

The Landscape of the Icelandic Sagas: Text, Place and National Identity

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Abstract

The Old Icelandic family sagas, *Íslendingasögur*, contain much information about the landscape of Iceland, and make use of a wide topographic vocabulary. The effect of these descriptive elements is to create within the sagas a remarkably vivid sense of place. Though scholarly examination of this feature of the narratives has attempted to identify the actual Icelandic locations represented by saga landscape descriptions, little attention has been paid to their literary implications and significance. This article offers a brief survey and discussion of earlier perceptions of saga landscapes by travellers, geographers and historians, and highlights the relationship between the textual and physical landscapes of Iceland and Icelandic nationalism.

If we examine closely a select and representative number of topographic features, we find that saga landscapes function as literary devices. They are a major, though previously ignored, element in the grammar of saga narratives. In addition to setting scenes and fixing locations, saga landscape features have distinct narrative functions that are associated with specific topographic terms.

Introduction

The Old Icelandic family sagas are a group of 40 prose narratives that relate the lives of tenth-century farmer chieftains; these tales are extant in manuscripts that date from the fourteenth century onwards (Plate 7). That the *Íslendingasögur* were written in prose during a period when other European literatures were produced in verse makes the *Íslendingasögur* a unique literary monument in the history of European literature.¹ These tales of early medieval rural life contain a great deal of information about the landscape of Iceland and employ an extensive topographic vocabulary. The effect of these

descriptive elements is to create within the sagas a remarkably vivid sense of place: the geography and topography of Iceland.

It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that scholarly acceptance of the historical validity of the sagas began to decline; there was a shift from accepting the sagas as true until proved false, to regarding them as false until proved true.

I would suggest that the perceived correlation between the textual and physical landscapes of Iceland has been a primary factor in the acceptance of the sagas as historical texts. We need to move away from a view of saga landscapes as backdrops that represent the physical reality of the Icelandic landscape and to explore instead the role of topographic references as literary devices. We will draw on a small number of examples of the narrative uses of woods, rivers and ice.

Travellers and the sagas

For some two hundred years, travellers have been attracted to Iceland to explore the countryside, pursue commercial interests, engage in scientific enquiry, experience adventure and visit the land of the sagas. Indeed, land ownership and a desire to know the extent of its resources prompted one of the earliest records of a journey around Iceland.² The *Reise igiennem Island* by Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson (1772) was commissioned by the king of Denmark, who wanted an account of the civil and natural history of a remote region of his kingdom. In addition to their account of land ownership and resources, the two authors make occasional references to the sagas, such as when they cite *Eyrbyggja saga* in identifying Þórólfr Örnólfsson Mostrarskegg as the first settler at Helgafell.³

‘Helgafell paa Thorsnæs var det Sted, hvor een af Landets forste Beboere, Thorolf Mostrarstiæg (en Nordmand), satte sin Boepæl’ [Helgafell, situated on Þórsnes, was where one of the land’s first settlers, Þórólfr Mostrarskegg (a Norwegian), established his home] (I, 364).

Eggert and Bjarni emphasize the historical validity of *Eyrbyggja saga* by correlating the textual references to Helgafell with the physical Helgafell, so that the land becomes a means of validating the text. In 1772 Uno von Troil, Archbishop of Uppsala, travelled to Iceland with the British scientist and explorer Sir Joseph Banks; this expedition became widely known in Britain through the English translation of von Troil’s letters (1780).

The expedition of Sir Joseph Banks established Iceland as an intriguing and worthy destination for British explorers and scientists; Sir George MacKenzie (1811) notes in his preface that the letters of von Troil succeeded in ‘awakening the curiosity of science to that neglected, but remarkable country’. The ‘curiosity of science’ to which MacKenzie refers is geology, and so it is as a scientific phenomenon that the landscape of Iceland draws travellers to its shores after the earlier journeys of explorers and natural scientists. Aho (1993,

206–232) discusses the work of nine British travellers to Iceland between 1772 and 1834 for whom, he states, research or exploration could be said to be the *raison d'être* of their journeys; whereas during the latter part of the nineteenth century visiting saga sites appears to have been the predominant attraction for travellers to Iceland.⁴ The idea of visiting Iceland for the sole purpose of visiting saga sites points to a new type of visitor, the tourist (Aho 1993, 233). Aho identifies the journeys of Robert Chambers in 1855, and Lord Dufferin in 1856, as marking the beginning of the 'tourist' era; Wawn (2000, 294) identifies Fredrick Metcalfe (1861) as the first traveller to Iceland to bring the 'saga-steads alive for British readers'. Metcalfe makes some geological remarks, but his primary objective is to visit saga sites. In his introductory discussion (written in the style of a conversation) he states his purpose as, 'to see with your own eyes the spots we have been reading of in the Sagas' (3). For Metcalfe the apparent correlation between the textual landscapes of the sagas and the physical landscape of Iceland confirms the historicity of the sagas.

