

Dithmar Blefken, “Islandia” (1607)

Abstract

When it came to continental Europeans’ image of Iceland, few works exerted a more powerful lasting influence than the travel report *Islandia*, published in 1607 by the Protestant pastor Dithmar Blefken. The account describes the author’s journey to and experiences on the myth-shrouded North Atlantic island between 1563 and 1565. Blefken reports on the Icelandic custom of parents offering their daughters to German visitors as temporary companions, in the hopes that the relationship would produce offspring. Here, as in so many travel reports, relationships between the sexes are viewed as key in presenting the distinctly different nature of Icelandic culture. Red Sea peoples – compared to the casual Icelanders – are portrayed by Blefken as representing the other extreme when it came to the virginity of one’s own daughters; on this subject, he invoked an Italian author, Pietro Bembo. In doing so, Blefken underscored the “otherness” of Icelandic culture still further by evoking a different type of “foreignness”; his own position – without being clearly illuminated – thus became the middle ground between two purported extremes.

Source

[...]

When they come to the harbor, they also always have their daughters of marriageable age with them. They ask our people if they have wives at home, and if not, they promise a night of love for bread, zwieback, or some other trifle. Sometimes the parents let some man have their daughter for a whole month, or for as long as he is staying, sometimes even for free. If the daughter becomes pregnant as the result of such a relationship, her parents embrace her with even greater love than before and raise the offspring for many years, either until the father comes back or they give the child with their daughter as a dowry to their future son-in-law, who in no way rejects the child because it has German blood. If a girl has a relationship with a German, she is held in high esteem and many men ask for her hand. And there was a time earlier when even improper activities, as long as they occurred outside the family, were not considered disgraceful. And although sermonizers rail against such behavior and the perpetrators are strenuously prosecuted, they can scarcely be deterred. How far removed are that nation’s people from the morals that consider virginity to be the highest good, as Pietro Bembo attests in the sixth book of his history of Venice, where he notes the following: “When the Portuguese sailors found their way into the Red Sea, they came upon several tribes of decent black people who were brave in war. Those people sew the genitals of their daughters shut immediately after birth, such that they are not prevented from urinating. When the girls are grown, they are given in marriage sewn shut and grown over, so that the first task of the groom is to cut open the girl’s stuck-together labia with a knife. The undoubted virginity of their brides is just that important to the savages.” So much from Bembo.

[...]

Source of the German text: Dithmar Blefken, *Islandia, sive populorum et mirabilium; quae in ea insula reperiuntur; accuratior descriptio; cui de groenlandia sub finem quaedam adiecta*, in: Robert Wallisch and Georg Holzer, eds., *Island – fremdes Land: Das Reisebuch des Dithmar Blefken 1563 – 1565*. Latin text of the first edition of 1607. Translation (into German) with notes and an appendix on the historical cartography of Iceland. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2012, p. 41f.

<https://verlag.oeaw.ac.at/island-fremdes-land>

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