

International Memory of the World Register

The 1703 Census of Iceland (Iceland)

2012-31

1.0 Summary (max 200 words)

The 1703 census is the first comprehensive census taken in Iceland and the oldest extant nominal census in the world that includes every member of a country's population, with name, age and social status. These unique resources are preserved in its entirety in the National Archives of Iceland. The census is a milestone in the history of population studies.

The Icelandic census was carried out in 1702-1703 by Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín, who were specially commissioned by the Danish king to assess the conditions in Iceland. Among the tasks to be carried out was to conduct a census of all the inhabitants of Iceland. The census was submitted to Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín at a meeting of Althingi (the parliament) in July 1703. According to the census the total population of Iceland amounted to 50,366 inhabitants in 1703.

The census most comparable to the Icelandic census is the 1666 census of New France in Canada. This includes only the French population of the colony, who numbered just 3,200 individuals. The first complete census in the Danish Kingdom was conducted in 1769, but it only counted the inhabitants. In most European countries general censuses were first carried out in the early 19th century.

2.0 Nominator

2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

The National Archives of Iceland

2.2 Relationship to the nominated documentary heritage

The custodian of the nominated documents

2.3 Contact person(s) (to provide information on nomination)

Eiríkur G. Guðmundsson Cand Mag, Head of Section.

2.4 Contact details

Name	Address	
National Archives of Iceland Eiríkur G. Guðmundsson	Laugavegur 162, IS-105 Reykjavík, Iceland	
Telephone	Facsimile	Email
+354-5903300	+354-5903301	eirikur@skjalasafn.is

3.0 Identity and description of the documentary heritage

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

If inscribed, the exact title and institution(s) to appear on the certificate should be given

“The 1703 Census of Iceland” is nominated by the National Archives of Iceland. The 1703 Census is preserved in its entirety and it is the first preserved census in the world that includes every member of a country’s population, with name, age and social status. The nominated documents contain a fully preserved census for the whole country. The documents, here usually referred to as the census reports, register every individual in all districts in Iceland in 1703. The census was carried out in 1702-1703.

The census documents

The census takers of 1703 did not have any pre-printed forms at hand when carrying out their task so therefore the reports from the district commissioners and county magistrates vary greatly in shapes and sizes. The census documents fall into three categories: county reports, which were compiled from district records in each county, district reports on the inhabitants of each district, and finally reports of paupers, vagrants as well as special reports (see detailed information in the attached Excel-file).

County reports - The county reports give population information about a total of 93 districts. Fourteen county magistrates of 23 combined the reports of the district commissioners in their county, into one collective report for the whole county (see pictures no. 36-53)

District reports - A total of 74 district reports have been preserved, especially from the counties in the south-western part of the country. These differ greatly in construction and writing skills and the sheets of paper that they are written on are of different sizes (see the data in the Excel-file). This is true of all the reports. The district reports are original reports although many of them are copies of the first census reports or copies of the original counts. By comparing the handwriting of the reports to the signatures below it becomes clear that in some cases reports were prepared and signed by the same person. Thus it becomes obvious that they are in fact copies of an original document. Maybe one of the census takers was given the job of producing a clean copy of the report, supplying any additional information and correcting mistakes before finally copying the names of all the census takers involved.

The district reports often provide more information than the county reports, although that is not always the case. Typically they include dates of counting and signing the report, as well as the signatures (hence the names) of all census takers involved (see pictures no. 32-35).

Paupers, vagrants and special reports - Paupers and vagrants are usually either included in the county reports or in the district reports. There are 38 special reports on paupers and vagrants, and in addition 3 other specific reports on (1) the members of the household in the School of Skálholt-see as well as (2) the schoolboys and (3) household members at Þingeyri residency (see pictures no. 58-60). Folded with the list of schoolboys there is a sheet of paper listing people located in Skálholt at the time of the census taking although living elsewhere. There are 7 separate reports on paupers, 19 separate reports on vagrants from other districts (see pictures no.56), and finally there are 12 reports on both paupers and vagrants. In some cases the reports are written on a small piece of paper (see picture no. 54) . These scattered reports are around two pages long on average, often written on of small scraps of paper. They were included with other reports when they were turned over to the county magistrates.

