



The function of landscape and place within the *Íslendingasögur*

Emma Horne

Introduction

As their name suggests, the *Íslendingasögur* characteristically pay a particularly close focus to the people and families of Viking Age Iceland. However, a large section of these sagas reflect narratives which are closely intertwined with the landscape and various settings, spaces, and places within Iceland itself – sometimes to the extent where the landscape becomes its own character essential to both the plot and the ‘complexity of narrative layers and the characterisation of the saga protagonists’ (Barraclough, 2010: 365). In this essay, I intend to demonstrate the function of landscape across *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, how it can be seen to emphasise the characterisation of saga protagonists, and reflect their status as religious people, outlaws, and, most importantly, Icelanders.¹

Landscape in relation to Icelandic Identity

The beginning of *Gísla saga*, like many of the *Íslendingasögur*, is highly focused on the Viking Age transitional period, the movement from Norway to Iceland, and the establishment of settlements and places in Iceland. Byock suggests that many of the sagas can be seen as a ‘series of stories about the historic migration of farmers rather than a mythic origin’ (2004: 303). It is perhaps this interpretation, and indeed purpose, of the sagas which account for the similarities between these narrative recordings of family connections and genealogical links to those involved in the original land-taking and settlement of Iceland and the historical recordings and documentation in the *Landnámabok* – a document which in itself emphasises the importance of landscape in the emerging Icelandic identity (Hastrup, 1990).²

Due to Iceland’s position as a *Terra Nova*, settlers could identify with the land in a wholly different way from Norway, as the land they chose to settle became completely their own. Because of this, Leonard (2010) suggests that those original groups of travellers - such as ‘Dyri who first settled the fjord’ (*Gísla saga*: 8) - became more than simply settlers, but instead ‘the progenitors of the Icelandic people’ (150). As such, the creation of these genealogical records embedded throughout the narratives of the *Íslendingasögur* work to link later Viking-Age families to those involved in the original land-taking and settlement of Iceland, and consequently support any later necessary claims to areas of land and Icelandicness.

While sagas were written for a contemporary audience with aims of entertainment and instruction (Rowe, 2009), their purposeful incorporation of genealogy and land claims

¹ All quotations will be taken from the Penguin Classics editions of *Gísla saga & Eyrbyggja saga* (Ed. Vésteinn Ólason, 2003) and *Grettis saga* (Ed. Örnólfur Þórsson, 2005). Translations are by Regal, Quinn, and Scudder respectively.

² While this purposeful attention to detail is vital in the Icelandic landscape and places, it is important to note that when the landscape featured is beyond the scope of Scandinavia there is the risk of authorial stereotyping of landscape and place-names (Jackson, 2019)

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help to create the idea of an Icelandic identity and community which has grown since the original settlement of the island. Consequently, alongside their entertainment value, the *Íslendingasögur* simultaneously function as a record of the heritage and culture of Iceland throughout their turbulent period of composition and in the face of civil war. As Clunies Ross (1993) succinctly explains:

‘Icelandic literature took shape during a period of acute political crisis for the Icelanders... they needed to tell the world, and the Norwegians in particular, that their claim to sovereignty was as good as their neighbours.’ (379-80)

While this political crisis eventually resulted in the loss of Iceland’s independence, the combined efforts of the *Landnámabok* and *Íslendingasögur* still create a traceable ancestry and concrete evidence of settlement, community, and an established society within Iceland, which – despite the range of settlers’ origins (S. Sunna Ebenesersdóttir et al, 2018) - was not Norwegian, English, Irish, or Scottish but something altogether independent and, more importantly, Icelandic.

