SIGNATURE ON BEHALF OF THE STATE PARTY

Signed on behalf of the State Party

Mr. Davíð Oddsson	Mr. Björn Bjarnason
Prime Minister	Chairman of the Þingvellir Commission
Date	Date

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Application for Inclusion in the World Heritage List

Þingvellir National Park

Mount Skjaldbreiður (Broadshield)

Eastward, stony steeps are leaping
stalwartly from Raven Gorge;
westward, walls of rock are keeping
watch above our nation's forge.
Grímur Goatshoe, sage and clever,
grasped the promise of this place:
Almanna Gorge, on guard for ever,
girds the councils of my race.

A travel poem from Þingvellir by **Jónas Hallgrímsson** (1807-1845). The Icelandic Nobel Prize laureate **Halldór Laxness** (1902-1998) called Jónas Hallgrímsson the "poet of Icelandic consciousness".

1. IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROPERTY

1.a Country

Iceland.

1.b County

Bláskógabyggð municipality, district of Árnessýsla.

1.c Name of the Property

The nominated area is Þingvellir National Park. The name of the nominated area **Þingvellir means "assembly plains"**. The Icelandic letter "**þ - thorn**" is pronounced like the English "th" in "thing" and is sometimes transliterated as "**th**" in other languages. The Icelandic letter "**ð-eth**" can also be found in the application. It is pronounced like the English "th" in "this" and is sometimes transliterated as "**d**".

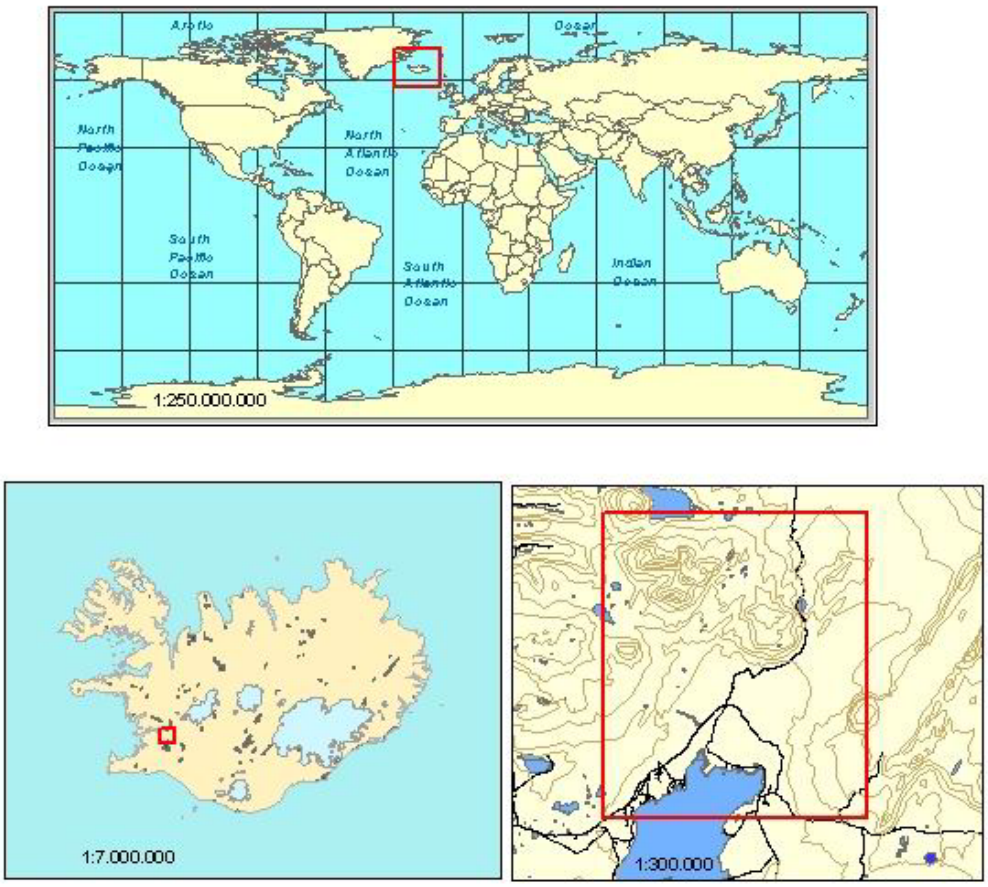

Figure 1.1. Location of Þingvellir National Park in Iceland.

1.d-e Location and map of the nominated area showing the boundaries of the area proposed for inscription and of the buffer zones

The **nominated area is the Þingvellir National Park**, located 49 km from Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland (Map 1 – for all references to maps, see Appendix 1). Park boundaries are shown on Map 1 and the coordinates of the National Park are shown on *Figure 1.2*. The **core area of the nominated area is the Innermost Assembly Site**, where the assembly representing the whole of Iceland, the Althing (Icelandic "Alþing", meaning "general assembly") was held from around 930 to 1798. The Innermost Assembly Site is shown on Maps 1 and 5.

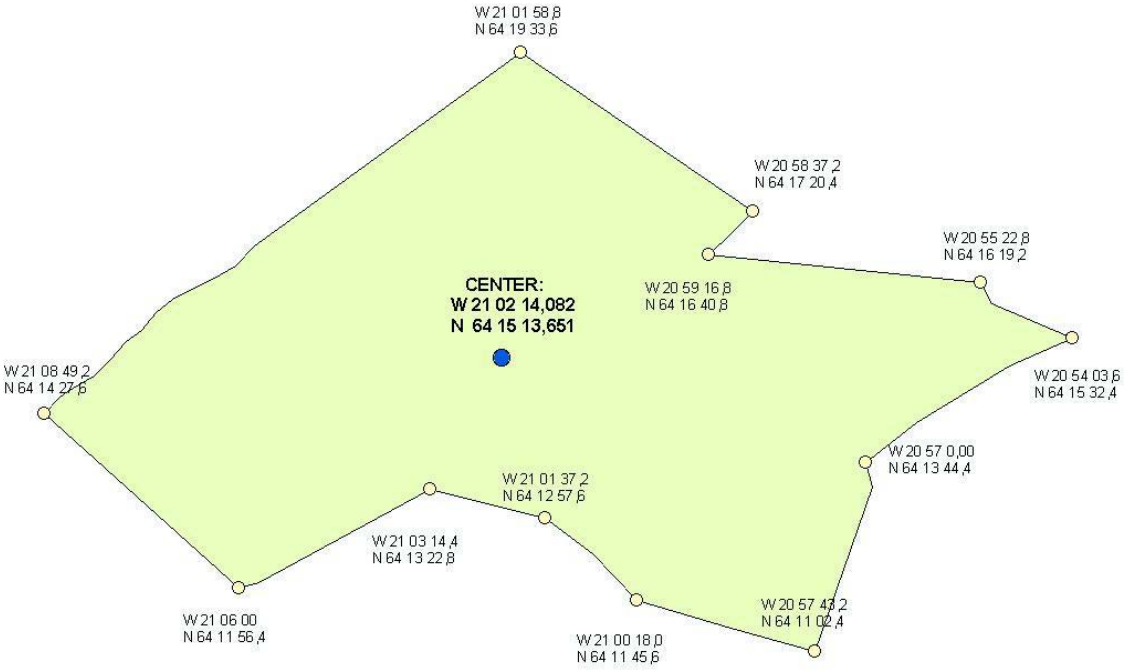

Figure 1.2. Coordinates of the Þingvellir National Park boundaries.

No developments which could have an impact on the nominated area are anticipated in the zone adjacent to the National Park, so a special buffer zone is not considered necessary to protect the area. However, there is an official buffer zone around part of the nominated area shown on Map 4 in red (zone 1). The buffer zone is in the municipality of Bláskógabyggð, which has the planning authority. Nonetheless, the Þingvelli*r* Commission has to grant permission for all developments within the National Park and the buffer zone according to the Act on the National Park (see further Chapter 4.b), before the planning authority can give its permission for development there. The Þingvellir Commission has committed itself to run the Park and the land in the buffer zone on sustainable principles according to its published planning strategy "Þingvellir – National Park and Environment" from 1988 (see further Chapters 4.b to 4.f).

The municipality of Bláskógabyggð also has authority over planning in the zone adjacent to the east and southeast boundaries of Þingvellir National Park, south of the "Highland Boundaries" (Map 4). Designated land use there is divided into the two following land-use zones according to the approved "Regional plan 1995 to

2015, for the two municipalities of Þingvellir and Grímsnes & Grafningur" from October 1996 (Þingvellir is now merged into Bláskógabyggð municipality):

- A zone which stands for the land use "mountain grazing for sheep", marked with violet on Map 4 (zone 2). No development is anticipated in this area so the land use within it will not have any significant impact on Þingvellir National Park. This area can thus be considered to act as a buffer zone.
- A zone which stands for the land use "forestry and farming", marked with yellow on Map 4 (zone 3). No developments are anticipated in this area that can be considered to have significant impact on Þingvellir National Park. This area can thus be considered to act as a buffer zone as well.

The land that lies adjacent to the east of the Þingvellir National Park boundaries and north of the Highland Boundaries, marked with green/grey on Map 4 (zone 4), has the designated land use "nature protection area" according to the "Regional Plan for the Central Highlands In Iceland to 2015", from May 1999. The planning authority in this zone is Grímsnes & Grafningur. There is, however, a planning committee, established by the Ministry for the Environment, with representatives from the associations of municipalities surrounding the Highlands, which effectively acts as a planning authority within the limits of the Highland Boundaries. There must be a cohesion between regional and municipial plans. Local municipalities must therefore follow designated land use according to the Regional Plan for the Central Highlands, within the Highland Boundaries. No developments are anticipated in this highland area so the land use within it will not have any significant impact on Þingvellir National Park and can thus be considered to act as a buffer zone.

The municipalities of Bláskógabyggð and Grímsnes & Grafningur are committed to preserve the pristine quality of Þingvellir National Park itself and have designated land use accordingly. The conclusion is that in the area outside that under the jurisdiction of the Þingvellir Commission (Map 4), land use according to officially approved regional – and municipial plans will not have any significant impact on Þingvellir National Park and can thus be considered a buffer zone.

1.f Area of the site proposed for inscription

The nominated area of Þingvellir National Park is 92.7 km^2 or 9,270 hectares (Map 1).

2. JUSTIFICATION FOR INSCRIPTION

2.a Statement of significance

Þingvellir is the most important cultural heritage site in Iceland, a national treasure and at the same time a major cultural treasure at global level. Its dramatic history from the establishment of the Althing around 930 gives insights into how a Viking Age pioneer community organized its society from scratch and evolved towards the modern world. Þingvellir also combines in a single place an assortment of natural phenomena which only a handful of places on Earth can boast.

To the Icelanders, Þingvellir is a symbol of national unity where the main strands of their history have been woven from the start of the settlement in the 9th century to the present day.

Iceland's general assembly, which was established to represent the whole country at Þingvellir in the year 930– The Althing – tells a unique story about legislative and judicial arrangements in the Age of the Commonwealth.

The pioneer society that established the Althing in around 930 is the only society to have such detailed records of its very earliest origins, along with remarkable archaeological remains to support them. History as preserved in this form sheds light on important elements in European constitutional development, all of which are linked directly or indirectly to the growth and ascendancy of the rule of law and can clarify our understanding of them. The oldest extant historical work in Icelandic, the Book of Icelanders (*Íslendingabók*) by Ari Þorgilsson the Wise, written 1120-1130, is the most important source of information about the settlement and the origin of Iceland's nation state and assembly at Þingvellir in the era commonly known as the Icelandic Commonwealth. The Commonwealth lasted from around 930 until 1262/64. As a single, general assembly for such a large country, which was later to develop into a nation state, the Althing was remarkable in its day. For the duration of the assembly Þingvellir effectively acted as the first capital of Iceland for two weeks every year.

What makes the Althing unique in legislative and judicial history is its particular emphases and detailed attention given to removing legal uncertainty and resolving disputes without a superior authority.

This is evident, for instance, in the important roles played by the Lawspeaker and Law Council. There are extensive and detailed sources on the organisation of the assembly and its working procedures. The fruit of this activity is the extensive legal collections of the Commonwealth known as *Grágás*, one of the most remarkable legal codices among the medieval Germanic peoples. One section of this codex is actually considered to be the first vernacular writing in Iceland, some two hundred years after the establishment of the Althing.

The Althing is unique since it has a longer, uninterrupted history than any other medieval assembly.

The Icelandic Althing has a longer, uninterrupted history than any other assembly established in the early Middle Ages with the possible exception of the Faroese legal assembly and the assembly on the Isle of Man, sources on the history of which are limited.

The Althing is unique insofar as the Commonwealth reflected an exceptionally clear view of early medieval notions of law and authority.

In shaping their new society, the Viking Age settlers of Iceland had to ponder more clearly the concepts underlying it, while those remaining in the places from which they emigrated could continue to adhere to ancient customs without paying any particular attention to them. One remarkable feature of Iceland is that the Viking Age left behind some of its perpetual milestones there, including the social structure, administrative procedures and political philosophy of the Icelandic Commonwealth. The Commonwealth established by the settlers of Iceland certainly preserved many traits of old European polities, but at the same time it has been considered by some authors as the first European state in the New World and a precursor of those that would later be instituted on the other side of the Atlantic.

The area of remains at Þingvellir on the site of the Althing is unparalleled in the world.

Þingvellir is remarkable as the only Germanic assembly site where remains of administrative structures such as *Lögberg* (Law Rock), *Lögrétta* (Law Council) and *Biskupabúðir* (Bishops' Booths) have been preserved. Remains of many manmade structures pertaining to the assembly and its functions dating from the 10th to 18th centuries can be found there. In its entirety, the area of remains at Þingvellir is also unique in that signs of a large part of the attendees' booths can still be seen on the surface and the overall layout of the assembly area can still be envisaged.

Þingvellir National Park contains well preserved remains of habitation in the 18th and 19th centuries which present an outstandingly comprehensive picture of the cultural landscape in the days before the mechanisation of agriculture.

The large number of remains of farms, tracks and grassfields found within the National Park form an interesting whole and give fascinating insights into agricultural practices and ecology in former centuries. Walls, turf and rock structures, and farm sites have been preserved from an age before mechanisation was introduced into agriculture.

A remarkable feature in the history of Þingvellir is that the inhabitants of a whole community changed their religion in a peaceful process at the Althing there in the year 1000.

The conversion of Iceland from heathendom to Christianity was approved by the Althing in 1000 and was remarkable for how peacefully this was achieved. It also shows how the administrative structure of the Althing functioned at this time, with unanimous approval needed in order for matters to be resolved.

Þingvellir and its surroundings are of outstanding value as a geological monument. It is unique from a geological perspective, as the most lucid example on Earth of tectonic plate boundaries on dry land.

The chief characteristic of the Þingvellir landscape is fissures, the largest of which, *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge), forms a cliff wall and backdrop to the ancient assembly site. These fissures are part of the Þingvellir rift valley, formed on tectonic plate boundaries where two continental plates are moving apart. The Þingvellir rift valley can be particularly clearly seen on the surface and was cited as an example when the theory of plate tectonics was being formulated in the 1960s – the foundation for modern understanding of geological processes and land formation. The Þingvellir rift is the most lucid example on dry land where plate separation on a mid-ocean ridge can be sensed and understood. Þingvellir and the lake Þingvallavatn surroundings are thus of outstanding value as a geological monument, not only for Iceland but also globally.

Lake Þingvallavatn is the only habitat in which four separate morphs of Arctic charr have evolved, which is biologically unique.

Nowhere else in the world have four separate morphs of Artic charr evolved in the same lake in a span of less than 10,000 years. In addition, the lake hosts a distinctive stock of brown trout which is well known for its longevity and large size.

Þingvellir's unique nature, landscape and cultural remains create a setting for history like the walls of a natural temple.

With its cliff walls, fissures, slopes, lava fields and grassy plains, where the river *Öxará* still flows and its ruins recall ages gone by, Þingvellir creates a backdrop to all the great historic events that have taken place there. In this environment of dramatic contrasts one can sense the mystery of sacred things, at once awesome and enchanting, which attracts and repels at the same time, arousing strong and conflicting emotions. Þingvellir is where Icelanders go when major decisions are to be made. Icelandic Nobel Prize laureate Halldór Laxness sets many of the key scenes of his "*Bell of Iceland*" at Þingvellir where it was said that the bell of Iceland itself rang in days of old. In doing so he lends these episodes, and the words spoken by the characters, a symbolic depth which invokes the history of Iceland and its campaign for independence.

Þingvellir is a symbol of national unity and the embodiment of the national identity. In the 19th century, when Romantic notions of liberty, national identity and natural philosophy began to gain momentum, Þingvellir assumed a symbolic

meaning. As a token of its importance to the Icelandic people, Þingvellir National Park was founded in 1930, the first National Park in Iceland. It is beyond doubt and well arguable that to most Icelanders today, Þingvellir remains a sacred place, where the dormant national spirit dwells and calls the nation to come together at crucial points in time.

The interplay of history and nature's distinctive scenery makes Þingvellir unique.

2.b Comparative analysis

The Althing was founded at Þingvellir and held there from 930 to 1798, or more than 850 years. An outstanding feature of the Althing was that it was a general assembly representing the whole of a relatively large country. Good written accounts have been preserved about the Althing from its very earliest days. Since a new pioneer society needed to be set up based on the settlers' traditional ideas, the political structure of the Icelandic Commonwealth is uniquely suited to shed light on governmental notions among Northern European peoples at the end of the early Middle Ages and in the main medieval period.

The constitution of Iceland was unusual by medieval standards in that farmers had a legal right to choose which chieftain they followed. Thus Iceland preserved traces of old forms of political organisations which had disappeared in most of Europe with the emergence of feudalism and royal power.

People attending assemblies put up houses or shelters known as booths or assembly booths. Clusters of booths are familiar characteristics of assembly sites and their design appears to have been quite standardised. Ruins of booths have been left behind at the assembly site of the Althing at Þingvellir (Maps 1 and 6) which are unique for being the best preserved specimens from an assembly with this historical background. The assembly booths in Iceland consisted of walls made of turf and stone, with a woollen cloth roof. At assemblies in other European countries, booths were in the form of tents or timber buildings which have not left behind such permanent evidence.

Ruins of other, local or regional, assembly booths are found elsewhere in Iceland, but not of the size or scope of those at Þingvellir, nor do they contain remains of administrative structures such as the Law Rock, Law Council and Bishops' Booths.

Virtually no visible ruins appear to have been preserved at assembly sites elsewhere in Europe apart from single assembly mounds in the Isle of Man, so although a number of assembly sites are known in Iceland and in other North European countries, Þingvellir is both historically and archaeologically the largest and most significant site of them all. Research conducted into the Þingvellir ruins suggests that, in addition to the visible remains, archaeological remains beneath the surface can shed new light on the site and its evolution – information that is unlikely to be obtained anywhere else. Compared with the district assemblies, the Althing was much larger and produced much more diverse remains. The crucial consideration in comparing assembly sites, however, is that the Althing performed a completely different role from the local or regional assemblies, and a much more important one. In these terms the Althing is certainly a unique site. Nowhere in Iceland or elsewhere have such extensive remains been found of a general assembly for a whole country dating back to the Viking Age.

Iceland's conversion to Christianity in 1000 is outstanding in several respects. The whole population of the country changed its faith in a peaceful process, which in a nutshell shows how the administrative structure of the Althing functioned at this time, with unanimous approval needed in order for matters to be resolved. Although methods of Christianisation of a similar kind are known elsewhere, this event is unusual and probably unique in Northern Europe.

The primary geological distinction of Þingvellir lies in the fact that Iceland is located on diverging plate boundaries, the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the Eurasian and North American continental plates are spreading apart. There are 55,000 km of diverging plate boundaries in the world and, along most of their length, they are a submarine feature. Only in Iceland and Djibouti are a few hundred km exposed subaerially. A branch of the diverging plate boundaries in Iceland extends into the rift valley at Þingvellir, where one of the clearest, if not the clearest examples, of diverging plate boundaries on dry land can be seen anywhere in the world. Continental rifts branch off from this spreading and form different geological setting and rock types. One of them is the Rift Valley system of East Africa. Iceland exists because it lies on the centre of its active spreading ridge combined with a mantle plume generated hot spot. There are other examples of interaction between a spreading centre and a hot spot on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, but the underlying mantle plume is more powerful in Iceland, causing the excess volcanic production and emergence of the huge land mass that is Iceland. Iceland is the largest island on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and the only one where the actual ridge is visible. As the Þingvellir rift valley can particularly clearly be seen on the surface, it was cited as an example when the theory of plate tectonics was being formulated in the sixties – the foundation for modern understanding of geological process and land formation. In the days when Wegener's theory of continental drift was rejected by most scholars in the middle of the twentieth century, German and Danish geologists pointed to the Þingvellir fissures as clear proof that horizontal crustal extension was taking place and they identified the driving force in movements within the Earth's mantle. They could hardly have come closer to the truth. From the edge of Almannagjá a variety of basaltic volcanic edifices can seen, such as those formed in water and under glaciers as well as the more common subaerial craters and shields. Thus Þingvellir combines in a single place a diverse range of natural phenomena hardly paralleled anywhere in the world.

Unique geological and geomorphological processes of great international interest are taking place at Þingvellir. Lake Þingvallavatn is the only known instance of Arctic charr, having evolved into four different morphs in one and the same lake in a span of less than 10,000 years. The basis for this is the creation of new habitats through crustal spreading. The landscape at Þingvellir has beautiful and mystical forms created entirely by this process, by volcanism and glacial erosion, whereby the three fundamental elements which created Iceland are found in a single place.

