



A study into the functional aspects of place-names and naming narratives in the *Íslendingasögur*, with a particular focus on *The Vinland Sagas* and *Egils Saga*

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According to Verena Höfig, 'nations connect with their pasts as a means of confirming and legitimising their present', and the *Íslendingasögur* are no exception.¹ Due to the two-hundred-year gap between the saga events and their composition, the *Íslendingasögur* 'cannot be regarded as entirely reliable historical sources'.² On the other hand, by bridging the gap between the historical period that the stories are depicted and the period in which they were written, 'the sagas become a decisive element in forming the cultural memory of Medieval Iceland'.³ Thus, the stories are important literary sources that may indicate the 'beliefs and ideological positions of Icelanders of the period in which the texts were written' via the saga author's interpretation and use of literary features.⁴ One such feature is place-names and naming processes within the narratives. As suggested by Eleanor Barraclough, a pervasive pattern of place-names emerge in the *Íslendingasögur*, which 'signify geographical/ natural features of the land'.⁵ However, naming cannot be merely defined in the sagas through a description of the surrounding topography. Landscape can also relate to name and identity, perhaps most obviously through direct personal names of settlers, but also through burial mounds as a means of commemoration. Naming in this way inscribes historical culture and history onto the land, transforming it into a social space. As such, the process of naming in the sagas becomes a crucial element by which the authors, and Icelanders more broadly, can establish and maintain cultural memory. Considering such notions, this project will examine the role of both topographical and social place-names as literary devices, and the implications they hold regarding the saga authors' understanding of the origins of these names. Furthermore, I aim to provide insight into the sagas' significance as influential elements in the development of cultural and historical memory during the time of writing. Using the case study of three sagas: *The Vinland Saga* (*Eirik the Red's Saga* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders*) and *Egils Saga*, this will be explored in two sections:

1. **Topographical place-names:** Through close readings of *Eirik the Red's Saga* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, I will examine place-names inspired by natural elements in the settlement narratives. This analysis will investigate the purpose of assigning names

¹ Verena Höfig, 'The Legendary Topography of the Viking Settlement of Iceland', *Landscapes: The Journal of the International Centre of Landscape and Language*, 8 (2018), 1-19 (1).

² Carl Phelpstead, *An Introduction to the Saga of Icelanders*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020), p. 93.

³ Jürg Glauser and John Clifton-Everest, 'Saga of the Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) and *Pættir* as the Literary Representation of a New Social Space', in *Old Norse Literature and Society*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 203-220 (p. 215).

⁴ Phelpstead, p. 32.

⁵ Eleanor Barraclough, 'Naming the Landscape in the Landnám Narratives of the *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók*', *Saga-Book*, 35 (2012), 79-101 (83).

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to locations based on their topography and review the underlying meanings they potentially convey.

2. **Social place-names:** building upon the first section, I will explore the complex role of personal place-names and their capacity to inscribe identity onto the landscape. By employing similar methodologies, I aim to investigate this phenomenon in the context of both *The Vinland Sagas* and *Egils Saga*. Through this exploration, valuable insights can be uncovered concerning notions of cultural history during the era the sagas were set and the period in which they were written.

Topographical Place-Names

Much like nicknames and naming of characters in the *Íslendingasögur*, which ‘demonstrate an interest in minute physical differences’ and ‘a tendency to reduce people to specific bodily features’, it can be similarly said of the naming of the landscape.⁶ Land is named after topographical features in many naming sequences, particularly during settlement and discovery narratives such as *The Vinland Sagas*. Perhaps one of the most prominent sequences in which this is evident is the narration of Leif’s discovery of Vinland in *The Saga of the Greenlanders*. Here, Leif first notices a ‘single flat slab of rock from the glaciers to the sea’, which he calls ‘Helluland’ meaning ‘flat stone, slab land’ after its observed characteristics.⁷ A similar situation occurs when Leif approaches landfall once again, this time naming the space ‘Markland’, meaning forest land due to its ‘flat and forested features’ (*Greenlanders*, p.6), as well as ‘Vinland’ named after ‘fields of self-sown wheat and vines’ in *Eirik the Red’s Saga* account.⁸ Again, the landscape is named after its physical characteristics or resources.