The reports on the paupers and vagrants are not only important because of the people that are recorded there but also because the reports are in general signed and dated. Thus they increase our knowledge of the system applied to the census taking as well as the census takers and their copyists (see pictures no. 32-35).

Table 1. An overview of the 1703 census reports

Counties	Number of districts	Number and type of reports	Number of special reports on paupers vagrants etc.
1. North-Múlasýsla	4	1 county report	-
2. Mid-Múlasýsla	6	1 county report	-
3. South-Múlasýsla	7	7 district reports	2
4. East-Skaftafellssýsla	3	1 county report	-
5. West-Skaftafellssýsla	3	3 district reports	-
6. Vestmannaeyjar	1	1 county report	-
7. Rangárvallasýsla	8	1 county report	1
8. Árnessýsla	13	13 district reports	2
9. Gullbringusýsla	6	6 district reports	-
10. Kjósarsýsla	3	3 district reports	-
11. Borgarfjarðarsýsla	9	9 district reports	2
12. Mýrasýsla	7	7 district reports	2
13. Hnappadalssýsla	3	1 county report*	-
14. Snæfellsnessýsla	6	1 county report	2
15. Dalasýsla	8	1 county report	4
16. Barðastrandarsýsla	10	10 District reports	3
17. West-Ísafjarðarsýsla	7	1 county report	10
18. North-Ísafjarðarsýsla	7	1 county report and 1 district report.**	1
19. Strandasýsla	6	1 county report	2
20. Húnavatnssýsla	12	1 county report and 4 district reports***	8
21. Skagafjarðarsýsla	12	12 district reports.	1
22. Eyjafjarðarsýsla	10	1 county report.	-
23. Þingeyjarsýsla	12	1 county report	1
1. North-Múlasýsla	4	1 county report	-
2. Mid-Múlasýsla	6	1 county report	-
3. South-Múlasýsla	7	7 district reports	2
4. East-Skaftafellssýsla	3	1 county report	-
5. West-Skaftafellssýsla	3	3 district reports	-
6. Vestmannaeyjar	1	1 county report	-
7. Rangárvallasýsla	8	1 county report	1
8. Árnessýsla	13	13 district reports	2
Totals:	163	14 county reports – 72 district reports	41

*Is in fact two documents but written on the authority of the county magistrate. Therefore here defined as one county report. **One district report is not in the county report, but separate. ***Four out of 12 districts are in duplicate, both represented in the county report and in the district report.

Quantity of the census

The total number of pages in the 1703 census is 1798. The census data is written on pieces of paper in very different sizes ranging from 33x21 cm to 9.5x8.3 cm. Blank pages and cover pages containing a name or an inscription are not counted. The 1703 census includes a total of 91 county reports and 71 district reports. The reports on paupers and vagrants are 38 and there are 3 special reports.

Following the application is a detailed list of the nominated documents.(Data-on-original-documents-of-The-Icelandic-1703-Census).

Age of the census documents

The district commissioners carried out the census in the period of December 1702 to June 1703, with most of the district censuses being carried out in March 1703. The reports were delivered to Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín at the meeting of Parliament at Thingvellir in the month of July 1703. Therefore the time the creation of these documents can be determined from December 1702 to July 1703 and that they are original documents from a rather complicated administrative process.

3.2 Catalogue or registration details

Depending on what is being nominated, appending a catalogue can be a useful way of defining a collection. If this is too bulky or impractical, a comprehensive description accompanied by sample catalogue entries, accession or registration numbers or other ways of defining a collection's size and character can be used.

The census documents are a part of the Rentekammer archives that was preserved in the National Archives of Denmark (Rigsarkivet) until 1928 when it was transferred to the National Archives of Iceland. Rentekammer was a government department in the Danish monarchy (1660-1848) that was responsible for accounting, customs, taxation, and managed the assets of the state.

