

**UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
FACULTY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

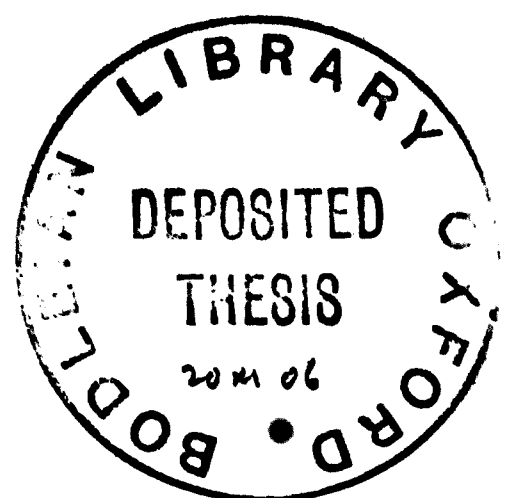
LAURA A. TAYLOR

**The Representation of Land and Landownership in
Medieval Icelandic Texts**

ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

{2006} (LTS 30.i.06)

D. PHIL. THESIS AND ABSTRACT



For Mum, Dad and the Bun

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the representation of land and landownership in medieval Icelandic texts. I shall demonstrate that there is scant homogeneity in this representation; the variation between different narratives is startling and unusual. I seek to categorise this variability by identifying the lack of a secure tradition surrounding land and landownership, and exploring the possibilities open to the saga author to use land practices and myths as literary devices or to glorify the past. I also examine variability caused by the differences in the realm of 'actual' experience.

I shall explore a range of narratives, from stories of the initial settlement of Iceland, to issues of inheritance, to conveyance and to dispute over territory. The last chapter takes a flip-side view of landownership to consider the representation of the landless of family saga narrative.

The texts which I shall examine are the *Íslendingasögur*, *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*. Throughout the thesis I also make reference to *Grágás* for illumination and comparison. In the first and second chapters I also include archaeological evidence for discussion.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	1
Introduction	3
Chapter One: Approaching Iceland	12
Chapter Two: Landtake in Iceland	57
Chapter Three: Boundaries	108
Chapter Four: Continuity	150
Chapter Five: Change	188
Chapter Six: The Landless	235
Conclusion	273
Select Bibliography	276

TWO NOTES ON THE TEXT

I have replaced ‘hooked o’ with ‘ö’ throughout the thesis, even where editions employ the former. This is purely for ease of printing. I have, however, retained ‘ø’ wherever it appears in other volumes.

All of the translations from the Icelandic in this thesis are my own.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank St John's College, Oxford for the phenomenal assistance it has given me over the last seven years. So many of its fellows, lecturers, staff and students have contributed in so many ways to this project; I would like to single out, however, Professor John Kelly, for his invaluable support.

The financial assistance of the North Senior Scholarship of St John's College over the last two years has helped enormously with the funding of my research. I would also like to thank the Student Awards Agency for Scotland for funding my M.Phil. in Middle English Studies, and the Arts and Humanities Research Board for funding my doctoral research. Both of these bodies also provided financial support for important research trips to Iceland, as did the Meyerstein and Davíð Oddson travel funds of the English Faculty, Oxford University; St John's College, Oxford; The Viking Society for Northern Research; and The High School of Glasgow. For all of the financial support I have received from all of these bodies and institutions, I am most grateful.

The Old Norse Reading Group of Oxford University deserves special mention. Its intense commitment to translation, discussion and cheap white wine makes the study of Old Norse-Icelandic Literature at this University a less lonely and far more stimulating business. In particular I would like to thank Dr David Clark and Dr Sian Grønlie for all of their help.

I was very fortunate to receive the advice of Dr John Blair, of Queen's College, Oxford, in connection with archaeological, historical and place-name research. I would not have had the confidence to delve into these matters had it not been for his encouragement and guidance. Professor Harold Fox of Leicester University also provided me with a helpful reading list for place-name research, for which I am most grateful. Mr Kristján Ahronsson was of tremendous assistance to me in keeping me up to date with the latest in Icelandic archaeology. A couple of key conversations with him about *Landnámabók* proved most inspiring; I extend my thanks to him.

My most heartfelt thanks go to my supervisor Dr Heather O'Donoghue who has looked out for me as well as involved herself in my academic progress from the minute I walked into her office as an undergraduate to translate *Víga-Glúms saga*. I cannot explain the incredible way in which each and every one of our discussions has led me to new and deeper understandings of saga literature, without her obviously guiding my thoughts or telling me what to think. It is the rarest gift in any teacher, and I am so thankful for having experienced it.

I am most grateful to my examiners: Professor John Hines of Cardiff University, and Dr Carolyn Larrington of St John's College, Oxford. My *viva voce* examination in their expert hands was a thoroughly enjoyable and stimulating experience. For their corrections, helpful suggestions and further thoughts I am extremely thankful. I owe Carolyn so very much for all of the support, encouragement, advice and knowledge she has imparted to me over the years, as well as for being the person who introduced me to Old Norse-Icelandic in the first place. I shall never be able to express adequately my enormous gratitude to her, and I shall not attempt to here.