However, the authors are doing much more than merely painting a depiction of the landscape; they are also utilising topographical place-names as a means to commodify the uninhabited land. Thus, place-names can also indicate the land’s material value to characters during the settlement narratives. The saga author specifies that Helluland appeared ‘of little use’ (*Greenlanders*, p.6) to Leif, which may suggest that they were specifically seeking land with valuable natural resources, which Helluland seemed to lack. Moreover, the explicit rationale behind naming Markland based on ‘what it has to offer’ (*Greenlanders*, p.6) reinforces the implication of categorising topographical place-names in relation to their invaluable resources. The landscape of Markland is additionally depicted as possessing ‘many beaches of white sand’ (*Greenlanders*, p.6). However, its exclusion in the place-name may signify that it’s ‘forested’ attributes are considered more favourable. As suggested by Hoidal, Greenland had limited forest vegetation; as such, ‘the timber that they could obtain from North America provided therefore an important supplement to their limited supply of wood’.⁹ In this case, Markland’s ‘forest land’ place-name suggests not only it’s geography, but its prospect as a profitable and noteworthy discovery. Thus, names and naming do not only connote a sense of the natural landform, but also act as a symbol of what material worth it can provide prospective settlers with, such as timber. In addition, the

⁶ Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir and James G. Rice, *Understanding Disability Throughout History: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Iceland from Settlement to 1936*, (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 16.

⁷ Keneva Kunz, trans., *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 6. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

⁸ Keneva Kunz, trans., *Eirik the Red’s Saga*, (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 35. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

⁹ Oddvar K. Hoidal, ‘Norsemen and the North American Forests’, *Journal of Forest History*, 24 (1980), 200-203 (202).

practice of commodifying the land through place-name can also serve as a means of attracting prospective settlers, as evidenced in *Eirik the Red's Saga*. Eirik named 'Greenland' as such because he believed that 'people would be attracted there if it had a favourable name' (*Eirik*, p.28). This indicates Eirik's intention to encourage settlement in Greenland by suggesting the land as fertile for agriculture, thereby presenting an opportunity for prosperity in an unfamiliar location. Thus, place-names are seen as influential, as they can serve the function of attracting migration. Nevertheless, the act of naming (or lack thereof), can hold significance in suggesting what certain characters perceive as valuable, or insignificant. In *The Saga of the Greenlanders* narrative, Bjarni refrained from naming the land he encountered since it seemed 'to offer nothing of use' (*Greenlanders*, p.5). Given that the land did not offer Bjarni anything of personal gain, he chose neither to name nor explore it further. Hence, the function of naming in this narrative reveals the varying perceptions different characters may hold regarding what they deem valuable, and how this shapes the naming of land.

It is evident that topographical features also provide navigational prompts, as travellers can associate certain areas with land features and thus orientate and locate themselves on a mental map. An example of using topographical place-names as a directional marker is seen in *Eirik the Red's Saga*, where he 'sailed seaward from Snaefellsnes and approached land under the glacier called Hvitserk' (*Eirik*, p.27). By identifying place-name through topography, Eirik sailed 'southwards, seeking suitable land for settlement' (*Eirik*, p.27) in Greenland. This is reinforced when Thorhall wanted to travel north to seek Vinland, knowing to head 'past Furdustrandir and around Kjalarnes' (*Eirik*, p.43). Accordingly, place-names that portray natural features are useful in navigational situations and important during the settlement and discovery narratives to 'help orientate themselves in their new surroundings'.¹⁰

In contrast, the landscape does not necessarily have to allude to the physical features attached to the land but can also be used as a literary device to portray feelings that the environment may conjure, such as highlighting an area of outstanding beauty. An example of this occurs when Kjalarnes beaches are named 'Furdustrandir' meaning 'wonder beaches', deriving from the noun *furða* meaning 'wonder' or marvel due to 'their surprising length' (*Eirik*, p.41).¹¹ Although the place-name still references the surrounding environment, it additionally mentions instead the action, or feeling one will have there - portraying the land in an attractive light. Although visually striking, the noun 'wonder' introduces a mysterious or foreign quality and highlights its ability to surprise settlers, who may have come from lands that did not resemble the same landscape. This brings a sense of the unfamiliar, with the saga author suggesting that these lands are distinctive and set apart from the landscape from which the settlers travelled, in this case, Greenland.

