

Norse cosmology: The world according to Snorri



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I: Context: Who, what, when, where

II: Sources: Texts and manuscripts

III: The story: What we can learn

Norse creation myth

~~Noise~~ creation myth

Icelandic

~~Noise~~ ^x creation myth
destruction

Icelandic

~~Noise~~ ^x creation myth [?]
destruction

Icelandic

~~Noise~~ ^x creation myth ^x destruction?

Icelandic

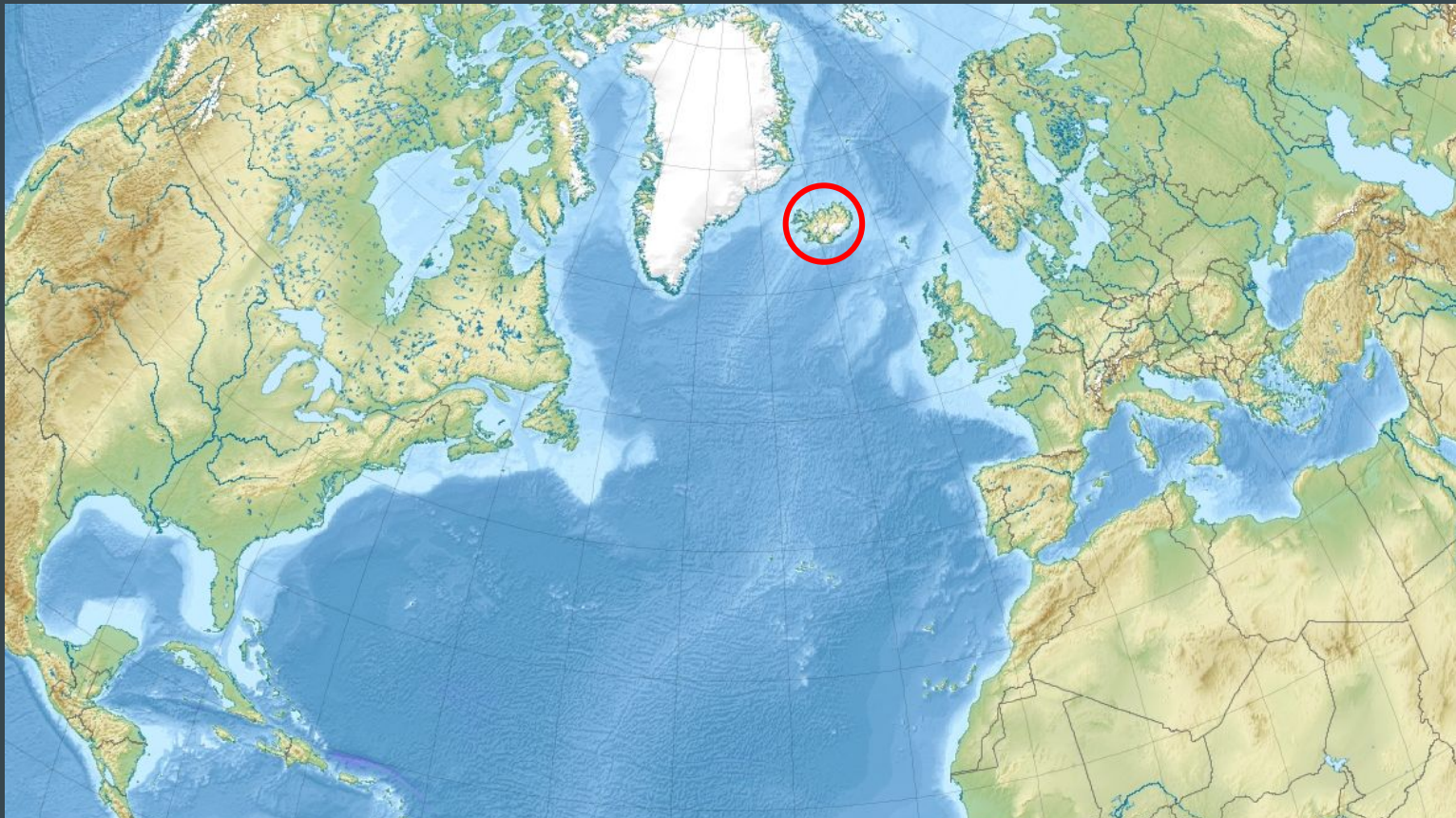
What is a myth?

Myth

Judith Jesch. 2015. *The Viking Diaspora*.