As the effective capital of Iceland while it hosted the Althing for two weeks every year during the Commonwealth period, and the place where all important decisions regarding the fate of the entire Icelandic society were made, Þingvellir is an outstanding example of a place that has played a key role in the evolution of a nation. It served as a symbol of unification in the campaign for independence in the late 19th century. In all, 25 major meetings were held at Þingvellir from 1848

to 1907. They were attended by delegates from all over the country to decide policy on the process for independence from Denmark and the modernisation of the country, especially concerning economic and cultural issues. All the crucial decisions about the destiny of Iceland have been made and are still made at Þingvellir and it is a symbol of national unity and embodiment of the national identity. - Þingvellir also played a very powerful part in stimulating the great scholarly and literary work which was produced in Iceland over the centuries. Icelandic medieval literature is integrally linked to Þingvellir, especially as far as the Sagas of Icelanders and the Kings' Sagas are concerned. These works are regarded as among the most remarkable literary achievements of the Middle Ages and occupy a leading place in world literature. They shed light on the lives and mentalities of Northern peoples in the Middle Ages, not least during the Viking Age, when their influence was felt throughout Europe. At the same time they are an important source of information about all Germanic nations. Here one could mention especially the independence, individualism and responsibility of each man for his actions. Icelandic medieval literature has also played a major part in shaping the image of the Nordic countries and their people, both in their own eyes and those of the world. As long as they value this heritage and identity, they must regard Þingvellir as among the most remarkable of their historical sites.

Established in 1930 according to an act from 1928, the National Park at Þingvellir was the first to be designated in Iceland. It was established at a time when concepts such as "national park" and "conservation" were scarcely known in Iceland. In declaring Þingvellir a national park, the government of Iceland at that time displayed great vision, while the selection of Þingvellir shows its supreme role in the national consciousness. Þingvellir was also one of the first national parks to be formally established in Europe.

All nations have places where, so to speak, their history resides. The Acropolis for the Greeks, the Forum Romanum for the Italians, the Place de la Bastille for the French. Places visited by pilgrims to re-experience for an instant the great events that occurred there. Yet such places are continually on the defensive against the modern age, which threatens to swamp them with its encroaching activities: buildings are constructed, asphalt advances, motor traffic that grants no quarter. One of the characteristic features of Þingvellir is the very small impact that the modern age has had on it. A visitor stands in the same surroundings as generations past, these are the same cliff walls, mountains, water, sky and atmosphere as in days of yore.

2.c Authenticity / Integrity

The Þingvellir Commission is committed to protect the integrity and authenticity of the area on sustainable principles, to keep it for the enjoyment of generations to come. The manner in which this has been done since the National Park was established has to some extent depended on prevailing general attitudes at any given time.

The land within the National Park has changed little since Iceland was settled. However, habitation and the holding of the assembly have to some extent led to the destruction of the woodland that was once in the area. This applies not only to Þingvellir, but to Iceland as a whole. Soil erosion and subsequent vegetation and forest deterioration have been one of the most important environmental issues in

Iceland for centuries. Subsequently, soil reclamation and forestry have been seen as the most important mitigation measures in the country and as a gesture of respect towards Þingvellir, the first conifers to be planted in Iceland were planted there in 1899. At that time it was considered environmentally acceptable to plant any kind of tree, and priority was given to identifying types which could grow quickly. Planting of these conifers has therefore to some degree altered the original natural environment and such action is regarded with circumspection today, although it was considered to be environmental improvement 100 years ago when it was begun. The planting of foreign species was stopped in the 1960s and currently there are plans to cut down some of these conifers within the innermost assembly site. The majority will be left untouched as a testimony to nature protection in the last century (*see* Chapter 5.a).

Located on an active seismic zone, the land is subject to natural change. The floor of the valley has subsided by some 3-4 metres since the Althing was founded at Þingvellir and will continue to do so. Subsidence has caused the surface of Lake Þingvallatvatn to extend higher into the innermost assembly site and the level of river Öxará has consequently risen and buried part of it under sediment. The plains below Lögberg, where the delegates to the assembly ("Thingmen") had their booths, will therefore eventually be submerged by natural processes (see Chapter 5.b-c).

Some chalets were built within the National Park boundaries from 1930 to 1960, within specific zones. Such action reflected the thinking of a particular period and is not allowed anymore. No new chalets will be built within the park boundaries (*see* Chapter 5.a).

The major part of the land of the Þingvellir National Park is still pristine and management plans are currently in effect with the aim of protecting the integrity and authenticity of the area on sustainable principles, in an effort to ensure that it will afford coming generations the same delight that it instils today.

2.d Criteria under which this inscription is proposed and justification for inscription under these criteria

The nomination of Þingvellir National Park as a cultural landscape site should be discussed in view of criteria 24 (a) (iii) and (vi) of the UNESCO Operational Guidelines of July 2002.

Criteria 24 (a) (iii): The Althing at Þingvellir preserves the history of an assembly representing an entire country in the early Middle Ages and main medieval period, which sheds light on Viking Age notions of polity, law and authority, since the shaping of a new pioneer society and flourishing written culture went had in hand. These ideas were the common heritage of Germanic cultures and have played a major role in shaping systems of government in many European countries up to the present day.

The area of remains at Þingvellir is unique insofar as remains dating from the very beginning of the Althing can be found there. These are the only ruins that show the overall layout of an assembly site from this time, and the only assembly ruins so clearly visible at the surface.

Criteria 24 (a) (vi): Distinctive natural features and unique geological characteristics at a tectonic plate boundary have created a natural stage for an

extraordinary history, a setting almost unchanged from the time when the Althing was first established. The environment at Þingvellir and its natural heritage have played a powerful role in stimulating great scholarly, artistic and literary work, and been central in the making of the Icelandic nation.

3. DESCRIPTION

3.a Description of the Property

TOPOGRAPHY

The nominated area is Þingvellir National Park, founded in 1930 and Iceland's first national park. It is located 49 km from Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland (Map 1). The National Park covers an area of 93 km^2 and is located on an active volcanic zone. Its most famous natural phenomenon is the rift running through it, with the majestic fissures of *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge) and *Hrafnagjá* (Raven Gorge) which create a beautiful cliff wall. The National Park is enclosed by a diverse belt of mountains on three sides, with grass-covered lava fields with marshland between them, and at its southern end lies Lake Þingvallavatn. This is the largest natural lake in Iceland, 83 km^2, at a surface elevation of 100 m a.s.l.

Þingvellir has a unique history and is a prime example of "cultural landscape" where natural remains, archaeological remains, history and outstanding scenery give the area unparalleled value. Þingvellir means "*assembly field*" and in 930 the Icelanders established a general assembly or parliament for the entire country there, the Althing (Alþingi), which lasted until 1798. The assembly was held at *Lögberg* (*Law Rock*) by Almannagjá and the people attending the Althing ("Thingmen") dwelt on the grassy plains below, just west of the site of the present Þingvellir farmhouse and church. As a single, general assembly for the whole country, the Althing was unique in its day. Tasks performed by the Althing were divided between its institutions: the Law Council, five courts and the Lawspeaker. The principal task of the Law Council, the assembly's most important forum, was to "frame the law" and "make new laws".

Figure 3.1. Lögberg in the innermost assembly site.

In a unique chronicle of the settlement of Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries, the Book of Icelanders (*Íslendingabók*) which Ari Þorgilsson the Wise wrote in the 12th century, there is a description of the journey made by Grímur Goatshoe around Iceland in search of a suitable assembly site. As he explored the country

he was also sounding out enthusiasm for the idea of establishing an assembly for the whole country and mustering support for it. His choice of Þingvellir was a fortuitous one. It was conveniently located for the modes of travel available at that time, especially the mountain routes from west and north Iceland, although people from the east had to make a long journey to reach it (*see* Fig. 3.2). Also, it was near to the most populated parts of the country.

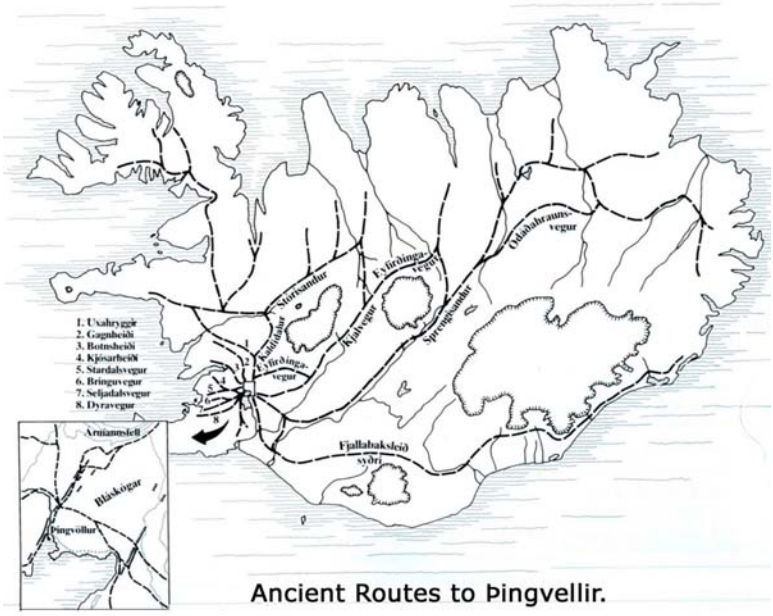

Figure 3.2. Ancient routes to Þingvellir.

Þingvellir is the only Germanic assembly site where remains of administrative structures such as the Law Rock and Law Council have been preserved. In its entirety, the area where the remains are is unique in that signs of a large part of the attendees' booths can still be seen on the surface and the overall layout of the assembly area can still be envisaged. Research conducted into the ruins suggests that, in addition to the visible remains, archaeological remains beneath the surface can greatly augment our knowledge of Þingvellir and its history.

In the midnight sun on a bright, quiet June night, the dramatic setting of the Althing at Þingvellir takes on a magical atmosphere. All around, placenames with clear, original meanings referring to the ancient gathering step forth to tell the history of Þingvellir. *Lögberg* (Law Rock), *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge), *Fangabrekka* (Wrestling Slope), *Fógetabúð* (the Sheriff's Booth), *Prestakrókur* (Priests' Corner), *Klukkuhóll* (Bell Hill), *Drekkingarhylur* (Drowning Pool) and numerous others link the environment and its history with unbreakable bonds.

When Þingvellir National Park was established in 1930 there were three farms in the area. These have gradually been bought out and now there are no residents within the National Park boundaries.

Within the Park Þingvellir farmhouse and church are on the eastern bank of Öxará and a hotel on the west bank beneath the viewing point at *Hakið* (the Platform). Farther north is an Information and Service Centre, with a café and campsite. A Visitor Centre has been set up on Hakið, above Almannagjá, where multimedia presentations of history and nature of Þingvellir and underwater photographs from Lake Þingvallavatn are on display (Map 1).

NATURE

Iceland is geologically a young volcanic island, ranging 16 million years back in age. It straddles the diverging plate boundary of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, with spreading zones that are characterised by a high volcanic production as a result of the ongoing hot spot activity and crustal growth. The rifts are a corollary of this process. They are generally of low topographical expression due to lava flows that smooth them out at intervals, hence the rarity of fault-bounded lakes nested within them. Lake Þingvallavatn is an exception with a pronounced low in volcanic production. This has persisted since the last interglaciation (over 100,000 years) but at the same time dilatation and subsidence of the rift floor has proceeded at an undiminished rate. This is the reason that the fault escarpments are higher in its surroundings than anywhere else in the spreading zone of Iceland and actually proportional in height to the age of the various surface lavas.

Þingvellir plain is on the western slope of a large lava shield that was formed some 10,000 years ago, shortly after the Ice Age glacier melted, and has a surface area of 200 km². The lava flowed into Lake Þingvallavatn and blocked its outflow, but a sizeable stretch has gradually vanished into the lake as the rift has deepened. The surface of the Þingvellir lava is typical hummocky pahoehoe. On the walls of Almannagjá the internal structure can be seen, innumerable thin flow units which characterise all shield lavas.

Fig. 3.3 Aerial view of faults and fissures at Þingvellir National Park.

The faults and fissures of the Þingvellir rift have grown incrementally. Measurements over the past 40 years show a latent creep of about 3 mm/y extension and 1 mm vertical displacement of the rift zone. However, short rifting events involving extension and subsidence of a few metres also occur. One event is known from historical times. It occurred in spring 1789 and lasted for 10 days. The subsidence then measured 2.5 m in the middle of the rift.

Lake Þingvallavatn is the largest natural lake in Iceland with surface area of 83 km^2 The lake biosphere clearly testifies to the fact that it straddles the border between the continents of Europe and America. The great northern diver, and a bird native to North America, breeds around the lake and is an emblem typifying it. White-tailed eagles, which nested in the area in old times, are rarely seen now. Mink live by the lake, preying on small birds, and foxes make occasional appearances.

Fig. 3.4. The great northern diver, an emblem of Lake Þingvallavatn.

Lake Þingvallavatn is the largest angling lake in Iceland, with four separate morphs of Arctic charr that have evolved in it in a span of less than 10,000 years, which is a unique phenomenon. The lake is also home to a distinctive brown trout stock which became isolated there shortly after the Ice Age, well known for its longevity and size of up to 29 pounds. At **Vellankatla** the only known cave-dwelling animal in Northern Europe was recently discovered, a pale and blind amphipoda of American origin which apparently survived in shallow water in caves beneath the Ice Age glacial cover. This is the oldest extant freshwater animal species in Iceland. Thus the biological history of Lake Þingvallavatn has origins stretching back hundreds of thousands of years.

Vellankatla is a fine example of an Icelandic placename, which are generally transparent in meaning since the language has changed little since the early centuries of Icelandic history. *Vellankatla* (Bubbling Kettle) is a spring at the east of the lake, whose name appears in the Book of Icelanders. Another placename that reflects spectacular natural features of Þingvellir is *Bláskógar* (Blue Woods), mentioned in the Book of Icelanders and the Book of Settlements (*Landnámabók*); the name is applied to the lava field north, west and south of Þingvallavatn, with its low-growing trees. Among the gorges and fissures are: *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge), *Brennugjá* (Burning/Stake Gorge), *Flosagjá* (Flosi's Gorge), *Nikulásargjá* (Nikulás's Gorge), *Peningagjá* (Money Gorge), *Hrafnagjá* (Raven Gorge), *Hvannagjá* (Angelica Gorge) and *Skötugjá* (Skate Gorge).

A list of placenames at Þingvellir which occur in medieval and later sources is given in Appendix II.b.

THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

"Cultural landscape" refers to a landscape on which man and history have left their mark by habitation or other kinds of activity.

A landscape with a history has sometimes been compared with a vellum manuscript which has continually been scraped clean to write on it again, so that each generation has left its mark on it. Þingvellir has a unique history and is a prime example of cultural landscape where natural remains, archaeological remains, history and outstanding scenery give the area unparalleled value.

For many centuries, turf and rock were used for virtually all manmade structures, regardless of whether farmhouses, outhouses, walls or booths were involved. Since turf is not a permanent building material, the structures needed to be regularly renovated. Material for them was probably taken locally or from even earlier ruins and later structures were often placed on older ruins. It is therefore not surprising to find historical remains of human habitation at Þingvellir showing that, in some locations, up to three or four layers of habitation have been built one on top of the other.

Numerous remains have been preserved at Þingvellir which are associated with habitation and daily toil, as well as archaeological ruins connected with the functions of the ancient assembly. Outhouses, sheep pens and ruins of abandoned farmhouses are still visible on the surface and spread across the area. Indeed, the Þingvellir National Park contains well preserved remains of habitation in the 18th and 19th centuries which present an outstandingly comprehensive picture of the cultural landscape in the days before the mechanisation of agriculture. The remains of farms, tracks and grassfields found within the National Park form an interesting whole and give fascinating insights into agricultural practices and ecology in former centuries. Walls, turf and rock structures, and farm sites have been preserved from an age before mechanisation was introduced into agriculture.

Fig. 3.5 The abandoned farm site Skógarkot.

Placenames constitute part of the living cultural heritage. Some of the placenames in which Þingvellir abounds reflect the cohabitation of man and nature. There are placenames, for instance, that indicate that natural features

were used as landmarks to tell the time from the position of the sun (e.g. from the farmhouse of Þingvellir): *Miðaftansdrangur* (miðaftan=approx. 6 pm, drangur=rock pillar), and *Dagmáladalur* (dagmál=approx 9 am, dalur=dale). Other placenames are formed from personal names, such as *Þorleifshaugur* (Þorleifur's Barrow), while a number are directly derived from the animal husbandry practised in the area, *Sauðahellir* (Sheep Cave) and *Kúatorfa* (Cow Turf) being examples. References to natural resources utilised at Þingvellir include *Ólafsdráttur* (Ólafur's Fishing Place), *Kolgrafarhóll* (Charcoal Pit Hill) *Sláttubrekkur* (Haymaking Slopes) and *Einiberjahæðir* (Juniper Berry Hill).

The placenames of Þingvellir are evidence, above all, of the highly varied activities which have taken place there through the ages, as Iceland's centre of government: legislative and judicial assemblies – including executions, religious rites and not least animal husbandry, as well as the everyday life of the inhabitants for more than a thousand years.

HABITATION AT ÞINGVELLIR

It is not known when Þingvellir was first settled. Placenames tell us nothing about the farms in the *Bláskógar* (Blue Woods) area prior to the days of the Althing, but after its foundation the estate was known as *Þingvöllur* (Assembly Plain, singular), according to the Book of Icelanders.

Þingvellir farm has probably always been located on a similar site to the present-day farmhouse. The oldest description of the farm dates from 1678. Old drawings show that the farm's front gables faced south with its front side in line with the south gate of the cemetery. The farm buildings were made from turf and rock until 1880, when the turf buildings were gradually replaced by timbered ones.

Figure 3.6. Þingvellir farmhouse and church. The farmhouse is built in the traditional Icelandic gabled style, which was common in the early 19th century.

A new concreted building was constructed with three gablets on the old farmhouse in 1928, to be ready in time for the Althing celebrations in 1930. It was designed by Guðjón Samúelsson, the State Architect, and illustrates how the distinctive Icelandic gabled farmhouse style could be adapted to the new building material of concrete. An extension of two gablets was added before the 1974 Festival marking the 1,100th anniversary of the settlement of Iceland.

The first **church at Þingvellir** was built soon after the adoption. In his *Heimskringla* (History of the Kings of Norway), Snorri Sturluson describes how King Olaf Haraldsson, who assumed the crown in 1015, sent timber to Iceland and a church was then built at Þingvellir. There has been a church at Þingvellir ever since. It is thought that the churches at Þingvellir were always made from timber. The present church at Þingvellir was built in 1858-59 and in 1907 a new tower was built. It seats only just over 40 and is not lavishly adorned.

Several placenames refer to the church and clergy: *Kirkjutún* (Church Field), *Klukkuhóll* (Bell Hillock), *Klukkustígur* (Bell Path), *Prestakrókur* (Priests' Corner), *Prestateigur* (Priests' Meadow), *Presthólmi* (Priests' Islet), *Biskupshólar* (Bishops' Hillocks).

Within the bounds of the National Park are the sites of various **farms, now abandoned** (*see* Map 1). In many cases extensive ruins may be seen of farmhouses, outhouses and homefields.

Figure 3.7. An Aerial photograph of Hrauntún, an abandoned farm site.

Arnarfell, leased from the estate of Þingvellir. Arnarfell was inhabited only intermittently. In the first half of the 20th century, reindeer from east Iceland were brought to Arnarfell, but this experiment in reindeer husbandry was short-lived.

Fornasel is the northern end of the Arnarfell hill. In olden times, Fornasel was a shieling or summer pasturage for livestock from the Þingvellir estate.

Böðvarshóll is a rock east of the Gjábakkastígur path. A farm of this name is believed to have stood there. To the south of the rock are remnants of a sheepshed.

Grímsstaðir, ruins of an abandoned farmhouse. The farm was first mentioned in the Harðar saga og Hólmverja (Saga of Hord and the People of Holm), which recounts events that took place in the 10th century.

Hrafnabjörg is said to have been a minor church or a chapel.

Hrauntún. In 1830 a farmhouse was built on an old foundation, said to have been a croft from the days of the Black Death in the early 15th century. The farm was inhabited until 1930. At Litla-Hrauntún (Little Hrauntún), farther into the lava field, indistinct remains of buildings may be seen.

Skógarkot is an abandoned farm site below Sjónarhóll hill in the lava field east of

the Þingvellir farmhouse. Regarded as a good sheep farm, Skógarkot was in use until 1936.

Vatnskot, abandoned farm site by the lake. Land resources were limited, but fishing in the lake was an important peripheral resource. In 1912 a couple settled there, to remain for more than half a century. They were the last farmers in the National Park.

Þórhallsstaðir, southeast of Skógarkot beneath the Ölkofrahóll hill. Ruins with a well and grass field. Þórhallsstaðir was the home of Þórhallur ölkofri (*öl* = ale), who brewed ale for consumption at the Althing.

REMAINS OF THE ASSEMBLY

Although few manmade structures remain intact at Þingvellir, numerous remains testify to human activities connected with the assembly. **Remnants of** at least 50 **booths** and other manmade structures are found in the area.

The "Thingmen" attending the Althing stayed in booths. Various services were provided in other booths by tanners, brewers and cooks. Booths had walls of turf and rock with a timber frame over them and a canopy of homespun twill.

According to *Grágás*, the old Law code, assembly participants were to bring enough twill with them to cover the width of the booth. Remains of booths are characteristic for assembly sites. Þingvellir is the largest and most significant site of them all.

Like other buildings made from turf and rock, the booths needed to be regularly renovated. As later booths were often placed on older ruins low mounds of ruins developed in the most popular areas at the assembly site where most of the Thingmen stayed. This accumulation of ruins means that Þingvellir is today one of the main and most extensive sites of remains in Iceland. The overwhelming majority of surface ruins of booths that can now be seen at Þingvellir therefore date from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Fig.3.8.: Ruins of Snorrabúð (Snorri's Booth).

The remains do not give an entirely correct picture of the scope of the assembly or the number of people attending it, because many lower ranking attendees did

not build booths, but stayed in tents during their time at the assembly, leaving little trace of their presence.

Placenames which refer directly to the Althing and its proceedings, and are known from old sources, are *Þingvöllur* (Assembly Plain) and *Lögberg* (Law Rock), *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge) and *Fangabrekka* (Wrestling Slope). Placenames which are known from later sources, but may still have source value with regard to older times are: *Drekkingarhylur* (Drowning Pool), *Gálgi* (Gallows), *Kagahólmi* (Whipping-post Islet) *Klukkuhóll* (Bell Hill). The names of several booths, used during the Althing assembly, are also known: *Njálsbúð* (Njáll's Booth), *Snorrabúð* (Snorri's Booth), *Byrgisbúð* (Shelter's Booth), *Mosfellingabúð* (the Mosfell People's Booth), *Lögmannsbúð* (the Law Man's Booth), *Amtmannsbúð* (the Regional Governor's Booth), *Stiftamtmannsbúð* (the Governor's Booth), *Fógetabúð* (the Sheriff's Booth), *Biskupabúð* (the Bishops' Booth).