In 1871 William Morris travelled around Iceland visiting places named in the sagas; he made the following observations on the location of Grettir's hideout, in Fagraskógarfjall, as described in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*:

We ride along the slopes still heading up the valley, and presently we see ahead of us a spur rushing at right-angles out from the mountains, a great ruin spoiling the fair green slopes; it is a huge slip of black shale, very steep, and crested by thin jagged rocks, like palings set awry, in one of which is a distinct round hole through which the sky shows: under these palings on the top of the grey ruin was Grettir's-lair, and it was down this slip he rattled after the braggart Gisli. It was such a savage dreadful place, that it gave quite a new turn in my mind to the whole story, and transfigured Grettir into an awful and monstrous being, like one of the early giants of the world. (1911, 149)

Morris views the scene as if it were the actual location of Grettir's hideout. He fills the landscape with violent movement and ruinous, almost industrial, imagery: the 'rushing' spur, the 'black shale', the 'awry' palings, and the despoiling 'ruin' associate the savagery of the landscape with the savagery of Grettir. Morris has viewed Fagraskógarfjall through his reading of the saga but the physical reality of the place has affected his interpretation of Grettir's character, and 'transfigured Grettir into an awful and monstrous being'. Morris's knowledge of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and his awe at the landscape have influenced each other, so that for Morris the physical location and the persona of Grettir coalesce.

It is with the 1897 Iceland journey of W. G. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson that the illustrated saga-site guide reaches its apogee in their 1899 publication, *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steads of Iceland*. This extensively illustrated book is dedicated to the representation of the locations of saga scenes, and saga landscapes. As the authors state, 'in these notes to our pictures we make no attempt to describe modern Iceland' (i), their illustrations are of

modern Icelandic landscapes to which their notes provide a saga context. Collingwood's stated and clear intention is not to produce a book about the nineteenth-century Iceland he was visiting, but to present an interpretation of the landscape before him through the lens of saga literature. He sought to actualize the literary-historical space of Iceland through images of the physical spaces of the sites he visited. For example, the description of the death of Kjartan Ólafsson in *Laxdæla saga* is accompanied by an illustration of the site of Kjartan's death (138 and facing plate 118; ÍF V, 152–154 [ch. 49]; Figure 1). The illustration of the rocky slope with a gill to the right features contemporary figures – possibly Collingwood's travelling companions – placed to illustrate the saga scene:

At half an hour's ride up Svínadal (Swinedale) a cloven gully runs up sharply to the right hand called Hafragil, the spot where Gudrún's brothers laid their ambush for Kjartan as he came from the north with only two followers. Under these rocks they sat, where the figures sit in the sketch, and on the brink above, looking up the valley to Mjósund, sat Bolli ... Soon Kjartan came, riding hard; it was only when he came to the edge of the gill (– just where the white horse stands –) that he saw men lying in wait and knew who they were.

“He leaped from his horse to attack them. A great stone stood there.”
(138)

All of the saga detail is to be found in the illustration: figures in the shadow of the gill, someone sitting in the position of Bolli looking up the valley, and a man on horseback at the spot where Kjartan would have first seen his attackers with a large boulder just in front of the horse. The strength of this image

FIGURE 1.
“Under the rocks they sat”, Collingwood's sketch of the area described in *Laxdæla saga* as the site of the ambush and murder of Kjartan.



is that it is not an historical representation of the saga scene, but rather is an illustration of the site peopled with modern visitors posed in the positions related in the saga. The presentation of the image in the present tense creates for the viewer a vicarious reality of the saga scene, a reality that may be visited, touched and experienced in the real Iceland of the saga events.

Throughout the twentieth century, Iceland's dramatic landscape has continued to attract visitors but there has been a reconfiguration of the commentary on sagas and saga sites in the travelogues of these visitors compared to those of the nineteenth century. Auden and MacNeice's (1937) *Letters from Iceland* is perhaps the most well known twentieth-century Icelandic journal. This unconventional travel book is a personal reflection of the poets' concerns and interests in verse and prose rather than a narrative description of the country or its history.

Gísli Sigurðsson (1996, 71) observes that the modern visitor to Iceland is now presented with a pristine landscape, and the 'literary heritage and the national culture that are so well presented on the official visits are left out, and are obviously not thought to be sufficiently attractive'.

Historians and the sagas

In contrast to travel literature, which by definition is usually the work of guests, the archaeological, geographical, and geological examination of saga sites in relation to references within the sagas has been a largely, though not exclusively, Icelandic enterprise. The apparent agreements between actual and textual landscapes have provided evidence for not only scholarly but also political discussion: textual and physical topographic correlations as evidence of saga sites have been valued as highlighting the deeply rooted cultural relationship between text and land.

The first, published, comprehensive analysis of the physical and saga topographies of Iceland in a historical discussion was that of the Danish scholar Kristian Kålund (1877). His historical topographic survey of Iceland describes the history of various areas from the earliest times to the mid eighteenth century, and pays particular regard to saga literature as a source of information for the earliest period of occupation (c. late ninth century). Adolf Friðriksson (1994) observes that Kålund's work was highly influential with nineteenth-century Icelandic antiquarians and archaeologists, and that of particular importance to these archaeologists were the locations of early assembly sites [*þing*], which Kålund had identified:

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the members of the [newly formed Icelandic] Archaeological Society actively surveyed and mapped out historic assembly sites, following exactly the same leads as Kålund. (113)

Kålund's 'leads', as Adolf Friðriksson puts it, are saga descriptions and references to the places he visited. Those locations where the actual topography

matched that of the saga reference proved, for Kålund, the historical validity of the saga.