- “‘Myth’, at the simplest level, can be understood as ‘story,’ but is usually, as here [in this Norse study], used to designate **stories about supernatural or superhuman beings, or events of cosmic significance.**” Such stories can reflect what people **believed to be true**, and may therefore be closely link to religion. In other contexts they can be understood as having a more **symbolic meaning**, recognizing their religious framework without any implication that they were believed literally to be true. Or they can simply be **enjoyed as stories for entertainment or edification**, without either belief or religion entering into the equation.” (120)

What is Iceland?



Map of North Atlantic Ocean

When is Iceland?

700

800

900

1000

1100

1200

1300

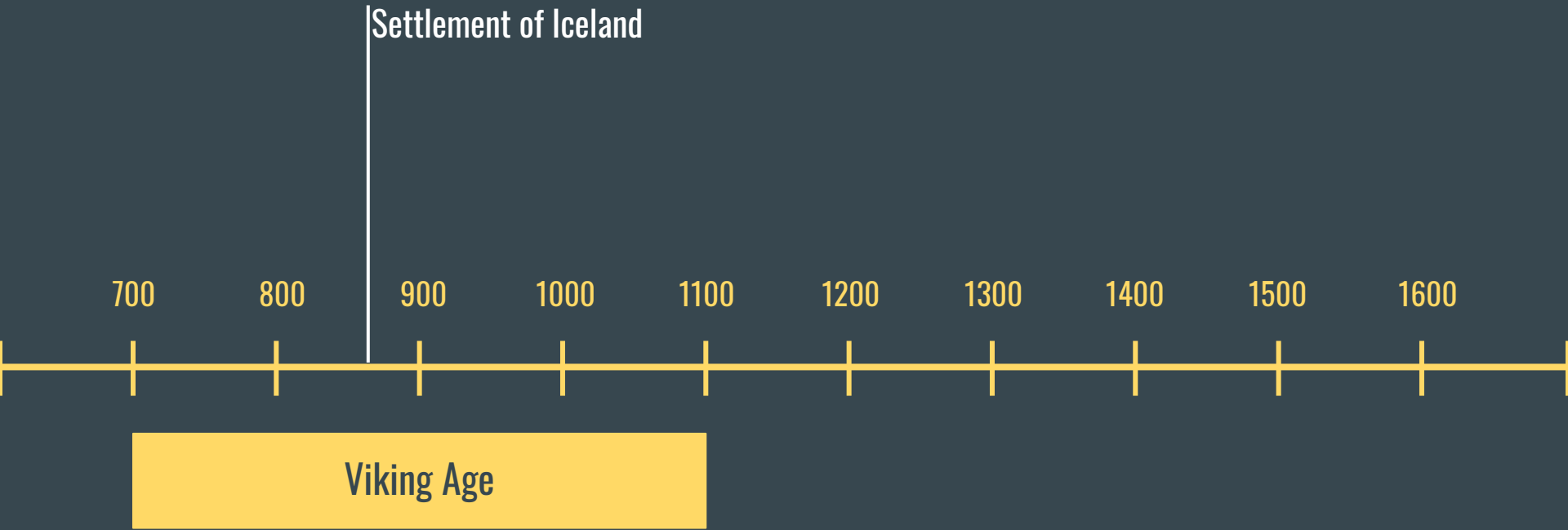
1400

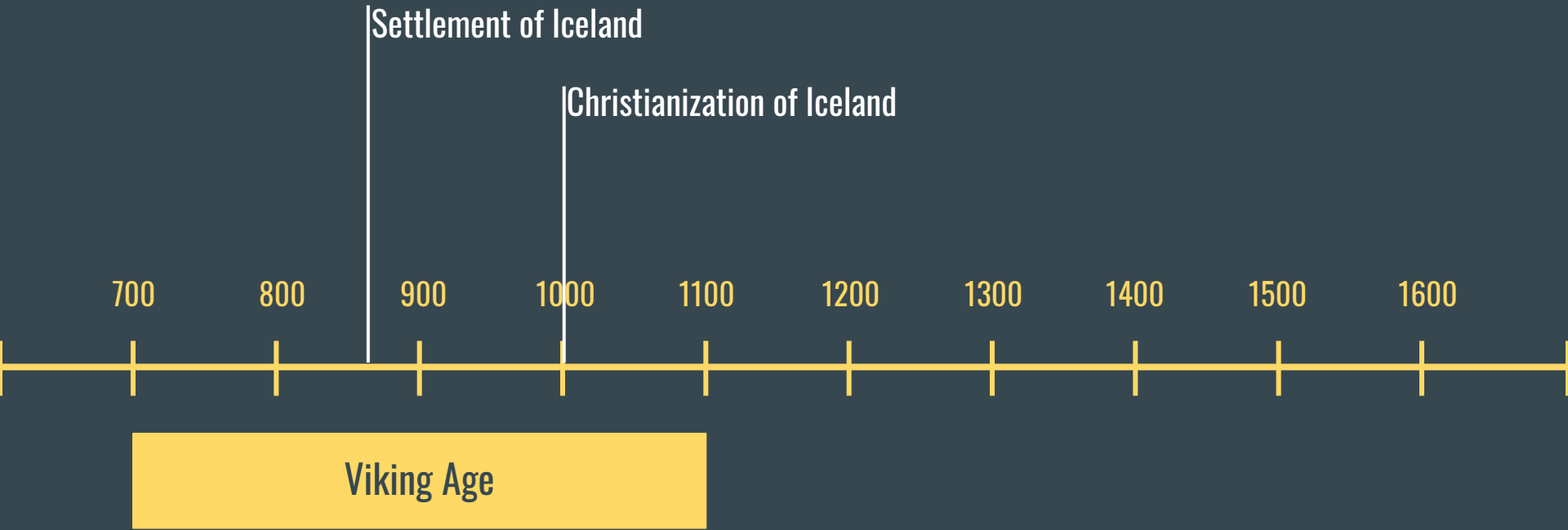
1500

1600

Viking Age

A horizontal timeline on a dark blue background. A yellow line runs across the top with vertical tick marks every 100 years from 700 to 1600. A yellow rectangular box labeled "Viking Age" is positioned below the line, spanning from approximately 793 to 1066 AD.