I would like to thank my various boyfriends over the years whom I managed to cajole into proof-reading; especially I would like to mention Mr Matthew Morrison who was so supportive during the completion of the M.Phil.. Warmest thanks go to my friends Misses Katherine McClune, Stella Moss, Caroline Waring and Mr Matthew Nicholls, to my singing teacher Ms Fiona Dobie, and to my mother, father, brother and grandfather for their love and encouragement. Without the emotional support of my friends and family the intellectual and financial support I have been so lucky to receive over the years would have counted as naught.

INTRODUCTION

Land and Landownership

Land and landownership in Old Norse-Icelandic literature are deserving of a separate study for two important reasons. Firstly, in Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship there has been no focused examination of this topic. Other studies which analyse the same narratives and cultural myths take for their organising principle some other aspect of saga literature, such as feud, mythmaking, the law and so forth. I believe that there is much to be gained from making landownership the principle by which to organise these narratives, as I shall demonstrate.

The second reason is the more important, however, and constitutes an intriguing and complex problem. Most of the social practices attested in Old Norse and Icelandic saga literature are secure in the imagination of its authors. Social practices such as the institution of marriage, the patterns of feud and subsequent vengeance and the technicality of the duel are represented in saga literature with a remarkable homogeneity. The consensus of these representations indicates a confidence and an ease with the details of their description. But land and landownership do not share this homogeneity of representation: there is no consensus in the reconstruction of the past. The instability in this representation warrants further investigation.

Medieval Icelandic Texts

The medieval Icelandic texts which I shall be examining throughout the course of this thesis are the *Íslendingasögur*, or family sagas,¹ *Íslendingabók* (the earliest known history of Iceland),² and *Landnámabók* (an account of the settlement of Iceland).³ I shall also be making reference, increasingly as the thesis progresses, to *Grágás*, the earliest Icelandic lawcodes. These lawcodes are difficult in their preservation, provenance and dating.⁴ There are two substantial texts of *Grágás* extant (the rest are fragmentary): one is in the *Codex Regius*, written around 1260, and the other is in *Staðarhólsbók*, written about 1280.⁵ All of these manuscripts, whole and fragmentary, vary significantly in their content and their ordering: indeed the “existence of contradictory articles in them shows that they could certainly not all have been in force at the same time.”⁶

However, even if one could unravel the palaeographical and dating problems, the lawcodes still rest uncomfortably in their relationship to other texts. Knowing the dates of the different portions of the manuscripts and even when they were first

¹ There is obviously much debate as to what constitutes a family saga: the boundaries between the different sub-genres of saga narrative are by no means fixed. On the other hand, there seems to be an unspoken consensus as to which texts belong to the sub-genre: see, for example, Víðar Hreinsson (gen. ed.), *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, including 49 Tales* (Reykjavík, 1997), which purports in its very title to include every family saga as well as various *þættir*. Within even the tightest definition of an *Íslendingasaga* there is variability and discussion: in any case, the distinction is not a crucial one with regard to this thesis.

² For a succinct introduction to *Íslendingabók*, see P. M. Sørensen, *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature*, trans. J. Tucker (Odense, 1993), pp. 1-2.

³ See M. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II: The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland* (Odense, 1998), pp. 27-8 for a discussion of this text.

⁴ “First written down in the early twelfth century, the earliest surviving manuscripts contain later material and some provisions that must have been relics even in the original text in the first half of the eleventh century. Most provisions cannot be pinned down to a date any more exact than to some time in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.” See T. M. Andersson and W. I. Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland* (Stanford, 1989), p. 4.

⁵ A. Dennis, P. Foote and R. Perkins (trans), *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás*, I (two volumes), (Winnipeg, 1980 and 2000), p. 13.

⁶ Dennis, Foote and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland* I, pp. 9-10. Heather O’Donoghue also states that “[i]t seems to be a compilation of laws - sometimes contradictory ones - from different periods in Icelandic history, more an antiquarian anthology than a workable reference book.” See H. O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2004), p. 32.

written down does not necessarily help in ascertaining when or if these laws were in operation: as Heather O'Donoghue writes, "[i]t is hard to tell whether saga and law independently depict an actual society, or whether a saga author himself has used law codes for some authentic detail, as an historical novelist might."⁷ Furthermore, even if they were in operation in the saga-age, one cannot easily build up a picture of a society from lawcodes. Any society's legal codices define the boundaries of what a member of that society must or cannot do; there is a whole world in between those limits which requires an act of interpretation in order to produce a representation of that society.

Therefore, given the lawcodes' precarious transmission and the ambiguities regarding their implementation (a particular problem of *Grágás*), and the difficulty of inferring anything about a society from its lawcodes (a universal problem), *Grágás* will be read alongside other medieval Icelandic texts in this thesis only in order to offer possible explanations for strange saga events, or to provide challenging or contradictory comparisons.