Furthermore, the importance of the land and soil can be seen in the blood-brother ritual between Gísli, Þorkell, Þorgrímur and Vésteinn in which they require a long strip of turf with both sides touching the ground:³

‘All four of them had to go under it, Thorgrim, Gisli, Thorkel and Vestein. Then they drew blood and let it drip down on to the soil beneath the turf strip and stirred it together – the soil and the blood. Then they all fell to their knees and swore an oath that each would avenge the other as if they were brothers, and they called on all the gods as their witnesses.’ (11)

From this ritual description, it appears that it is the combination between the blood and soil which forms the link between the men as sworn brothers. There is a partnership and intermingling of the blood between the men, and so their respective families, but the combination of blood and soil indicates a tying of their intended brotherhood to the landscape itself. This tying to the Icelandic landscape could be used to excuse one another from the duties of revenge which transpire outside of Iceland or perhaps act as an escape clause in the event of one brother’s outlawry and subsequent position outside of Icelandic society. However, it could also be used to symbolise the concept of sworn brotherhood and family bonds as something inherently Icelandic in its nature, and therefore as intrinsically connected to the landscape as the people and society within it. Once again, this appears to link back to the concept of original settlement, and the establishment of blood ties to those *landnámsmenn* who originally settled the island. As such, perhaps the landscape can be seen to act as the linking force that connects the people of Iceland with the practices and cultures which make them Icelandic.

Landscape and Religious Practices

A similar incorporation of landscape in ritualistic practices can be seen in *Eyrbyggja saga* through the settlement processes of Þórólfr and the high seat pillars from his temple:

‘Thorolf declared that he would settle in Iceland in whatever place Thor directed the pillars to land. As soon as the pillars were thrown overboard, they were swept towards the more westerly of the fjords and seemed to travel faster than might be expected.’ (75-6)

³ While there is very little evidence that practices such as this were regularly carried out, I have used the term ritual following the *Collins Dictionary* definition that ‘a ritual is a religious service or other ceremony which involves a series of actions performed in a fixed order’ (2022). In this case, the term should not be taken to imply any instances of exact replication or general traditional practice.

As promised, Þórólfr trusts in the guidance of Þórr and settles in the western-fjords as directed. Interestingly, as observed by Lethbridge (2022), some vital manuscripts of *Eyrbyggja saga* came from the western-fjords of Iceland, consequently creating an overlap between the narrative landscape and the physical location and local knowledge of saga audiences.⁴ In instances such as this, where the ‘textual space’ (Livingstone, 2003) of the narrative and audience’s setting overlap almost wholly, the saga’s landscape becomes even more pivotal in the saga events as the audience becomes able to map both the outside and inside events within their mind as they unfold.⁵

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, where the narrative landscape is used to emphasise the sanctity and sacredness of Þórrsnes and its subsequent defilement through blood spilt in rage (Wanner, 2009), this local knowledge and understanding of landscape works to underpin the “truth” of the narrative. The saga narrator claims:

‘It is still possible to see the judgement circle in which men were sentenced to be sacrificed. Within the ring stands Thor’s stone, across which men’s backs were broken when they were sacrificed, and the stain of blood can still be seen on the stone.’ (82)

This, allegedly, still-present feature of the Þórrsnes landscape creates the illusion of historical accuracy in which this notable feature is explained. As such, if the saga audience believes this local origin, they perhaps would be more likely to accept the original sanctity and religious nature of the landscape as indicated by Þórólfr. The sacredness of the landscape is further supported by the abundance of religious placenames featured (76-7), with ‘Thorsa’ [Thor’s River], ‘Hofsvog’ [Temple-cove], ‘Hofstadir’ [Temple-place], and ‘Helgafell’ [Holy Mountain]. The prominence of these place-names directly link the landscape setting of the saga with religion, and consequently work as a somewhat unobtrusive reminder of the perceived holiness of the location and the guidance from Þórr during the settlement process.