Settlement of Iceland

Christianization of Iceland

700

800

900

1000

1100

1200

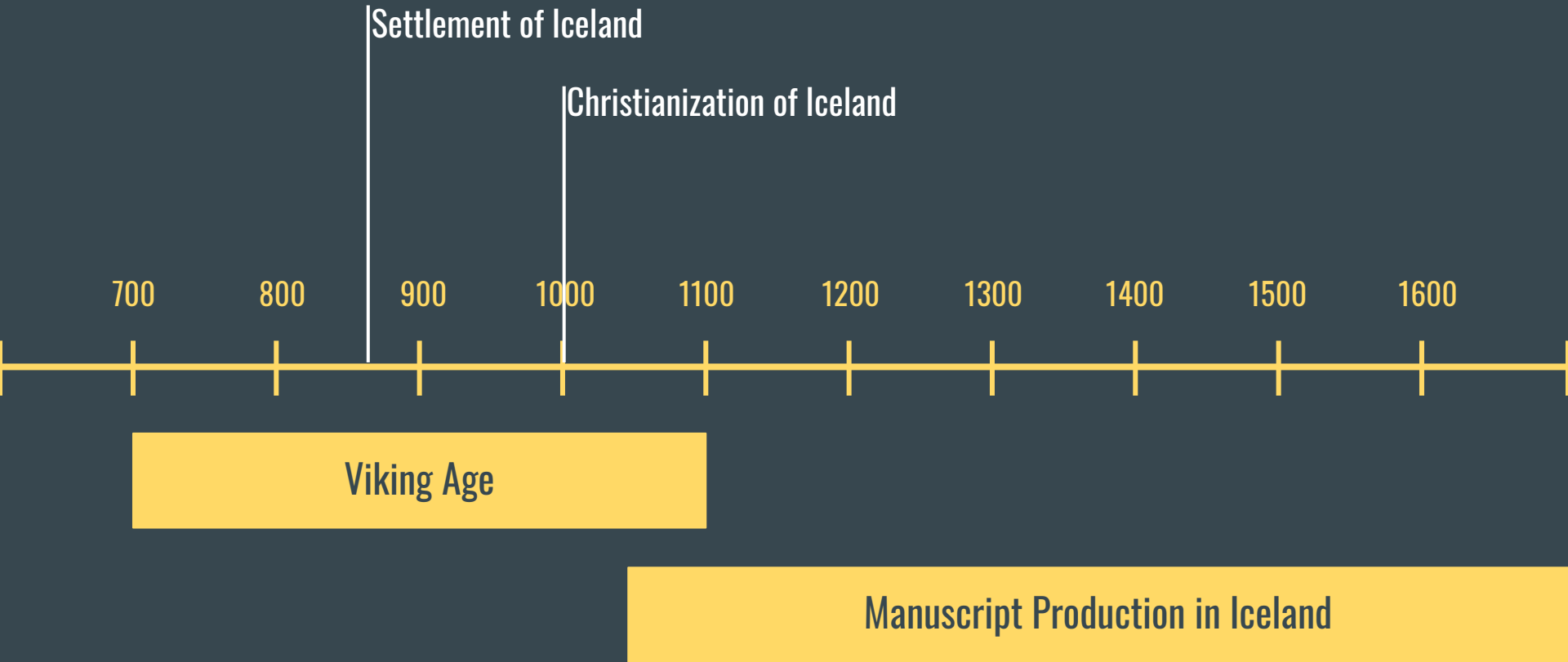
1300

1400

1500

1600

Viking Age



Settlement of Iceland

Christianization of Iceland