Representation

Unlike the character Jeff, berated by the historian Dr Max in *England, England*, most scholars nowadays are aware of the problems in separating history from 'what actually happened':

⁷ O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 32.

What, my dear Jeff, do you think History is?
Some lucid, polyocular transcript of reality? Tut,
tut, *tut*. The historical record of the mid-to-late
thirteenth century is no clear stream into which we
might trillingly [sic] plunge...⁸

History is an individual historian's or chronicler's representation of actual events.

Derek Gregory asserts that "[i]f the critique of realism has taught us anything, it is surely that the process of representation is constructive not mimetic, that it results in 'something made', a 'fiction' in the original sense of the word."⁹ Kirsten Hastrup describes textual representation as "the process whereby life is transformed into texts where it can be stored for posteriority [sic]."¹⁰ She highlights, though, the complexities inherent in such a transformation:

However, storing itself transforms life, which was never meant to be turned into letters. The transformation invokes a reconstruction (in letters), and we all know that any reconstruction of past events parts company from the events themselves. It involves a highly complex process of selection, interpretation, and qualification of collective memory.¹¹

Representations are all fictions, no matter if they purport to be entirely 'made-up' or an historical account. Despite the author's intentions for her text it is always her individual construction. The challenge, therefore, is to analyse representation in these terms and to identify not history or fiction, but historicity and fictionality, that is, the historic/fictional quality or character of any text.

⁸ J. Barnes, *England, England* (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 148.

⁹ D. Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Oxford, 1999), p. 8.

¹⁰ K. Hastrup, "Text and Context. Continuity and Change in Medieval Icelandic History as 'said' and 'laid down'", in *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages*, ed. E. Vestergaard (Odense, 1986), p. 9.

¹¹ Hastrup, "Text and Context", p. 9.

Variability

The variability in the representation of land and landownership in medieval Icelandic texts is worthwhile demonstrating and detailing in itself. However, throughout the course of this thesis I shall attempt to categorise this variability. Normally, variation in representation could be suggestive of fictionality: not all of the variations can be reasonably expected to be ‘right’ or can be supposed to have ‘actually happened’.

Variation implies that there are differences, divergences, discrepancies. However, it is possible that variation can occur because of the differences in ‘actual’ experience.

In other literatures and histories of other cultures, one could therefore make an attempt to separate out the variations caused by different actual experiences, and the differences created by fictionalisation. But saga literature presents particular difficulties which remove the tools for diagnosing fictionality from the scholar’s kit-bag.

There are four reasons why the diagnosis of fictionality in family saga narrative is problematic. Firstly, only rarely can the actuality of a saga event be measured against any other source.¹² There are very few occasions when one can assert with certainty that the saga author has got it ‘wrong’ or ‘right’. There is a paucity of Icelandic texts both written at and about the same period, and because of Iceland’s geographical isolation, there are only a small number of non-Icelandic texts written at roughly the same time which could be used to support or to contradict family saga narrative, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*. Other areas of study can provide valuable information in building up a picture of life on Iceland in the saga-age, such as archaeology, and I intend to explore this possibility in especially the first

¹² O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 36.

two chapters, but, these can, for the most part, only contribute to the ‘bigger picture’ of Icelandic settlement and landownership. They can verify only in exceptional circumstances the fine detail of saga narrative.

The second reason is that the saga author offers no signposts to the reader: there are no clues offered as to the mode or modes in which he is writing. It is at this point that one must make a careful distinction between *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók* on the one hand, and family saga narrative on the other. Both the authors of *Landnámabók* and Ari Þorgilsson purport to be writing histories: Ari in particular takes care to mention his oral informants who have contributed to the making of his history. But this is not the case with the *Íslendingasögur*. “In family sagas... we lack any statements, explicit or implicit, of intent.”¹³ The saga author barely intrudes on his text and the reader (in the vast majority of cases) is not provided with, for example, confessions of where he lacks the details to make his story complete, or information regarding his sources beyond anonymous formulae such as ‘and so the story goes’.

A third reason is the ‘style’ of saga narrative (and of *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*). The style is that of historical reportage. As Heather O’Donoghue puts it, “it remains difficult, in a genre in which the highest art is the most convincing impersonation of history, to disentangle traditional truth from novel fiction.”¹⁴ And the fourth reason is that the naturalistic material of family saga narrative means that, for the most part, the events described could have all plausibly happened. These four reasons take away the diagnostic tools (for example, cross-referencing of independent

¹³ O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 47.

¹⁴ O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, pp. 46-7.

sources, or clear authorial intent) which could help to identify separate out variation caused by differences in actual experience, and variation caused by fictionalisation.

And so one must find other ways in which to categorise variability in the representation of land and landownership. The understanding of the adjustment and glorification of the past by later writers is an important method of categorising variability. One must contend with the gap in time between the happening of the events described and their being written down. There were considerable developments in both the surroundings and the experience of everyday life between the early Norwegian settlers and the Icelandic writers of a later age. One such manifestation of this is the changes that Christianity wrought on the island over time. For example, the author of *Hrafnkels saga* anachronistically envisages the pagan temple as being attached to a farm.¹⁵ Although archaeologists are as yet uncertain as to where these temples were positioned and how they functioned, the model used in saga literature suggests that the authors were imagining in terms of the known relationship between church and farm after the Conversion of Iceland to Christianity.