More generally, however, this religious ritual of settlement noted in *Eyrbyggja saga* is not a unique occurrence as *Landnámabok* notes similar instances in the settlement practices of Hrollaugr Rognvaldsson, Hásteinn Atlason, and Thorðr skeggi Hrapppsson while *Laxdæla saga* indicates the same ritual is undergone by both Bjorn Katilsson and Unnr Djupudga (Wellendorf, 2010). With so many common occurrences, it is possible that this ritual is less realistic or genuinely practiced and more a narrative device used to indicate the establishment of a new settlement, however Clunies Ross (1998) and Strömback (1928) argue that this sort of ritual could be interpreted as a way of transporting sacred religious powers to the new land from the old. If this interpretation holds any weight, the landscape of Iceland can be seen as an anchor for religious beliefs and allows for their continuation and cementation within the daily practices of the settlers’ new home.

This reflected importance of landscape in religion and settlement is not, however, constrained to pagan rituals. In fact, it can be paralleled to both the death of Þórgunna in the same saga, and the secular, family-oriented settlement ritual of Egil, Skallagrimr, and Kveldulf in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (Ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 2004). *Egils saga* more closely parallels the exact ritual featured in *Eyrbyggja saga* through the final wishes of Kveldulf:

⁴ See Kinniburgh (2018) for geospatial data on the outlaw sagas.

⁵ For further discussion on nature of landscape and geography within readership practices see Keighren (2006) and Livingstone (2005).

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'If it happens...that I die, make a coffin for me and put me overboard. Things will not turn out as I imagined if I do not reach Iceland and settle there.' (48)

The saga then proceeds as predicted, Kveldulf dies, the crew cast his coffin overboard, it is washed ashore, and buried nearby in a place by which Skallagrimr settles. While this ritual is not driven by religion, it follows the same indicators of fate, fortune, and good will for the future which underpins the same process of settlement as the religious rituals. Premonition appears to be a vital factor in these rituals, but while Kveldulf's premonition appears to be fearful of what may happen if he does not settle in Iceland successfully, Þórólfr is confident in the successful and positive results of settlement under Þórr's guidance.

Much like Kveldulf, it is Þórgunna's last wish which reflects the importance of landscape and place in Christian religious contexts, both in the saga narrative and the future of Iceland:

'What I want is to have my body carried to Skálholt if I die from this illness...because something tells me that place will one day be the most venerated in Iceland. And I also know that there are priests there now who can sing mass for me.' (168-69)

Her premonition, like Kveldulf's, accounts for and allows the best possible future for herself in Iceland, despite her death. Skálholt became one of the most important places in Iceland, with a bishopric being established in 1056, and remaining an area under a bishop's jurisdiction until 1785 (Jon Vidar Sigurdsson, 2017). Overall, these examples indicate the importance of various locations, landscapes, and rituals within religious practices and peoples, as well as their vital inclusion across a range of different religious identities. 7

Landscape and Social Status

Ogilvie and Pálsson (2003) suggest that the natural landscape is 'closely intertwined with the cultural landscape' (296) of medieval Icelandic society. This is something seen most explicitly in the outlaw sagas, especially *Grettis saga* in which topographic references constantly function as a literary device (Wyatt, 2005) which shape the action, pace, and overall movement within the saga due to Grettir's status as an outlaw. The *Laws of Early Iceland* describes full outlawry as the following:

'Full outlawry cast a man out of society. The outlaw forfeited his property and all rights, civil, family, and ecclesiastical. He could not lawfully be given any assistance - sustenance, passage, or any saving advice. He might be killed by anyone with impunity and had a price on his head; this applied forever even if he escaped abroad.' (Dennis, Foote and Perkins, 1980: 246)

Consequently, through his position as an outlaw, Grettir is a man placed firmly on the outskirts of society and effectively in the wilderness. If, as Sayers (1996) suggests, the hall can be considered a 'social and cultural microcosm' (252) it is Grettir's inaccessibility to the social aspect of society which leaves him vulnerable, rather than simply his physical position in the harsh outside landscape. Or perhaps, as Barraclough (2010) puts it in her discussion of the outlaw sagas:

'Grettir remains caught between his human fragility and his stunted potential for a solely supernatural existence, with his need for social contact and his fear of uncontrollable forces such as darkness feeding a particular human vulnerability in him.' (369)

Grettir's liminal position as an outlaw, somewhere between the accepted and desired society of the hall and the monsters who reside solely in the wild, dangerous landscape prevents

him from truly accepting and moving towards one path or another for the most part of the saga.

