



A RAINBOW T*READ

**NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF ICELAND**

Welcome to the Rainbow Thread, a queer guide through the permanent exhibition of the National Museum of Iceland, *Making of a Nation – Heritage and History in Iceland.*

[Location: 1](#)

Were there gay men and lesbians back in the day? Intersex people and trans people? Bisexual people, pansexual, asexual and non-binary people?

Yes, probably. But these words don't have a long history. People's ideas on sex, gender and sexuality have changed a great deal through the centuries. As a result, we can't always use modern terms to describe the past. Yet by examining history from a queer perspective, we can make many interesting discoveries.

The Rainbow Thread is a queer guide through the exhibition *Making of a Nation*. It deals with queer history in Iceland. The term *queer* refers to sex, gender and sexuality that don't coincide with the traditions and customs of a particular time period, including people who would today be called trans, intersex, non-binary, or homo-, bi-, pan- or asexual.



What is a Nation?

Location: 2

Who belongs to the Icelandic nation? People born in Iceland? Foreign citizens who live here? Christians? Muslims, Buddhists or Jews? Queer people?

Dominant ideas about nationhood are about 100–200 years old and have changed greatly within that time. It varies, therefore, which people are being referred to when a nation is discussed. One hundred years ago, the “true” Icelander was an able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender white man. When people spoke of a nation, they usually had in mind a group of such men. Icelanders later came to include women in their idea of the nation, and queer people later still.

Gay and bisexual men became visible in the 1950s. Icelandic newspapers began discussing and condemning them. They were considered diseased and a threat to the nation. How could they then be a part of it?

Queer women were invisible in public discourse until about 1980. Could they be considered part of the nation? What about other people who were neither men nor women? Whose history does *Making of a Nation* tell?

Before 1950, reference was seldom made to queer people in Iceland. There was occasional discussion of foreign scandals involving “sexual deviants,” but Icelandic queer people were all but invisible in public discourse. Could they then be considered part of the nation?



The thread is available as an audio guide on www.thjodminjasafn.is/audio-guides

Skeletons

[Location: 10](#)

Modern ideas about two genders and opposite gender roles are a fairly recent phenomenon. This is often referred to as the gender binary. In other time periods and other societies, people have had different ideas. They may have had three, four, or five genders, or even just one.

People's ideas of gender are variable and always shaped by society. Skeletal structure and DNA do not provide comprehensive information about the gender of the people who lie

here. How did they think about their gender? Can today's ideas describe our predecessors' experiences of their own gender?

Biological sex does not exist in only two varieties, either. It too is diverse. People with variations in sex characteristics are now called intersex, but they have always existed. Could these skeletons have belonged to such people? What conclusions can we draw about sex and gender based on 1000-year-old skeletal remains?

Commonwealth-Era Laws

[Location: 12](#)

Sexual relations between people of the same sex were not illegal under Icelandic law until 1869. They were nevertheless considered immoral, sinful or perverted. *Grágás*, Icelanders' oldest book of laws, contains legal codes from the 12th and 13th centuries. According to these laws, same-sex sexual relations were not illegal and there was no mention of sex between women. It was, however, illegal to defame a man by calling him *ragur*, *stroðinn* or *sorðinn*. These words meant that the man was *argur*, i.e. feminine,

cowardly or had been penetrated by another man. The words thus referred to qualities that were considered unmanly. These qualities were called *ergi*. It was, however, not considered unmanly to penetrate another man. Men would even rape other men if they wanted to humiliate them and demonstrate their power.

Why was the accusation illegal, but not the deed itself? What does this tell us about ideas of masculinity and gender roles in the Commonwealth Era?



Confessions and Monasteries

Location: 31

Sexual relations between people of the same sex were condemned in both the Catholic and Lutheran traditions. The Confessional Guide (*skriftaboð*) of Bishop Þorlákur from the late 12th century was a guide for priests on how people might atone for various sins. According to the guide, it was considered a serious sin if a man was “polluted” by another man. It was also considered sinful if “women engaged with each other until their desire was released.”

