

# Stjarnvísindafélag Íslands The Icelandic Astronomical Society

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Dear Nordic colleagues.

I am happy to inform you that on December 2, 1988 a number of Icelandic astronomers and astrophysicists held a meeting in Reykjavík and founded *Stjarnvísindafélag Íslands* (The Icelandic Astronomical Society), a professional society devoted to the promotion of astronomy and astrophysics in Iceland. The society has at present only 12 members but we expect this number to increase considerably in the near future.

As you probably know Iceland does not have much of a tradition as far as the science of astronomy is concerned. According to the Sagas and other old Icelandic manuscripts some interesting observations of the sun and the seasons were performed during the 10., 11. and 12. centuries by Thorsteinn surtur, Stjörnu-Oddi and others. Some of these observations even resulted in the improvement of the then existing Nordic calendars. In fact since that time and through the centuries almanacs were written by Icelanders both in verse and prose. Many of those, mainly the ones written by priests and bishops, were even published in printed form.

From the 16th century onwards most of the necessary knowledge for timekeeping as well as for the determination of latitude and longitude was obtained in Denmark. Two Icelandic bishops, Gudbrandur Thorláksson and Oddur Einarsson, had some contact with Tycho Brahe. Most educated Icelanders studied in Copenhagen where they learned elementary astronomy at the university as a part of their general education. Once in a while a student would seek a deeper knowledge. Such was e.g. the case with Magnús Arason who worked for a short period of time with Ole Rømer and later Björn Gunnlaugsson worked for two years as one of Schumacher's assistants in Altona.

The only period when continuous astronomical observations were carried out in Iceland was at the end of the 18th century. The Danish government established a small observatory at Lambhus near Reykjavík where Rasmus Lievog, a Norwegian educated in Copenhagen, performed various observations of an astronomical nature for 26 years. His astronomical diaries still exist and are preserved at the National Library in Reykjavík. Lievog sent copies of his results to professor Thomas Bugge who supervised the operation of the observatory from Copenhagen. The poorly equipped observatory was closed down in 1805 when Lievog left the country. Since then there has been no professional astronomical observatory in Iceland.

It is only during the last fifteen or twenty years that the number of professional astronomers and astrophysicists has started to increase here in Iceland. Earlier in the century two Icelanders obtained degrees in astronomy, one from the University of Copenhagen in 1929 (Steinþór Sigurdsson), the other from the University of Göttingen in 1934 (Trausti Einarsson). However when they came back to Iceland they could not find much to do in astronomy. They therefore turned to geophysics, a field in which they both had successful careers.

At present there is one astronomer, Thorsteinn Sæmundsson, employed by the University of Iceland. Working as a permanent member of the department of geophysics, his main duties are to calculate and publish the Icelandic almanac and to direct a small magnetic observatory at Leirvogur near Reykjavík. Also at the university are two astrophysicists in temporary positions in the department of physics. One, Einar Júlíusson, works in cosmic rays and image processing. The other, Einar H. Gudmundsson, is a theoretician working on neutron stars and cosmology. These three scientists are to some extent all collaborating with foreign groups on various research projects. An associate professor of physics, Thorsteinn Vilhjálmsson, should also be mentioned in this connection since he is engaged in work on the history of science (in particular astronomy) in Iceland.

Outside the university a recent Ph.D. astrophysicist, Karl Jósafatsson, is presently teaching full time at a high school in Reykjavík with almost no opportunity for doing research. He did his theses on a topic in infrared astronomy. A few other persons with degrees in astronomy, e.g. Thorir Sigurdsson at Akureyri, are also teaching science in high school. In addition two Icelandic students, Gunnlaugur Björnsson and Steinn Sigurdsson, are well on their way to a Ph.D. in theoretical astrophysics at foreign universities. They are both interested in returning to Iceland if the opportunity arises.

The University of Iceland does not grant degrees in astronomy or astrophysics. However the physics department offers two courses in astrophysics for students who are working towards the B.S. degree in physics, geophysics or mathematics. One of the courses has been offered since 1975. The second and more advanced course was first given in 1987. Since 1988 the department has also offered a more elementary course in introductory astronomy for the general student. As in most other countries all the courses are very popular among the students. At present the teaching is mostly theoretical, since observational facilities are as yet in rather an undeveloped state. The department uses a portable 20 cm Celestron reflecting telescope for teaching and has access to a larger telescope owned by an amateur society (see below). In addition to the university courses the physics department has also organized two summer schools in astronomy and astrophysics for Icelandic high school teachers.

The general interest in astronomy here in Iceland is high. The Icelandic Almanac is a bestseller; about 10000 copies are sold each year. We also have an amateur astronomical society, *Stjörnuskoðunarfélag Seltjarnarness* (The Amateur Astronomical Society of Seltjarnarnes) with about 110 members. It has its own observatory with a 35 cm Celestron reflecting telescope. The society, which was founded in 1976, sponsors lectures and meetings for members, school classes and the general public and organizes short courses in astronomy for children in elementary school. It also publishes a newsletter.

As can be seen from this short and admittedly rather incomplete description, the field of astronomy and astrophysics is a relatively new addition to the Icelandic scientific scene. Because of the lack of tradition there are no positions at the university or elsewhere in the country that are earmarked especially for astronomy. With the increasing number of Icelandic professionals in the field there is a growing need for a more secure basis for astronomical research. One of the main purposes of the newly founded Icelandic Astronomical Society is therefore to look for ways to improve the astronomical environment here in Iceland. An important factor in this respect is contact with foreign societies, observatories, universities and individual scientists. A step in this direction was taken when Iceland joined the IAU at the General Assembly in Baltimore last year. At present we are seeking new contacts in the Nordic countries, especially on the professional level.

This letter is one attempt to inform the Nordic community of astronomers and astrophysicists of our existence and to give a short description of the astronomical situation here in Iceland. If you are interested in obtaining more information please address inquiries to me.

With best wishes



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