The principal archaeological remains are in the area where the Althing assembled, which may be seen on Map 6 showing catalogued archaeological remains within the innermost assembly site. Archaeological remains are also found in various other places; these are ruins of deserted farms within the National Park.

The most important sites are at the old assembly site, within the area marked on Maps 1 and 5. They may be divided into five areas. A field survey of the surface of this area has revealed the remains of some 50 relics.

- The largest collection of archaeological remains is on the plain beneath *Hallurinn* (the Slope), where many ruins of booths may be seen, arranged in rows and in some cases in clusters, in an area of about 100 m wide and 350 m long. The most recent ruins are uppermost and clearest, while remnants of three or four layers of older ruins may be seen projecting from them. Among them are ruins of *Lögrétta* (the Law Council).
- At the top of the slope is a manmade platform. This is believed to be the remains of the old *Lögberg* (Law Rock). Close by is the booth named after the chieftain Snorri.
- The third collection of ruins consists of booths in the *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge), most of them from the latter centuries of the Althing.
- On the other side of the river, adjacent to the churchyard, are extensive ruins of booths that belonged to leading ecclesiastical figures, known as *Biskupabúðir* (the Bishops' Booths).
- At some distance are old manmade structures on *Spöngin* (the Neck), a narrow strip of land between two water-filled fissures. The old Lögberg is believed to have been located there to begin with.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Much archaeological research has been carried out at Þingvellir. Researchers have considered the locations of places and events in saga literature, surveyed old sites, made maps, and published their findings. The oldest description of historical remains at Þingvellir dates from 1700; it describes the site of the Law Council and 18 booths. Later in the 18th century more descriptions of the assembly site were published, including the locations of the booths of leading officials at that time. In addition to these descriptions, three maps of Þingvellir are extant from the 18th century and one from the 19th. The oldest dates from about 1781-2.

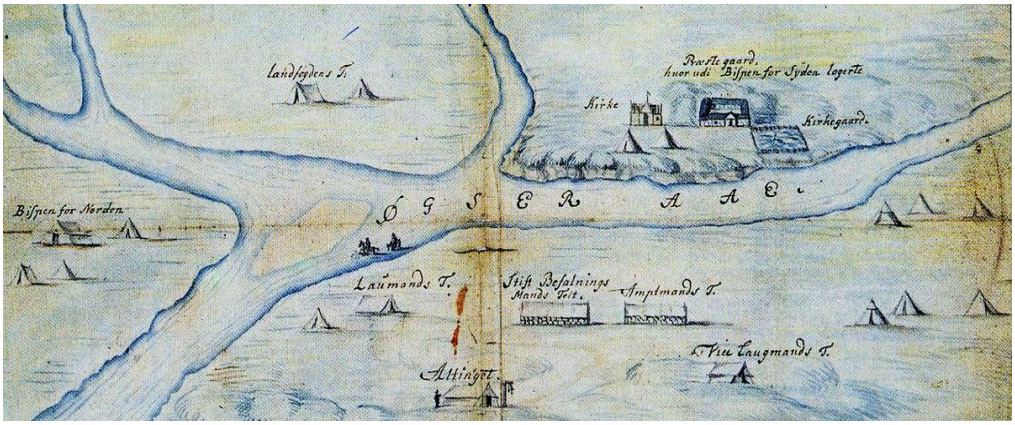

Figure 3.9. Drawing of the assembly site, propably from 1781-72.

Six archaeological excavations have been carried out at Þingvellir since 1880 (Map 7). They are:

1. An archaeological dig by antiquarian **Sigurður Vigfússon** in 1880 was the first in the area. A pioneer of Icelandic archaeology, he went to Þingvellir specifically to excavate the ancient parliamentary site. He spent nearly four weeks on the site, carrying out excavations and various other investigations of old structures.
2. Another excavation took place in 1920, when general director of National Museum of Iceland, **Matthías Þórðarson** excavated *Þorleifshaugur* (Þorleifur's Barrow) in connection with an extensive study of the assembly site.
3. A small excavation was made in 1957, when a double-crook crosier dating from the 11th century was unearthed in a grassfield near the Þingvellir farmhouse when an electrical cable was being laid to Hotel Valhöll.
4. In 1986-1992 an archaeological field survey was made at Þingvellir under the auspices of the National Museum of Iceland. All remains visible on the surface were surveyed and plans drawn to a scale of 1:100, and the area was surveyed using a total station. These surveys were the basis of the planning map prepared for the Þingvellir Commission around 1990 (*see* Map 6).
5. In 1998 the Institute of Archaeology and the National Museum of Iceland excavated the area adjacent to the church.
6. In 2002 excavation was carried out at Njálsbúð, Biskupabúðir and the trench where the crosier was unearthed. The Institute of Archaeology has made a research schedule for the area until 2006 and has received a grant for this purpose.

SIGURÐUR VIGFÚSSON'S EXCAVATIONS 1880

Sigurður Vigfússon's excavations were important and quite extensive, witness the fact that he made excavations in six of the area's best-known relics:

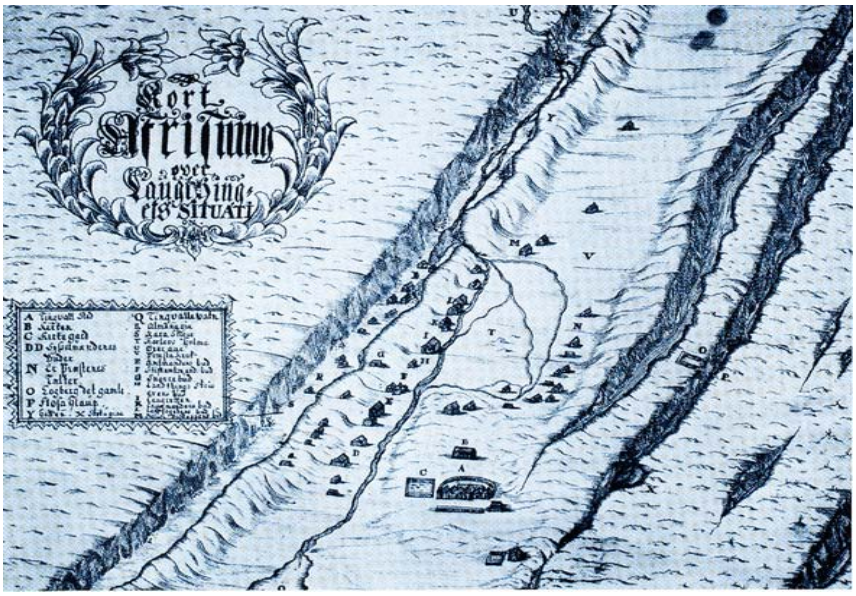

Figure 3.10. Map of the Law Council in the 18th century*, propably by Sæmund Hólm, 1789.*

1: Circular structure on Spöngin: Sigurður Vigfússon surveyed an oval structure on Spöngin, which measured just under 17 x 20 m. Within are ruins of a rectangular structure, measuring just under 10 x 7 m. The entrance to this building, in the middle of the longitudinal wall, faced the church at Þingvellir.

Sigurður Vigfússon's report on his excavation is interesting. He concludes that the site is not that of any booth of great age, nor of any very large building, as the structure was not built of stone. He believed that traces of several structures, and of two or three concentric circular wall structures, were visible in the trench. He also discerned a black layer of ash and charcoal. The circles and an enclosure in the centre of them are beneath this layer, while the ruins visible on the surface are above it. Hence the structures are clearly from different periods. A short distance north of the circle is a small hill, which he believed was *Lögsögumannahóll* (Lawspeakers' Hillock).

2: Turf wall at the west of Spöngin: Sigurður Vigfússon had an excavation made by a turf wall structure he came across at the western side, *Lögbergssporðurinn* (Law Rock Tail), which was probably adjacent to what is now known as *Peningagjá* (Money Gorge), where visitors throw small coins into the water and make a wish. He unearthed traces of an indistinct turf wall structure, and steps below it. Ashy soil was revealed, and he concluded that this was a fireplace, but found no other traces of a building.

3: Ruins in the grassfield at Þingvellir farm: The ruins of the booth are, according to Sigurður Vigfússon, west of the livestock pens in the grassfield at Þingvellir farm. The ruins were very large, about 33 m long and a little over 7 m wide. The doorway was on the west side, near the northern end, while on the eastern side wall, and the northern end, there was a connected building. The ruin was that of the *Biskupabúð* (Bishop's Booth), identified with Bishops Gyrðir Ívarsson and Ögmundur Pálsson of Skálholt. Sigurður Vigfússon was of the view that this was a

large booth fur use during the Althing, and indeed the site had been identified with bishops for centuries. However, from the description, it is just as likely that he had excavated an ancient longhouse, which may even have predated the bishops, dating from the 10th or 11th century.

It must be acknowledged that we do not know with any certainty what the assembly booths of the Saga Age looked like – whether they resembled the houses of the time, like the ruins excavated here, or whether they were of simpler structure, as was the case in later centuries.

4: Njálsbúð: Sigurður Vigfússon's excavation of *Njálsbúð* (Njáll's Booth) involved digging down alongside the end walls, both inside and outside. This revealed fairly clear turf walls, although somewhat distorted. It also transpired that the northern end wall had later been moved a little farther into the structure. The ruins measured about 29 x 8 m. Sigurður Vigfússon discovered an entrance on the eastern longitudinal wall facing the river, near the northern end.

5: Snorrabúð: *Snorrabúð* (Snorri's Booth) is in the centre of *Hamraskarð* (Crag Cleft), a short distance west of *Lögberg* (Law Rock). Sigurður Vigfússon had excavations made by the end walls, in order to examine both ends of the ruins. He concluded that there were three sets of rock walls, each inside and above the next and that the original side walls had vanished. Snorrabúð was about 23 m long, and 10 m across at its widest point. From under the end wall of Snorrabúð, Sigurður Vigfússon observed what appeared to be a wall which had collapsed down the rock. The lower part of this wall was 8 m long, and he concluded that these were remnants of a bulwark which led from the booth, and that Snorrabúð was the same structure as was termed *Virkisbúð* (Bulwark Booth) in Njáll's Saga.

6: Lögberg: Last but not least, Sigurður Vigfússon made excavations of the structure on *Hallurinn* (the Slope), which is now generally believed to be the site of *Lögberg* (the Law Rock). In his interesting account of the study, he states that the raised area on Hallurinn is about 20 m across from the edge of the gorge and toward the slope, and 21 m in length. He had a trench dug, about 1.5 metres wide, across the structure, from the edge of the gorge and down to the rock beneath.

One of the most interesting aspects of Sigurður Vigfússon's excavations at Lögberg is that, at the southern part of the trench, he found traces of ash, which became a considerable layer of ash down at rock level, where there was also a large cleft or hollow, full of ash. Sigurður Vigfússon concluded that this had probably been a fireplace. This could indicate that, up on Hallurinn, there was an ash-heap connected with activities carried out there before the manmade structure was built up.

When we consider Sigurður Vigfússon's work today, we must of course take into account that he could only practise the archaeology of his own time. Nonetheless his work is of great importance; it has revealed much which leads one to ask questions which may have interesting answers. For instance, what was the purpose of the circular structure on Spöngin, and does it indeed comprise several structures from different periods? There is no doubt that specialised archaeological research using modern methods could provide answers to many of the questions about Þingvellir which have long been a mystery.

MATTHÍAS ÞÓRÐARSON'S RESEARCH AT ÞINGVELLIR 1920-1945

In the period 1920-1945 **Matthías Þórðarson**, general director of the National Museum of Iceland, undertook an extensive study of Þingvellir. He wrote a number of papers and published a book on his findings, together with a map of the parliamentary site and booths.

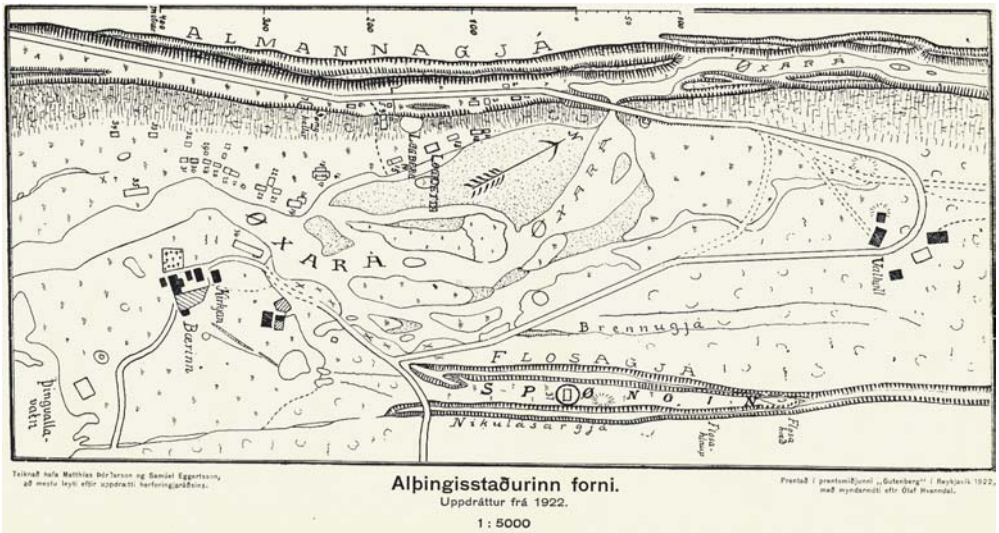

Figure 3.11. Map of the ancient assembly site from an article by Matthías Þórðarson, 1922.

He excavated a structure known as *Þorleifshaugur* (Þorleifur's Barrow) in 1920. According to oral tradition, it was the burial place of *Þorleifur jarlaskáld* (Þorleifur Poet of Earls), who was slain at Þingvellir and buried "north of the Law Council". Matthías Þórðarson concluded that the contents of the barrow had been disturbed – hence it had been dug up before. The barrow appeared to be a manmade structure of considerable age. It contained a large amount of rock. He found slight traces of ash and charcoal. Small fragments of bone, iron and nails were also unearthed, along with a small silver coin in poor condition. The coin, which resembled those of the 12th-century King Sverrir of Norway, disintegrated before it could be studied further.

The rock pile within the structure was about 5.5 m long and nearly 4 m across, comprising a higher central section with piles on either side, to east and west. It is impossible to say with any certainty whether the structure was a barrow or some other manmade structure.

RESEARCH IN CONNECTION WITH THE DISCOVERY OF A TAU CROSIER IN 1957

An unexpected object was discovered when an electrical cable was being laid across the grassfield at the Þingvellir in 1957. It was identified by **Kristján Eldjárn**, general director of the National Museum of Iceland and later President of Iceland, "as a tau cross or tau crosier. It consists of socket in which the top end of a staff of cornel wood is still preserved – with two symmetrically placed crooks, all cast of bronze in one piece. The metal is now oxidized to a dark green and there are no traces of gilding. On both sides of the socket there are engraved lines running through loops of the well known Ringerike or rune stone kind. The crooks are terminated by animal heads typical of the Urnes style, with an elongated

pointed eye filling almost all the open space of the head, long twisted lip-lappets and degenerate head-lappets. The object must certainly be grouped with the monuments and the Urnes style and consequently it should very likely be dated to the third quarter of the eleventh century, a period roughly coinciding with the term of office of the first bishop of Iceland."

The object was unearthed in a low-lying, uneven patch of grassy ground a short distance north of the eastern end of the bridge across the Öxará river. Curator **Gísli Gestsson** visited the site and excavated there.

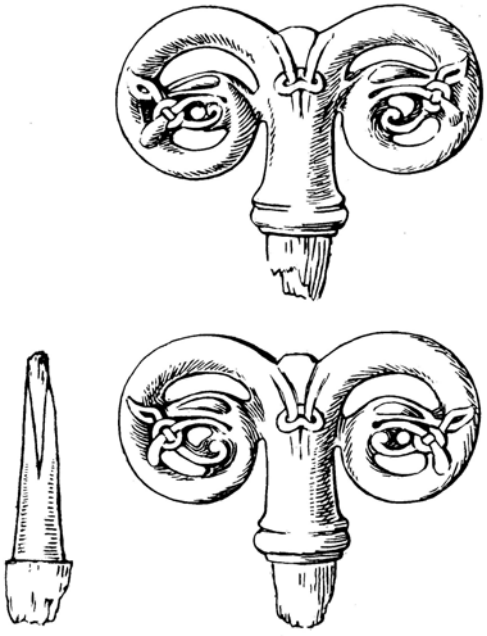

Figure 3.12. Illustration of the tau crosier by Kristján Eldjárn, 1970.

CATALOGING OF VISIBLE REMAINS AT ÞINGVELLIR 1986-1992

In the summer of 1986 the Þingvellir Commission assigned the National Museum of Iceland to undertake the cataloguing of archaeological remains of human habitation at Þingvellir. Visible manmade structures in the assembly area were registered. A precise system of coordinates was mapped in the area of the ruins and a map of the area made for use in planning work, including contours and the surveyed ruins (Map 6).

The area is delimited to the south by *Hestagjá* (Horse Gorge) , to the north by *Stekkjagjá* (Sheep Fold Gorge), to the west by *Almannagjá* (Everymans's Gorge) and to the east by *Nikulásargjá* (Nikulás's Gorge). The ruins were mapped and plans drawn to a scale of 1:100. This survey was not expected to reveal much that was new, as the area had previously been mapped and surveyed. In fact, however, this method of cataloguing yielded a far more accurate, and also far more disparate, picture of the area of the ruins than had been possible before. The ruins could be classified as belonging to older and more recent periods of construction. In some locations up to three or four layers of habitation are built one on top of the other.

In addition to remains in Almannagjá and on Hallurinn and the plain beneath,

Biskupabúðir, structures on Spöngin and Stekkjagjá were catalogued.

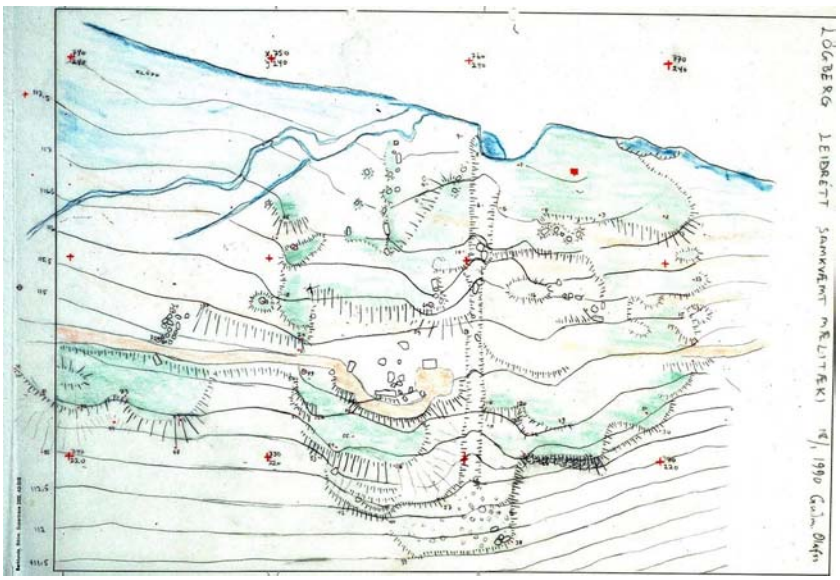

Figure 3.13. Manmade platform on Lögberg rock at the top of Hallurinn. The trench and research area excavated in 1880 can be seen in the middle.

The following documents exist from this cataloguing of archaeological remains at Þingvellir: 33 plans on A3 paper to a scale of 1:100, 3 plans on A4 paper to a scale of 1:100, records of data and coordinates from computer readings, a considerable number of computer printouts of contour maps on various scales, 4 A4 sheets of seven drill-core readings to a scale of 1:10, two soil samples from drill cores, many photographs taken of the area, both slides and black-and-white photos, and copies of outline and planning maps of ruins and archaeological sites on various scales.

All visible ruins have been surveyed and plans made, and they have been plotted on maps. The archaeological remains are far more extensive and complex than had previously been realised. They date from various periods and are often superimposed on older buildings. Sections of older walls project in many cases from under more recent wall structures. The cataloguing of the area revealed the remnants of at least 50 booths and other manmade structures in all.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH SINCE 1998

In **1998** the Institute of Archaeology commenced preparation and gathering of sources for an archaeological excavation on the area around Þingvellir Church. The excavation took place in 1999. A trench was dug, ten metres long and two metres deep, from the northwest corner of the present church. Finds included the foundation of a 16th-century church and traces of its structure, and an assembly booth nearby. The results indicate that a farm was not established at Þingvellir until after it had become an assembly site. Georadar readings were also taken at several locations.

Among the finds made during the excavation was an intact silver coin which turned out to be Norwegian and dating from the period 1065-80. It is an imitation of a coin from the reign of Ethelred II or Canute the Mighty which were minted in England around the millennium (997-1003). As far as is known, no identical coin, i.e. minted using the same cast, has been previously found. Only one other 11th-

century Norwegian coin has been found in Iceland, at Bessastaðir in 1996.

In **2002** test trenches were dug in Njálsbúð, Biskupabúðir and the trench where the crosier was found. This research was most promising; it indicates that further investigation could add much to our knowledge of the site. In all cases archaeological remains were found, dating from various periods. Previously unknown remains were also discovered, which are deteriorating due to encroachment by the Öxará river. Adjacent to Biskupabúðir a cluster of structures, dating back as far as the 10th century, was uncovered.

The study of archaeological remains at Þingvellir will continue until 2006. The Institute of Archaeology is carrying out this research on behalf of the Þingvellir Commission. The objective of the study is to gather more information on the history of Þingvellir. During the period of the archaeological study, the National Park will keep visitors to the National Park informed about the project, by means of guided walks and presentations, and will present information on the National Park's website.

Fig. 3. 14 Archeological research at Þingvellir 2002.