The use of saga landscapes as evidence in discussions of the physical world has not been restricted to the validation of saga sites. Guðmundur Finnbogason (1921) sought to define the Icelandic character in his historico-geographical account of the condition of the land and climate in Iceland, making use of saga evidence. He comments on 'áhrif landslagsins á sálarlíf manna' [the influence of the landscape on the human psyche] (100), and he pays particular attention to the influence of the weather on the psychological make-up of men. In a further description of the Icelandic character Guðmundur Finnbogason (1943, 10) states that 'the characteristics of the nation originate in the intersection of land and people'.

The geographer Ólafur Lárusson (1944) makes use of the sagas to discuss the settlement of Iceland (c. 870–930), and the distribution and movement of households after the settlement period. Similarly, Sigurður Thorarinsson (1958) uses saga evidence to discuss geological, glacial and climatic changes from the saga period to the twentieth century; in order to illustrate some of the changes which have taken place in Iceland he compares the topography of *Njáls saga* with the actual geography and geology of the areas referred to in the saga.⁵ Sigurður Thorarinsson does not question that the landscape descriptions in *Njáls saga* are an accurate representation of tenth-century topographic and human geography.

However, the notion of accepting an actual geographical location and a saga reference as having equal value as facts was brought into question by Sigurður Nordal (1940).⁶ He is unequivocal in his views regarding the presumed historicity of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, concluding that the saga 'was the work of a single author whose purpose was not to narrate a true story but to compose a work of fiction' (1958, 57). A further conclusion of Sigurður Nordal's research on *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* is to warn that 'much of the belief in the truthfulness of the Icelandic sagas is based on reasons which, if closely scrutinized, would turn out to be as untenable as those once used to support the veracity of [the saga] *Hrafnkatla*' (60). He highlights a belief in the accuracy of saga topography, despite clear discrepancies between a saga's descriptions and actual locations, as 'untenable' evidence of historicity:

Apparently he [the saga author] never visited Hrafnkelsdalr itself, for everything that the saga says about its topography is either wrong or based on guesswork and the vague descriptions of other men's reports ... (58)

Sigurður Nordal's controversial conclusions on the topographic inaccuracy of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, and by implication other sagas, had profound political ramifications: to question the place of the sagas was (in 1940) to question the very bedrock of Icelandic culture, and the importance of sagas to Icelandic nationalism. Byock (1994), in discussing the role of the sagas in the development of Icelandic nationalism, illustrates the pivotal role of Nordal's essay for the nationalist position:

In this climate [Iceland's desire for liberation from Denmark], nationalism spilled over into analyses of the national treasure, the family sagas. The problem facing Icelandic intellectuals was how to lift the sagas from their status as traditions of unlettered storytellers and elevate them to the rank of world literature. (176)

By defining the sagas as literary fiction rather than as records of oral history Sigurður Nordal helped to bring about a fundamental change in the perception of the sagas. However, a fierce debate ensued between the supporters of the new view and the traditionalists. Some of the traditionalists were landowners with a personal stake in reading the sagas as history, they lived and worked on the land identified in the sagas and may well have considered themselves as having a direct link with the past through the land. Byock (1994) also suggests that the debate between the traditionalists and the modernists represents a debate between the urban and rural views of the Icelandic self image. Jón Karl Helgason's (1994) discussion of the role of the Alþingi [Icelandic Parliament] in regulating the editing and printing of Old Icelandic texts highlights the extent of the division between the traditional and new positions. He brings the relationship between land and saga to the fore by focusing on the parliamentary debates surrounding the state-sponsored 1944 edition of *Njáls saga*, noting that:

... the three members of the Alþingi who were officially responsible for the proposal [a state-supported edition] all lived in the district of Rangárvallasýsla, in which a substantial part of *Njáls saga* takes place. (152)

Furthermore, one of the editorial policies of the state edition was that it should include all genealogies; Jón Karl Helgason asserts that the genealogies were included because 'for twentieth-century residents of a district ... genealogies had an independent validity as links between living individuals or locations and the ancient saga narrative' (154). Gísli Sigurðsson (1996) makes a similar observation on the relationship between the land, the sagas and a sense of historical continuity:

The events of many of the medieval sagas take place in Iceland, and are thus set in the same landscape as that which people still have before their eyes today. Sagas were (and still are) linked to the land in the minds of people. (43)

Given that perceiving the physical landscape is an interactive process of geography and culture, it follows that representations of landscape must also be products of a similar process. Barnes and Duncan (1992) state in their foreword that 'representations of landscape – the city, the countryside or wilderness – are not mimetic, but rather a product of the nature of the discourse in which they were written.' This is an assertion which could be applied, for example, to Kålund's historico-geographical description of Iceland

in which, as we have seen, he attempts to confirm the historicity of the sagas by relating the topographic descriptions to the actual landscape. The end product of Kålund's work is a discourse of acceptance in which saga topographic references are re-stated to prove their own veracity, and thus illustrate the historical imperative in Kålund's narrative. Similarly, with writers such as Morris and Collingwood we can see that the operation of this process has produced a conceptual landscape, where the landscape of Iceland has been interpreted through readings of the sagas. Toren (1995, 164) suggests that in understanding the land the 'dynamic past continues to inform the dynamic present', a view shared by Magnus Magnusson (1987, 32) who says that 'however lonely the landscapes [of Iceland], they are peopled by the constant presence of the past'. Magnusson is of course referring to saga characters, but I would suggest that some of the nineteenth-century travel writers, such as Morris and Collingwood, have become a part of the 'dynamic past' which they re-represented, and are now integrated into the matrix of influences upon us as viewers and readers of the geographic and textual landscapes of Iceland.