The census documents are registered under the census reports series in the Rentekammer archives in the National Archives of Iceland. The census documents are preserved in two archival boxes. This link, <http://test.manntal.is/Default.aspx?id=705621>, refers to a catalogue entry (in Icelandic) in the National Archives of Iceland Records Catalogue. Registration details are as follows: National Archives of Iceland. Accession number 1928/11. Rentukammer. Manntöl og tölfræðiskýrslur. Archival box No. D1/1-D1/2.

The census documents are arranged in 18 folders (9 in each archival box). In each folder there are district records of the inhabitants of each district, records of paupers and vagrants, and county reports, which are copies of district records within each county.

The total number of pages in the 1703 census is 1798. The census data is written on pieces of paper in very different sizes ranging from 33x21 cm to 9.5x8.3 cm. Blank pages and cover pages containing a name or an inscription are not counted. Following the application is a detailed list of the nominated documents (see attached Excel file).

3.4 History/provenance

In 1703 Iceland was governed by the Danish king and a part of the Atlantic Provinces of the Danish kingdom. The administration was carried out by Danish officials. The Icelandic society was rather primitive and the main occupation of the inhabitants was farming (sheep and cows) and off-shore fishing. The country was sparsely populated along the coastline and

proper urbanization had not yet begun. The population of Iceland numbered 50,366 in 1703. Natural conditions in Iceland were harsh in the last two decades of the 17th century, when hard winters coincided with a grave and general reduction in fish catchment, even at the best fishing stations in the South-Western and Western part of the country. Icelandic officials were concerned about the situation and sent in 1701 a delegate to meet with King Frederick IV in Copenhagen asking him to intervene.

The Danish King responded favourably to the delegate's request and appointed two Icelanders, Professor Árni Magnússon and Deputy Chancellor Páll Vídalín, as his commissioners with an official letter of instructions dated the 22nd of May 1702 (see pictures no. 66-73). Among the tasks to be carried out was to conduct a census of all the inhabitants of Iceland and to count all the livestock and to compile a registry listing all the landholdings over the entire country. The 8th paragraph of the letter of instructions stipulates that a census should be conducted (see picture no. 70).

For carrying out the census Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín had the assistance of the county magistrates the district commissioners . At that time there were a total of 23 counties and 163 districts in Iceland to be counted. Each county had one county magistrate and there were between 3-5 district commissioners in each district.

Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín sent their instructions to the county magistrates in October 1702 and entrusted them, with the assistance of the district commissioners, to "compile a complete register of all the people in the country", saying:

"The register shall give an accounting, from farm to farm, of the farmer and housewife, children and other members of the household, identified by name, patronymic and age; item tenants, household servants and fishermen (themselves hired by the farmers) where they are situated, with their wives, children and households, listing each by name, patronymic and age, and for each male and female to specify clearly what work each one does, whether farming, housework, odd jobs, as worker or other honest way of living."

This was the core of the instructions as to how to count the general public. Next came an advice on how to register those who were away from home and the obligation to record them with the household where they resided. Then they came to the indigents: "Then shall be listed in the register by name and age all those indigents who are in your County during the next period of Lent". The instructions then refer to the last group of inhabitants and those considered of the least social standing, the vagrants. The county magistrates shall instruct the district commissioners:

"that the farmers, tenants or fishermen or others managing a household in the district, each and every one, whether or not at church, shall be notified in time, informed in writing, all vagrants spending the night before next Easter 1703 in their houses, where they say they have come from, all single persons or with children, and how many, and of what sex."

The district commissioners carried out the census in the period of December 1702 to June 1703, with most of the district censuses being carried out in March 1703. When the district commissioners had completed the census taking and written their reports they sent their reports to the county magistrate. In some cases the district commissioners sent the reports on paupers and vagrants separately and perhaps not at the same time as the main report. The county magistrates were to submit their reports to Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín at

the meeting of Parliament at Thingvellir in the month of July 1703. Some submitted the district reports (see examples in pictures no. 1-11) but the majority (14 of 23) submitted full county reports (see pictures no. 36-53) and in fact some of them signed reports at Thingvellir by the River Öxará (see picture no. 52).