To conclude, topographical place-names have many functions anchored in their reference to natural and prominent features of the landscape. By attaching anecdotal settlement narratives to place, the saga characters can use naming to aid navigation, point toward fertile or profitable lands, and illustrate their ability to evoke sentiment. Arguably, such functions are underpinned by an attempt to create an unfamiliar landscape into one of familiarity and identity.

¹⁰ Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 45.

¹¹ Geir, T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 2nd edn (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), p.153.

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Social Place-Names

As argued by Christopher Tilley, through the process of naming places, land ‘becomes captured in the social discourses and act as mnemonics for the historical actions of individuals and groups [...] in a fundamental way names create landscape’.¹² Hence, place-names are not merely prescribed as a means of topographical observation but can also refer to characters and significant events in the sagas. This, in turn, creates a landscape of social activity, which Carol Hoggart states, ‘endow that which they name with human significance and history’.¹³ It is therefore interesting to explore the functions of place-names that depict social activity within *Egils Saga* and *The Vinland Sagas*, and what this can reveal about medieval attitudes toward the action of naming and anthropomorphising the landscape.

Most evidently, place-names can refer to a character’s name or family name, indicating land or property ownership. This is seen through the naming sequence in *Egils Saga* when Skallagrim establishes settlement in Iceland. Chapter 28 provides the reader with a narrative that follows the process of land claiming and a subsequent indication of property boundaries. For example, Grim ‘owned the land between the river and inland to another river known as Grimsa’.¹⁴ By naming the river ‘Grimsa’, this may suggest that place-name can be distinguishable as an invisible property boundary or land territory. This is significant as it suggests that social and ‘habitative’ place-names were an essential factor in establishing land-claim and communities in the settlement of Iceland.¹⁵ The saga author is thus attempting to capture the moment when a specified person was connected to a specific place in a specific past. Conversely, it is possible that the inclusion of such narratives in *Egils Saga* may be attributed to a degree of bias influenced by external factors during the time of its writing. As suggested by Heather O’Donoghue, ‘sagas were perhaps commissioned by the leaders of powerful families’.¹⁶ While this may affect the author’s historical precision, it also underscores a Medieval Icelandic attitude that places significance on ancestral origins and the preservation of cultural ties to the land via written records.

Additionally, saga authors may use place-names as a literary device to suggest specific features or qualities about a character associated with land. When Skallagrim named his settlement in Iceland, he ‘built a farmstead there and called it Borg’ (*Egils*, p.50). According to the Old Icelandic Dictionary, ‘Borg’, meaning ‘stronghold, fortification, castle’, may reflect Skallagrim’s persona through place-name, highlighting his influential and ‘industrious’ (*Egils*, p.51) status in the community.¹⁷ As such, social place-names can also indicate a particular quality or characteristic about historical heroes or saga characters. This is further exemplified in chapter 33 of *Egils Saga* when Bjorn encounters Borg whilst fleeing Iceland. Upon their arrival, Bjorn and his crew asked ‘where they had made land’ (*Egils*, p.58). They were informed that it was ‘called Borgarfjord, the farm there was Borg, and the farmer’s name was Skallagrim’ (*Egils*, p.58). With this knowledge, Bjorn knew ‘at once’ his location and who Skallagrim was. This implies that place-names associated with specific

¹² Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments*, (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 1994), p. 18-19.

¹³ Carol Hoggart, ‘A Layered Landscape: How the Family Sagas Mapped Medieval Iceland’, *Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*, 16 (2010), (2).

¹⁴ Scudder, Bernard, and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, trans. & ed., *Egils Saga*, (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 50. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

¹⁵ Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, p. 43.

¹⁶ Heather O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 23.