Narrative functions of saga landscapes

For Icelanders, and others with an interest in Icelandic culture, the sagas represent a form of collective memory of the settlement period, and it is this memory which gives meaning to the landscape and offers a sense of place to the viewer of that landscape.⁷ Vésteinn Ólason (1998, 82) acknowledges the 'powerful sense of place' of the sagas and comments on the literary aspect of saga landscapes, stating that 'settings are used primarily to serve the plot of the saga rather than as narrative decoration' (82). However, he does not expand on how the topographic settings may serve the plot, and it would seem that it is the geographical accuracy, or lack of it, of saga landscapes that interest him. Like other scholars, he recognizes saga landscapes primarily as topographic reference points for the actions described in the sagas. The remainder of this paper will demonstrate that saga landscapes are, far from being mere backdrops for action, literary devices that function as elements within the narrative grammar of the sagas; that specific topographic terms have clear and identifiable literary functions.

The sagas contain a rich woodland vocabulary that is not dissimilar to that of modern English: *holt* [copse/hillock], *lundr* [grove], *mørk* [forest], *skógr* [wood] and *viðr* [forest/timber]. These terms primarily represent differing sizes of – usually birch – woodland (Plate 8).⁸ In addition to signifying specific topographic features and operating as locative devices, the saga author's use of woodland terms is related to its narratological functions and thus illustrates the role of topography as a literary device. I have identified specific narrative functions associated with the woodland terms *skógr*, *mørk* and *holt*; this paper will focus on the most common term *skógr*.

There are 290 instances of *skógr* in the sagas, which may be found in ninety-eight scenes; in forty-nine of these scenes the narrative function of the *skógr* is

concealment. Schach (1949, 205) also found that ‘woods and forests are most often depicted as places of concealment and especially as places of refuge for outlaws’, but he makes little further analysis of woods and concealment beyond this comment. The use of a *skógr* for concealment may be deliberate in preparation for an attack, as an escape route, or as the location of a secret meeting. Each of these forms of concealment has the same narrative aim of creating an advantage for an individual, or a group, and so indicates deliberate authorial control of the narrative through the use of topographic material.

A fine example of deliberate concealment, for the purposes of an attack, may be seen in *Heiðarvígá saga*. The scene is that of Barði Guðmundarson’s attack on Gísli Þorgautsson, as vengeance for the killing of his brother Hallr:

There was a large wood^a in Hvítársíða, as there then was widely here in this country. Six of them sat above the wood^b and saw clearly the happenings in Gullteig. Barði was in the wood^c with five others and only a short distance from those who were mowing. Now Barði considered how many men were mowing. He was not certain whether the third person, whose head was white to the naked eye, was a man or a woman: ‘or could that be Gísli there?’ They now came down out of the wood^d, one after the other, and it seemed to the Þorgautssons that a single man was walking there, and Þormóðr began to speak, who was the last one to be mowing in the meadow: “Men are travelling there,” he said. “It looks to me,” said Gísli, “that it is a single man walking.” And they walked briskly but did not run.

(ÍF III, 294 [ch. 27])

Heiðarvígá saga contains five instances of *skógr*, four of which refer to this single wood (*a–d*). The opening woodland reference (*a*) functions to establish the location, and to historicize the locative reference by commenting on the extensive forestation of Iceland during the period when the story is set. Moreover, the author’s statement that there was once a large wood at Hvítársíða, coupled with his assertion that such woods were common in Iceland at the time of the events he describes, suggests that there was no longer a wood at Hvítársíða at the time he was writing.

‘Wood’ references (*b*) and (*c*) conceal the two parts of Barði’s company: (*b*) obscures the reserve party from Gísli while leaving them in a position to view the action, and (*c*) provides the cover necessary for Barði to approach and watch Gísli from quite close range before attacking. Reference (*d*) marks a shift of narrative focus from the approach of Barði to the response of Gísli. We are now looking towards the wood from Gísli’s viewpoint, rather than at Gísli from within the wood, but because Barði and his men are moving in single file it appears as though only one man has emerged from the wood. So, even though the narrative perspective has changed the wood continues to function as a concealing feature. At no point does the author explicitly state that Barði and his men are hidden from view or that they are deliberately hiding, this is simply understood in context through the use of *skógr*.