3.b History and development

THE VIKING AGE

The Viking Age was an eventful period in the history of Nordic peoples – and has even been linked with Nordic folk migrations. Its beginning is generally dated from a raid made by Vikings on the monastery at Lindisfarne in northern England in the year 793, and its conclusion is marked by the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. During the intervening period great numbers of people left their homes to seek new places to live, in areas spreading from the banks of the Volga River to the east coast of North America, and from the Mediterranean to the Arctic Ocean. Never before or since have Nordic peoples had as much influence on other nations.

Vikings are widely imagined as brutal raiders, but we must not forget that many

others were peace-loving farmers who sought new places for themselves to live – and not least merchants who promoted trade between different countries and cultures.

Vikings settled in many areas of Europe and established colonies, but these were small in population and were soon assimilated by the previous residents, with the result that their influence was only indirect. The expansion of the Vikings westward to the islands of the North Atlantic was quite another story. These territories were unsettled, and here the Nordic settlers could build up societies completely on their own premises, societies which lasted for several centuries.

Nordic societies of this period were governed, on the one hand, by an assembly of free and armed men and, on the other hand, by a leader generally referred to as a king. This was the same arrangement as prevailed among other Germanic peoples. Laws were adopted at the assemblies, judgements passed and other issues in the society settled. The king would take the lead in times of war, but had little power in other respects.

THE SETTLEMENT OF ICELAND AND BEGINNINGS OF STATEHOOD

Iceland was among those islands settled when Nordic peoples set out across the North Atlantic, as referred to earlier. Settlement of the country began around 870 and Iceland is considered to have been fully settled by around 930. This period is called the Age of Settlement.

Like any other colonist community, this society had to be organised from the ground up, with settlers of many different origins. They came in particular from Norway, many from Scotland, Ireland and the northern islands of the British Isles, but also a few from Sweden and Denmark. The migration clearly destabilised the legal structure which was rooted in ancient customs and an established system. Here traditional attitudes could not serve as a reference, but instead a new structure had to be found for the nascent society. This tested especially the mettle of those persons entrusted with the leadership, in resolving disputes, controlling the setting of legislation and enforcing the same. It had to influence the role and structure of the society's institutions.

In the manner of other Nordic and Germanic peoples, the Vikings established assemblies in the new islands they settled, but neither in the Faroe Islands, nor in Iceland or Greenland, were national leaders established. The most probable explanation is that the waters of the Atlantic offered protection against invasion by large armies – and the Norwegians and island dwellers dominated this ocean area in any case.

In Iceland, an assembly for the entire country was established around 930 and called the Althing (General Assembly). It was located on the field of Þingvellir. The establishment of the General Assembly marks the beginning of an organised society in Iceland generally referred to as the Icelandic Commonwealth. It would last until 1262-64.

The settlement of Iceland is remarkable in three different senses. Firstly, as far as is known, seafarers sailed in relative certainty across the North Atlantic, heading for a definite place. It is not known that this had been done before, and these were apparently the first organised sailings on the open seas for which reliable records have been preserved. Secondly, this mass migration headed north, which must be considered fairly unusual, since by far the most common practice was for

northern peoples to head south from their barren and harsh lands to more fertile ones. Thirdly, the settlement of Iceland and other outlying islands in the north can be seen as the first steps by Europeans towards the New World.

BACKGROUND TO AND ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ALTHING

Assemblies were set up in Iceland before the country was completely settled. Old sources mention assemblies at Þórsnes (Snæfellsnes, west Iceland) and Kjalarnes (southwest Iceland). The establishment of a single assembly in Iceland was an ambitious move, since it would possibly have seemed more natural to divide the country into smaller ones. There could have been a number of reasons. Iceland lacked the stability of the settlers' old society, partly because the family and clan structure had been disrupted since the settlers had their roots in various places and families of noble descent had spread around the country. Blood ties therefore did not tie the local communities together. Families sided with each other on important issues, and the natural place to achieve such solidarity was an assembly representing the whole country. The fact that Iceland was settled by people from different geographical areas and with diverse backgrounds and to some extent disparate customs and concepts concerning the law also contributed to the establishment of institutions to tackle the challenge of introducing a single body of law for a very diverse group – and an assembly for the whole country was the only suitable solution. Finally, overland communications were fairly good in Iceland in comparison to Norway, which made it easier for people to gather at meetings.

DISTRICT ASSEMBLIES

The two aforementioned district assemblies, at Kjalarnes in the southwest and Þórsnes, on Snæfellsnes, west Iceland, were founded around the year 900. Other assemblies may have been established at the same time although none are mentioned in historical records. After the establishment of the Althing, which was an assembly for the whole country, the spring district assemblies became more permanent institutions. They were divided into two sessions, the "prosecution assembly" and the "debt assembly", and gathered for 4-7 days in May for the settlement of debts and disputes. The midsummer or autumn assemblies usually took place when people were returning from the Althing and lasted for one or two days at the end of July or August. The acts of the Althing were promulgated and discussed there, but no judicial actions were taken.

Around 965 Iceland was divided into quarters and the number of spring assemblies increased to 13. It was decided that in each quarter there should be three district assemblies, except for the Northern quarter, where four were established. The district assemblies were as follows:

- West Quarter: 1. Þverárþing, 2. Þórsnesþing, 3. Þorskafjarðarþing
- North Quarter: 1. Húnaþing, 2. Hegranesþing, 3. Vaðlaþing, 4. Þingeyjarþing
- East Quarter: 1. Sunnudalsþing, 2. Krakalækjarþing, 3. Múlaþing
- South Quarter: 1. Rangárþing, 2. Árnesþing, 3. Kjalarnesþing

Most of these assembly sites were located and surveyed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rough maps of most sites have been made. The drawings below, from the end of the 19th century, shows an assembly site in south Iceland (figures 3.15 and 3.16).

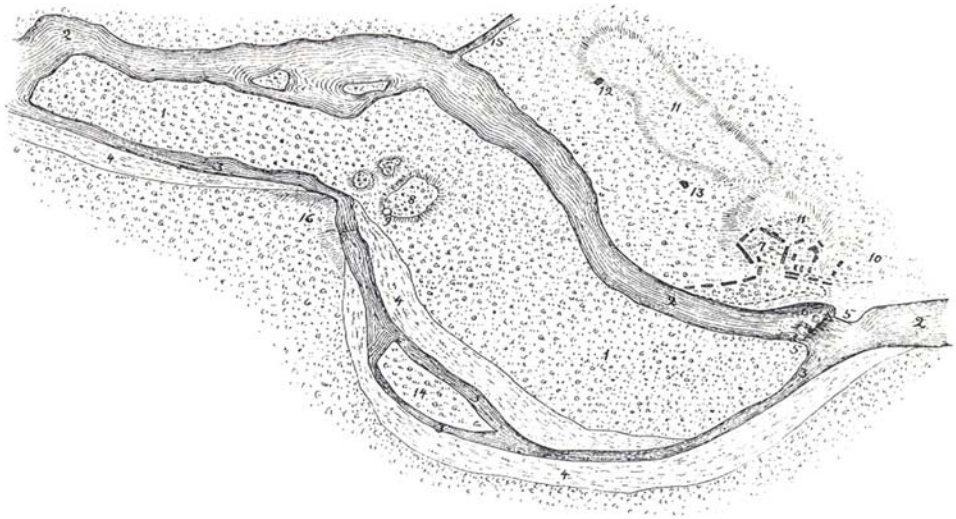

Figure 3.15. Árnes and the assembly site: 1. Árnes. 2-2. River Þjórsá. 3-3-3. River Árneskvísl. 4-4-4. Old course of the river Þjórsá. 5-5. Búði. 6. Búðaberg. 7. Búðatóttirnar (booth ruins). 8. Þinghóll (assembly mound). 9. Dómhringurinn (Judgement Circle). 10. Hofsheiði. 11-11. Hofsholt. 12. Stóra-Hof. 13. Minna-Hof. 14. Lækjarey. 15. Outflow of the river Kálfá. 16. Akbrautarholt. Drawing by Brynjólfur Jónsson, Yearbook of the Archaeological Society, 1883.

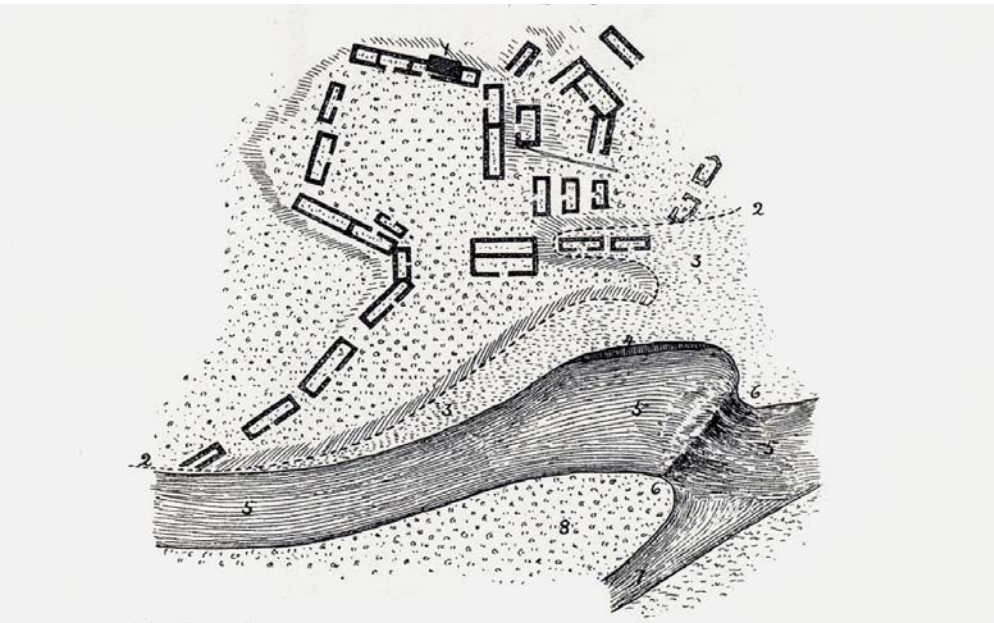

Figure 3.16. Booth ruins at the Árnes assembly site. 1. Later booth. 2-2. Eroded riverbank. 3-3. Wind-eroded gravel bank. 4. Búðaberg. 5-5-5. River Þjórsá. 6-6. Búði. 7. River Árneskvísl. 8. Árnes. Drawing by Brynjólfur Jónsson, Yearbook of the Archaeological Society, 1883.

THE OLD ASSEMBLY SITE

The Althing lasted for roughly two weeks a year. At the time of its foundation, all Germanic societies held their assemblies outdoors. This was also the case at the Althing, a custom that prevailed until the mid 18th century. Since it only lasted for a fortnight (and even shorter after 1271), there was no need to make much effort on buildings there. The main development made there was to divert *Öxará* (Axe River) through the assembly site (Map 5). The oldest authority about this dates from the 13th century and describes a journey made by the settler Ketilbjörn the

Old and his band of men:

> *"When they had gone a short way from there, they reached a frozen river where they cut a hole in the ice and dropped their axe into it, and therefore named it Öxará. This river was later diverted into Almannagjá and now runs through Þingvellir."*

The purpose in diverting the river was to provide water for the assembly, meaning that this was the first known major water diversion scheme in Iceland.

The assembly was held in the area marked "assembly site" on Maps 1 and 5. Assembly duties were mainly confined to two places, **Lögberg** (Law Rock) and **Lögrétta** (Law Council). Sources from the 13th century imply that Lögberg was on the eastern edge of Almannagjá, although it is impossible to locate Lögberg categorically at the start of the Commonwealth. Together with the Law Council, Lögberg was the centre of the assembly proceedings. The laws were recited at either of these places, or in the church if the weather was bad. Members of the Law Council and panels proceeded from Lögberg to perform their duties, and it was there that the assembly was inaugurated and closed. Announcements of all kinds were made at Lögberg, summonses were made there and anything else that should be made public, people made speeches, presented ideas and submitted proposals. The Lawspeaker (*lögsögumaður*) was based at Lögberg, where a special space was allocated to him. Sources from the 13th century imply that the Law Council sat on the field in front of Lögberg, possibly north or east of the Öxará river. However, there is much to indicate that it was originally located elsewhere. It should be borne in mind that the land between Almannagjá and Hrafnagjá has subsided since the time of the settlement, so that the landscape now is not in its original form. Originally the land would have been higher, the current in Öxará stronger and Lake Þingvallavatn farther away. The assembly fields themselves after which Þingvellir is named would therefore have been drier than they are today. For this reason it is not possible to locate precisely the site of the Law Council during the Commonwealth. It functioned outdoors throughout the Commonwealth and for a long while afterwards.

THE ICELANDIC COMMONWEALTH

Tasks performed by the Icelandic Althing were divided between its institutions: a Law Council, five courts and the Lawspeaker.

The Assembly's most important forum was the Law Council, the organisation of which was finalised about 1000. It was comprised of 48 of the country's leading chieftains (**goðar**, sing. **goði**), each with two advisors, plus the country's two bishops. Each goði was supported by a group of followers from among the farmers. Their connection was based on mutual trust and could be terminated by either party.

The principal task of the Law Council was to "frame the law" and "make new laws". The former involved ruling on what law applied when dispute arose as to the substance of a legal provision. In interpreting the term "frame the law", special attention should be paid to medieval ideas on the origin and nature of law. According to these ideas, the laws pre-existed in human minds and appeared in traditional practices. They were not the creation of any individual, but rather part of the human condition, past and present; laws were the tried and true inheritance of past generations and were to be respected. Rules were not

conceived and adopted consciously and purposefully, they were brought to light.

As previously mentioned, legal customs and traditions were destabilised during the settlement of Iceland. Because of this, the resulting uncertainty often had to be eliminated. Disputes would have been common while the political structure of Iceland was being formulated, and these could be referred to the Law Council. When legal disputes arose – or people "argued on legal questions", as it is worded in the earliest Icelandic law codex Grágás, containing the laws of the Commonwealth – the goðar who sat on the Council's mid-platform were to rule on them in accordance with specific procedure. This involved in effect bearing witness to what was considered to be applicable law, and was called "framing the law". By this means the true and traditional law was revealed. Accordingly, elder law took precedence over younger, in contrast to present practice, whereby newer laws replace older ones. With this attitude, when laws needed improving because they were unclear or contradictory, new laws were not adopted but rather older and more original ones were sought. Behind this lies the idea that the laws had been corrupted in the course of human treatment and needed to be corrected. In other words, it was necessary to "frame the law".

Fig. 3.17. The "Golden Age" assembly at Þingvellir in ancient times, as painter W. Collingwood imagined it would have been at Almannagjá.

It must be borne in mind here that the laws were preserved in oral tradition and human memory is not infallible, so that laws in this form were surprisingly flexible and could more easily be adapted to new circumstances than laws which are fixed in writing. In this case the method was not dissimilar to that practised when courts today issue judgement in cases lacking specific legal provisions, and rules have to be formulated supported by legal references such as legal principles and general legal conceptions.

While it is now clear that in fact new rules were often being adopted, by approaching the subject in this manner the mid-platform members of the Law Council (the goðar) by no means had free rein in their rulings. They were bound by traditional conventions, recognised interests and the prevailing legal conceptions – in short, the legal traditions of generations – in a similar manner to that whereby a judge is bound by recognised sources of law when issuing a new

ruling. A majority of the goðar determined the outcome, with the minority obliged to abide by this decision, as can only be considered normal in view of the fact that they were bearing witness to what was considered to be factual. This meant that the society was not controlled by laws formulated at the will and whim of its rulers – the nature of the law limited their power.

Although this method solved many problems, it was impossible to avoid innovation completely in a society whose foundations were being laid and shaped. This was acknowledged with specific instructions on the "making of new laws". Although the law does not state specifically how they were adopted, there can hardly be any question that they required unanimous acceptance. Here it should be kept in mind that formal voting was probably not practised; men expressed their position by voicing dissent or assent, by beating of weapons or clapping their hands. Questions were deemed to be accepted if a good majority of the most powerful and influential leaders gave their assent, and no one was bound by any decision which he had not himself agreed to. In men's minds new laws were thus the equivalent of a covenant between free men. The account by historiographer Ari the Wise (1067-1148) of the adoption of Christianity in the year 1000 shows clearly how people proceeded when a new law was disputed by men of power.

> *As a consequence of this, one man after another named witnesses and both sides, the heathens and the Christians, declared they would no longer share law with the other and then departed from Lögberg.*

People declared they were no longer bound by the same law and the society split. The response to this was to seek a compromise, as the heathen chieftain Þorgeir, goði of the People of Ljósavatn, did.

> *"My advice now," he said, "is that we refuse to allow those people who are most determined on conflict to decide our course, and seek a compromise between them so that each side gains some of its demands, and all of us have one law and one faith. It will prove true, that if the law is split then peace will also be split."*

Thus power was limited, although in a different manner from that involved in framing the laws. A different arrangement was scarcely possible amongst people who lacked a central executive power, as it was necessary to achieve the widest possible consensus.

In accordance with these basic ideas there was no provision for a national leader. No centralised executive power existed in the society in the sense that no single authority looked after law enforcement. The Commonwealth was thus a loosely connected alliance of the country's principal chieftains; they in turn shared mutual obligations with their followers among the farming class. The governing institutions of the society thus performed merely the function of defining people's rights, not of enforcing them. This has generally been described as a flaw in the constitutional structure of the Commonwealth and among the reasons for Icelanders submitting to the Norwegian monarchy in 1262-64. While this may be true enough if seen from a modern perspective, it is scarcely the case if examined according to the premises of the Commonwealth itself. It rejected the centralised executive power represented by the figure of the sovereign, which is not least evident in the emphasis placed by the ancient compilers of Icelandic sagas on the tyranny of King Harald Fine-Hair, in attempting to consolidate his power over all Norway, as one of the main reason for the exodus to and settlement of Iceland.

Centralised executive power was weak in European medieval states and what could be referred to as anarchy characterised many societies other than Iceland. Gradually, royal power grew and peace became more stable than before; this was a development which Icelanders were obliged to follow. Eventually they were no longer able to retain their special position and, like other peoples of the Middle Ages, they submitted to the rule of a sovereign. They did not, however, choose a domestic king, but rather one located at a suitable distance. For them, this was the best way to preserve their independence.

There were five courts at the Althing, one for each quarter of the country, and a fifth court for the entire country. For a judgement to be passed in a quarter court all the judges – 36 in number – had to agree. Failing this, the case was dealt with in the fifth court, where a majority was sufficient to decide the outcome. The fifth court was comprised of 48 judges, 36 of whom participated in the handling of each case. The courts do not appear to have ruled on legal disputes, but rather the Law Council, as has been described previously. The former would only have assessed the facts in a case. Rules of evidence were strictly formal, which meant that the role of the courts was only to judge whether a fact was considered to have been properly established according to form.

Finally, the Lawspeaker must be mentioned, whose chief role was to recite the laws before the Law Council. Originally the laws were unrecorded and his regular recitation of them was intended to ensure their preservation. Apart from this, the Lawspeaker directed the assembly proceedings.

In the winter of 1117-1118 the major step was taken of having the laws written down; subsequently additions were made to them. The outcome was the extensive legal codes which have been preserved as *Grágás* (which literally means "grey goose") in manuscripts from the mid-13th century. Although the text of *Grágás* is generally terse and bears all the characteristics of learned texts, it is the most extensive of all Nordic medieval law codes, an indication of the extensive legislative efforts in the new and unformed Icelandic society.

MONARCH AND PARLIAMENT

Around 1200 this administrative structure began to disintegrate and the entire first half of the 13th century was characterised by major domestic clashes between the country's most powerful leaders.

The kings of Norway had long been of the opinion that countries which had been chiefly settled from Norway were in one way or another subject to their sovereignty. By the mid-13th century royal power in Norway had grown considerably in strength following brutal domestic conflicts. Individual Icelandic leaders had often sought the king's support in their struggle for supremacy and become his liegemen. The king's control was signed and sealed in 1262-64, when all the country's principal leaders swore their loyalty to him and made a special covenant laying down both parties' rights and obligations. The Icelanders agreed to pay the king a tax which was decided, but reserved the right to involvement in the setting of laws, while the king promised in return to ensure peace for them along with certain other specific rights. For the Icelandic chieftains this was the best solution. The king was a long distance away and had scant means of exercising his power in Iceland, so as a result the chieftains retained their independence for the most part.

Norwegian laws were reviewed during the years 1267-77. The final stage in this extensive work was the law codex *Jónsbók*, which was sent to Iceland in 1280 and adopted in the country, following heated debate, at the Althing in 1281. Icelanders raised various objections to the codex, in particular in order to limit the king's power, angering the royal emissary, who claimed that the king alone was to ordain the laws. Icelanders could subsequently request that he make improvements to them. This represents a new philosophy of law as a fiat, which can be traced to Roman law but was foreign to Icelanders of the time. They reacted very critically, maintaining the ancient rights of the population to control lawmaking. Eventually, however, a compromise was reached and revisions made in 1294 did accommodate the wishes of the Icelanders to some extent.

Although *Jónsbók* was originally ill-received it soon became very popular and served as the principal foundation of Icelandic law for centuries. No other work has contributed more to shaping the legal conceptions and social ideas of Icelanders. There are still 45 sections which are wholly or partly current law in the country.

During the years 1262 to 1319 the country's administrative structure was altered in the direction of a state in the modern understanding of the word although, in Iceland as elsewhere, this was not achieved without conflict. The most visible change was that it now became the task of the king and his officials to enforce the laws. This had previously been the responsibility of the parties to the case. The king also assumed part of the legislative power together with the Althing, which did, however, continue to adopt laws independently. Furthermore, the king and his council became the seat of final judicial power in Icelandic affairs.

Changes made to the Althing itself now resulted in the king's officials, the bailiffs (*sýslumenn*), appointing 84 free men to attend the Althing, while the Royal Commissioner (*hirðstjóri*), who was the king's chief official, and the Lawman (*lögmaður*), who replaced the Lawspeaker (*lögsögumaður*) in chairing the assembly, appointed 36 men to sit on the Law Council. This now served both as a legislative institution and a court.

Although the assembly was now comprised of men appointed by the monarchy, it defended its right to legislate and levy taxes right up to the time of Absolutism.