700

800

900

1000

1100

1200

1300

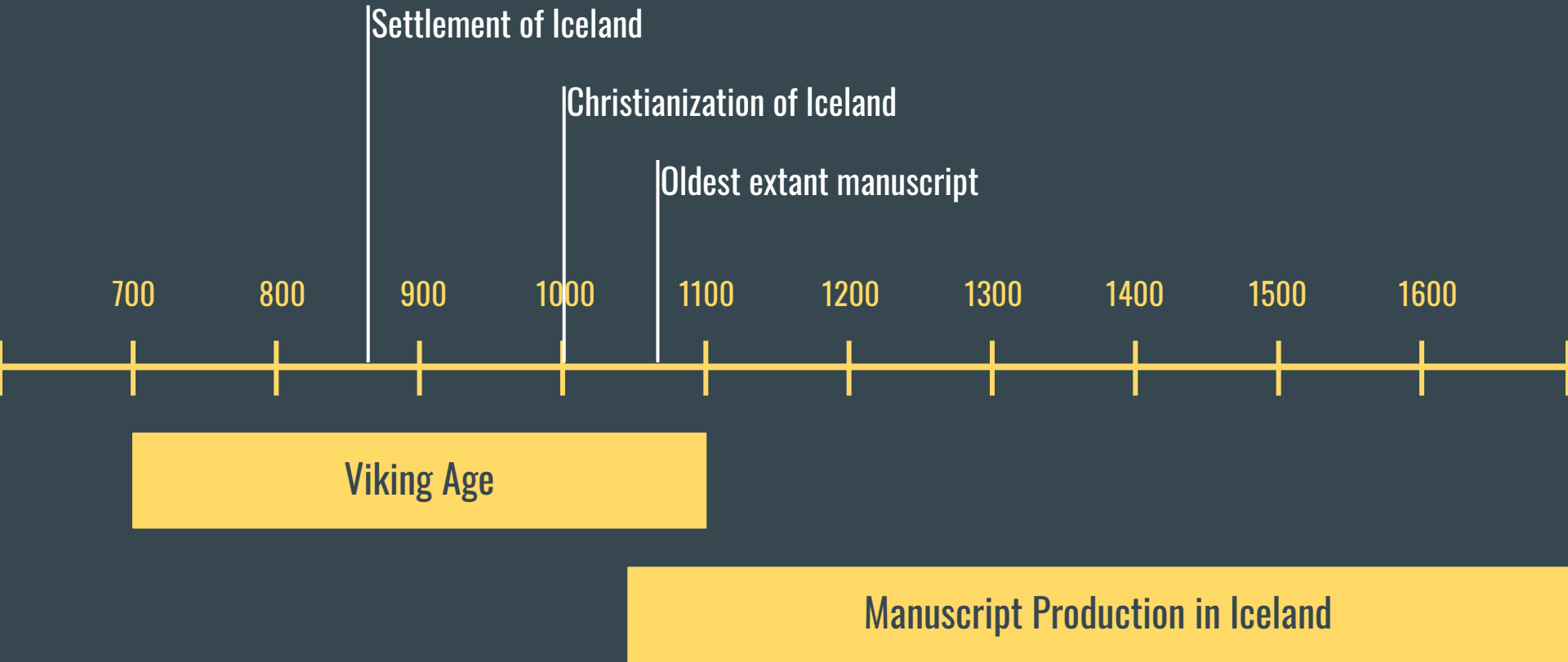
1400

1500

1600

Viking Age

Manuscript Production in Iceland



Settlement of Iceland

Christianization of Iceland