It is uncertain whether Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín sent the census to Copenhagen in the autumn of 1703 or in the spring of 1704, but in any case it was delivered there relatively shortly after its completion. In Copenhagen, however, the census seems to have lain untouched and forgotten for decades in the archives of Rentekammer. It was discovered in 1777 and the first official analysis of the census was done the following winter, when Skúli Magnússon, the Treasurer, used it to compile a land register and used it to study the population in Iceland in his century. He compared the 1703 census numbers with population numbers from the 1769 numeric census (see picture 78). It is worth noting though, that there are indications that Árni Magnússon and/or Páll Vídalín had made some statistical study of the 1703 census, and that some unofficial preliminary results were known among certain Icelandic officials in early and mid-18th century.

Incidentally the census documents were to become forgotten again in the 19th century, buried in the midst of Rentekammer's archive. The 1703 census results were only known through Skúli Magnússon's work from 1778 and an extract that was published in a book in the year 1780. By the turn of the 20th century it was regarded by many Icelandic scholars that the census documents were in fact lost. In 1914 the National Archivist of Iceland, Jón Þorkelsson, formally asked the National Archives of Denmark to conduct a search for the census documents, and after a careful investigation they were found. An agreement was made in 1921 and the census documents were loaned to Iceland for further examination and research. Following negotiations between Icelandic and Danish delegations in the mid-twenties – whose members mainly included archivists and historians on both sides – a contract was signed in 1927 regarding mutual return of historical documents belonging to the two countries. In 1928 a great amount of official documents concerning Icelandic matters that had been kept in the archives of different offices of the Danish Kingdom were returned to Iceland. The contract included the documents that comprise the 1703 census.

In the years 1921-1947 the Statistics Iceland published the census of 1703. The last part of the publication got delayed during the Second World War, since the original documents were stored with other important documents at a safe location in the countryside. This printed publication was organized according to the present arrangement of counties and districts, which had changed from that of 1703

4.0 Legal information

4.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

Name	Address	
National Archives of Iceland	Laugavegur 162, IS-105 Reykjavík Iceland	
Telephone	Facsimile	Email
+354 5903300	+354 590 3301	eirikur@skjalasafn.is

4.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details if different from the owner)

Name	Address
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Telephone	Facsimile	Email
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4.3 Legal status

The National Archives of Iceland is an independent institution for the preservation of records under the direction of the Icelandic Ministry of Education and Culture. The function of the National Archives is to collect and keep records and other documentary material concerning the history of Iceland for the use of government agencies and individuals in order to ensure their interests and rights and for use in scientific research and scholarly studies. The National Archives of Iceland function under the Act No. 66/1985.

4.4 Accessibility

All access restrictions should be explicitly stated below:

The collection can be accessed in three ways: in the National Archives Reading Room, in a digitized form in the online National Archives Census Database, and in a published book. Access restrictions only apply to the original documents, see below.

The National Archives Reading Room

Until now the census documents have been accessible for everyone in the National Archives Reading Room. When the digital images have been made accessible online the access to the originals documents will be limited to researchers who will have to apply for access and support their application to examine the originals with sound arguments. The reading room is under guidance and surveillance by staff members and archivists. Visitors to the reading room must follow the National Archives Reading Room rules, which require every guest to register when entering the reading room, no bags are allowed, as is any use of pens and other safety measures are applied.

The National Archives Census Database

The 1703 census has been digitized (typed) and published online in the National Archives Census Database, see www.manntal.is. The database also includes data from some 10 other Icelandic censuses covering the period of 1835-1910. The database is searchable by various keywords, e.g. name, age, position in household, house/farm, county or parish. The visitor to www.manntal.is can choose between three languages, Icelandic, Danish and English. The census data is, however, only available in Icelandic. This website includes now some sample images of census reports. But soon (during 2012) the images of all the documents of the 1703 census will be available on this website. All the census documents have been scanned in high resolution (600 dpi) and the preparations to make them accessible on-line is undergoing.