ABSOLUTISM

In 1662 Absolutism was introduced in Iceland, which had been under Danish rule since the 14th century, and the royal senior administration reorganised accordingly. The effect of this on the Althing was to substantially reduce the legislative power of the Law Council. However, it still adopted laws in limited areas up until 1700. The judicial authority of the Law council was also curtailed with the establishment of a Superior Jury (*yfirréttur*) in 1563, presided over by the Royal Commissioner who appointed the 24 members of the jury, preferably from the ranks of the District Commissioners. Appeals against rulings could be brought before this court. By the 18th century the legislative power of the Althing had disappeared. Here the laws of the Absolutist monarch were simply presented to the population to be followed, and judgements were pronounced. As the end of the 18th century approached, assembly meetings were scarcely a shadow of their former selves. To make things worse, major earthquakes in 1789 somewhat damaged the assembly site. A decision was taken to move the assembly to

Reykjavík (which was granted a municipal charter in 1786 and was gradually emerging as Iceland's capital), which was implemented in 1798. The assembly met in Reykjavík the following two years, before it was abolished in 1800 as part of a complete restructuring of the country's legal system. It was reinstated in altered form in 1843.

ÞINGVELLIR AS A NATIONAL CENTRE

The history of Þingvellir is not only linked to issues of national governance. It was here that men gathered by the thousands, from all parts of Iceland, in late June each year on a variety of errands. Merchants and tradesmen would attend to conduct business; poets and storytellers went to entertain others and enrich their own troves; learned men gathered to exchange views; travellers went to tell news of faraway lands; hearty fellows went to compete in sports; and many others went seeking entertainment and to enjoy everything which was on offer, to see and be seen by others. For two weeks the Icelanders lived as if they were a city state – the fields of Þingvellir served the same function as the fora, temples and theatres of Greek city states. They thus played a key role in Icelandic culture.

The extensive Icelandic medieval literature is thus closely connected with Þingvellir, by one means or another, although the cathedral schools and the monasteries also made a sizeable contribution here. Many events described in the Sagas of Icelanders took place at Þingvellir and the same is true of the contemporary sagas dating from the 12th and 13th centuries. In addition to these genres there are the Eddic and Skaldic poems, the Kings' Sagas and learned works of various sorts, for instance, in the field of philosophy, theology, mathematics, geography and natural sciences – not to forget the law codices. The scope of the sagas is very wide, its settings reaching to the banks of the Volga River and Constantinople, across the Mediterranean to the eastern shores of North America, across Greenland and the Arctic. Most importantly, the Icelanders recorded the oldest history of Greenland, the Faroe Islands, the Orkneys, Norway and Sweden. The sagas also contain important chapters from the history of Russia, Denmark, England, Scotland and Ireland. Icelanders could be said to have become the medieval historiographers of the North Atlantic.

THE HERITAGE OF ÞINGVELLIR

Icelandic medieval literature is integrally linked to Þingvellir, especially as far as the Sagas of Icelanders and the Kings' Sagas are concerned. These works are regarded as among the most remarkable literary achievements of the Middle Ages and occupy a leading place in world literature. They shed light on the lives and mentalities of Northern peoples in the Middle Ages, not least during the Viking Age, when these peoples' influence was felt throughout Europe. At the same time they are an important source of information about all Germanic nations. Particular characteristics include championing the independence, individualism and responsibility of each man for his actions.

Icelandic medieval literature has also played a major part in shaping the image of the Nordic countries and their people, both in their own eyes and those of the world. As long as they value this heritage and identity, they must regard Þingvellir as among the most remarkable of their historical sites.

In Iceland a society of settlers developed, the only one in Europe to have detailed

sources describing its very origins. The settlement contributed to destabilising established customary rights and the settlers thus had to shape a new legal structure in a new society. This they had to accomplish on the basis of a shared life philosophy and the conceptions of Nordic, and thus Germanic, peoples as to the proper social structure. Here the assembly was the most important forum for governing the country and it was natural that the settlers soon arranged the holding of an assembly. The Althing was thus one of many assemblies held in Europe, including in the Nordic countries. But it is unique in a number of ways. The first way concerns the particular emphases and detailed attention given to removing legal uncertainty and resolving disputes without a superior authority. This is evident, for instance, in the important roles played by the Lawspeaker and Law Council. Secondly, there are extensive and detailed sources on the organisation of the assembly and its working procedures. The fruit of this activity is the extensive legal collections of the Commonwealth known as *Grágás*, which were previously discussed. Thirdly, the Icelandic Althing has a longer uninterrupted history than any other medieval assembly with the possible exception of the Faroese legal assembly and the assembly on the Isle of Man, sources on the history of which are limited.

Although both the conceptions and philosophies of all the medieval Nordic peoples were very similar, especially bearing in mind the events of the Viking Age, in shaping their new society the settlers of Iceland had to develop a clearer consciousness of what lay behind this philosophy than did those who remained behind and continued to follow ancient traditions without examining them in particular. As a result, medieval conceptions of law and power are manifested especially clearly in the Icelandic Commonwealth.

As was previously mentioned, the basic idea behind the administrative structure of the Icelandic Commonwealth was that laws are actually a covenant between free men, a social contract in the literal sense of the word. This is visible in the practice of referring to legal tradition and general legal conceptions in framing the law, in other words to consider what might be said to derive from the contract of generations, while the making of new laws was a contract among the living, and thus no one was regarded as obliged by anything to which he had not agreed personally. This called for compromise, which is one of the most important factors in the constitutional history of Germanic nations. Thus the legal status of individuals was defined and there the line was drawn – it was left to the parties involved to enforce their rights.

This represents a rejection of the idea that laws were the instrument of an authority which could be applied without restriction, as was subsequently assumed and enforced to the utmost under Absolutism; instead the concept of law implied that power was by nature restricted. This is by no means to imply that the laws were completely satisfactory in all areas, or that they suited everyone equally well. But laws which have been shaped over a long period of time in dealings of successive generations, or which have arisen out of compromise between opposing forces, can be assumed to have suited the great majority fairly well, and offered the common people some protection against overbearing leaders, even if such protection was by no means unfailing, as medieval governing practices were far from perfect.

The history of the Icelandic Commonwealth can probably shed light on significant aspects of constitutional development in Europe, all of which are linked directly or

indirectly to the growth and ascendancy of the rule of law, and can probably clarify our understanding of them. Even though they may have failed to achieve their goal, this does not detract from the value of their underlying ideals, which can still light our path. The plains of Þingvellir are an integral part of this story.

ÞINGVELLIR: A HALLOWED SITE

One of the most important events in Icelandic national history was the adoption of Christianity, which took place at Þingvellir in 1000. The decision to convert to Christianity has probably been the subject of more written speculation than any other event in Icelandic history. Opposing parties upheld Christianity and the old heathen religion, but a peaceful decision was made to adopt the Christian religion and reject heathendom. After this, mass baptisms took place all over Iceland. This remarkable story is preserved by Þingvellir.

King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway (995-1000) set out to convert both Norway and Iceland to Christianity, and lent his support to missionaries in Iceland for this purpose. At the Althing in the summer of 1000 (or possibly 999), the Christian and heathen factions, the latter far more numerous, came together. There was no armed conflict. Instead, they succeeded in reaching a peaceful solution. This was not least due to the contribution of Þorgeir, goði of the People of Ljósavatn and leader of the heathen faction, who was Lawspeaker at the assembly. He accepted the challenge issued by the leaders of the Christians, to declare laws which all would obey. He lay down under a cloak, which was a heathen ritual practice; scholars believe that this entailed that he was endowed with divine authority for his decision.

The following morning Þorgeir called the assembly to gather at the Lögberg and declared that all Icelanders should have one set of laws and one religion, and that their religion should be Christianity. He said that it boded ill for differing sets of laws to apply within the country, and it would lead to strife and armed conflict. Instead, a compromise should be reached, which both Christians and pagans could accept. It was vital that one set of laws, and one religion, should be upheld.

The assembly accepted Þorgeir's proposal, and he was then asked to recite the new laws. Under the new laws, all men should be Christian, and be baptised. Concessions were made to the heathen faction, however, by permitting for the time being the exposure of infants and eating of horsemeat. It would be permitted to practise heathen rites in private, but if these were discovered they could result in outlawry.

The oldest and most reliable source on the adoption of Christianity is the Book of Icelanders by Ari Þorgilsson the Wise. It is believed to have been written around 1130, or a little more than a century after the events at Þingvellir. Ari the Wise had easy access to people closely related to those who had personally experienced the events at Þingvellir about a hundred years before.

Prior to the formal adoption of Christianity, Iceland was not all heathen. A considerable number of Icelanders were Christians, although the Christian mission prior to 1000 had met with little success. The first settlers began to make their way to Iceland after 870. Most were from Norway, but some, mainly their slaves, were from Ireland and the Orkneys and Hebrides. At that time Norway was still heathen, but there was also a considerable Norse population in the British Isles, especially in the Orkneys and Ireland, where Christianity had long been

established. Ireland was one of the first countries at the periphery of Europe to embrace Christianity, as early as the fifth century.

It has been pointed out that the decision made at Þingvellir in 1000, and the mass baptisms which followed, must be regarded as a natural approach to religious conversion in a society moulded by family bonds and solidarity, even "the best proof for perfect renewal of mentality" (Wilhelm Grönbech). Hence there is no reason to suppose that the adoption of Christianity was a mere superficial change to society without deeper meaning. In fact Icelanders strove to build churches and chapels, and before long the church was well established in Icelandic society.

Many scholars maintain that the government of Iceland, from the foundation of the Althing, was based upon a close tie between religion and civil administration. So far as one can tell, the social system was based to a considerable degree upon the heathen religion. In its early period, the Icelandic church is known as the "church of goðar" (chieftains). This focuses on the special relationship that prevailed between the church and the chieftains, or between the ecclesiastical and the secular. The goðar were chieftains, each in his own region, and after the advent of Christianity they continued to sit in the assembly as they had done before. Chieftains manifested their respect for the Christian faith in many ways and built churches on their estates: not only were the churches under their protection, they were also a source of revenue.

Fig. 3.18. Þingvellir church.

The first **church at Þingvellir** was built soon after the adoption of Christianity. In his *Heimskringla* (History of the Kings of Norway), Snorri Sturluson describes how King Olaf Haraldsson, who assumed the crown in 1015, sent timber to Iceland and a church was then built at Þingvellir. The king also sent a large bell which was still in the church when Snorri wrote *Heimskringla* around 1230. The church would

have been fairly large since a major function was assigned to it, both for the assembly proceedings and the synods held at Þingvellir. Medieval sources relate that the church was well stocked with artefacts and ornaments.

Just west of the church were the booths of the bishops of Skálholt, who sat on the Law Council after Christianity was adopted and also chaired synods held there for the Skálholt see, which were held almost every year in the church – generally in connection with the assembly – until the Althing ceased to be held there in 1798.

It is thought that the churches at Þingvellir were always made from timber. For most of the time the parish church has been small, however, serving a small parish, besides which the benefice was a fairly poor one. The first priest named as serving at Þingvellir was Brandur Þórisson who assumed the post in 1190. Since then, there has been a resident clergyman for most of the time. When Þingvellir National Park was established in 1930 the parish was served by a neighbouring minister, and this arrangement was maintained until 1958 when a clergyman was appointed to the church and also performed the duties of national park warden.

The church and the gabled farmhouse on its south side greatly enhance the picturesque quality of Þingvellir. The centrally located church has far from diminished its sanctity.

CULTURE

Þingvellir is the place where the Icelandic nation entered the world. For centuries it was its meeting place where great drama was enacted, playing to a full house in the days of the Commonwealth and all the way down to a handful of people during its death throes in the eighteenth century. But even after the assembly had become redundant, the ancient sun of glory still shone behind the darkness and when the Icelanders launched their independence movement in the 19th century, Þingvellir automatically became the place to imbibe vigour and determination. To modern Icelanders also, Þingvellir is one of Iceland's most magnificent places. Artists and writers who have long sought inspiration in this place still do, as does the whole people. Thus whenever the Icelandic nation considers itself to be standing at a crossroads it seeks strength and solidarity at Þingvellir. All the major festivals in Icelandic history have therefore been held there.

ÞINGVELLIR AS A LITERARY INFLUENCE

In the Sagas of Icelanders, Þingvellir was a place where people enjoyed sanctuary, were able to consult in peace and achieve reconciliation: champions of freedom made decisions there for the benefit of country and people. In the 19th century, when Romantic notions of liberty, national identity and natural philosophy began to gain momentum, Þingvellir assumed a symbolic meaning. The humiliation of Þingvellir over the centuries was considered symbolic then for the humiliation of Iceland itself, as an oppressed Danish colony which had let independence slip through its grasp. Poets and authors adopted the idea of a free and sovereign Iceland, but it is not least in the poems of **Jónas Hallgrímsson** (1807-45), later dubbed "Iceland's beloved son," that Þingvellir is given pride of place in the national consciousness. He wrote prose and poetry describing how the "soul" and "spirit" of the Icelandic nation dwelt at Þingvellir, and how the state of Þingvellir invariably reflected its mental condition. In the minds of 19th-century writers, the only option was therefore to set up the restored Althing, the main

goal of the campaign for independence, at Þingvellir. To them, Þingvellir became a sacred place. People are filled with inspiration and a sense of sanctity there, and only at Þingvellir could it be possible to trust that the leaders of the nation would become instilled with the spirit of national awareness which would help them to make beneficial decisions on Icelandic affairs.

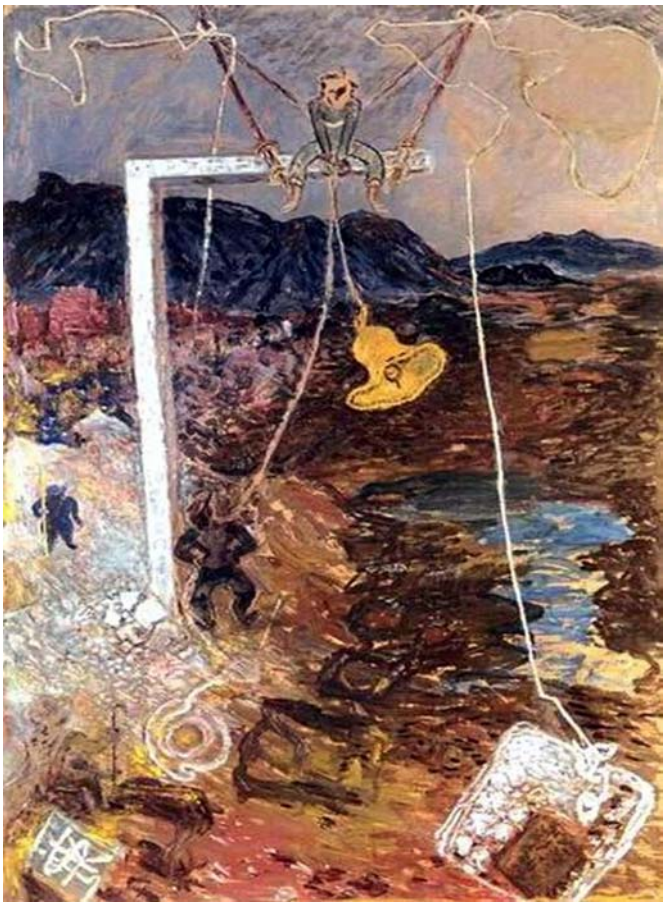

Figure 3.19 The Bell of Iceland by Jóhannes S. Kjarval, 1952.

The Romantic independence movement of the 19th century had an enormous impact on the identity of the Icelandic nation. Most 20th century poets took over where they left off, and in the works of many of the main authors Þingvellir often plays a symbolic role as the setting for or backdrop to important events. People are led there when much is at stake; suffice it to mention **Halldór Laxness** (1902-1998) and his novel "*The Bell of Iceland*". Laxness, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1955, for this work among others, sets many of the key scenes of "The Bell of Iceland" at Þingvellir, where it was said that the bell of Iceland itself rang in days of old. In doing so he lends these scenes, and the words spoken by the characters, a symbolic depth which invokes the history of Iceland and its campaign for independence. It is beyond doubt, and well justifiable too, that in the minds of most Icelanders today, Þingvellir remains a sacred place, where the dormant national spirit dwells and calls the nation to come together at crucial points in time.

ÞINGVELLIR AS SEEN BY VISUAL ARTISTS

Þingvellir has long been an important place for Icelandic visual artists, who still seek inspiration for their work there. Numerous artists from other countries have also painted Þingvellir. One of the first Icelanders to be admitted to the Copenhagen Academy of Art, in the late 18th century, was **Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm**. He is the probable author of a map of the assembly site as it was in the 18th century. The illustration shows the layout of the booths and buildings for the duration of the assembly (*see* Fig. 3.10).

French landscapist **Auguste Mayer** went to Þingvellir in 1836 with an expedition of French scientists led by doctor Paul Gaimard, and painted the following scene at Almannagjá.

Figure 3.20 Scene from Þingvellir by French painter August Mayer, 1836.

Danish artist **Emmanuel Larsen** painted in a similar area ten years later, when he wrote that "each patch and each rock in that place, the Capitol of the old Icelandic republic, recalls the ancient deeds of renown that we know from the sagas and poems."

British painter and archaeologist **W.G. Collingwood** travelled around Iceland in 1897 specifically to paint and photograph the saga sites, "so that readers of the sagas could better imagine the saga-steads", as he put it himself. In a painting, which he named *The Golden Age at Þingvellir*, he has gone further and painted the assembly at Þingvellir in ancient times, as he imagined it would have been at Almannagjá (See Fig. 3.25).

Among the first paintings acquired by the National Gallery of Iceland were scenes from Þingvellir by the Danes **Frederik Th. Kloss** and **H. August G. Schiøtt**, from the mid 19th century. And its first Icelandic acquisition was also painted there, *Summer Night* at Þingvellir by **Þórarinn B. Þorláksson** (1867-1924), produced in 1900.

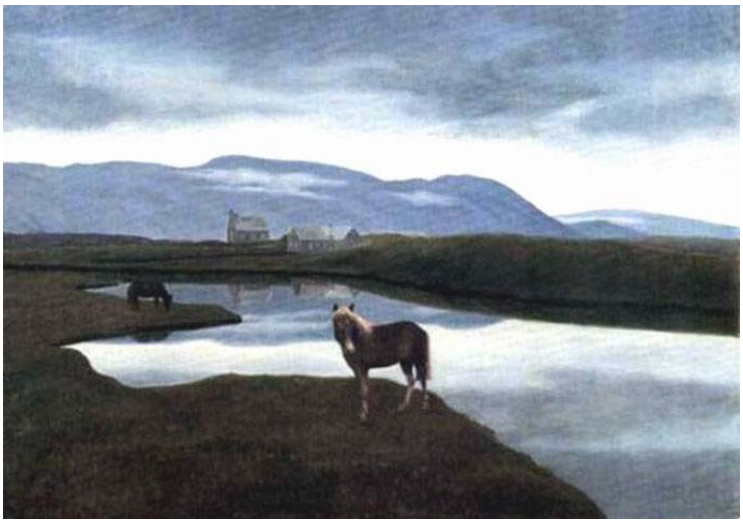

Figure 3.21. "Summer Night" by Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, 1900.

Þórarinn B. Þorláksson was one of the Icelanders who went abroad to study art just before 1900 and returned when the campaign for independence was at its peak. By then, Reykjavík had the first makings of an urban community and was the seat of the government administration. Parliament House had been built in the capital and Iceland had acquired its first brass band, theatre and art museum. At Þingvellir, however, artists continued to find worthy subjects for their work.

The painting *From Þingvellir* (1905) by **Ásgrímur Jónsson** (1876-1958) projects a sense of peace and tranquillity and the completely harmonious cohabitation of man and nature. Here we see the old vicarage and the minister's daughters sitting by the riverbank.

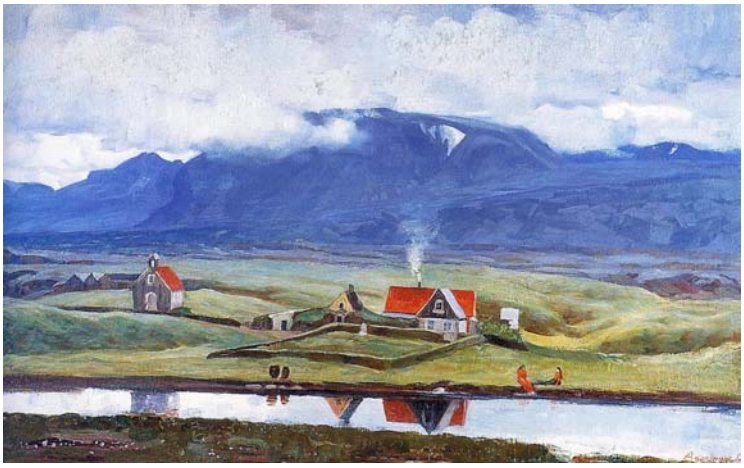

Figure 3.22 From Þingvellir by Ásgrímur Jónsson, 1905.

Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval (1885-1972), one of Iceland's best loved visual artists, painted many of his best works at Þingvellir. His first major paintings were produced just before and after 1930, when Iceland commemorated the millennium of the establishment of the Althing at Þingvellir. Subsequently, Kjarval produced one masterpiece after another at Þingvellir. He painted *Mountain Milk* at Flosagjá, Þingvellir, in 1941.

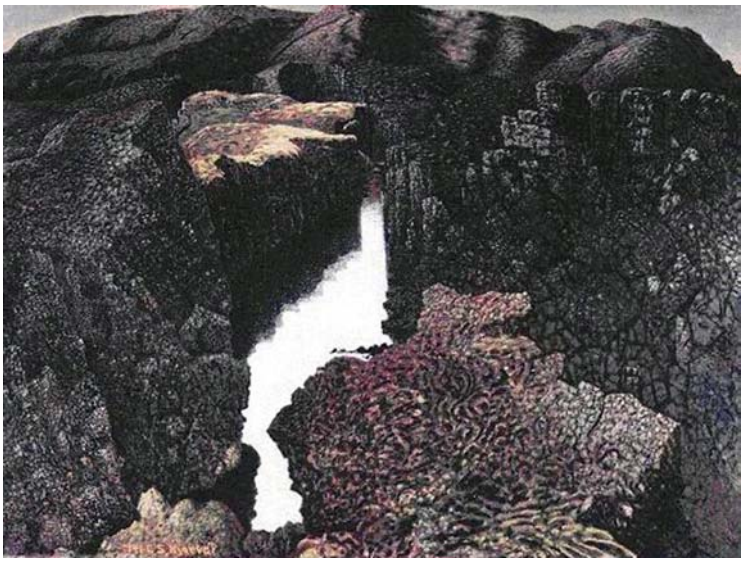

Figure 3.23. Mountain Milk by Jóhannes Kjarval, 1941.