Oldest extant manuscript

700

800

900

1000

1100

1200

1300

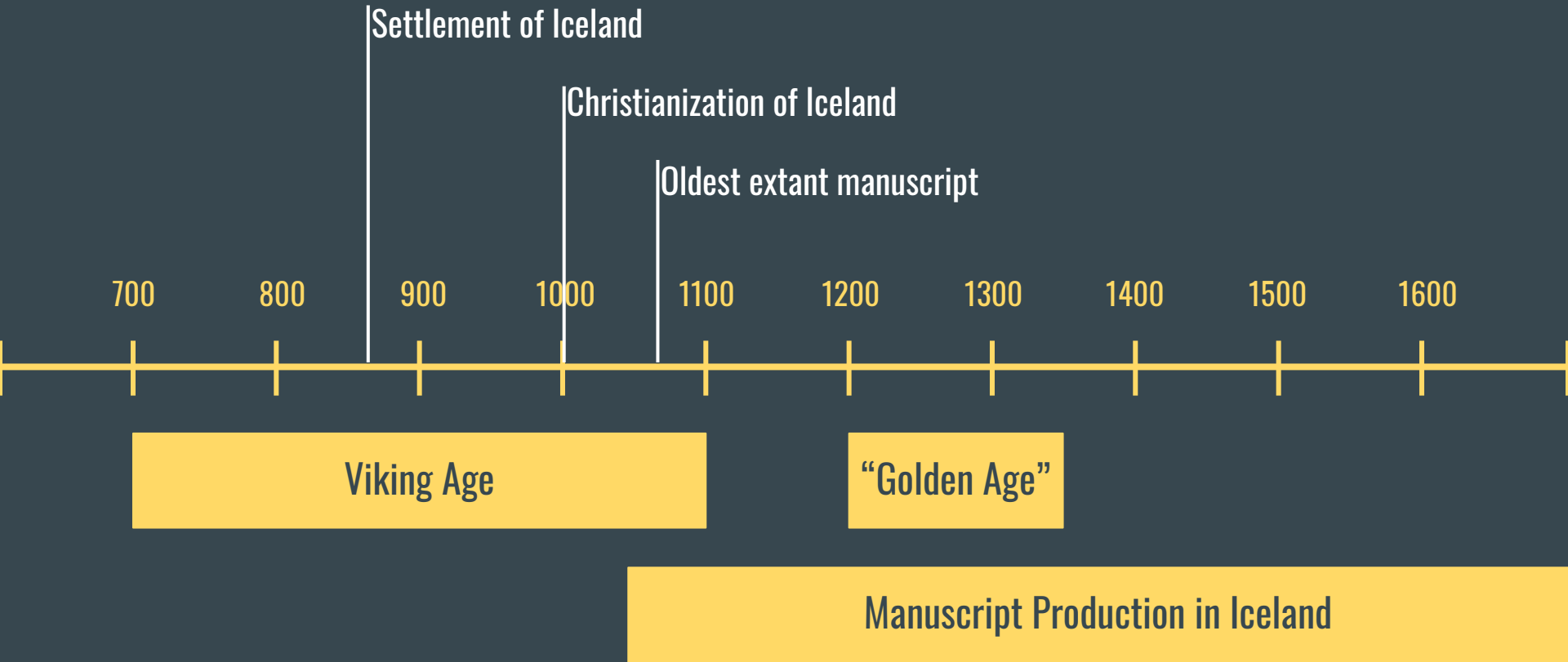
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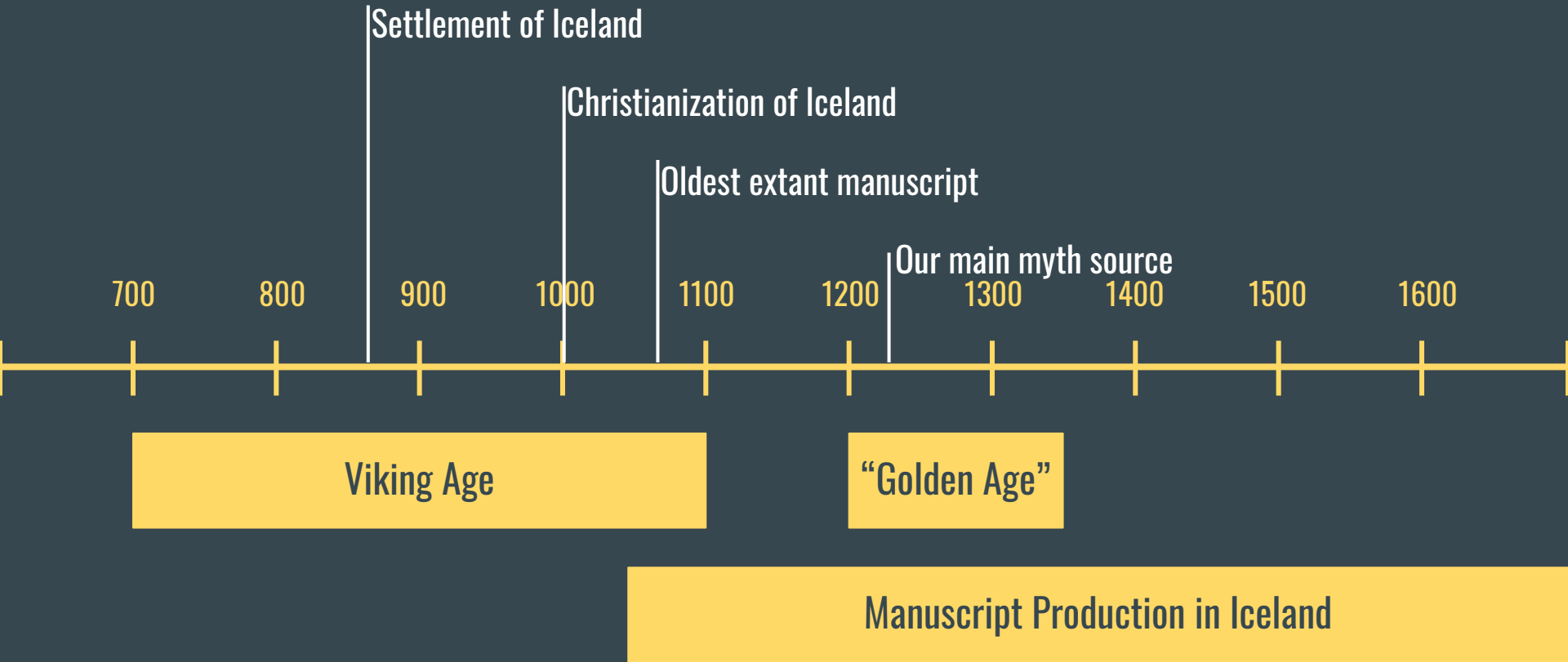
1500

