjords.<sup>11</sup>

Examples of the opposite, celebration of early modern characters in public places, exist as well. In downtown Reykjavík, there is a prominently placed statue of the country treasurer (landfógeti) Skúli Magnússon (1711–1794), often called “the father of Reykjavík”. And one kilometre from his statue, one can find Hallgrímskirkja (“the Church of Hallgrímur”), which was built in 1945–1986 to commemorate the minister and hymn writer Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614–1684) and was, until recently, the tallest building in Iceland.

Neither of these, however, is likely to be the subject of a contentious debate stemming from the BLM movement, as in the case of many eighteenth-century figures in neighbouring countries. Iceland, unlike most countries that border the Atlantic Ocean, was neither a colony nor a colonizer in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and thus did not take part in the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>12</sup> One could argue that Icelanders might have indirectly benefitted from slavery through economic reforms as part of the kingdom of Denmark-Norway, but it would quite far-fetched to apply that argument to individual Icelanders.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example: Diljá Auður Kolbeinsdóttir Gray, Brotakonur fortíðar, píslarvottar samtímans? Drekkingarhylur rannsakaður út frá kyngveri minninganna. BA thesis at the University of Iceland, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Minnisvarði um Spánverjavíginn”, Stjórnarráðið, 27 April 2015, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/efst-a-baugi/frettir/stok-frett/2015/04/27/Minnisvardi-um-Spanverjavigin>. Accessed 17 February 2021.

<sup>12</sup> The status of Iceland within the Kingdom of Denmark is, however, debated among academics. Many argue that Iceland was not a colony although some say that, culturally, Icelanders were treated as such. See Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Var Ísland nýlenda?” *Saga* 52:1 (2014), pp. 42–75; Gísli Gunnarsson, “Einokunarverslun í öllu Danaveldi?”, *Saga* 57:1 (2019); Jón Yngvi Jóhannesson, “Af reiðum Íslendingum: Deilur um Nýlendusýninguna 1905”, *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár?* Ed. Jón Yngvi Jóhannesson, Kolbeinn Óttarsson Proppé and Sverrir Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2003), pp. 135–136.

Icelandic statues and monuments, therefore, did not feature prominently during the BLM protests and debates of 2020, except for the inconspicuous discussions about removing the statue of Ingólfur Arnarson and the decision to erect a new statue of Hans Jónatan. This does not mean, however, that Icelandic places of memory are entirely unproblematic. In many ways, Icelandic monuments reflect an outdated nationalistic view which downplays the importance of early modernity in the nation's history.