Because of this gap in time, the authors of the family sagas, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* would have had to rely on memories and/or oral traditions handed down through several generations.¹⁶ Past events retold in a favourable light lend prestige to those fortunate enough to be connected to history's heroes and heroines, or 'set the records straight' where dubious characters and events are concerned. By

¹⁵ E. V. Gordon (ed.), *Hrafnkels saga*, in *An Introduction to Old Norse*, revised edition A. R. Taylor (Oxford, 1956), p. 79.

¹⁶ Memory is, as Jonathan Z. Smith ascertains, "a complex and deceptive experience. It appears to be preeminently a matter of the past, yet it is as much an affair of the present. It appears to be preeminently a matter of time, yet it is as much an affair of space." See J. Z. Smith, *To Take Place. Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago, 1987), p. 25.

telling old tales and recording genealogies, the writers of these first Icelandic prose texts assured “both themselves and other people of the new social order’s respectability and authority.”¹⁷ I turn again to Julian Barnes and his novel *England, England*, and to the character Martha, who ponders the nature of memory:

If a memory wasn’t a thing but a memory of a memory of a memory, mirrors set in parallel, then what the brain told you now about what it claimed had happened then would be coloured by what had happened in between. It was like a country remembering its history: the past was never just the past, it was what made the present able to live with itself.¹⁸

The ramifications of the interlocking of past and present are thus highly significant. Furthermore, even if one did not stand to gain personally from a representation of one’s ancestors in the formative period of one’s national history, then in a more community-minded spirit “ancient lore acquired new value through a socio-politically grounded antiquarianism”.¹⁹ The means of understanding and shaping the present society were to be found in the country’s past, and, by unlocking the secrets of, for example, skaldic verse, as Snorri Sturluson did in *Skáldskaparmál*, one held the key to the development of the Icelandic consciousness, and a comprehension of language and lore. This is particularly acute with reference to the representation of land and landownership. As Joachim Frenk writes in the introduction to *Spatial Change in English Literature*, “...there is no such thing as an objective and disinterested representation of space.”²⁰ Thus, there is tremendous scope for careful selection and adjustment of facts in the writing down of Iceland’s history, a country which since its

¹⁷ M. Clunies Ross, “Textual Territory: the Regional and Genealogical Dynamic of Medieval Icelandic Literary Production”, *New Medieval Literatures*, ed. W. Scase, R. Copeland and D. Lawton (Oxford, 1997), p. 11.

¹⁸ Barnes, *England, England*, p. 6.

¹⁹ T. Tulinus, “The Matter of the North: fiction and uncertain identities”, *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. M. Clunies Ross (Cambridge, 2000), p. 245.

²⁰ J. Frenk (ed.), *Spatial Change in English Literature* (Trier, 2000), p. 12.

Norse beginnings has struggled to assert its independence and forge and maintain its identity. The glorification and the creation of a nation's history as well as the shaping of its outlook are possible reasons why variability in the representation of land and landownership occurs.

Another cause of variability is the saga author's desire to propel his plot. Practices connected with land and landownership, such as exchanging farms, or buying land on credit, can be used as narrative devices, thereby skewing the depiction and creating variation in the representation. And the last cause which I explore occurs in those episodes in which the author cannot quite make sense of his narrative. At such points the author has been failed by history: gaps or inaccuracies in the tradition create for him enormous difficulty. But at these points he is also failed by fictionality. For whatever reason the author is not necessarily able or willing to patch over the cracks in his narrative. This lack of a secure tradition really lies behind all of the causes of variability in the representation of land and landownership: were it secure, then there would be far less scope for the glorification of the past, or the employment of land practices as literary devices.

With all of these causes of variability, it is by no means a simple affair to categorise them; however, my method is to break down examples of variation, examine closely the context of each incident, place that incident within the larger pattern of representation, and ask questions of it in an attempt to categorise the variability. In most cases it is impossible to be certain about the categorisation, but there are a number of instances when this careful method produces results.

Chapter One: APPROACHING ICELAND

Introduction

Iceland had been produced textually by the time the Icelanders themselves wrote about their country. Before the Norsemen landed on the island the space had had its physical position noted, its geographical features defined and its history described in learned texts stretching back at least as far as Pytheas of Massalia in Antiquity.

Once we come to the native historical tradition, there are two texts which are of central importance in examining Iceland's Norse beginnings: *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*. The former details the landclaims of all of the first settlers whilst the latter recounts important events in the country's history, such as the foundation of the Alþingi (the Icelandic parliament), the reckoning of the Icelandic calendar and the Norse discovery of Greenland.