1600

Viking Age

Manuscript Production in Iceland





700

800

900

1000

1100

1200

1300

1400

1500

1600

Settlement of Iceland

Christianization of Iceland

Oldest extant manuscript

Our main myth source

Viking Age

"Golden Age"

Manuscript Production in Iceland

I: Context: Who, what, when, where

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Two main sources:

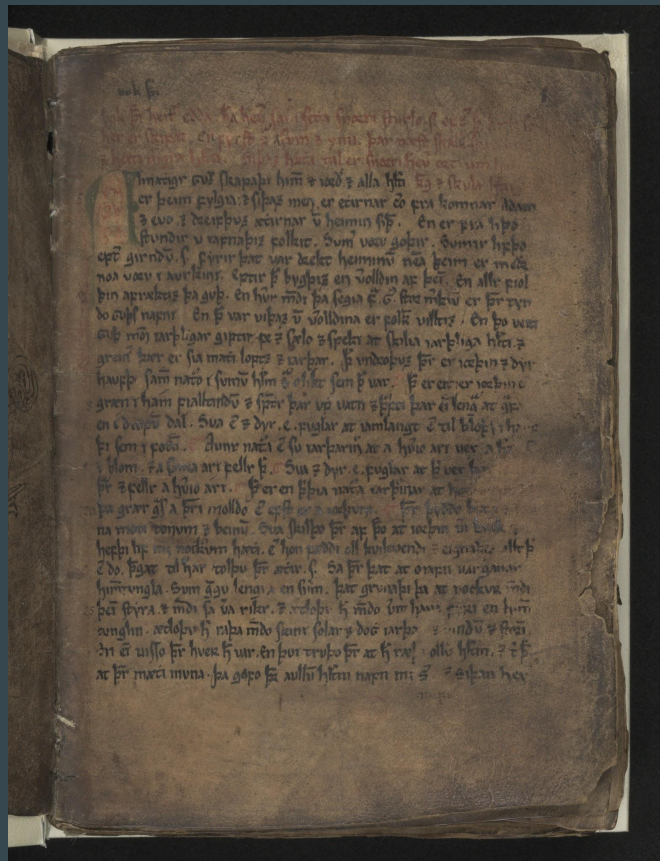
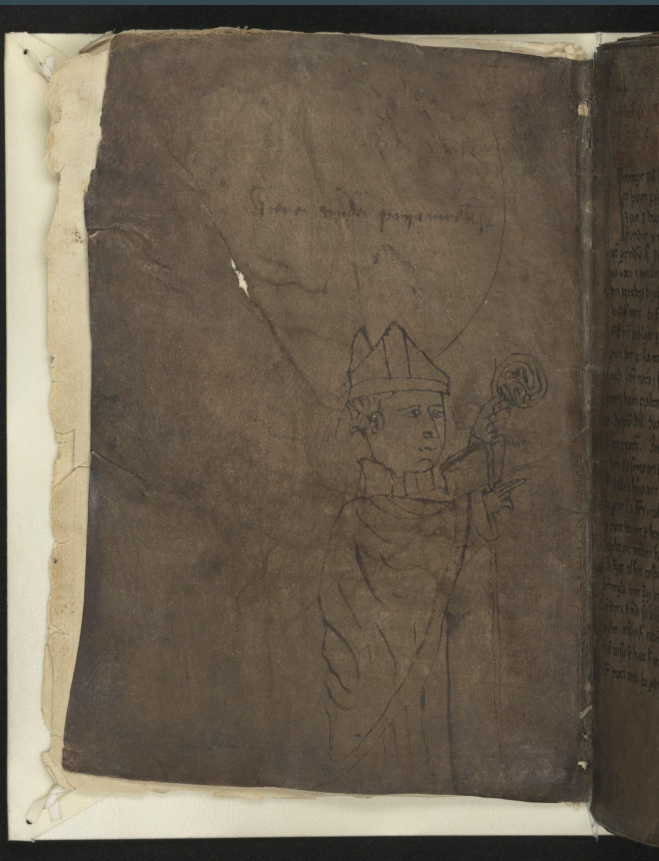
Gylfaginning