A similar example of an attacker watching and assessing his quarry from a vantage point in a wood may be seen in the battle of Clontarf in *Njáls saga*. During the course of the battle one of the Icelanders, Bróðir, is knocked over three times and on the third occasion ‘as soon as he could stand up, he fled away and into the wood’ (ÍF XII, 450 [ch. 157]). A short while after we are told that:

Bróðir now saw that King Brjánn’s company were pursuing the fugitives, and there were few men left near the shield-wall. He then rushed from the wood and broke the whole shield-wall and hacked at the king.

(ÍF XII 452–453 [ch. 157])

Bróðir, having fled the battle-field, has clearly been watching King Brjánn’s company from the safety of the wood until the time was right for him to strike. There is a comment in *Laxdæla saga* that clearly associates woods with concealment. Halldórr Ólafsson sets out to attack Bolli Þorleiksson but is seen by a shepherd of Bolli’s: ‘he saw the men in the woods, and also the horses which were tethered; he suspected that these were not peaceful men who travelled so secretly’ (ÍF V, 165 [ch. 55]). No explanation is offered as to which aspect of Halldórr’s journey defines it as secret, but when seen in the context of *skógr* and concealment we may conclude that they are considered as travelling secretly because they are in the woods.

The terms most commonly used for representing rivers in the sagas are *á* [river] and *læk* [stream].⁹ As an active topographic feature, a river is open to a high level of authorial manipulation. It may be described as high or low, completely frozen or partially frozen, or contain large blocks of ice; fords may be passable or impassable all at the discretion of the author. Rivers in the sagas may also function as legal or physical barriers; so a small *læk* may indicate a boundary between farms, and an *á* can function as a physical barrier between feuding factions. It is this notion of the river as a barrier that underlies the majority of the narrative functions of rivers. The present discussion will highlight the role of rivers as retardation devices, which facilitate further narrative developments or allow the insertion of an episode, and as boundaries.

A river scene in *Eyrbyggja saga* makes use of an *á* [river] to retard the narrative and allow the insertion of a parenthetical scene. A Hebridean woman, Þórgunna, dies and her body is taken from Fróðá to Skálaholt, for a Christian burial:

... they then went south over the heath, following the established routes, and nothing is said of their journey before they went south over Valbjarnarvellir; there they were confronted by huge swampy areas, and the body often fell down. They then went south to the **Norðrá**^a [river] and crossed the **river**^b at Eyjarvað, and the **river**^c was deep. It was both stormy and pouring with rain. They eventually came to the farm in Stafholtstungur that is called Lower Ness. They asked if they could stay there, but the farmer did not want to help them out; but because night

had arrived they thought they would not be able to go on any further, as they did not think it wise to tackle the **Hvítá**^d at night.

(ÍF IV, 143 [ch. 51])

The emphasis on the difficult crossing of the Norðrá river (*a-c*), and the very poor weather conditions, implies that the pall bearers could not return along this route, but the way forward is now barred by the Hvítá river (*d*). The party is trapped between two rivers, and this device of high water delaying the party allows the author to insert a parenthetical scene. The farmer reluctantly allows the pall bearers to stay but does not offer them any food, during the night Þórgunna's ghost appears and prepares a meal for her pall bearers. As a result of this apparition the farmer and his wife are much more co-operative and the travellers experience no further difficulties on the route to Skálaholt.

The wider context of this scene is that of the supernatural sequence known as the Fróðá wonders (ÍF IV, 136–152 [chs 49–55]); the bad weather, the high rivers, and the difficult travelling conditions are all details which ensure that the delay in the transportation of Þórgunna's body is seen to be due to entirely natural phenomena. The saga author appears to be emphasizing Þórgunna's Christianity by making a clear statement about the reasons for the pause in this journey, in order to disassociate her ghostly appearance from the earlier supernatural events. Thus, the high river functions both as a retardation device and an element of characterization.

A river that functions as a barrier can also offer a potential escape route. Once the escaping character reaches the opposite bank, the river may then effectively operate as a barrier between the pursuer and the pursued. For example, in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa* Þórðr Kolbeinsson cheats Björn Arngeirsson Hítðlakappi of his bride-to-be, Oddný Þorkelsdóttir, and a lengthy and bitter feud ensues. Þórðr is clearly the villain of the saga and usually loses when the two meet in conflict, as may be seen in the following illustration of Þórðr's attempt to ambush Björn at a river:

Þórðr had learnt of Björn's journey and went on his route with nine men, and lay in wait for him by the **Hítará**^a [river]. Björn travelled his route home and saw men ahead by the **river**^b and it seemed clear that this must be Þórðr. He prepared himself just as before, meaning to take up the challenge again, even though the odds against him were great. And when he reached them, they attacked him from all sides and he could not defend himself. They wounded him, and he saw that he would not be able to hold out as things stood. He then leapt out into the **river**^c and swam across the **river**^d with his weapons, his shield on his back. There was a Norwegian with Þórðr, and he threw a spear over the **river**^e at Björn, piercing his shield. When Björn came out of the **river**^f, Kolbeinn, the son of Þórðr, threw a spear at Björn and this struck him in the thigh. But Björn took the spear and threw it back across the **river**^g at them. There a man stood in its path, and it flew through him and

into Kolbeinn Þórðarson, who was sitting behind him, and they both died.