However, this appears to change during the fight sequence with Glámr, in which the setting and landscape parallel their respective position in society, and their consequent strengths and weaknesses which comes from it:

'A mighty fight ensued, because the wretch intended to take him outside the farmhouse. But difficult as Glam was to deal with indoors, Grettir saw he would be even harder to handle outdoors, so he struggled with all his might to stay inside. Glam's strength redoubled and he clutched Grettir towards him when they reached the entrance hall. When Grettir realized he could not hold him back, in a single move he suddenly thrust himself as hard as he could into the wretch's arms and pressed both feet against a rock that was buried in the ground at the doorway. The wretch was caught unawares and, as he had been straining to pull Grettir towards him, Glam tumbled over backwards and crashed through the door. His shoulders took the door-frame with him and the rafters were torn apart, the wooden roofing and the frozen turf on it, and Glam fell out of the house on to his back, face upwards, with Grettir on top of him. The moon was shining strongly, but thick patches of clouds covered and uncovered it in turns.' (1908- 1921)

In this fight sequence there appears to be three places of interest: the inside of the farmhouse, the outside landscape beyond the farmhouse, and the doorway between the two. Hastrup (1985) states that the 'boundary between the "social" and "the wild" has nothing to do with physical or geographical boundaries' (137). However, in this case, I completely disagree in that the doorway between the outside and inside clearly acts as a physical and spatial boundary between the 'social' and 'the wild'. It is for this reason I suggest Van Genep's (1960) idea as the doorway representing 'the boundary between foreign and domestic worlds...therefore to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world' (20) as much more appropriate for this sequence. Grettir appears to have the upper hand in the farmhouse, as despite his position as an outlaw he still identifies with the expectations and ideas of society. Contrastingly, Glámr is recognisably stronger outside the farmhouse for as long as Grettir continues this desire to remain in society. This leaves the doorway to act as a liminal space between these two characters, worlds, 9 and their respective strengths (Heiniger, 2020). Grettir is reluctant to face Glámr outside in the wild, natural landscape and leave behind the security of the hall, however doing so is what allows Grettir to eventually succeed and kill him.

Despite this success, Grettir has passed through this liminal space into the wild landscape and through the destruction of the doorway it is clear that there is no way to return. Grettir must accept his place in the landscape of wilderness and his place beyond society in order to assimilate to the world of the monsters (Orchard, 1995) and gain the strength to overcome the other supernatural forces within the dangerous and changing landscape of the saga.

Conclusion

Across this essay I have evidenced the great importance and varying function of landscape, setting, and place across a range of the *Íslendingasögur*, and how it can emphasise the complex layers of protagonists' characterisation, views, and development as well as influence the narrative structure and plot. Despite this range, it is important to note that no matter the individual purpose of landscape – to highlight family, brotherhood, religion, or

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outlawry – it creates a fundamental cultural and narrative link between the characters and events of the saga and the place and landscape of Iceland itself. Often, this pivotal link between narrative and place works to the extent where some of the *Íslendingasögur*, such as *Grettis saga*, would not be able to function or flow successfully without it. Removing the character, culture, and independence of Iceland from the *Íslendingasögur* leaves a narrative void, in which the protagonists, stories, and events have no link to the real world or even, in fact, to each other. Therefore, a major underlying function of landscape in these sagas is to reaffirm the Icelandic identity, the shared cultural history, legends, mythology, and formation of a nation through collective settlement. Consequently, even in the face of civil war and loss of independence, the landscape and place of the sagas cements these narratives as something inherently Icelandic

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