The Catholic church offered an escape from engagement, marriage and procreation. That escape was to join a monastic order. Might queer men and women have taken that opportunity and joined convents or monasteries?

Is it possible that romantic and even sexual relationships between people of the same sex occurred in monasteries? Might people who had little or no interest in sexual relationships have been drawn there? What about other queer people?

Silence

Location: 35

The history of queer people in Iceland and elsewhere is characterized by silence. Little has been done in terms of research, and sources are hard to come by. This is true of men but especially of women and people of other genders. In this guide, for example, there is a large gap between the middle ages and the 19th century, owing to a lack of research and source materials.

When researching queer history in Iceland, it is important to work with the silences and interpret them. Why does the exhibition *Making of a Nation* make no reference to sexuality? How can we interpret this silence?

A Cure for *Ergi*

Location: 58

Before the advent of modern medical science, various forms of knowledge were used to defeat ailments and restore balance in people's bodily functions. In addition to witchcraft and prayer, bloodletting and herbal medicines were used. An Icelandic medical text believed to date from the late 16th century contains remedies for various diseases and ailments. It includes advice for treating *ergi* that reads as follows: "Take juniper berries and rub on the secret member." The same text recommends using vinegar, willow seeds and willow flowers to treat "*ergi* and lust, if a man should be too eager for women." The text is attributed to the Reverend Kristján Villadsson, but it has also been

suggested that Jón Guðmundsson the Learned may have contributed to its preserved form.

Ergi was a negative term in the Middle Ages and referred to a lack of masculinity. It could imply a variety of things, including cowardice, the lack of children or a beard, or having been penetrated by another man. The medical text indicates that *ergi* was also a known phenomenon in the 16th century.

What does this text tell us about people's attitudes toward *ergi* and same-sex sexual activity?

Kisses between Men

Location: 73

Modern Western ideas concerning homosexuality first took form in the late 19th century in Europe but didn't reach Iceland until considerably later. At the dawn of the 20th century, Icelanders had little knowledge of "gays" or "homosexuals" and had not encountered ideas about their being regarded abnormal and dangerous.

At the turn of the century, it was a common custom, especially in the countryside, for people to greet each other and take their leave with a kiss on the lips. This was customary among men as well as women. Kisses were neither considered "gay" nor an indication of homosexuality or bisexuality.



This kissing custom mostly vanished in the first decades of the 20th century. One reason was that Icelanders became more aware of homosexuality, at least among men. They also connected it with abnormality and femininity. It was therefore considered less problematic if women kissed each other on the lips.

What did it mean when two men kissed? Could they be considered “real men”? What does it mean now if two men kiss? Can men kiss each other without being considered queer?

Homoeroticism in the 19th Century?

[Location: 80](#)



Sigurður Guðmundsson (Sigurður the Painter) is sometimes said to have shaped the Icelandic national image, partly because he designed the national costume for women called *skautbúningur*. He was a respected man, but there were rumors that he was effeminate and might even have been attracted to men. Nothing is known for certain about his sexual orientation. He had many other pursuits besides design, and his oeuvre includes paintings, backdrops for theater performances, letters and drawings. In Sigurður's letter to the pastor Eggert Ó. Briem in 1870 he includes a drawing of a winged

phallus that dives onto the text. The letter opens with the words “All hail your magnificent phallifly!” and concludes with “...I’m sorry but there is no space here for phalliflies or butterflies and it wouldn’t do you any good to see it anyway.” The image is multifaceted and Sigurður's words can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

Is the drawing symbolic of homoeroticism in communications between two men? Or is it an affirmation of their masculinity? What does Sigurður mean when stating that it will “do [Eggert] no good” to see a phallus?