(ÍF III, 179 [ch. 26])

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The primary function of the river in this scene is to facilitate Björn's escape, and thus delay the narrative in order to permit the further development of the conflict. This scene is also structurally very significant: when Þórðr's son is killed by Björn any possibility of a reconciliation is at an end, and it is clear that this conflict will cease only with the death of one or both men. So, as a structural marker this river indicates the beginning of a new and deadly phase of the feud, and as Björn's escape route it is the mechanism by which the narrative is moved into its final stages. This scene is a good example of a river simultaneously performing a multiplicity of narrative functions: the river and so the location are identified (*a*), and the river is established as being large enough to function as a barrier against which Björn may be trapped (*b*). Recognizing that the opposition is too great, Björn chooses discretion as the better part of valour and escapes across the river (*c*, *d*); as he climbs up onto the other bank no-one follows him and the river becomes a barrier between the two parties (*e-g*). This scene is also a further illustration of the role rivers can play in highlighting characterization: Björn does not escape out of fear, but because he is rational enough not to allow a distorted sense of honour to bring about his death. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (ÍF III, 179 note 1) point out that the saga author establishes beforehand 'that Björn needed to cross the Hítará on his journey from Knarrarnes to Hólm, but this is clearly not the case'. This note clearly highlights the importance to ÍF annotators of saga topographies as representations of the actual landscape rather than as literary devices.

In comparison with the obvious potential of an *á*, a *lækur* [stream] may appear to offer a less obvious escape route, yet this is precisely the means by which Gísli Súrsson escapes detection after the murder of Þorgrímur Þorsteinsson in *Gísli saga Súrssonar*.

He [Gísli] took the spear Grásiða from the chest; he is dressed in a black cloak, shirt and linen breeches. He then went to the **stream**^a, which flowed between the farms and was used for drawing water for both farms. He went on the path as far as the **stream**^b but then waded the **stream**^c to that path which led to the other farm.

(ÍF VI, 52–53 [ch. 16])

This example of a *lækur* to conceal tracks is, to my knowledge, unique within saga literature where characters are usually directly hidden in or behind a topographic feature. The saga author sets the scene by stating that 'the snow then drifted during the night, and hid all the paths' (ÍF VI, 52 [ch. 15]). Hansen (1978, 47) views this weather reference as being largely 'anvendes her med en dramatiserende funktion' [employed here with a dramatising function], heightening the tension of the scene and fulfilling an informative role in that

it leads to Gísli's snow-covered shoes identifying him as the killer to his brother Porkell, who kicks the shoes out of sight. The snow is undoubtedly an important factor in the dramatic tension of this scene, but Hansen misses the subtlety of the author's use of the stream for concealment and the fact that Gísli's shoes are frozen because they are wet. The reference to snowfall would ordinarily mean that tracks would be left to identify the killer, but this crucial clue is cleverly hidden by means of Gísli's use of the stream (*a-c*). In addition, the saga author's use of *lækr* ensures that there could be no difficulty in wading the stream, whereas an *á* would have indicated a river that may have to be traversed by swimming, with the resultant wet clothes easily revealing the killer, as the frozen shoes almost do.

An example of a territorial conflict within river boundaries may be seen in Grettir's defence of his hideout in Fagraskógafjall (*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* ÍF VII, 188–198 [chs 59–60]). Gísli Þorsteinsson, a boastful and flamboyant character, is introduced into the saga and undertakes to stop Grettir's harrying of a local landowner.

That morning Grettir had got up early in his lair. The weather was cold and frosty and snow had fallen, though only a little. He saw three men riding from the south over the Hítará [river], their ornamented clothing and enamelled shields shining.

(ÍF VII, 190–191 [ch. 59])

The cold clear sky and the monochrome background produced by the frost and snow make these brightly dressed men very easy to spot when they cross the river and enter Grettir's territory. It is not until they cross the Hítará river that Grettir attacks, and it is clear that this area is to be understood as under Grettir's control: he lives high up inside Fagraskógafjall, from where he can survey the land and swoop down to attack intruders. Furthermore, the saga author underlines Grettir's territorial authority in this area by directly linking his name to topographic features such as Grettishaf (ÍF VII, 192 [ch. 59]), the defensive position taken by Grettir while fighting Gísli and his men. Gísli fares worse in their exchanges and tries to run away:

Gísli ran all the way across the mountain and also over Kaldárdalur and so over Áslaugarhlíð and above Kolbeinsstaðir and out into Borgarhraun. Gísli was then in only his linen clothing and eventually became extremely weary. Grettir pursued and there was always a hand's grasp between them. He then snatched up a large branch. But Gísli did not stop until he came out to the **Haffjarðará**^a, which was in full spate and difficult to cross. Gísli intended to go immediately out into the **river**^b.