Published book

In the years 1924-1947, the 1703 census was published in Icelandic by the Icelandic Statistical Bureau. The publication also included reports of the only three counties that the 1729 census was conducted

in. The census was published in 17 installments, which were later bound together in one book. The title of the book in Icelandic is *Manntal á Íslandi árið 1703 / tekið að tilhlutun Árna Magnússonar og Páls Vídalín ásamt manntali 1729 í þrem sýslum*. This book sold out many years ago and is now only available in libraries.

4.5 Copyright status

The collection of original material is not protected by any copyright restrictions, but all copies of secondary documentation, such as published books or photographs, will adhere to Icelandic copyright laws and regulations.

5.0 Assessment against the selection criteria

5.1 Authenticity.

There is no doubt about the authenticity of the 1703 census documents kept in the National Archives of Iceland. The documents themselves and their origin and history are well known and documented. The census documents are an integral part of the Rentekammer collection that was preserved in the National Archives of Denmark until 1928 when it was transferred to the National Archives of Iceland. Rentekammer was a government department in the Danish monarchy (1660-1848) that was responsible for accounting, customs, taxation, and managed the assets of the state.

On the 22nd of May 1702 the Danish king ordered a census to be taken in his remote island Iceland. This directive is published in *Lovsamling for Island* (see vol. I, pp. 586-587. See pictures no. 66-73). The reports were presented in Althingi Parliament 9th to 20th of July 1703. The Althingi Parliament was annually held in July.

Based on the directive from the king, Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín ordered the 23 county sheriffs in Iceland to conduct the census, counting every inhabitant in the whole country, in a prescribed manner. The county sheriffs then ordered the district commissioners in the 163 districts of Iceland to conduct the census. These orders are quite often referred to in the census reports themselves.

The census reports are usually signed with the registrars name, time and place (see pictures no. 10, 29, 65). There are exactly 503 persons, all men, usually district-commissioners, mentioned by name and identified as registrars of the reports listing the inhabitants of each district (municipality). There were usually 3-5 district commissioners in every municipality and usually they all participated in the census process and subsequently verified the report by writing their name, date and place on it. This is true for 104 districts out of 163. In the case of most of the remaining 59 districts the district reports were compiled into one county report, which the county sheriff verified with his signature, date and place. County reports were made for 14 out of 23 counties in Iceland in 1703 and signed by the county sheriff. Other sources acknowledge the existence of those sheriffs and comparisons have proven that their handwriting can be found in other documents.

Only six individual district reports are without registrars name on them. But as other reports all these six reports begin with comments on what they contain, where and why the counting of people took place (see pictures no. 13-21). In addition the content, the paper, ink and paleographical evidence argue that these reports are identical with the other reports of the 1703 census and are certainly a part of it. No scholar has ever argued that any census reports is not authentic or of another origin.

There is one instance, however, of a farm which was almost certainly inhabited at the time, but was not included in the census. This was the farm and household on the island of Viðey in Kollafjörður, just offshore the modern capital Reykjavík. This is probably due to a misunderstanding between registrars.

5.2 World significance

The heritage is unique and irreplaceable because here we have the original documents of the oldest preserved nominal census in the world where all inhabitants of a whole nation are recorded by name and position. The census documents are preserved in their entirety so the census is a complete whole.