In 2000, Iceland commemorated the millennium of the historic adoption of Christianity by the Althing at Þingvellir in summer 1000. An outdoor art exhibition was staged to mark the occasion in Almannagjá and Stekkjargjá, under the title The Seven Virtues Past and Present. Fourteen young artists – seven female and seven male – tackled this project, interpreting the Icelanders' attitudes towards virtues in old and modern times. The works were on exhibit at Þingvellir for the whole summer and commanded a great deal of interest. This showed beyond a shadow of a doubt that Þingvellir, the setting for all the main events and meetings of the Icelandic nation in times of old, has no less of an influence on artists today.

Figure 3.24. Justice by Magnús Tómasson, 2000.

Þingvellir and the Icelandic identity

Of all the phenomena in Icelandic nature and history, Þingvellir is the greatest wonder of all. A place which has come into being through the mighty actions of the forces of the deep. An amphitheatre and backdrop awaiting its audience and players.

It almost seems providential that the Icelanders should have discovered Þingvellir and made it into its meeting place. It was at once the first collective location for the nation and its birthplace: people went there from all sorts of distant communities and merged into a nation after they had established a general assembly to organise their affairs. Þingvellir is the place where the Icelandic nation entered the world and became a fountain where the Icelanders could imbibe inspiration and determination.

And it has been ever since when the Icelandic nation considers itself to be standing at a crossroads. All the major festivals in Icelandic history have therefore been held there.

- **National festival at Þingvellir in 1874**. A national festival was held at Þingvellir in 1874 to commemorate the 1,000th anniversary of the settlement of Iceland. On this occasion, Iceland was granted its first constitution (by the King of Denmark), whereby the Althing was given limited legislative authority and fiscal control. This marked a milestone on the Icelandic nation's path towards independence.
- **Althing millennium festival in 1930**. A festival was held at Þingvellir in 1930 to commemorate the millennium of the establishment of the Althing. At the festival, the nation also celebrated its status as a free and sovereign state, which had been obtained 12 years before.
- **Establishment of the Republic of Iceland in 1944**. A festival was held on the occasion of the establishment of the Republic of Iceland on June 17, 1944. The Althing convened at Lögberg and the constitution of the Republic was declared to have taken in effect. Sveinn Björnsson, Regent, was elected the first President of Iceland.
- **National festival at Þingvellir in 1974**. A national festival was held at Þingvellir in 1974 to commemorate the 1,100th anniversary of the settlement of Iceland.

Fig. 3.25. The 1,100th anniversary of the settlement of Iceland, 1974.

- **Festival of the Republic at Þingvellir in 1994**. In 1994, a festival was held at Þingvellir to commemorate the half-centenary of the Republic of Iceland.
- **Christianity 2000 festival at Þingvellir**. In 2000, Iceland commemorated the millennium of the adoption of Christianity by the Althing at Þingvellir.

THE BEGINNINGS OF TOURISM AT ÞINGVELLIR

Þingvellir's magnetism not only attracts Icelanders to celebrate special occasions. Tourists from Iceland and abroad visit the site year round. At the beginning of the 21st century, Þingvellir is the most visited tourist spot in Iceland, and has been for a long time; most tourists from abroad go there, regardless of whether they plan to make a short or long stay in the country.

Þingvellir has not always enjoyed this status in people's minds, and even as late as the 19th century it was seen as little more than barren and fairly difficult farmland by most people who took any interest in the place. When the first travellers arrived in Iceland from abroad in the 18th century this attitude prevailed among them too, Iceland's nature was primarily seen as menacing and inhospitable and the Icelanders as primitive, poor and uneducated.

Ideas began to change towards the end of the 18th century, as can clearly be seen in the writings of British natural scientists who made expeditions in the latter part of the 18th century. In particular their interest focused on other phenomena and areas than Þingvellir, above all geysers and volcanoes. These expeditions also went to Þingvellir, but this tended to be because it was en route to the Geysir geothermal fields. The well known British explorer and scientist **Joseph Bank**, for example, went to Þingvellir in 1772 and described it as "romantic and picturesque" but made little mention of it in other respects. The young British aristocrat **John Thomas Stanley** described it in similar terms in 1789; neither of them saw Þingvellir in the context of Icelandic cultural history.

Fig. 3.26. Almannagjá as seen by the French traveller Nougaret, 1868.

Nonetheless, Þingvellir did not remain in a secondary role for long. Towards the end of the Napoleonic wars early in the 19th century, British travellers and scientists resumed their visits to Iceland and now a different attitude towards Þingvellir could be discerned. **George Mackenzie**, for example, in his Travels in the Island of Iceland which was published in 1811, mentioned how regrettable it was that the Icelanders had ceased to hold their national assembly in the bosom of such magnificent nature.

Admittedly, few travellers visited Iceland until the second half of the 19th century, but then their number grew sharply as that liner services by steamship began. Around this time Þingvellir had already become one of Iceland's most popular tourist spots, as shown in the writings of English travellers and travel guides around the mid 19th century and later. The Hand-Book for Travellers (London 1858) describes the three "the chief places of interest" in Iceland as Þingvellir, Hekla and Geysir.

A particular reason for this interest in Þingvellir was the nationalist awakening which flourished in much of Europe. Such sentiments came to focus on Iceland and the Icelandic cultural heritage and led to the translation and publication of old Icelandic literature in the late 18th and 19th centuries. As the century progressed, these works enjoyed growing popularity in much of Europe and drew attention to Iceland. One translator of the sagas in the second half of the 19th century was the well known British author and craftsman **William Morris**, who travelled around the country in 1871 and 1873, visiting Þingvellir on both occasions.

In the second half of the 19th century Þingvellir had in a sense become a place of pilgrimage, and travellers, especially British and German ones, linked it to their own cultural histories. To many of them Iceland represented a kind of repository of the essence of Nordic culture. Þingvellir was the very heart of that essence. In describing Þingvellir, some of these travellers said they could visualise the leaders of medieval Icelandic society setting laws and pronouncing judgements. Others related how saga heroes had appeared in their minds when they arrived at Þingvellir. In a certain sense, the place served as a backdrop for the ancient Icelandic saga world.

Alongside this change in attitude to Icelandic culture in the first half of the 19th century, visitors to Iceland also radically altered in the view they took towards Icelandic nature, including Þingvellir. In fact Þingvellir was already considered a remarkable object of study in the eyes of travellers from abroad. As the 19th century wore on, it also came to enjoy growing popularity on account of its unique geological formations. Romantic travellers described it in the spirit of the prevailing notions of that time. Þingvellir was admittedly not regarded as an attractive place, but magnificent, wild, awe-inspiring, in other words "sublime", and an especially apt location for Iceland's unique society in medieval times.

Since the mid 19th century Þingvellir has enjoyed the undivided admiration of Icelanders and visitors from abroad alike. People have visited the place to enjoy its natural beauty, but not least because it has become a shrine for the Icelandic nation, as shown by its role in national celebrations, which has been its profile towards tourists in the 20th century.

Fig 3. 27. Travellers at Þingvellir in the first half of the 20th century.

3.c Form and date of most recent records of site

There are extensive records of field studies at Þingvellir relating to culture, natural science and excavations. All these records are in official archives and files at the National and University Library of Iceland, the National Museum of Iceland, the Icelandic Institute of Natural History, the Þingvellir Commission or the National Energy Authority. Most of the bibliographies or references for these studies are in Chapter 7. Documentation, 7.c. Bibliographies.

STUDIES AND PROJECTS RELATED TO THE MANAGEMENT OF ÞINGVELLIR NATIONAL PARK

The Þingvellir Park Authority manages and documents all restoration work carried out on the site according to maintenance plans. Other studies are made when considered necessary. One example of a recent survey for the Þingvellir Commission in January 2003 was conducted by "Tourism Research and Consultancy": Tourists at Þingvellir and its value for tourism and outdoor leisure. This study was based on data on the composition, mode of travel and various other points regarding Icelandic and foreign visitors to Þingvellir in 2001. Covering the Greater Reykjavík Area, it assessed the value of the Þingvellir area for outdoor leisure activities and tourism and compared it with other protected and outdoor leisure areas in southwest Iceland.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES

An overview of the archaeological studies made in the Þingvellir area is given in Chapter 3.a. All reports and documents are archived at the National Museum of Iceland and with the Þingvellir Commission.

NATURAL SCIENCE STUDIES

An overview of ecological studies at Lake Thingvellir was published in a book, "Ecology of oligotrophic, subarctic Thingvallavatn" in 1992, Jonasson, P.M., ed. OIKOS, 437 pp. The book covers the following fields: Geology, meteorology, vegetation of the catchment area, physics and chemistry, plankton, benthos, fish, birds, mammals and synthesis. Studies of the four morphs of arctic charr and the brown trout are regularly undertaken or overseen by the Institute of Freshwater Fisheries in Iceland. Geological studies of the Þingvellir area have focused in particular on the two dominant features of the environment there, namely fissures and lava fields. Both are parts of a larger whole. Geological mapping has therefore not focused specifically on the National Park, but rather on the Lake Þingvallavatn environment and its total catchment area. Ever since the mid 1960s, a priority has been direct measurements of movements in the Earth's crust in the Þingvellir area.

MAPS AND AERIAL PHOTOS

Aerial photos of the innermost assembly site from 1937, 1949, 1959, 1960, 1971, 1981, 1991 and 1996 are kept by Þingvellir National Park. There is an aerial photograph of the entire National Park with placenames marked on it, a unique record made by the last resident of Skógarkot. Iceland Geodetic Survey has produced maps of the area on the scales 1/100 000, 1/50 000 and 1/25 000.

3.d Present state of conservation

Þingvellir National Park has remained under single administration (the Þingvellir Commission) since it was founded in 1930. Thus the supervisory duties of the National Park administration and its responsibility for conditions in the Park and its impact area are very strong. The Park administration pursues all possibilities to ensure that the National Park does not deteriorate and that it is being run in a sustainable fashion. There are, however, sensitive areas within the park which need special attention continuously.

The most sensitive areas in the National Park are the innermost assembly site as well as the banks of Lake Þingvallavatn (Map 1). Since most tourists come to the innermost assembly site, pressure from them is greatest there. Footpaths have been laid through the innermost assembly site, so as to protect remains, geological formations and vegetation. These paths are properly maintained, by adding paving material and laying turf beside them, whenever needed. Measures are constantly being examined to protect the innermost assembly site as far as possible. There is often a great number of anglers along the banks of Lake Þingvallavatn. The condition of footpaths by the lake is monitored regularly, along with that of footpaths in general inside the National Park.

The floor of the valley has subsided by some 3-4 metres since the Althing was founded at Þingvellir, affecting the innermost assembly site with the associated impacts on the river Öxará which consequently overflows its banks.

Long-term solutions to the problems at these sites are described in Chapters 4 to 6.

3.e Policies and programmes related to the presentation and promotion of the property

One of the characteristic features of Þingvellir is the very small impact that the modern age has had on it. A visitor stands in the same surroundings as generations past, these are the same cliff walls, mountains, water, sky and atmosphere as in days of yore. Pilgrims to Þingvellir can experience the major events which once occurred and still occur here.

It is the policy of the National Park administration to preserve these special characteristics of Þingvellir, with emphasis on presenting the cultural and natural values of the area while at the same time creating a framework for ensuring their protection. The most important area with respect to culture is that of the innermost assembly site and its nearest surroundings with Almannagjá and Lögberg. As for nature and the treasures that it enshrines, there is no single location which is exceptional, because it is the variety characteristic of the entire area – its geology, landscape and biosphere – which lends it value.

The general plan for presenting these characteristics is to encourage high-quality cultural and nature tourism, with low-key information at the assembly site. The emphasis is on high-quality information service at two locations: in the Visitor Centre at the top of Almannagjá and in the Information and Service Centre. Low-key hiking paths are being provided at the assembly site, with bridges were needed to protect the archaeological remains. For the enjoyment of nature there are hiking paths within the park, mostly following old footpaths from the days of the Althing, and camping sites at some distance from the Almannagjá-Lögberg site (Map 1).

Þingvellir National Park is treated in most guide books covering places of interest in Iceland, and is one of the key sights visited in the most popular guided tour in Iceland, the ten-hour "Golden Circle," which is offered by many travel agencies from the capital city of Reykjavik daily all year round.

Instruction in the National Park

The interpretive programme of the National Park sets as its goal that visitors to Þingvellir have the opportunity of becoming acquainted with its unique history and nature. The National Park employs an interpretive manager who is responsible, under the management of the Director, for developing and directing interpretive issues. In 2002, some 4,000 visitors were guided through the Park under the supervision of its own personnel.

Visitor Centre

The Visitor Centre of Þingvellir National Park is situated right beside the viewing point on Hakið, where visitors begin their walk down Almannagjá. The exhibit in the Visitor Centre is the first in Iceland to be based almost entirely on multimedia, presenting the history and nature of the Þingvellir area through state-of-the-art multimedia technology. Exhibit visitors can select audio or screen texts in four languages (Icelandic, Danish, English and German) and themselves control on touch screens what items of content to observe and in what order. The estimated time for viewing the entire multimedia content on screen is approximately 40 minutes. Also at the Visitor Centre, a movie is shown which was taken under the

surface of Þingvallavatn lake and reveals the diversity of its biosphere. Admission to the exhibit is free of charge, and Centre attendance has remained good since opening.

Fig.3.28. The Visitor Centre.

Walks

Among instructive activities in the National Park, walks are the most popular. Every day of the week during the summer season, from May to September, walks comprise a substantial part of the Park's offerings, with guides speaking Icelandic and English. Walks proceed through the ancient assembly grounds of the Althing and through the entire Park. A new type of walks commenced in the summer of 2001, theme walks, in which scholars are brought in from outside the Park to lead walks entitled "Thursday Evening at Þingvellir." Scholars, historians, natural scientists, artists and authors come to serve as guides for an evening at Þingvellir. Achieving tremendous popularity, these walks were joined by over 1,000 visitors in the summer of 2002, and have succeeded in increasing interest in the National Park, which manifests itself through added participation in its other informational activities and by attracting visitors who do not attend its instruction at weekends.

Publication of brochures

The National Park has sponsored the publication of assorted materials presenting the history and nature of Þingvellir. A brochure replacing older ones appeared in 2000 on the history and nature of Þingvellir, and Söguslóðin ("On the Trail of History") is a brochure which visitors can carry around the Althing area, following numbered points and reading about the events associated with them. All these brochures and the map are available at the National Park's Information and Service Centre and Visitor Centre.

Reception of school groups

Every year, the staff of the National Park receive over 2,000 students at Þingvellir. While the students are of all ages, most are in the 5^{th}-7^{th} grades (having started school at age six). Visits by school groups are organised in consideration of subject matter and the national curriculum, with the groups who arrive receiving instruction in geology, hydrology, nature conservation, the ancient assembly grounds and the history of the Althing. These visits have gone

well, and teachers have expressed great satisfaction with them.

In the autumn of 2001, cooperation began with the Iceland University of Education to develop course materials for posting on the National Park website. The objective for the Þingvellir website (www.thingvellir.is) is to make it a teaching website with diverse content, and the main purpose and goal of the educational project is to compose subject matter and assignments on Þingvellir for the 5th-7th grades and to make this universally accessible on the Þingvellir website. In addition, this project is intended to encourage schoolchildren's field trips to Þingvellir, supporting both preparations and subsequent school work on them, besides enabling pupils, who on account of where they live, disability or other causes cannot tour Þingvellir, to study the area and become as closely acquainted with it as possible by means of computer technology.

The subject matter will be presented in accordance with the national curriculum for elementary schools, and it is planned for students to be able to use the material in a trial run on the website during the spring of 2003.

Presentation of archaeological research

The most recent archaeological research at Þingvellir began in 1998 and is to continue until 2006. The Institute of Archaeology is carrying out these archaeological investigations at Þingvellir in cooperation with the National Museum of Iceland, on behalf of the Þingvellir Commission. For the duration of these interdisciplinary archaeological studies, the National Park will introduce visitors to the research being conducted, through walks, presentations and the National Park website.

The facilities available at Þingvellir are described in detail in Chapter 4.i.

Fig. 3.29 Theme Walk in Þingvellir National Park summer 2002.

4. MANAGEMENT

4.a Ownership

The land of the National Park nominated here, as shown on Map 1, is all under the ownership of the Icelandic State and protected under the Act on Þingvellir National Park no. 59/1928. Address of the managing authority:

Þingvellir Commission
Hverfisgata 4a
104 Reykjavik.

4.b Legal status

The Þingvellir National Park Commission is responsible for the maintenance, management and any conservation or preservation measures which may be necessary to protect the park. Protection is provided under several acts, both a specific act covering Þingvellir and general legislation protecting what are considered to be distinctive features in the area. The specific act is:

- Law on the Þingvellir National Park no. 59/1928. Dealing only with the National Park.

General legislation:

- The National Heritage Act no. 107/2001.
- The National Planning and Building Act nos. 73/1997, 135/1997 and 58/1999.
- The National Architectural Heritage Act no. 104/2001.
- The Nature Conservation Act no. 44/1999 with subsequent amendments.

The main aspects of these laws which may relate to Þingvellir are described in more detail below.

LAW ON THE ÞINGVELLIR NATIONAL PARK

Þingvellir National Park is protected by a specific Act no. 59/1928 on the Protection of Þingvellir, with subsequent amendments:

> *"As from 1930 Þingvellir by Öxará and its vicinity shall be a protected national shrine for all Icelanders" (Art. 1, first paragraph).*
>
> *"The land inside the boundaries delineated above shall, as determined by the Þingvellir Commission and proven feasible by experience, be protected from the pressures of sheep and goats. The woods and wildlife that may flourish there are nonetheless fully protected. Notwithstanding this, the Commission shall take measures to destroy those animals and birds which cause problems in the protected area or loss to the livestock of regional residents.*
>
> *The Þingvellir Commission also decides on angling in Lake Þingvallavatn north of the line drawn in .. [on Map 1]. There shall be no disturbance to the soil nor construction of buildings, roads, electric power lines or other structures in the protected area or in the land of the farms Kárastaðir, Brúsastaðir, Svartagil and Gjábakki [the buffer zone] without the permission of the Þingvellir Commission."* (Art. 2, paragraphs 6 to 8.)

The protected area shall be under the protection of parliament and indefinitely the property of the Icelandic nation. It can never be sold or mortgaged. (Art. 4).

The Þingvellir Commission, comprised of three members of parliament, oversees the management, on behalf of parliament, of the protected land and other land owned by the state which is specified in Art. 2. [The National Park and the buffer zone as shown on Map 4]. The Þingvellir Commission shall be elected by a proportional vote in the United Chamber of parliament at the end of each session immediately after a general election, for the first time at the parliamentary session in 1928. (Art. 5).

The Þingvellir Commission shall compile a regulation on the protected land which is ratified by the Government. The regulation may include a decision on charges for visiting Þingvellir and allocating those funds towards the cost of protecting it. (Art. 6).

[The Þingvellir Commission appoints a Director. He appoints other staff.]

All unavoidable expenses on the protection of Þingvellir shall, according to this Act, be paid by the treasury. (Art. 7).

[A breach of the provisions of this Act and regulations set pursuant to it shall be punishable by a fine [or a prison sentence of up to two years]. Action on account of breaches of this Act shall be treated as a criminal case.] (Art. 8).

THE NATIONAL HERITAGE ACT

All archaeological remains in Iceland are protected against any kind of disturbance under the National Heritage Act no. 107/2001.

"The aim of the Act is to contribute to the preservation of cultural-historical remains and ensure that Iceland's cultural heritage is passed on intact to coming generations.

Where possible this legislation is supposed to ensure the preservation of cultural-historical remains in their own environment, facilitate national access to acquaintance with Icelandic remains, and promote research into them.

Cultural-historical remains include tangible evidence of national history, such as archaeological remains and old buildings, ecclesiastical artefacts and memorials, archaeological objects, works of art and functional articles, as well as pictures and other sources on the national cultural heritage. Such remains can also include sites connected with cultural history.

Remains of Icelandic cultural history which are preserved in the National Museum of Iceland or in local museums, or have been declared under protection, are considered part of the national heritage.

Under this Act, antiquities are comprised of archaeological remains and archaeological objects. (Art. 1).

By law it is the Archaeological Preservation Agency which:

"...discusses and grants permission for all archaeological research in specified areas and for limited periods of time." (Art. 6, paragraph 1).

"It monitors all archaeological research and advises the parties involved on

the preservation, registration and research of archaeological remains". (Art. 6, paragraph 3).

Archaeological remains are defined as: "*… any kind of remains of ancient manmade structures and other local remains made by man or on which the works of man are located.*" (Art. 9, paragraph 1)...."*Remains more than 100 years old shall be considered as archaeological remains, but younger remains may also be placed under protection.*" (Art. 9, paragraph 11).

According to Article 10 no one may: "*..damage, destroy or alter archaeological remains, nor cover them, repair or disturb them, or move them to another place without the permission of the Archaeological Preservation Agency*".

Archaeological remains registered as protected are more strongly protected than other types. They are recorded in the "Register of Protected Remains". All archaeological remains at Þingvellir have been registered by law since 1927. Accordingly the following applies to registered remains (condensed from Art. 11): Registration of protected archaeological remains shall be published in the Official Journal and the location be specified in as much detail as possible on a map or by other means. Protected archaeological remains or cultural areas shall be identified by special markings. Landowners and tenants shall be notified of the decision on protection by legally verifiable means.

".....Registry of protected archaeological remains shall be officially confirmed as a restriction on property concerned. Those archaeological remains that are protected shall have a restricted buffer zone of 20 metres in all directions from the site's visible borders, unless otherwise provided. In the case of a larger buffer zone, consent of the landowner shall be sought. Protected archaeological remains shall be marked on development plans." (Art. 11, paragraph 3).