(ÍF VII, 192 [ch. 59])

Grettir's pursuit of Gísli provides the saga author with an opportunity to illustrate the extent of Grettir's territory, and the high waters of the Haffjarðará function as a barrier (*a, b*) preventing Gísli's escape. Grettir gives Gísli a thorough thrashing and then releases him – 'he [Gísli] leapt out into a large pool

and swam across the river' (ÍF VII, 193 [ch. 59]). There is also a sense here that Grettir is somehow able to control the actual landscape: when Gísli first arrives at the river it is impassable but when Grettir has finished with him it becomes passable, but only when Grettir is ready. The notion of the river as Grettir's boundary is further emphasized by another place-name bearing his name, which functions as a boundary marker. When Grettir is later attacked by another force he takes a defensive position on a spit of land at the river, which becomes known as Grettisoddi (ÍF VII, 197 [ch. 60]). However, the rivers which delineate Grettir's territory may also be seen as enclosing him, symbolically representing clausturation or imprisonment and his psychological condition as an outlaw. Fumagalli (1994, 128), writing on medieval perceptions of the environment, observes that writers 'often used landscapes to symbolize states of mind'. Grettir's relationship with the landscape may thus be seen as physical, psychological and personal: he lives within the landscape, controls the area, has given his name to topographic features, and the topography reflects his state of mind. As Damico (1986) observes:

When Björn first suggests Fagraskogafell [*sic*] as an ideal hideout (*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* ch. 58), he is prescribing two roles that Grettir must necessarily assume if he is to endure the years of outlawry: he must become an architect of illusion as well as predator of the land. Björn describes Fagraskogafell as a place 'easily defended', because of its high elevation and its protective barrier. There is a hole right through the mountain that commands a view of the main path below, and it is that bore hole that Grettir inhabits. The image is one which presents the hero as integral to his environment, for he completes it. (7)

Although Grettir is 'integral to his environment', the river boundaries of Fagraskógafjall signify his imprisonment in a similar way to that of the island of Drangey during his sojourn and death there, also noted by Damico (1986, 11): 'the island is symbolic of an incarcerated psyche which has learned to depend upon and relate to itself'.

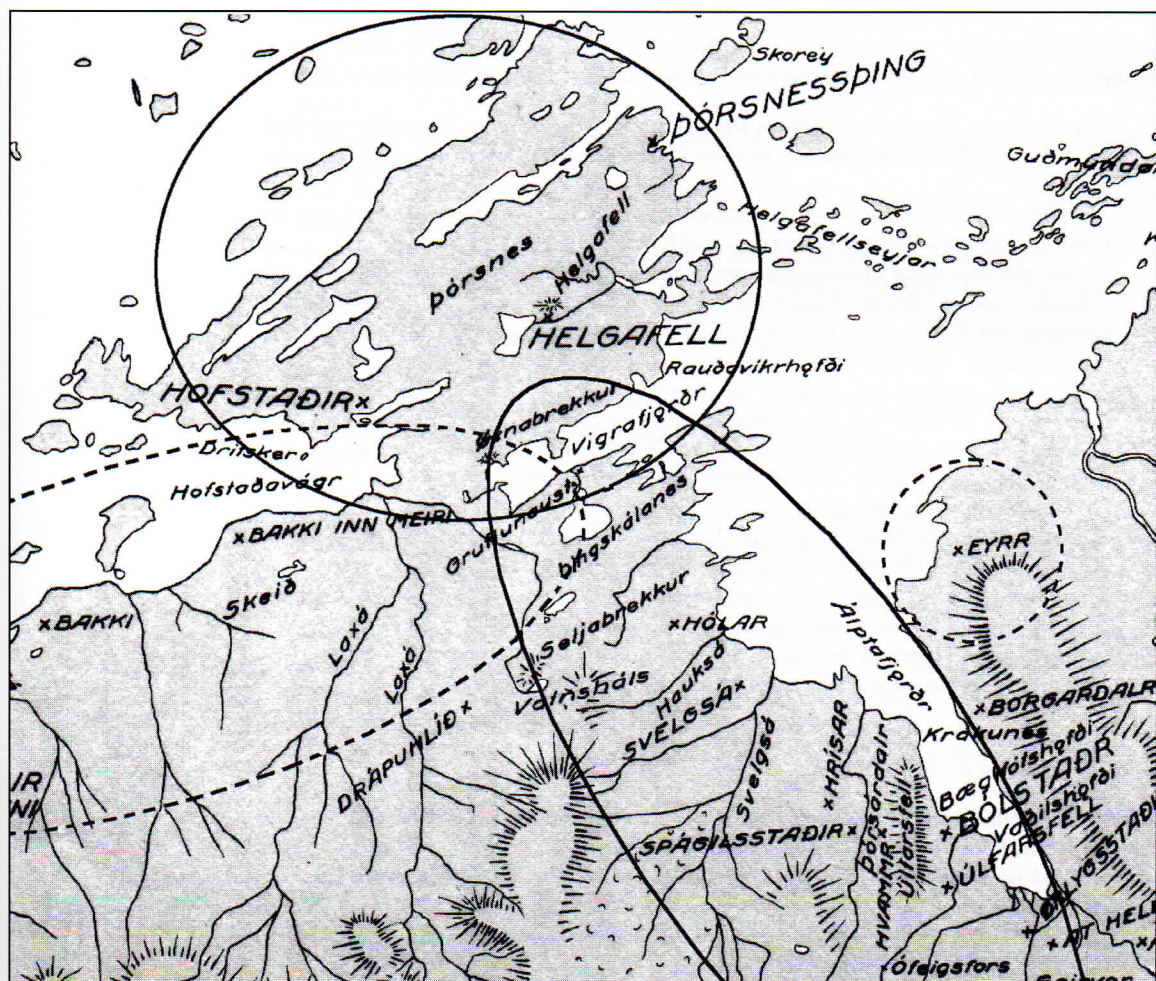
In the sagas *íss* [ice] is the term most commonly used to describe frozen water features. In addition to these seasonal ice features the sagas also contain references to the permanent *jökull* [glacier]. Schach (1949) highlighted the expository function of *íss* in relation to travelling conditions; I have found that it may also function as an authorial device for highlighting the passage of time. However, I wish to illustrate here the role of ice as an authorially determined location, which is aimed at mitigating culpability by offering a neutral space for action.

