

Guðmundur Jónsson, ed., *Ástand Íslands um 1700. Lífshættir í bændasamfélagi* [The State of Iceland at the Turn of the 18th Century: Economic and Social Conditions in Peasant Society] (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2024). 442 pp.

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Iceland, unlike many other northern and western European countries, did not experience an agricultural revolution in early modernity. As Guðmundur Jónsson notes in the introduction to *The State of Iceland*, Iceland was the only European country that did not undergo sustained population growth in the 1700s (p. 12). Consequently, historians of early modern Icelandic rural society and economy have at times been preoccupied with examining what impeded breakthroughs and progress, rather than studying Icelandic early modern society on its own terms.

The State of Iceland takes a different approach. This work is the product of a research project based on an extraordinary set of sources produced by a research commission consisting of the philologist Árni Magnússon and lawyer Páll Vídalín. Starting in 1702, the commission conducted a population census, a livestock census, and a national register of estates. The resulting book provides readers with a detailed and wide-ranging account of Icelandic peasant society at the turn of the eighteenth century, enriched at times with comparative examples from neighbouring countries. A central theme is the effort to correct and redefine older depictions of early modern Iceland, which portrayed it as a homogenous group of poor but free peasants. As such, the aim of the book is not to answer causal questions about political or economic development, but rather to provide a reliable cross-section of early eighteenth-century Icelandic society.

The first two chapters of the book are an introduction, written by Guðmundur Jónsson, and a discussion of its sources.

In chapter 3, Sigríður Hjördís Jörundsdóttir relates the Icelandic hardships of the late seventeenth century to hemispheric climatic cooling caused by the eruption

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of the Icelandic volcano Hekla in 1693, as well as two Indonesian eruptions of the 1690s. She provides a detailed account of the hardships themselves and the government's limited response to them, underlining the lack of state capacity in this peripheral part of the Danish empire. Her chapter is pivotal, as these hardships directly prompted the central government to commission the information-gathering effort on which the book is based. This weakness and disinterested nature of the state in Iceland is also highlighted by Jónsson in the introduction, where he suggests that the Danish state in Iceland in the period in question could be characterised as a “predatory state”—a state which first and foremost serves the interests of those operating in its upper layers, rather stimulating economic development or providing public service to subjects (p. 40).

In chapter four, Ólöf Garðarsdóttir analyses the censuses of 1703 and 1729 from the perspective of demography, family, and household. By excluding duplicate records, she reduces the recorded population of the 1703 census from 50,358 to 50,140. More broadly, Garðarsdóttir explores how the late seventeenth-century hardships, as well as the smallpox epidemic of 1707–1709, affected different groups, categorised by gender, area of residency, age, and socioeconomic status.

In chapter five, Óskar Guðlaugsson and Ingibjörg Jónsdóttir use the project's GIS database to geographically map out the structure of settlements and habitats in Iceland. The chapter highlights the possibilities offered by the database assembled by the project, which is now publicly available on 1703.is. Among the more interesting parts of the chapter is on p. 164, where Guðlaugsson and Jónsdóttir provide a map of Iceland delineated into different types of agriculture and employment.

In chapter six, Guðmundur Jónsson and Óskar Guðlaugsson discuss the structure of farm organization and land management, presenting the first-ever “national statistics ... on the number of farms and the division between main farms and cottages prior to the 20th century.” (p. 379). Among other things, they highlight the importance of small landholdings, noting that “small farms” (valued at less than ten cows) accounted for 44% of all farms.

In chapter seven, Jónsson and Guðlaugsson turn their attention to land ownership, providing a detailed breakdown of “who owned Iceland.” They reveal that 56% of land was privately owned—35% of this to major landowners and 21% by owner-occupants or small-scale landowners). Meanwhile, 17% was owned by the Crown, and 27% by the Church. Compared to other Nordic countries, Iceland had a low proportion of Church lands, and one of the lowest rates of self-ownership, with 4% of land held by owner-occupants, second only to Denmark's 2%.

In chapter eight, Árni Daníel Júlíusson examines the nature and geographic distribution of demesnes (*höfuðból*) and domains (*góss*). Júlíusson observes that

large-scale domains (*stórgóss*) were more common in the southern and northwestern Iceland, which can be explained by proximity to ecclesiastical and royal power centers. Júlíusson also notes that *corvée* labor was more common on manors in the southwest than in the north, underscoring the intimate link between fisheries and *corvée* labor in Iceland. Although there was no formal aristocracy in Iceland, he stresses that demesnes and domains were still important nodes of power.

In the last three chapters of the book, Guðmundur Jónsson explores class structure. He argues that despite the absence of a legal division into three estates, Icelandic society nevertheless reflected such a model. An Icelandic elite composed of government officials, clergy, and Danish merchants, was akin to the aristocracy, clergy, and burghers of Denmark and Norway. This elite enjoyed legal privileges such as tax exemptions, in stark contrast to the rest of society. Secondly, Jónsson analyses the gender dimension of land ownership, noting that women owned 30% of land in Iceland.

Jónsson furthermore provides an analysis of socioeconomic stratification based on land ownership and rents, demonstrating that the thirteen richest men in Iceland owned 62% of all privately owned land. In chapter ten, Jónsson examines tenancy in more detail, arguing that older notions of the Icelandic tenant as having enjoyed comparatively great freedoms do not stand the test of evidence. 96% of Icelandic peasants were tenants. And while not bound to the land, they were comparatively rightless in the west European context. Leases were rarely written down, typically lasted for only one year, and *corvée* labor was more extensive than in other Nordic countries. In the final chapter, Jónsson provides an overview of subtenants, fisherman cottars, lodgers, and laborers as recorded in the 1703 census.

The State of Iceland is a book whose authors can be proud of—a landmark reference for scholars of early modern Iceland and anyone interested in comparative studies of early modern peasant societies. While the fact that it is written in Icelandic will certainly pose challenges for many, they can still read the English summary at the end of the book and use the project's database at 1703.is.