THE NATIONAL PLANNING AND BUILDING ACT

The National Park is also protected under the National Planning and Building Act nos. 73/1997, 135/1997 and 58/1999, which gives general rules on land use:

"The aims of this Act are:

- *to ensure that the development of settlement and land use in the country as a whole will be in accordance with development plans which are based on the economic, social and cultural needs of the population, and also their health and safety;*
- *to encourage the rational and efficient utilisation of land and natural resources, to ensure the preservation of natural and cultural values and to prevent environmental damage and over-exploitation, based on the principles of sustainable development;*
- *to ensure security under the law in the handling of planning and building issues so that the rights of individuals and legal persons will not be neglected even though the common interest is the guiding principle;*
- *to ensure the professional preparation of development and active monitoring to ensure that the requirements regarding safety, durability, appearance and suitability of buildings and other*

structures are fulfilled." (Art. 1).

Different types of development plans are in effect in Iceland: the Regional plan, Municipal plan and Local plan, which municipal governments are in charge of producing and must approve for them to become legally binding.

> *"Regional plan: A development plan covering more than one municipality. The role of a regional plan is to coordinate policies regarding land use, transportation and service systems, environmental matters and the development of settlement in the region during a period of not less than 12 years."* (Art. 2, paragraph 9).
>
> *"Municipal plan: A development plan for a specific municipality expressing the local authority's policy regarding land use, transportation and service systems, environmental matters and the development of settlement in the municipality during a period of not less than 12 years." (Art. 2, paragraph 1).*
>
> *"Local plan: A development plan for specific areas within a municipality, based on the municipal plan and containing further provisions on its implementation. Local planning provisions apply equally to urban areas and to rural areas."* (Art. 2, paragraph 3).
>
> *"If there exist within the boundaries of the planning area individual buildings, structures, groups of buildings, natural features or vegetation which is considered desirable to conserve because of their historical, natural or cultural value, without statutory protection, then local conservation provisions shall be included in the relevant development plan. There shall be internal cohesion between regional, municipal and local development plans."*

An overview of development plans relevant to Þingvellir National Park and the surrounding area is given in 4.f.

THE NATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE ACT

Þingvellir Church is specifically protected under the National Architectural Heritage Act no. 104/2001. The following is an extract from that Act:

> *"The purpose of this Act is to preserve the Icelandic architectural heritage which has cultural-historical value. The Act provides for the protection of buildings and other manmade structures, and for arrangements for the protection of the architectural heritage."* (Art. 1).
>
> *"Manmade structures, buildings or parts of buildings which have cultural-historical or artistic value may be protected. Protection may extend to the immediate vicinity of the said structure. Groups of buildings with the same value as specified above may be protected, whereupon the protection rules apply to each separate building. The purpose of protection is to ensure the best possible preservation of the protected structure."* (Art. 4).
>
> *"All buildings constructed before 1850 are protected, and all churches built before 1918."* (Art. 6).
>
> *"No alterations may be made to a protected property without the permission of the National Architectural Heritage Board."* (Art. 9).

THE NATURE CONSERVATION ACT

The Nature Conservation Act no. 44/1999 with subsequent amendments deals in

general terms with nature conservation and natural remains, and defines them. It will refer to Þingvellir in general, as it does to the country as a whole, and enable the prevention of damage to the environment where it is considered to be special, in the highly unlikely event that municipal authorities in the area and/or the Þingvellir Commission should not adhere to its own strategy and development plans.

> *"The purpose of this Act is to direct the interaction of man with his environment so that it harm neither the biosphere nor the geosphere, nor pollute the air, sea or water. The Act is intended to ensure, to the extent possible, that Icelandic nature can develop according to its own laws and ensure conservation of its exceptional or historical aspects. The Act shall facilitate the nation's access to and knowledge of Icelandic nature and cultural heritage and encourage the conservation and utilisation of resources based on sustainable development."* (Art. 1).
>
> *"The following landscape types shall enjoy special protection and their disturbance shall be avoided if at all possible:*
>
> 1. Volcanic craters, rootless vents (pseudocraters) and lava fields;
> 2. freshwater lakes and pools, 1000 m² or more in area;
> 3. bogs and fens, 3 hectares or more in area;
> 4. waterfalls, hot springs and other thermal sources, as well as surfacial geothermal deposits (sinter and travertine), 100 m² or more in area;
> 5. salt marshes and mudflats.
>
> *The opinion of the Nature Conservation Agency and nature conservation committees shall be sought prior to granting of project authorisations or construction" (Art. 1, Paragraphs 1-7).*

4.c Protective measures and means of implementing them

Enforcement measures and penalties according to Chapter 4.b:

- Under the act on the National Park it is a criminal offence to alter, damage or destroy any properties within the National Park boundaries without the consent of the Þingvellir Commission. The commission is elected by a proportional vote at the end of each term of parliament immediately after a general election.
- Under the National Heritage Act it is a criminal offence to alter, damage or destroy ruins and any properties that fall under the protection of the act, as all ruins do within the Þingvellir Park Area, without the written consent of the Archaeological Preservation Agency.
- No one is allowed to alter, damage or destroy landscape types that fall under the Nature Conservation Act without prior notification to the Environment and Food Agency of Iceland and relevant municipality. In considering development and development plans, municipalities are bound to have special regard to the desirability of preserving these landscape types in consultation with the Environment and Food Agency of Iceland.
- No alterations may be made to a protected property without the permission of the National Architectural Heritage Board, for listed buildings which are protected under the National Architectural Heritage Act.
- According to the National Planning and Building Act, if a development project is carried out in a manner different from that for which permission was

granted, or if a building is put to a use other than that which the local authority has authorised, the planning/building officer may stop such actions immediately. If the project requires a development permit the planning officer shall seek the confirmation of the local authority. If the project requires a building permit the building officer shall seek the confirmation of the building committee as soon as possible. The development plan for an area in which construction work has been carried out in violation of the plan may not be amended before the illegal building, or part of a building, has been removed, broken ground smoothed over or activity discontinued. If the need arises, the police shall be obliged to assist a building officer or building committee in carrying out the above measures.

4.d Agencies with management authority

The agency with management authority at Þingvellir is:

Þingvellir Commission

Hverfisgata 4a
104 Reykjavik
Iceland

The members of the Þingvellir Commission are:

- Mr. Björn Bjarnason, Member of Parliament, chairman.
- Mr. Guðni Ágústsson, Minister of Agriculture.
- Mr. Össur Skarphéðinsson, Member of Parliament.

The Þingvellir Commission appoints the Director of the National Park. The Director is in charge of day-to-day supervision of the area, appoints other staff and is responsible for its finances.

The Archaeological Preservation Agency handles implementation of the law on protection of archaeological remains.

Archaeological Preservation Agency

Lyngás 7
220 Garðabær
Iceland

The Environment and Food Agency of Iceland handles implementation of the Nature Conservation Act.

Environment and Food Agency of Iceland

Suðurlandsbraut 24
108 Reykjavik
Iceland

The National Architectural Heritage Board handles implementation of the law on protection of buildings.

National Architectural Heritage Board

Lyngás 7
220 Garðabær
Iceland

The Municipalities of Bláskógabyggð and Grímsnes & Grafningur are planning authorities.

Bláskógabyggð Municipality

Bláskógabyggð
Reykholt
801 Selfoss
Iceland

Grímsnes & Grafningur Municipality

Borg
Grímsnes
801 Selfoss
Iceland

4.e Level at which management is exercised (e.g. on site, regionally) and name and address of responsible person for contact purpose

The agency with overall management authority for the Þingvellir Park is:

Þingvellir Commission

Hverfisgata 4a
104 Reykjavik
Iceland

The individual responsible for day-to-day management of the property and for the budget relating to its maintenance in the park is the Director of the National Park, Mr. Sigurður K. Oddsson, based at the Þingvellir Commission headquarters. Day-to-day work is supervised by Mr. Sigurður K. Oddsson and staff based at the Þingvellir National Park.

E-mail: sko@thingvellir.is

Tel: +354-552-1730
Mobile: +354-896-6309
www.thingvellir.is

4.f Agreed plans related to property

The following is an overview of agreed plans related to the property e.g. regional plan, local plan, conservation plan and tourism development plan.

STRATEGY FOR PLANNING OF THE NATIONAL PARK

In May 1988 the Þingvellir Commission published its planning strategy "Þingvellir – National Park and Environment". The Þingvellir Commission has committed itself to run the Park and the land in the buffer zone on sustainable principles according to this published planning strategy. It is the policy of the National Park administration to preserve the special characteristics of Þingvellir, with emphasis on presenting the cultural and natural values of the area while at the same time creating a framework for ensuring their protection. This can be done by such means as informing visitors to the National Park about its value, thereby also making them active participants in its protection. Efforts will be made to plan

traffic through the National Park and visitor stays in it, in adherence to the aforementioned aims.

The first action taken at the innermost assembly site following the 1988 strategy was to improve access to Lögberg, the main place visited by everyone who goes to Þingvellir. A footbridge was built there to relieve the pressure on Lögberg, which was beginning to show signs of encroachment. This action marked the beginning of the laying of a path network around the assembly site which aimed to improve access while at the same time protecting the site against tourist traffic. In 1993 a draft plan of the innermost assembly site was produced, aimed at improving visitor access while at the same time easing the pressure on the booth ruins and assembly site remnants. This plan assumed paths linking up the main starting points for walks around the assembly site.

A draft plan made of the area around the Information and Service Centre at Leirar assumes that the centre could be expanded by up to double its size and that the car park could be extended. It also assumed that all facilities for the centre's activities, machinery and other accessories for operating the National Park would be behind the Information and Service Centre.

A local plan was completed for the area around the Visitor Centre at Hakið above Almannagjá in 2000, and this was ratified by the Planning Agency. The local plan was consistent with the strategy for planning the National Park which envisaged construction of a cultural centre on the west bank of Almannagjá.

OTHER PROPOSED PHYSICAL PLANS CONNECTED WITH THE AREA:

The Regional Plan for the Central Highlands in Iceland, 1995-2015. The limits of the Central Highlands which were ratified on May 10, 1999 extend to the northern edge of Þingvellir National Park. The regional plan assumes a protected nature area north of the park boundaries (Map 4). In line with the decision of the current committee addressing the Central Highlands and in order to make the plan consistent with the current National Planning and Building Act no. 73/1997, the protected nature area in the municipalities' municipal plans shall be assigned local protection. Other land use according to the proposed plan addresses transportation, construction, preservation of archaeological remains and traditional farming.

The regional plan for Grímsnes & Grafningur and Þingvellir municipality 1995-2015 was ratified by the Minister for the Environment in 1996. In a joint decision, municipalities in the area decided to withdraw this plan in October 2002. This decision awaits the final approval and signature of the Minister for the Environment. In spring 2002, Þingvellir municipality made a resolution that the same policy should remain in effect towards it as that in the regional plan until a municipal plan has been produced for Þingvellir municipality and the whole of Bláskógabyggð. Þingvellir municipality has now merged with the parishes of Biskupstungur and Laugardalshreppur to form the municipality of Bláskógabyggð.

Municipal plan for Bláskógabyggð: Work on the municipal plan for Þingvallasveit will commence in 2003 and it will be incorporated into the municipal plan for the Bláskógabyggð municipality. A municipal plan has been completed for Grímsnes and Grafningur and awaits ratification.

4.g Sources and amounts of funds

Þingvellir National Park receives funds for routine maintenance and management of Park property in the form of yearly allocations in the Treasury budget. The funding is based on an annual plan for administrative costs, divided into two parts:

A. **Fixed-sum funding:** This portion covers the cost of wages, daily operation of the park and routine management. The annual cost of managing Þingvellir is US$ 800,000.

B. **Funding for specific projects:** This portion covers the cost of specific projects such as restoration and new development, and is received from the State in a bidding process based on special administrative procedures:

Funds available for specific projects vary greatly from year to year, depending on what is to be undertaken. The park also receives income from campsite charges and the sale of angling permits, books and souvenirs.

Currently the Þingvellir Commission supports archaeological excavation which commenced in 2002 and will continue until 2006. The objective of this research is to increase further information on the history of Þingvellir and the assembly site. This excavation coincides with excavation at selected district assembly sites around the country, to be carried out during the same period.

Additional sources of funding are received from Landsbanki bank. An agreement was made with Landsbanki in summer 2002 whereby the bank will sponsor interpretative work in the National Park by funding specific projects. In recent years the bank has provided funding for various interpretive projects in the Park. These include marking of paths, publication of brochures and cartography. The objective of the agreement is that the park and Landsbanki will develop interpretative work which increases interest in and understanding of Þingvellir's magnificent history and nature. On the basis of this agreement, work will involve computer-related projects, an interpretative programme including walks and reception of students, lectures by scholars on their research projects related to Þingvellir and publication of general interpretative material. The Park authorities present an annual operating forecast for confirmation by the bank along with a report on implementation of the agreement during the previous year. Payments to Þingvellir are based on the confirmed forecast. In 2002 Landsbanki contributed US$ 32,000 towards projects at Þingvellir. The current agreement is in effect until January 2007 and at the end of that period the partners will evaluate their cooperation and decide whether to extend it.

4.h Sources of expertise and training in conservation and management techniques

The Director of the Þingvellir National Park is a civil engineer with an extensive background in management. He has also received training and attended courses in the field of conservation. The interpretive manager has a BSc in Geography and MLA as a landscape architect and a solid background in running the park. He also has training in nature protection, forestry and soil conservation. The head warden has attended diverse courses in nature conservation and taught classes at the park warden course for the Nature Conservation Agency, and is currently studying public administration at the University of Iceland.

The National Museum of Iceland, the University of Iceland, the Icelandic Institute of Natural History and the Environment and Food Agency of Iceland have highly qualified experts, architects, historians, archaeologists, natural scientists and other specialists at hand and provide assistance and expertise for Þingvellir National Park when needed. They participate when needed in setting up research and conservation plans at Þingvellir according to their specialist fields.

It is the Þingvellir National Park's policy to hire local people as staff as far as possible. They play an important role for maintaining knowledge of the natural processes in the Þingvellir Park.

4.i Visitor Facilities and Statistics

Þingvellir National Park, which is open to visitors all year round, is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Iceland and has long remained so. A study made for the Þingvellir Commission revealed data on the composition, mode of travel and various other points regarding Icelandic and foreign visitors to Þingvellir in 2001. The study showed that 67% of foreign visitors to Iceland in the summer (June-August) of 2001 went to Þingvellir and 57% of tourists at other times of the year. An estimated 290 thousand people visited Þingvellir in 2001, just under 90 thousand Icelanders and around 200 thousand from abroad, on a total of 410 thousand occasions.

In a comparative survey on the value of outdoor leisure areas among residents of the Greater Reykjavík Area, Þingvellir achieved a high and unequivocal rating despite being farther away than all the other areas in the comparison.

Þingvellir is a stopping point on the so-called "Golden Circle," which is one of the very most travelled tourism routes in Iceland: a ten-hour round-trip offered daily from Reykjavík. Tourism at Þingvellir is characterised by most visitors coming there for short visits. National Park guests may be roughly divided into four groups, including those who come as follows:

- on their own on day trips, mainly from the capital area
- on organised group trips
- for the weekend
- due to special interests.

TOURISTS ON THEIR OWN DURING DAY TRIPS

Day-trippers, who include foreign tourists in rental cars, Icelandic families and Icelanders bringing foreign guests along, go to Þingvellir to experience the history and nature of the site.

ORGANISED GROUP TRIPS

According to figures from the Icelandic Tourist Board, the proportion of travellers on organised group trips is around 35%. Groups organised by tourism businesses do not conduct long stopovers at Þingvellir. The estimated average stay of visitors on organised group trips lasts between 30 and 40 minutes.

WEEKEND STAYS

Þingvellir is known as a place to spend the weekend. The campsite there is open from 1 June to 31 August every summer. Numbers of weekend guests gradually

increase until the end of June, peak at the first weekend in August (a bank holiday), then gradually diminish.

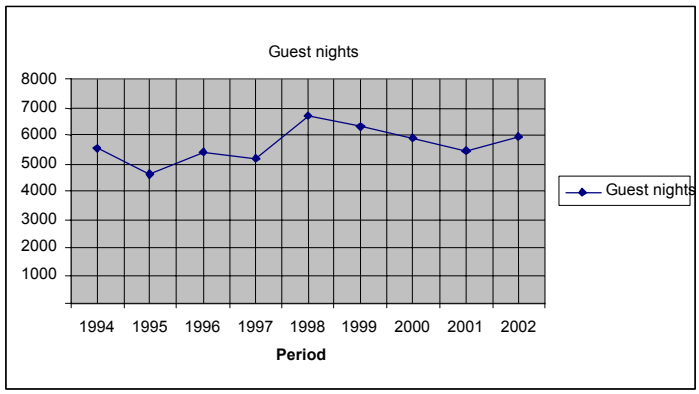

Figure 4.1 Overnight stays in Þingvellir National Park, 1994-2002.

TOURISTS WITH SPECIAL INTERESTS

One of the largest groups coming because of special interests is anglers, who arrive to fish in Lake Þingvallavatn inside the National Park. The Information and Service Centre sells angling permits and Park personnel supervise fishing. The fishing season is from 1 May to 15 September. Whereas 2,950 angling permits inside the National Park were sold in 2001, a greater number of anglers is probable, since older citizens, the disabled and children accompanied by their parents are allowed to fish for free.

For centuries, Þingvellir has been a customary rest stop for those travelling around Iceland on horseback. There are good facilities for equestrians at Skógarhólar, located on the periphery of the National Park. Although two bridle paths lead through the National Park, riding horses through the assembly site is prohibited. A rough but probable estimate is that some 2,000-3,000 horses stay at Skógarhólar each summer, where most of them remain only one night.

Recent years have seen diving gain rapidly in popularity in Iceland. Diving is permitted in two fissures within the National Park, Silfra and Davíðsgjá. Not only is Silfra one of Iceland's best locations for diving, but it is widely claimed to be world-class, the reason being excellent visibility through the clear groundwater, along with the spectacular surroundings of Silfra.

TRAFFIC AND ROADS IN THE NATIONAL PARK

Road No. 36 leads through the National Park and is classed as a major state road. The intersection of Roads No. 36 and 52 at Þingvellir is by the Information and Service Centre. Road No. 36 connects higher-lying communities of the capital city area with the Árnessýsla district, while Road No. 52 connects Þingvellir with Lundarreykjadalur in the region of Borgarfjörður. The Public Roads Administration maintains these national roads, which are intended for free public travel and maintained through state funds. All roads inside the National Park are paved, and have a speed limit of 50 kph. Totals from a fixed traffic counter provide an idea of the number of tourists travelling on the major road, No. 36, to Þingvellir. The number of vehicles driving on this road remained fairly stable until 2000 when the increase can be traced to the sizeable additional traffic in connection with preparations for the festival to mark the millennium of Christianity in Iceland,

which took place at Þingvellir in the summer of 2000.

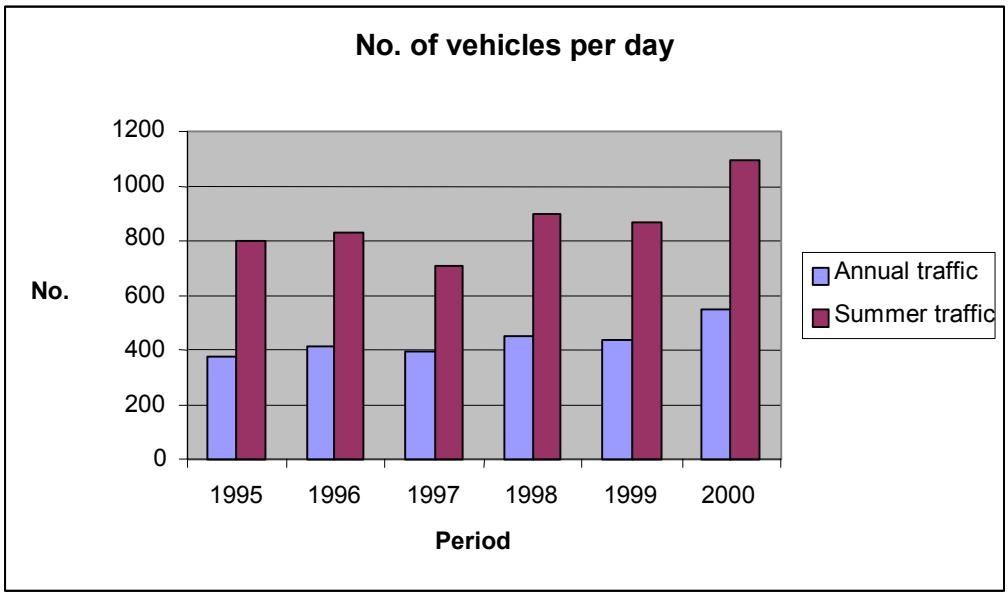

Figure 4.2. Daily Number of vehicles driving on Road No. 36 to Þingvellir.

According to figures from the Public Roads Administration, the average number of passengers per vehicle (apart from the driver) is 1.6. Figure 4.3 presents the number of passengers travelling on this road, based on the above figures.