The authors of these texts do not represent the Norsemen arriving in a country which was empty or chaotic: they share the insight of the French philosopher and critic Lefebvre by realising "that an already produced space can be decoded, can be read", and, as such, can subject the unknown and the chaotic to control and interpretation.¹ Both texts approach the problem of beginnings: conceiving of the beginning of Icelandic history, and how to begin to write it. *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* approach Iceland and the problem of beginnings in two different ways, and I shall examine them both in turn after I have looked briefly at Iceland as a

¹ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991), p. 17.

textually-produced space in earlier European learning. After that I shall explore the variation in representations of the migration from Norway to Iceland in saga narrative and in *Landnámabók*.

1. European Learning and the Approach to Iceland

It is difficult to ascertain the point at which Iceland was first identified in text for two main reasons. Firstly, although Iceland became known as *Thule* or *Ultima Thule* to later authors, there is no way of verifying at which historical point or in which text Iceland is the country being identified by this name: in earlier works *Thule* “most often had an imprecise referent, being just a northern part of the world.”² Secondly, in antiquity there seem to have been disputes and arguments over certain individual geographers’ findings and statements.

Pytheas of Massalia is a key author in tracing the history of the land called *Thule*. Unfortunately, the works of Pytheas now only exist in fragments incorporated into other texts such as Strabo’s *Geographia* and the Elder Pliny’s *Historia Naturalis*. Therefore one experiences further difficulty in this case in attempting to reconstruct exactly what Pytheas wrote, and from where he had gathered all of his information.³ However, it appears from these fragments that Pytheas, when negotiating the North Atlantic region, was writing from personal experience. He gives an eye-witness description of *Thule* as being a mixture of elementary earth, sea and air which is impassable by boat or foot. He also states that it is the most northern of the Prettans, that is, Britain and the surrounding islands. Strabo certainly did not agree with Pytheas on the subject of this land called *Thule*: in his *Geographia* he states

² K. Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Analysis of Social Change* (Oxford, 1985), p. 7.

³ See Pytheas of Massalia, *On the Ocean*, ed. C. H. Roseman (Chicago, 1994).

adamantly that the Massalian is a liar. Strabo declares that its existence is pure fantasy because more recent writers on Britain and Germany had not mentioned it all; he thought that Pytheas had simply concocted the entire notion.⁴ Most writers on Pytheas think that *Thule* of his account refers either to Iceland or Norway.⁵ Whichever it is, his description of the region conjures a hazy and chaotic picture of a primordial, unformed world: it is depicted as a shifting, unstable land mass. Pytheas' account possibly constitutes one of the earliest - if not the very first - productions of Iceland in textual space.

According to Horstman, Pytheas' real achievement lies elsewhere, in that he:

...immortalized Thule as the very last of named places: a place at the limits of the cosmos. The lure of such an island fired the imagination, and as knowledge of northern lands expanded, so Thule retreated, staying always just beyond the familiar. All maps based on Ptolemy show it near the Shetlands in the Atlantic; on modern maps the name today marks a remote outpost on the western coast of Greenland, and now, after lunar exploration, an area on the moon also bears the name.⁶

As can be seen later in accounts by the saga authors when discussing the migration from Norway, Iceland is represented as the last out-post, the edge of the western world, until, that is, the discovery and settlement of Greenland and, later, Vínland. What is missing from later native accounts is this sense of 'outlandishness' in the bizarre geography, geology and climate of the new country. There are no strange accounts of volcanic fire and sea-beasts or geysers or earthquakes as new and exciting phenomena, such as are present in, for example, *Konungs Skuggsiá* or

⁴ *On the Ocean*, p. 127. See the commentaries on the various fragments for this discussion.

⁵ *On the Ocean*, p. 138. Again, this can be found in Roseman's commentaries on the fragments.

⁶ *On the Ocean*, p. 158. This information forms part of a discussion entitled 'Deductions that can be drawn from the Corpus'.

Historia Norwegiae, medieval texts which were written in Norway for the Norwegian court.⁷ Perhaps thinking of a time when such things were unusual was difficult or even completely unimaginable to writers in a later period who had been familiar with these erstwhile curiosities for generations. Whereas earlier European learning on *Thule* evokes the unfamiliarity and chaos of this part of the North Sea, in the later, native textual tradition Iceland is no longer a curious place.

Roseman maintains that by the time of Dicuil, an Irish monk who wrote in the Carolingian court, Iceland was almost certainly meant when he and other writers referred to *Thule*.⁸ In his *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* Dicuil details authors from antiquity and the early medieval period who have written on *Thule*, including the Elder Pliny, Priscian and Solinus. Like Pytheas, Dicuil's own voyages in the region of the North Sea were extensive, but he deployed what he knew both from his discoveries and from men of religion who had occupied the islands of the area for contemplation and solitude to form his account of the region. He relies on the thirty-year-old testament of clerics who had visited the island for information on the country which Pytheas identified as Thule. Of this island the clerics, who had spent from the first of February to the first of August on the island, famously relate that in the days round about the summer solstice, the sun hardly seems to set, so that a man can even remove the lice from his shirt in the middle of the night because it is so light.⁹ The strange seasonal daylight conditions provide much of the material for his description

⁷ In *Historia Norwegiae*, there is a chapter on Iceland which describes, amongst other marvels, volcanoes, earthquakes and hot springs: see G. Storm (ed.), *Historia Norwegiae* in *Monumenta Historica Norvegiae* (Oslo, 1880), pp. 92-7. *Konungs Skuggsiá* also mentions volcanic fire, earthquakes, the abundance of ice and the presence of springs, but also has a chapter on the various sea creatures to be found in Icelandic waters: see L. Holm-Olsen (ed.), *Konungs Skuggsiá* (Oslo, 1983), pp. 14-21.