A frozen body of water provides the saga author an unusual location, which is temporary, belongs to no one and is under complete authorial control. So, like rivers, ice may be considered as an active feature that the saga author is able to manipulate for his own narrative purposes. By using ice as a location the saga author removes any sense of territoriality from the protagonists, and so the ice may therefore be considered as a neutral location. I would further

FIGURE 2.
Vigráfjörðr, Western
Iceland; Areas of
familial (clan)
influence.
Þorbrandssynir
Þorlákssynir. Map
section is taken from
ÍF IV, map facing
pp. 128 'Umhverfi
Helgafells', reproduced
with the kind
permission of
Hið íslenska
bókmenntafélag,
www.hib.is. I have
added the lines
indicating areas of
familial influence.

suggest that the underlying function of ice as a neutral location is to aid the settlement of conflict; swift resolution is, indeed, an element that is common to all conflict scenes located on *íss* in the sagas.

The neutrality of ice as a location for conflict may be seen in *Eyrbyggja saga*, in which a battle takes place on the frozen Vigráfjörðr (ÍF IV, 125–130 [ch. 45]). This battle leads to the final resolution of a protracted conflict between the Þorbrandssynir and the Þorlákssynir. Garmonsway (1940, 86) has commented on the topographic accuracy of the *Eyrbyggja saga*, and the geography of this battle does appear to be significant. Figure 2 offers an approximation of the areas of influence of the conflicting families as represented by the saga. Vigráfjörðr is at the confluence of the familial areas of both clans and it is also directly below Þórsnessþing, the area's administrative centre, and Helgafell, the home of Snorri goði (a key protagonist). Although Eyr is the ancestral home of the Þorlákssynir the saga author highlights Bakki as their familial centre for the action in the episode. Hermann Pálsson and Edwards (1989, 8) observe that 'the [saga] author draws attention to the enormous pressure these conflicts are



placing on society', and I would suggest that the ice in Vigrafjörðr functions as a frozen no-man's land for the conflicting parties. The neutrality of the location of the battle serves to support the resolution of a conflict that has affected the whole community.

Lawson-Peebles (1988), writing on the narrative use of landscape in the literature of revolutionary America, has suggested that:

If there is no such thing as an artless language, it follows that descriptions of the environment are never merely empirical. They are strategies which encode the interests and concerns of the writer as well as the physical nature of the terrain, the climate and so on. (6)

Representations of landscape in the sagas function not merely as signifiers of the physical Iceland but as literary phenomena; they actually encode the narrative purpose of the sagas. This purpose, in turn, is closely associated with individual topographic *lexemes* – the building blocks of the language. Ice, rivers, and woods are not merely elements describing places; they have literary functions which are central to the way the sagas tell their stories.

Notes

1. Henceforth the *Íslendingasögur* will be referred to simply as the sagas. The reader may find the following phonetic explanation of some Icelandic letters of use: Þ, þ = 'th'; ð = 'eth'; ö = ö.
2. The oldest extant description of the geology and therefore geography of Iceland may be found in Arngrímur Jónsson's *Crymogæa*, published in Hamburg in 1609.
3. Unless otherwise stated all translations are by the author. The reader is also referred to the Icelandic standard editions of saga texts: the *Íslenzk fornrit* (ÍF) series, see primary sources. *Eyrbyggja saga* ÍF IV, 7–10 [ch. 4]. For English translations of many of the sagas referred to see Örnólfur Thorsson (2000).
4. Aho's article outlines and discusses the writings of forty British travellers to Iceland between 1772 and 1897. See also Wawn (2000) 34–59, 283–311.
5. Full title is *Brennu-Njáls saga* but it is commonly referred to simply as *Njáls saga*.
6. All quotations are from the 1958 translation of Sigurður Nordal 1940.
7. See Gísli Sigurðsson (1996) 43–4.
8. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (1997) 120, suggests that 'woods in Iceland and South Greenland originally consisted almost entirely of small birch (*betula pubescens*) with no conifers'.
9. There is also a third term *fljót*, but unlike *á* and *læk*, it can be difficult to determine the type of water feature represented by *fljót*: it may signify either a river or a lake. The lack of a clear distinction between *á* and *fljót* is not a modern phenomenon, no clear geomorphic distinction is made between these terms in the sagas.

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Entries are listed according to Icelandic alphabetic practice: accented vowels follow their unaccented forms, ð follows d, and þ, ø and ö follow z.

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