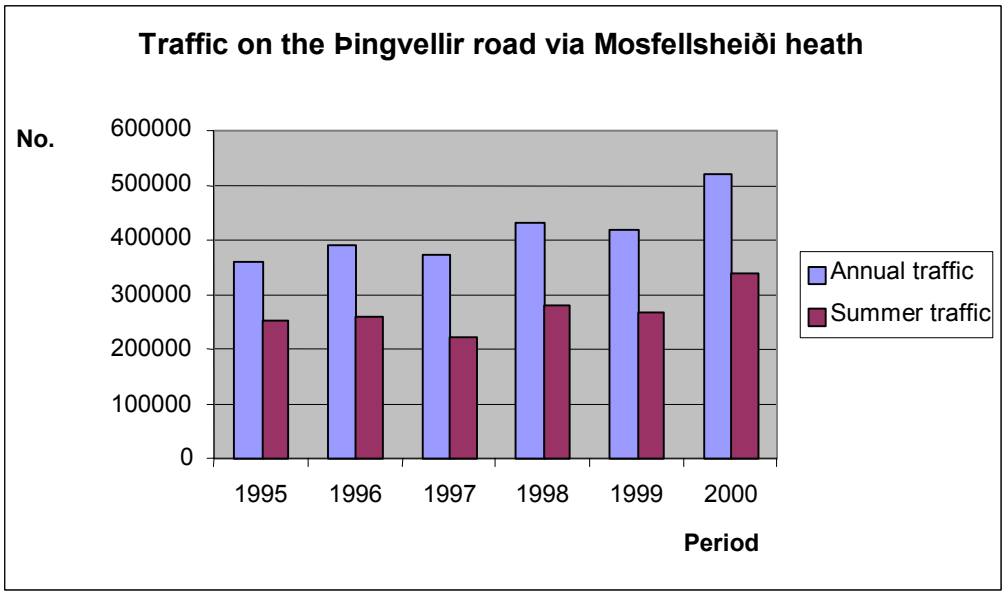

Figure 4.3. Annual number of passengers travelling on the Þingvellir road via Mosfellsheiði heath.

LEIRAR INFORMATION AND SERVICE CENTRE

The National Park's Information and Service Centre is located on the Leirar flats, at the junction of highways No. 36 and 52. An information service and small, specialised bookstore are operated there by the National Park. There is also a franchised restaurant, run by local people.

HOTEL

There is one hotel in the National Park, Hotel Valhöll. First built in 1899, it then stood by the north side of the ancient assembly grounds at *Kastali* (Castle) but was moved in 1929 south of the river Öxará (Map 1). Since that time the hotel has been enlarged, and has today thirty rooms, along with a restaurant and facilities for meetings and other gatherings. The Icelandic State owns the hotel but hotel operations are leased out. The contract with present operator will be in effect until the end of 2007; however, there is as of now no plan to extend the agreement or on future utilisation of the hotel.

VISITOR CENTRE

The Visitor Centre of Þingvellir National Park was opened in 2002 (map 1 and Figure 3.28) and is situated right beside the viewing point on Hakið, where visitors commence their walk down into Almannagjá. The exhibit in the Visitor Centre is the first in Iceland to be based almost entirely on multimedia technology, presenting the history and nature of the Þingvellir region. Exhibit visitors can select audio or screen texts in four languages (Icelandic, Danish, English and German). At the Centre, a movie is shown which was taken under the surface of Þingvallavatn lake. Admission is free of charge.

CAMPSITES

There are two campsites in the National Park. The larger one is located by the Information and Service Centre and has facilities for camping vehicles, tent trailers and tents. The smaller campground, situated by Lake Þingvallavatn at Vatnskot, also receives camper cars, tent trailers and tents.

A stopover for those travelling on horseback is operated at Skógarhólar on the periphery of the National Park and provides both bunk accommodation and a camping ground for horsemen.

PATHWAYS

Footpaths in the National Park have been marked and improved to make it convenient for people to acquaint themselves with the history and nature of Þingvellir. Pathways through the National Park can be divided into two categories, those in the assembly grounds and those in other areas of the National Park (Map 1). In all, some three kilometres of paths have been laid through the assembly grounds and the immediate vicinity, all paved with gravel, although wooden platforms are also used in Stekkjargjá on the way to the waterfall in Öxará river (Map 9). Outside the assembly site about 11 km of footpaths have been paved with gravel. Other pathways within the Park – mere trodden trails – were used for centuries by people living on the small farms in the area of Bláskógahraun, now inside the Park boundaries. Stakes now mark these trails so that people will stay on them and preserve them.

TOILET FACILITIES

Toilets are provided at several points for visitors to the National Park. At the Visitor Centre there are 6 toilets, including 1 for the physically disabled, while the Information and Service Centre has 14 toilets, besides 2 for the physically disabled. Outside the Service Centre, there is a building with toilets and showers

for visitors, along with a washing machine. Each camping site has 2 toilets and sinks with cold water. Skógarhólar has 3 toilets and two showers. Toilet sewage is collected in sumps and driven outside National Park boundaries, in accordance with specific permits on this matter.

PARKING

In the environs of the assembly site there are 4 main parking lots where it is possible to leave cars and walk to the site (Map 1), and there are also 6 major parking lots along the shores of lake Þingvallavatn. Alongside the circular route through the National Park, there are frequent places to pull over and park one to two cars.

EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

First-aid courses are held every spring for Park personnel, reviewing the basics of first-aid. In the event of serious injuries or accidents, notification is sent through an emergency line which calls the police, an emergency medical team or rescue squad. The police medical team's response time for injuries or accidents is about 35-45 minutes.

4.j Site management plan and statement of objectives

In May 1988 the Þingvellir Commission published its planning strategy "Þingvellir – National Park and Environment". It is the policy of the National Park administration to preserve the special characteristics of Þingvellir, with emphasis on presenting the cultural and natural values of the area while at the same time creating a framework for ensuring their protection. The most important area with respect to culture is that of the innermost assembly site and its nearest surroundings with Almannagjá and Lögberg. Since 1990, systematic work has been under way to improve access by travellers to the assembly site with footpaths and platforms. These measures have substantially reduced trampling and encroachment by visitors on the remains at the assembly site, and treatment of it has improved enormously.

A general management plan will be produced for the National Park by February 1 2004 and address all issues concerning protection of natural and cultural remains, the look of the park, interpretation and care of the site. Clear targets will be set along with an implementation plan for the Park and Þingvellir area, which will serve as its strategy for ten years at a time, to be reviewed at intervals of five years.

In continuation of the protection plan, the Þingvellir Commission's development plans will also be reviewed. Until a revised local plan goes into effect, implementation within the National Park and innermost assembly site will be conducted in accordance with the strategy and the municipal plans that have already been put forward.

Since the single greatest source of wear and tear on the sites is visitors, an important aspect of the management plan is to control visitors through persuasion, signs and well run and organised hiking paths. A project plan is included in Appendix II.C.

Regarding Archaeological research emphasis will be put on protection of the ruins by using remote sensing and geophysical techinques whenever feasible.

4.k Staffing levels

Four permanent staff work for the National Park on a year-round basis. The Director is in charge of its day-to-day operation and finances. Working under him are the interpretive manager, head warden and a manual labourer, all of them residents in the municipality. From May 1 to September 1, 10 are taken on to work in the park. They are responsible for supervision, instruction and minor maintenance work, along with other permanent employees.

5. FACTORS AFFECTING THE PROPERTY

5.a Development pressures

The Þingvellir Commission and the municipal authority have the power to forbid new housing or developments within Þingvellir National Park boundaries as well as within the buffer zone (Map 4). The Þingvellir Commission is empowered to initiate new developments, as long as they do not conflict with protection legislation and the desires of the local authority. All the archaeological remains within park boundaries have been registered under the National Heritage Act and are thus protected by law. They must not be touched without prior permission from the Archaeological Preservation Agency, which serves to protect the remains against new construction. Nonetheless, vigilance is required so that small-scale improvements possibly needed to protect ruins in the innermost assembly site do not damage important archaeological remains.

There are plans to improve parking areas, construct new ones and improve other facilities to receive tourists such as footpaths, signs, etc. These improvements will be carried out in consultation with the Archaeological Preservation Agency as the responsible authorities. Before these projects are undertaken, plans will be drawn up for acceptance by the Archaeological Preservation Agency and Municipality of Bláskógabyggð.

An approved regional plan is ready in accordance with laws applying to Bláskógabyggð, and it is anticipated that a municipal plan being prepared for that community will be finished within two years. Park authorities have had site plans prepared for certain areas inside the National Park; an overview of these areas appears on Map 4. These are plans which have been approved by the Þingvellir Commission. The intention is to renew the site plan for the innermost assembly site within two years.

Vigilance is required if small scale works in the area are not to damage the National Park. The Public Road Administration has plans to rebuild the road 365 from Gjábakki to Laugarvatn that runs through the eastern most part of the National Park to improve traffic safety and traffic management (Fig. 1). It will be emphasised during road design to minimize the environmental impacts of the road and take into account the importance of the natural and cultural heritage of the Þingvellir National Park.

HOLIDAY CHALETS

Inside Park boundaries, private parties own holiday chalets by a property contract with the Þingvellir Commission, generally for a ten-year period. It is not permissible to build new holiday chalets in the lands of Þingvellir National Park; however, there are no plans for moving those already there. A site plan approved by the Þingvellir Commission is available, applying to all tracts in the National Park with holiday chalets.

FORESTRY

Conifers have been planted at various places in Þingvellir National Park (Map 8). The first planting was done in 1899, with the resulting "Pine Grove" now being considered the pioneering experiment of Icelandic foresters with growing conifers

in Iceland. The Pine Grove is located some 1,000 metres north of the assembly grounds, although the most extensive forestry areas within the National Park are just west of the fissure Hrafnagjá and just east of the fissure Stekkjargjá. In addition, forestry plots reach east toward Skógarkot in the middle of the lava field Þingvallahraun. The Þingvellir Commission and Icelandic Forest Service signed a declaration of partnership in the summer of 1999 on caring for the woods at Þingvellir. This declaration says that the Þingvellir Commission will cooperate with the Icelandic Forest Service on preserving and caring for the arboreal vegetation inside Þingvellir National Park. The Þingvellir Commission will seek professional advice from the Icelandic Forest Service in connection with tracts of natural birch woods as well as cultivated woods. On behalf of the Þingvellir Commission, the Icelandic Forest Service will provide its expert staff to handle supervision and will undertake specific actions if needed. The Pine Grove shall receive particular attention, with the objective of letting the oldest trees prosper as much and as long as possible. The aim is also to assess the wooded lands within the National Park, and, on the basis thus provided, to consider special measures when found necessary. Finally, thinning has been undertaken in recent years, in consultation with the Icelandic Forest Service, and the Forest Service will continue to be responsible for thinning the woods inside the National Park.

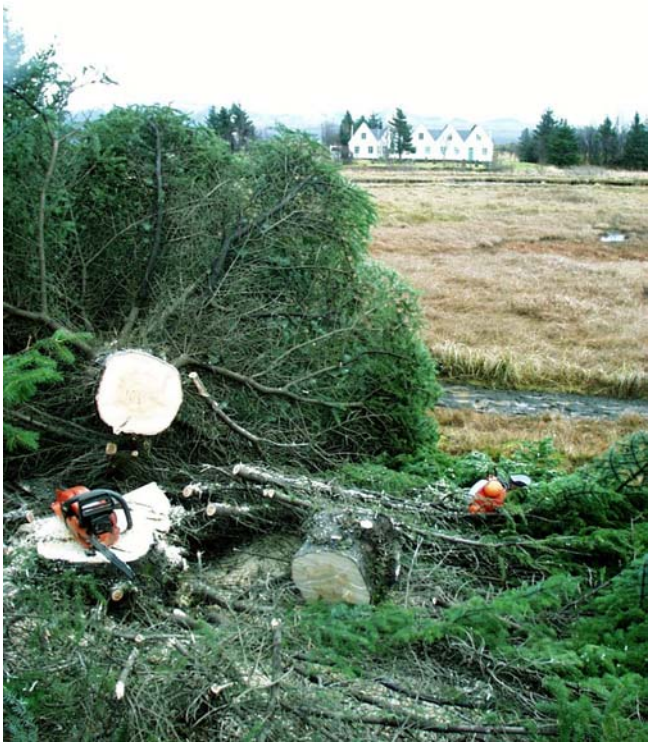

Fig. 5.1 Clearing of Evergreens at the Assembly site.

The principal threats directed at the area with points of interest inside the innermost assembly site are forestry and erosion damage by the river Öxará. Afforestation is a problem at several places where trees have been planted in ruins or too close to them; these sites have been identified in Map 8. The park authorities have identified critical areas within the innermost assembly site where trees might damage the ruins and will cut those trees down.

5.b-c Environmental pressures, natural disasters and preparedness for them

The sole environmental pressure at Þingvellir National Park is erosion and encroachment by the river Öxará where the main ruins are located, as seen in Map 8. Öxará has sometimes flooded the flat areas, and cut out its banks at many points, and during research in 2002, remains of an old ruin appeared reaching out into the river. A run-off river, Öxará is difficult to obstruct or keep within definite banks, since the nature of run-off rivers is varying flow and erosive power, causing migration of the channel. As may be seen from Map 8, channels are still somewhat evident where Öxará used to run over the flat land between Almannagjá and the Þingvellir farmhouse. According to ancient sources, Öxará was diverted into the fissure of Almannagjá and down onto the flats of Þingvellir in order to channel water to the assembly site. Thus, its encroachment was caused by humans and is the first known diversion of water in Iceland.

Apart from the environmental pressure on the flat land from Öxará, the appearance of Þingvellir stems from natural disasters or earthquakes in the area during the last 9-10,000 years. Fissures and cracks form and land subsides when a series of earthquakes occurs. Since the Althing was founded at Þingvellir, this subsidence may be figured to have amounted to nearly four metres, meaning that the flat stretches east of Almannagjá have subsided by four metres since then. In the summer of 2000, two strong earthquakes shook south Iceland, upon which rocks fell from the fissure walls at two places in Hestagjá, and small rocks dropped down in Almannagjá.

Öxará has modified the appearance of the assembly site with sediment, while subsidence of the ground has caused water to encroach into the innermost assembly site. Encroaching water and subsiding land directly affected assembly activities. It is thought that Þingvellir Church was moved to its present location in the 16th century and the site for court sessions transferred in 1594 when it had become isolated on an islet in Öxará. When land sank in 1789, some of the hayfield at Þingvellir was submerged; also, fissures opened up in and around the field so that livestock were endangered. At Vatnskot near the centre of the caldera, the ground subsidence measured some 2.5 m in 1789, and a major portion of the hayfield was submerged. Moreover, the general public thoroughfare over the mouth of Öxará river and along Hallurinn was also flooded; subsequently, assembly sessions were discontinued at Þingvellir and transferred to Reykjavík.

There was an attempt in 1921 to dam the most westerly channel of Öxará in order to protect assembly remains on the west bank of the river, and that is the only action taken to reduce the pressure from water on objects of interest associated with the assembly. Land will continue to subside at Þingvellir, leading predictably to encroachment on the banks by water and the river.

Although Park authorities monitor major changes in river flow and will attempt to prevent the river from destroying sites of artefacts, it is extremely difficult to hinder run-off rivers, as mentioned previously, and impossible to respond to the land sinking. The most significant mitigation measure to prevent the loss of evidence on the assembly grounds is therefore to map the areas where there are ruins, as has already been done, in addition to excavating or investigating more precisely the sites of ruins thought to be interesting. That should be done by the

methods found to be best suited in each instance, with the object of disturbing the appearance of Þingvellir as little as possible. Mitigation measures are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

5.d Pressures from tourism

Tourist pressure affects the Lögberg area. The results of an excessive number of visitors and the measures taken to mitigate the damage to sites and to the visitor experience are described below. The National Park may be divided into the following three areas with respect to area pressure from tourists and area tolerance for tourists:

- innermost assembly site
- shoreline
- interior reaches of the National Park.

INNERMOST ASSEMBLY GROUNDS

By far the greatest part of travellers to Þingvellir pass through the innermost assembly site, creating the heaviest pressure due to tourists there. This area is not quite 5 ha in size.

After a policy on planning was established, as approved by the Þingvellir Commission in 1988, tourist access was dramatically improved from what it had been previously. A footbridge and platform were built in 1990, with the footbridge reducing pressure on Lögberg, where substantial deterioration was visible. This measure marked the beginning of constructing a system of footpaths through the innermost assembly site so as to protect it from encroachment by tourists, while at the same time improving access. Following registration of remains in 1986 to 1992, it was possible to engage in still more effective measures toward improvement of the innermost assembly site, organising the area in consideration of protecting points of interest, so that tourist traffic was directed past the ruins, rather than over them, by building attractive footways.

Figure 5.2. Wooden Footbridge at Lögberg.

As paths and other connections within the area have become more numerous, tourists have shown much more care for it. Because paths and walkways are wide and clearly delineated, the routes for tourists are clear. Encroachment by

tourists on this area is closely watched, continuously looking for techniques of improving their access and decreasing their impact on the innermost assembly site.

SHORELINE

The shoreline of Lake Þingvallavatn attracts anglers and other visitors. There are seven large parking lots distributed beside the lake. The main footpaths alongside the lake are on trails and trodden routes, some of which have been marked by stakes. Vegetation by the lake has deteriorated at many of the most popular angling points. The Park administration has carefully monitored the status of paths and vegetation in these areas and will seek means of protecting them if needed, so that they will not lose quality.

INTERIOR REACHES OF THE NATIONAL PARK

In the interior reaches of the National Park, the condition of vegetation and paths is good, since the paths are wide, rough trails indicated by stakes, and all routes marked. Because it is a very small fraction of the total number of tourists coming to the National Park who go on long hikes, there is much less pressure on the interior portion of the Park. Plans exist for promoting those areas more and thereby increasing traffic through them, since current traffic is well within their carrying capacity.

GENERAL POINTS ON ORGANISING THE RECEPTION OF TOURISTS

Park authorities emphasise informing those tourists arriving at Þingvellir about the culture and nature of the area, and doing so without spoiling the innermost assembly site and the unique atmosphere reigning there. Manmade structures are to be kept away from the innermost assembly site and to be built at points hidden away from it.

In 2002, a Visitor Centre was opened for tourists, and thoroughly presents the history and natural conditions of the area. Although the Visitor Centre is within walking distance of the innermost assembly site, it is not visible from there. Plans have been made to improve the facilities there even further in coming years.

More plans will be prepared during the next few years on arrangements for reception and service of tourists in the National Park, with emphasis on extending the time they stop in the area and finding means of distributing them better throughout the region, offering organised recreation at more frequent points around the National Park. These matters will be dealt with in more detail in the future according to the project plan in Appendix II C.

5.e Number of inhabitants within Park lands

There are no permanent residents inside the National Park. The population of the community Bláskógabyggð, in which the National Park is located, was 887 on December 1, 2002, and the number of residents in the buffer zone was fewer than ten.

6. MONITORING

6.a Key indicators of conservation status

There are currently three key indicators for the status of conservation in the park:

- state of the Öxará riverbanks
- condition of ruins in the innermost assembly site
- appearance of walking paths through that assembly site.

One of the tasks in the current management plan accompanying this application is to set up a monitoring programme and revise the key indicators, based among other things on the study and further registration of archaeological remains in the innermost assembly site.

6.b Administrative roles in monitoring the premises

The Archaeological Preservation Agency monitors the site of the ruins in the innermost assembly, though not doing so regularly, but as the occasion arises. The Park administration contacts the Archaeological Preservation Agency when ruins are disturbed. In addition, the Archaeological Preservation Agency watches over excavation and research at the Þingvellir ruins, and a permit is required from the Institute. When the management plan is reviewed, the division of assignments between the Archaeological Preservation Agency and the Park administration will be organised more precisely.

Day-to-day monitoring is carried out by the staff of Þingvellir National Park.

6.c Findings and consequences of previous reports

Compiling previous annual reports has led to the following findings and consequences regarding conservation measures:

- The paths and bridges currently in the innermost assembly site were constructed in connection with registration of remains in the area from 1986 to 1992, and in connection with a report on the status of the ruins. Registration of remains demonstrated that considerably more extensive objects of interest were present than had been expected. Moreover, the poor condition of booth ruins was very clearly illustrated. Where trails had been trodden over the booths, they were actually flattening out into shapeless hummocks and piles of dirt. Some of the ruins had deteriorated a great deal through heavy pressure from numerous tourists, so that they were under serious threat. It had become imperative to improve the pathways through the assembly site.
- It was also suggested in these reports that one or more sites with ruins be particularly investigated through archaeological excavation in order to obtain more information on the assembly site. This is to be undertaken, and the project is described in more detail in Chapter 3.a, where archaeological research is discussed. Subsequent to the registration of remains, measures were taken to protect features of interest. A footbridge was constructed skirting the Snorrabúð ruins as well as such other sensitive spots as Lögberg between Hamraskarð and Krossskarð, and paths were repaired and improved. An archaeologist supervised the installation of the footbridge, which was formally opened on 24 June 1990 and rests on narrow iron rods

drilled into the rock but removable, if desired, without leaving visible traces. The experience from constructing this bridge is excellent, since it provides substantially better access to the features of interest. In addition, experience has shown that the bridge is used by over 90% of tourists, besides protecting features of interest from being trodden down, and creates easier access for the disabled to the most sacred site of the Icelandic nation.

7. DOCUMENTATION

7.a. Photographs, slides and video

SLIDES AND PHOTOGRAPHS

There are 32 pictures on slides of the Þingvellir area included with this application. Two maps have been made, Maps 10 and 11, which show the angle from which the pictures were taken (see Appendix I). The slides are in Appendix III. The pictures have also been added to a CD Rom which is in Appendix IV.

MULTIMEDIA CD ROM

A multimedia CD Rom that gives an overview of the history of Þingvellir is included in Appendix IV. This presentation was made last year and is on display at the Visitor Centre at Þingvellir.

CD ROM

Included on a CD Rom is a powerpoint presentation with the same photographs as are seen on the slides see Appendix IV.

VIDEO

A video is included that gives an overview of the Þingvellir area, with the title "*Thingvellir – Iceland's Natural Heritage*". Publisher Bergvík.

BOOKS

Two books with information and photographs of the Þingvellir National Park are also included for the purpose of illustration purpose only:

- Björn Þorsteinsson. 1987. *Thingvellir. Iceland´s National Shrine. A visitor´s Companion.* Örn og Örlygur, Reykjavík.
- Björn Th. Björnsson. 1984. *Þingvellir. Staðir og leiðir*. Menningarsjóður, Reykjavík.
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7.b. Management plans and maps

One map of the Þingvellir area in included in Appendix IV. Ísland 1:25 000, sérkort. By Icelandic Geodetic Survey, Printed 1994.

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APPENDIX I: MAPS

APPENDIX II: ATTACHMENTS

Appendix II.a. Authorization

Appendix II.b. Place names

Appendix II.c. Project plan

Appendix II.d. List of illustrations

Appendix II.e. List of photographs and slides

APPENDIX III: SLIDES

APPENDIX IV: CD ROMS, BROCHURES AND MAP