⁸ *On the Ocean*, p. 157. See Roseman's deductions.

⁹ Dicuil, *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*, ed. J. J. Tierney (Dublin, 1967), p. 74. He can be referred to as either Dicuil or Diculi. I refer to him as Dicuil throughout.

and discussion of the island. Amongst the observations of the various different islands in the North Sea there are some details familiar from later Icelandic sources. The following quotation is generally accepted as a description of the Faroe Islands.¹⁰

Illae insulae sunt aliae paruulae... in quibus in centum ferme annis heremita ex nostra Scottia nauigantes habitauerunt. Sed sicut a principio mundi desertae semper fuerunt ita nunc causa latronum Normannorum uacuae anchoritis plenae innumerabilibus ouibus ac diuersis generibus multis nimis marinarum auium. Numquam eas insulas in libris auctorum memoratas inuenimus.¹¹

There is another group of very small islands... on which for one hundred years hermits who sailed from Ireland have lived. But just as they were deserted at the beginning of the world, now they are empty of anchorites because of Norse sea-raiders, and now instead they are full of countless sheep and many different types of sea-birds. We have never found these islands mentioned in the books of other *auctors*.

Again, Dicuil states explicitly where he has new observations to make about this region which are not based on works of earlier and greater geographers. But more important than the posited identification of the Faroes is the reason given for their deserted state. The pressure of the Viking expansion forces the religious to quit the islands, and although the threat or execution of violence is not explicitly stated, the word “latro” is suggestive: these men are thieves. In this situation co-habitation is impossible for peaceful men of God. This description of holy men being forced to abandon their place of solitude because of Viking aggression resurfaces in the native Icelandic tradition.

¹⁰ See Dicuil, *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*, pp. 115-6, notes 14 and 15 (for chapter seven) regarding this identification.

¹¹ Dicuil, *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*, p. 76.

2. From Foreign Learning to Native Tradition, with Archaeological Assistance

Ari's account of Iceland before the settlement in *Íslendingabók* bears a striking resemblance to Dicuil's of the Faroes. He emphasises early in his text the Christian history of Iceland's pre-Norse existence. His evidence is the archaeological discovery of artefacts left by the Irish hermits:

Þá váru hér menn kristnir, þeir er Norðmenn kalla papa, en þeir fóru síðan á braut, af því at þeir vildu eigi vera hér við heiðina menn, ok létu eptir bækr írskar ok bjöllur ok bagla. Af því mátti skilja, at þeir váru menn írskir.¹²

There were Christian men here, whom the Norsemen call *papar*, but they went away afterwards because they did not want to dwell here alongside heathen men, and they left behind Irish books and bells and crosiers. From this one could tell that they were Irishmen.

Perhaps Ari himself dug up all of this evidence, for little or nothing in the modern period has yet been found to prove the existence of these Irish hermits on Iceland before the date which has been traditionally accepted as the beginning of the Norse settlement. The only objects which might have demonstrated a pre-Norse presence are the discovery of five Roman coins, but a lack of other evidence to support Roman occupation and/or exploration means that these artefacts have been considered to be Viking booty.¹³ As in Dicuil's account, no mention of hostilities is made: the Irishmen leave the island due to their personal preferences in the matter. The symbols of a Christian past, embedded in the Icelandic earth, serve as a good portent and solid foundation for the later Conversion and establishment of the Church in Iceland. As Margaret Clunies Ross states: "[i]t may be that thinkers such as Ari believed that, because of the prior settlement of the Irish *papar* (priests), and because of the

¹² Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, ed. Halldór Hermannsson, *Islandica* XX (Ithaca, 1930), p. 52.

¹³ See K. P. Smith, "Landnám: the Settlement of Iceland in Archaeological and Historical Perspective", *World Archaeology*, XXVI (1995), 324.

presence of many Irish Christians among the first settlers, one could expect Christianity to have been an active force in Iceland from the very beginning of the Scandinavian settlement.”¹⁴ Ari expresses his belief in the power of the country’s religion and in the prevailing social and legal order by making it abundantly clear that Iceland has always been a Christian space.

Because of the uncertainties which such accounts create, scholars of literature, anthropologists and historians in the last half of the last century had felt uneasy about engaging with issues of dating and the early history of the island. As Orri Vésteinsson writes, it has been left “to a handful of archaeologists to worry about the settlement of Iceland.”¹⁵ In a sense, there is nothing much about which to worry. It would appear that archaeological data uphold the date of the Norse settlement as A.D. 870 or 871, agreeing with Ari and the authors of *Landnámabók*. I shall now examine why the dating of the settlement can be verified with such confidence.