Völuspá

Gylfaginning

in the *Prose Edda*
by Snorri Sturluson
1220s





Codex Uppsaliensis
1300-1325

Gylfaginning

- Prose story written by Snorri Sturluson in the 1220s in Iceland
- One of our most important textual sources of Scandinavian mythology because it **explains kennings** found in earlier poetry

What is a **kenning**?

A **kenning** is a two-part **metaphor**

Horse of the sea

Fire of the water

Tree of the spear

Arm of the tree

Mountain of the shoulders



Karlevi runestone

Öland, Sweden, ~late 900s

S[t]æ[inn] [sa]s[i] es satr
æftir Sibba Goða, sun Fuldars,
en hans liði satti at

Fulginn liggR hinns fylgðu,
flæstr vissi þat, mæstar
dæðir dolga Þruðar
draugR i þæimsi haugi;

munat Ræið-Viðurr raða
rogstarkR i Danmarku
[Æ]ndils iarmungrundar
URgrandari landi.

This stone is placed in memory of
Sibbi the good, Fuldarr's son, and
his retinue placed on

He lies concealed, he who was
followed by the greatest deeds
(most men knew that), a
battle-tree of Thrúðr in this howe;

Never again shall such a
battle-hardened **Viðurr of the
Carriage of Endill's mighty
dominion** rule unsurpassed over
land in Denmark.

Snorri Sturluson wrote his *Prose Edda* to:

- 1) **explain** kennings
- 2) defend his **prestige as a poet**

His audience was most likely upper class and well-educated

Gylfaginning

- Prose story written by Snorri Sturluson in the 1220s in Iceland
- One of our most important textual sources of Scandinavian mythology because it **explains kennings** found in earlier poetry
- Begins with the creation & ordering of the world
- Lists the names & attributes of many Scandinavian deities & orders them into a [hierarchical] pantheon
- Tells several full myths present in a few eddic poems, like the marriage of Frey, the tale of Útgarðr-Loki, Þórs fishing trip, the death of Baldr, and Ragnarök, and connects them
- Ends with the destruction & recreation of the world

Gylfaginning 1-3

Frame narrative:

- Wisdom challenge
- Student + Teacher

The power of **names**:

- Gylfi = *Gangleri*
- High, Just-as-High, Third
- “All-father,” 12 names
- *Grímnismál*, *Völuspá*
 - Poetic quotations used as *source material* and thus as *evidence*—they scaffold / support the narrative

Völuspá

in the *Poetic Edda*
anonymous
late 10th century



regin lifri þar þo tali vala scialy; heit e velta s as
ja. Sæc þær heit e nu. en þær livalar knego vry
þma. þær þær dny 3 saga drecca v alla daga glæd æ
kerð. Glæd heit heit en v. þær en goll bracta
vll und of þrym. en þær hrope. kys hōian dag va
þa va. Hloc er apþent þ. er. a. h. l. k. vaxr hang
tan dny oc drup arn yf. Huc er apþent þei e t obis
tal kyst at lia. scarpd er ran rept. scioðo e talr þa
þrym v becca stræt. Þrym heit heit en vi. e þær
a us amacke iocry. en in scadi þo ov tar brido goda
oc topd þadov. Breda þeo in livido en þær balde þer
þa tali. ap landi e ec hōia vete josta reien tþan.
og ey en atto en þær heidall gþa valda ved. þær vax
dreccy vero vax glæd goda miob. jolevangr e in
ndi en þær þrepa reþe tesa colto rlat. hal: an val þo
hōian dag en halþan dny a. Hloc e in x. h e gull
e j luf þær þ sama. en þær jolect hystre þlestan
j hōiet allar talur. Noa tyn ey en xi. en þær miob
s v goppa tali. mayþengill en merul vani hæðeo.
þarg. Ig risti vax j þa grati vþær þ. vdr e þær ma
en lere q; marþ bala þrocy j hejma jadv. Andh.
muy lere ield þrimne se þrimni sodny. jleka heit
þ þær orto hvat en þær alax. Hera j þreca sed
þær mik hroþor hia þæde. en vþ vny eit vapr ga