¹⁷ Geir, T. Zoëga, p.63.

individuals, such as owned land, may align with characters' reputations. Borg holds immediate significance for Bjorn, potentially due to its association with a particularly significant person. As such, this highlights the importance of place-names as a literary tool that shapes a characters' understanding of person and place - subsequently influencing their actions.

However, an attempt to connect with the past is perhaps more evident through place-names that directly recount historical narratives, thus 'attaching storytelling traditions to certain natural and man-made markers' such as recounting events or burial mounds.¹⁸ An example of a burial naming narrative can be seen in *The Vinland Sagas* when Thorvald is mortally wounded. Thorvald asks his crew to 'mark my grave with crosses at the head and foot and call the spot Krossanes (Cross point) after that' (*Greenlanders*, p.11). This suggests a culture of commemoration and attachment to the land, as Thorvald did not want his body to return to Greenland but rather to be buried in the 'attractive' cape where he wanted to build his farm (*Greenlanders*, p.10). Furthermore, Krossanes, meaning 'crosses', not only signifies human inscription onto the land through settlement, but also represents the introduction of religion onto the landscape, as indicated by the place-names reference to Christianity.

Furthermore, an attempt to establish a link between the social activities of characters and particular landmarks through storytelling traditions can be emphasised through the practice of naming places after specific objects or events. The saga author's interpretation of such narratives may provide an insight into the social activities of the characters, reinforcing the interplay between human activity and the inscription of this onto the land they encounter. This is evidenced in *Eirik the Red's Saga*, where Snorri and Karlsefni named a peninsula 'Kjalarnes', which the saga author interprets to derive from 'discovering the keel of a ship there' (*Eirik*, p.41). This narrative account is contrasted in *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, however. Instead, the origin of the name Kjalarnes is argued to have occurred after Thorvald and his crew smashed the keel of their ship in stormy weather, by which Thorvald proclaims to 'raise the broken keel up to this point and call it Kjalarnes' (*Greenlanders*, p.10). Thus, inscribing an anecdotal account of the origin of the name rather than the observational account derived from *Eirik the Red's Saga*. This indicates that the naming narratives are not always reliable. In addition to the saga accounts, Judith Jesch suggests that the origin of the place-name 'Kjalarnes' may have 'been transferred' from a prominent peninsula, or possibly refers 'to the shape of the headland'.¹⁹ However, the interpretation that the authors take in *The Vinland Sagas* signifies their intention to portray a historical narrative of exploration and settlement, symbolised by the keel of a ship as a means of portraying a seafaring and maritime culture of the saga era. This is again significant as it portrays the saga author's commitment to inscribe human activity and objects onto the land via place-names.

As expressed, it is interesting to consider naming and place-names as a means of constructing identity and the cultural history of Iceland. When place-names are anchored in the saga stories to specific locations, they become tangible and visual to the reader, similarly to the 'legacy of oral storytelling traditions'.²⁰ The saga landscapes and naming processes are still relevant at the time of writing, as it links to a past which can indicate rich historical

¹⁸ Höfig, p. 1.

¹⁹ Judith Jesch, 'Geography and Travel', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 119-135 (p. 123).

²⁰ Phelpstead, p.18.

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ancestry, acting ‘to transform the sheerly physical and geographical into something that is historically and socially experienced’.²¹ Ultimately, place-names can indicate human interaction, be it a person’s name or a commemoration. This highlights an attempt at producing ancestral connections from the past to a time where cultural and historical continuity is vital, adding depth to the saga narratives to perform a ‘semanticisation of the landscape’ through the inscription of human activity onto the land through naming.²² Again, anthropomorphising land presents itself as a means of familiarity to maintain historical identity.

Conclusion

The utilisation of names and naming narratives within *Íslendingasögur* serves as a crucial literary device. It allows saga authors to convey insights into the practical usage of place-names by characters, the inscription of personal names onto the land to signify ownership, and the establishment of connections between past historical accounts and the present time of writing. Despite serving multiple functions for the saga characters and readers alike, the underlying purpose of place-names is arguably to imbue the landscape with meaning, intertwine culture with history, and inscribe human activity onto formerly unfamiliar territories.

²¹ Tilley, p.18.

²² Glauser, p. 209.

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