Tephrochronology is of enormous importance in the dating of the settlement of Iceland. Layers of tephra, the deposits of ash emitted in a volcanic eruption, settle on the ground and form a “chronological marker” which can then be dated relatively

¹⁴ M. Clunies Ross, “‘Saint’ Ásólf”, *Germanisches Altertum und Christliches Mittelalter*, ed. B. Brogyanyi (Hamburg, 2002), p. 34. Many have tried to posit the influence of Celtic settlers who remained or were brought as slaves in the Scandinavian settlement by the examination of different evidences, including genetic, demographical, archaeological, historical and literary. See L. Fergersten Saugstad, “The Settlement of Iceland” and responses, *Norwegian Archaeological Review* X (1977), 60-5; A. Helgason *et al.*, “mtDNA and the Origin of the Icelanders: Deciphering Signals of Recent Population History”, *American Journal of Human Genetics* LXVI (2000), 999-1016; O. Bjarnason *et al.*, “The Blood Group of Icelanders”, *Annals of Human Genetics* XXXVI (1973), 425-58; D. E. Vasey, “Population Regulation, Ecology, and Political Economy in Pre-Industrial Iceland”, *American Ethnologist* XXIII (1996) 366-92; Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland* (Reykjavík, 2000).

¹⁵ Orri Vésteinsson, “Patterns of Settlement in Iceland: A Study in Pre-history”, *Saga-Book* XXV(1998), 2.

or alongside dateable evidence of specific eruptions.¹⁶ It is especially important to date one particular layer of tephra, the so-called “*Landnám*-tephra”. Just above this layer, which is found over the most part of Iceland, there is evidence of human habitation in early archaeological sites. Yet there is no reliable documentation from the early settlement of Iceland which can be employed in order to date this tephra layer with any degree of certainty. Archaeologists have used radio-carbon analysis, but unfortunately the dates produced by these tests are fraught with difficulties and possible inaccuracy. However, the study of the Greenland ice-core samples has proved a better method for dating the *Landnám*-tephra. As Orri Vésteinsson explains:

[a]n annual cycle of freezing and thawing leaves horizons in the ice-cap which can be counted in a similar way to tree-rings. Recently traces of the *Landnám*-tephra have been found in the ice-cap and this produces the date 871, with a margin of error of less than two years, for the deposition of the *Landnám*-tephra. There can as a result be no doubt any more regarding the date of the *Landnám*-tephra and any claim for human habitation in Iceland predating 871 must therefore be based on finding actual human deposits underneath this layer.¹⁷

Archaeologists are thus left with a clear marker, a definite line under which they must find evidence of Norse, or any other, presence if they are to prove the currently accepted date for settlement is too late. So far, although much research has been carried out in this field, “nothing has turned up contradicting the long-held view that Iceland was settled by Norsemen around and shortly after AD 870.”¹⁸ Both

¹⁶ See Orri Vésteinsson, “Patterns of Settlement”, 2-3.

¹⁷ Orri Vésteinsson, “Patterns of Settlement”, 3. See K. Grönvald *et al.*, “Ash Layers from Iceland in the Greenland GRIP Ice Core Correlated with Oceanic and Land Sediments”, *Earth and Planetary Science Letters* CXXXV (1995), 149-55.

¹⁸ Orri Vésteinsson, “Patterns of Settlement”, 2. Kristján Ahronson is currently researching into and publishing on caves in the south of Iceland in which he has found evidence of human habitation below the *Landnám*-tephra, as well as Christian symbols engraved in the rock. Might this be evidence of the *papar*? (Ahronson, forthcoming).

Kevin P. Smith and Orri Vésteinsson question the focus which archaeologists have maintained. Smith states “[a]rchaeologists studying this period have... until recently, devoted more effort to debating the chronology of settlement than trying to understand the settlement process itself or its impacts on Icelandic society and environment”,¹⁹ or as Orri Vésteinsson puts it “...until quite recently Icelandic archaeologists have, by and large, considered their task to be to retrieve objects and structures to illustrate studies of the texts and they have treated their results as capable of only very limited observations about the past.”²⁰ Because of this less fruitful approach, Icelandic archaeology has now taken a different turn, focusing instead on what can be learned about *how* the Norsemen settled the island, where they chose to settle first, what they built when they got there, and whether they moved their settlement in subsequent years. I shall be making reference to some of this new research throughout this chapter and the next, but suffice to say at this point that archaeological evidence still supports the medieval Icelandic texts which place the settlement of the country at around the year A.D. 870.

The author of the opening of *Landnámabók* mentions the pre-Norse presence of *papar* as well, but not before he tackles in the first instance the issue of approaching Iceland a little differently. He quotes Bede as his main source for his locating of Iceland in the Atlantic (not Dicuil, as the author of *Íslendingabók* may have done). Bede wrote on *Thule* in his *De Temporum Ratione* and used Pytheas’ calculations via Pliny as well as the work of Solinus. Unlike Ari, the author is not interested in making any claims for Iceland’s pre-Norse Christian heritage in his text, but instead seeks to place the country in space and time before he tells of any

¹⁹ Smith, “*Landnám: the Settlement of Iceland...*”, 319.