Identities

Location: 83

Identity categories like nationality, sexual orientation and gender identity are changeable and shaped by social circumstances at a given time. National identities came into being with the emergence of nation-states in the 19th century. At that time the idea of homosexuality did not exist, nor heterosexuality, pansexuality, bi- or asexuality. What we refer to today as sexual orientation was considered to be something a person did rather than an essential component of who a person was.

Modern medicine was developed in the 19th century and soon began to exert an influence on what people thought they knew about sex, gender and sexual behavior. Medical science rejected the idea that unusual sexual behavior, such as sexual intimacy with people of one's own sex, was

criminal or immoral. On the contrary, they posited a phenomenon called "homosexuality" that characterized some individuals. This sexual orientation caused people to be attracted to individuals of their own sex or behave in other ways that were not considered appropriate for their sex.

In this way our ideas about different sexual orientations and genders emerged. Sexual orientation is now considered to be a personal characteristic of an individual, much like gender, skin color or nationality. We say that sexual orientation and gender identity make us who we are. But two hundred years ago, no one considered themselves to be trans, lesbian, gay, bi-, pan-, asexual or heterosexual.

What will our ideas be like in another hundred years?

Women's Love at the Turn of the Century

Location: 89

The social changes that occurred around the dawn of the 20th century made a major impact on women's

opportunity to participate in and influence society. Through community organizations, education



and employment opportunities, women's spaces emerged. These changes also enabled women to reject heterosexual marriage and provide for themselves. In Reykjavík, several well-known women cohabited for varying lengths of time. Many of them had romantic relationships, but it is not known whether they were sexual in nature. There were also no words like homosexual, bisexual or lesbian that could be used to define the women

or their practices. Neither society nor the women themselves had tools to define them based on sexual orientation. There was certainly some gossip about them in town, but the nature of their relationships was mostly shrouded in silence.

Did this silence grant women more freedom than men to live queer family life?

Men in the “Situation”

Location: 90

During the Second World War, up to 55 thousand soldiers were stationed in Iceland at the same time. Thousands of young men changed the face of Reykjavík and invigorated the city's party scene. Girls who became involved with soldiers were condemned and persecuted by the state and other citizens, but society did not interfere much in love affairs between soldiers and Icelandic boys. Many narratives and other sources from the period demonstrate that men could have romantic relationships with other men without attracting particular attention or

comment. This was equally true of teenage boys and married men.

These relationships did not become a subject of discussion until the 21st century. The silence about interactions between Icelandic men and soldiers raises questions. What does this silence indicate? Were Icelanders generally unaware of same-sex attraction? Did society's ignorance or lack of interest provide the men with some cover? Or did the nation not find these relations particularly threatening because they could not produce children?

The Conveyor Belt of History

[Location: 94](#)

The conveyor belt symbolizes the history of the Icelandic nation in the 20th century. This is a concise retelling of a vast history, as is the entire exhibition. It is therefore probable that important aspects of the nation's history are missing.

The 20th century saw great changes to the circumstances of queer people in Iceland. A man was sentenced to prison for homosexual conduct for the first and only time. Icelanders' awareness of different sexual orientations and gender identities grew. Queer people began adopting various queer identities and founded organizations to fight for respect and human rights. Are there any indicators of queer history and culture on the conveyor belt?

What makes an object a queer museum artefact? Does it qualify by virtue of being rainbow-colored? Relating to famous queer people? Having been used in the struggle for human rights? What about everyday objects, for instance the butter knife of *Félagið*, the organization of homo- and bisexuals? Does it belong on the conveyor belt of history?

What would you like to put on the conveyor belt to tell queer history? What objects, stories, images and documents might belong here?

Participate in the conversation using the hashtag [#hinsegin saga](#) ([#queerhistory](#))



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The objectives of the Rainbow Thread are:

To convey information about queer life and existence throughout Icelandic history.

To demonstrate how ideas on gender and sexuality take different forms in different time periods.

To ask questions, examine what remains unsaid and encourage critical thinking.

Participate in the conversation using the hashtag #hinseginsaga (#queerhistory)



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