5.3 Comparative criteria:

1 Time

The census documents are “first of its kind” in the sense that it is the oldest extant nominal census in the world that includes every member of a country’s population. The 1703 census contains information about a time scheme that is now extinct. It contains indications that the age of persons was counted relative to Christmas Eve for in some places in the census it is mentioned that a child has not lived a Christmas Eve

2 Place

The 1703 census depicts a society of farmers in North-Europe that is now extinct. No other nation we know of can present equally old demographic information on its entire population as can be found in the 1703 census. At that time almost all Icelanders based their livelihood on farming and, to lesser extent, fishing. This is illustrated in the census where the heads of households were usually farmers or fishermen, or both. The census also provides information on other activities of the inhabitants of Iceland. Thus there were 670 district commissioners, 245 clergymen, 108 artisans, 76 schoolboys, 7 executioners and 6 falcon catchers.

In 1703 there were 725 personal names in Iceland, 387 male names and 338 female names. The most common female name was Guðrún (20%) while the most common male name was Jón (John, 25%).

3 People

Iceland in 1703 was essentially a rural society, sparsely populated and geographically a borderline area of the Danish kingdom. The execution of the 1703 census is therefore a testimony of an effective administration. A key role in the execution was played by the district commissioners since they took care of the counting in the period from December 1702 to June 1703. A district was the smallest administration unit in Iceland and its roots can be traced back to the 11th century at least. Their primary role from the very beginning was supporting paupers within the district and from around 1100 collection and distribution of tithes. Originally the district commissioners were elected by the farmers in the district, but by 1700 this old custom had changed so they were now chosen by the county magistrates. Usually there were 3-5 district commissioners in each district. The successful execution of the 1703 census can be contributed to a combination of the Icelandic administrative unit, the district, and the administration system of the Danish king, that had grown stronger and more

efficient in the latter part of the 16th century. In this sense the cultural context of the document's creation does reflect significant aspects of social and political development in early 18th century Iceland.

4 Subject and theme

In Early Modern times governments and officials in Europe had an increased interest in enumerations and collecting statistics on the size of the population. In Scandinavia this increased interest in demography is traced to the ideology of cameralism – a political and economic ideology that is the Prussian counterpart of mercantilism. The administration of King Frederic IV of Denmark was influenced by cameralism, and this ideology prompted his decision of having the 1703 census in Iceland conducted.

5 Form and style

6 Social/ spiritual/ community significance:

Most Icelanders of the 21st century can easily trace their origin to the people recorded in the 1703 census, which is, therefore, of vast importance to genealogists and researchers of personal history. Research has proven the information contained in the census to be reliable and for most part accurate. The next complete census of similar form was conducted a century later, that is the 1801 census.

6.0 Contextual information

6.1 Rarity

The 1703 census in Iceland is one of a kind, and is the oldest preserved census in the world that includes every member of a country's population. It is also remarkable that the 1703 census is preserved in its entirety. There are older censuses known and preserved, but none of them includes every member of a country, including paupers and vagrants.

Before the time of censuses, it was customary in many countries to count tax-payers and men that could be armed in case of war.

Population registers from the 17th century, recording every inhabitant, exist in some regions of Europe. An example of this is the Danish census of 1665. While in most parishes only the head of a family was listed by name and position, there are examples of parishes that count every member of each household by name, age and household position. A Norwegian census of 1665 only lists men, but excludes women. The same holds true for the 1701 census of Norway. Population registers of this kind from the late 17th century and beginning of the 18th century have been preserved for some regions of England.

The census, which is most comparable to the Icelandic one, is the 1666 census of New France in Canada. It included only the French population of the colony, who numbered just 3,200 persons. Natives are not included. The first general census of the Danish Kingdom, which included Iceland at that time, was conducted in 1769. This census was limited to counting the number of people in each parish. In most other European countries, general censuses were first carried out in the early 19th century.

6.2 Integrity

The individual documents making up the 1703 census of Iceland are preserved as they were created in 1703. The information in the census can be, and has been, verified by comparison to other unrelated primary sources from the same time. For example many persons listed in the 1703 census have been identified in contemporary judicial records. It is also worth mentioning that data contained in the Livestock Register, compiled in 1703, as well as the Land Register, compiled in 1702-1714, also proves the existence of the same people, the same farms etc. that are mentioned in the 1703 census.