Ue de dny dny va. v m. hōiorv er hia ganga
dvo þa e þr þara ac viciu ac vega. Heitvun
e stende hōillo a hōiadaf. j lter g. leraps limo te
lla ho st ml scira mradar kna ac sv veig vana
ry heit hōocy er stende a hōillo hia þærþr. j h
apl limo en q. hl hōmō dnypr ihōgelmi þan en
vll vega. Sþ j vþ sekun j ekin tval j gnyþro j
jūvþvul. rih j reþandi gþul j gþvul. gamv
mul. þer hōia v hōdd goda. þyn j vny þvll j ha
j gnyþoerj. Vin a heit en anhoz veglun þridia þ
nyr. j navr. navy. j hrany. slþ j hrip. tylgr j ylgr.
vand j strvnd. groll j leipce þer þalla gōno ner e
hehar hēday. Rornt j arnt j klugar tves þer
vada hōian dag er h dōma jæn ac alcyvdrasill.
at brv þreþ av logo heilog vocy hloa. Glæd j gyl
j scēidþrim þiljntoþer j linnr gull j þal hōerj gull
leþer þei rida ætr iom dag hōn er þr dōa þar
ei vdrasill. Þriar vter standa apria vega vnda
vdrasill. hel þyr vnd eny anjari hmpvlar þridi
en. Ratarolce heit ihoem e reya st ac alcy vdrasill
æd h st anj ba j legia niþhōcu niþ. Hic ey j
þær j; þer ingar a. agaghals gnaga. dan j dvaly.
j dnyþro. Ormar þlemy hōia vnd alcy vdrasill er
þær hōr. ofvbra ana. Rom j mōn þr ero annt

Codex Regius, GKS 2365 4to 9v-10r

~1270 CE

Völuspá

- Part of the *Poetic Edda*, first in the *Codex Regius*
- Probably composed in the 10th century
 - Religious *syncretism*
- Wisdom poem, Odin seeks wisdom

1. Hljóðs bið ek allar helgar kindir,
meiri ok minni mögu Heimdallar;
viltu at ek Valföðr vel framtelja forn spjöll fíra,
þau er fremst um man

1. Hearing I ask | from the holy kins,
From **Heimdall's sons**, | both high and low;
Thou wilt, **Val-father**, | that well I relate
Old tales I remember | of men long ago.

I: Context: Who, what, when, where

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Völuspá

- (1-8)
- (9-16)
- (17-20)
- (21-24)
- (25-29)
- (30-35)
- (35-39)
- (40-44)
- (45-49)
- (50-54)
- (55-58)
- (59-66)

**5 minutes: What happens?
What is created? What is destroyed?**

Völuspá

- (1-8) Creation
- (9-16) Naming of the dwarves
- (17-20) Ash & Embla, Yggdrasil
- (21-24) The first war
- (25-29) Oaths sworn, Odin comes
- (30-35) Death of Baldr
- (35-39) Rivers, halls
- (40-44) Fenrir, roosters
- (45-49) Social bonds break
- (50-54) Troops gather
- (55-58) Battle, destruction
- (59-66) Recreation

Völuspá

The creation of the world is:

- 1) cyclical: creation, destruction, recreation
- 2) not only of the natural world, but of the **social world**

Gylfaginning 8-9

5 minutes: What happens?
What is created? What is destroyed?

Gylfaginning 8

The creation of the world from Ýmir's body



Grænihryggur, Southwest Iceland



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Háls, East Iceland



Víðidalstunga, Northwest Iceland



Höfði, Dalvík, North Iceland



Herðubreið, Northeast Iceland

Gylfaginning 9

**The creation of humanity;
Odin and his high-seat**



Gravhaug (Burial mound), Tanum, Southeast Norway

Gylfaginning

The natural world and the social world are so intertwined as to be inseparable.

Actions in one affect the other.

SCAND 330: Scandinavian Mythology

SCAND 270: Sagas of the Vikings