²⁰ Orri Vésteinsson, “Patterns of Settlement”, 2.

Norwegian discovery of the island. He quotes the Venerable Bede's own account as well as material derived, he says, from other English sources ("á bókum enskum"):²¹

Í aldarfarsbók þeiri, er Beda prestr heilagur gerði,
er getit eylands þess, er Thile heitir á bókum er
sagt, at liggi sex dægra sigling í norðr frá
Bretlandi; þar sagði hann eigi koma dag á vetr ok
eigi nótt á sumar þá dagr er sem lengstr.²²

In *De Ratione Temporum* which the Holy Priest Bede wrote, an island is mentioned, called *Thule* in all the books, which, he said, lay six days' sailing north of Britain. There, he said, day did not dawn in the winter and night did not fall in summer when the day was at its longest.

The citation of Bede adds credence and religio-historical authority to the text: it highlights the fact that Iceland had been mapped cognitively and produced textually by antiquarian authors as the island *Ultima Thule* before the Norse settlement. Iceland is thus not only part of ancient learned culture, but is legitimized by its place in the great texts of continental European Christian learning. This differs from *Íslendingabók's* approach, which makes the creation of Icelandic history a more home-grown affair. Although it relies on Church and European history for its dating system, it only alludes to the prior knowledge of Iceland experienced by the *papar*.

Also, in terms of the textual production of the country, the placing of Iceland in space and time pre-empted Norwegian first contact with the new and unknown land in *Landnámabók*. Its presence in works of earlier European authors has a familiarizing effect. Only after this careful positioning does the author then represent the Norse settlement in a tentative and a gradual process. First of all, the author

²¹ Jakob Benediktsson (ed.), *Landnámabók*, Íslensk Fornrit I (Reykjavík, 1968), p. 32 (S). Throughout the thesis I only refer to the redactions individually in the text when there is a significant variation between them. In the footnotes I mark whether I am referring to *Hauksbók* (H), *Sturlubók* (S), or both redactions (H and S).

²² *Landnámabók*, p. 3 (S).

relates mere sightings: those of Nadoddr víkingr and his crew, and Garðarr Svávarsson's mother.

Nadoddr's sighting is the first according to the *Sturlubók* version of *Landnámabók*. He and his crew wish to travel to the Faroes from Norway but are blown off course. They discover by accident a "land mikit" - "a large country" and they go ashore to explore.²³ Theirs is not a short visit, though. They appear to stay there for some length of time, since "[þ]eir fóru aptr um haustit til Færeyja" - "they went after that during the autumn to the Faroes" - which implies that they must have been there long enough at least to have experienced a change in the seasons. Nadoddr seems to have led an impromptu expedition, and not just to have been responsible for a chance sighting. They name the land which they have visited '*Snæland*' - Snowland.²⁴

Garðarr Svávarsson's mother experiences a chance sighting, but possibly from the comfort of her own home. It is related that the Swedish man sets out to find Snowland with the help of his mother who has second sight.²⁵ One supposes that guidance from this sort of source was needed to explain how Garðarr managed to find a country which had only recently been discovered by accident: how else would he have known where to go? It may be that what is encountered here is a fictional device which aids the logic of the 'plot' - without the second sight some might have enquired as to how the Swede managed to find Iceland at all.

²³ *Landnámabók*, p. 34 (S).

²⁴ *Landnámabók*, p. 34 (S).

²⁵ *Landnámabók*, pp. 34-7 (H and S).

In the *Hauksbók* version of *Landnámabók* Garðarr actually beats Nadoddr to it. Garðarr is attempting to reach the Shetlands to claim his inheritance when he accidentally discovers Iceland, and then Nadoddr, who had originally established himself in the Faroes, manages to find the new land.²⁶ In contrast with *Sturlubók*, both men in this version discover Iceland by accident. Thus it can be seen that the two most significant redactions of the text are in disagreement over the order and unravelling of events which constitute the approach to Iceland.

Garðarr performs a circumnavigation of the entire country in both versions, thus proving it an island.²⁷ He acts rather like a landtaker in that he goes round the entire boundary and extent of the land (as landowners would beat the boundary to assert their claims - see chapter three).²⁸ Garðarr sails around Iceland and, by ascertaining its island status, marks it off from the ocean and other land, and the author then too isolates it in textual space by writing an account of it.²⁹ Oddly, the name change is not in keeping with this detail of an early, pre-Ingólfr settlement. The land is not renamed by another of its physical attributes, but instead it is called “Garðarshólmr” - “Garðarr’s Island”, and the versions differ in their explanation of the naming process: *Hauksbók* states that Garðarr names the island, whereas in

²⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 35 and p. 37 (H). Curiously enough, however, later on in *Sturlubók* Garðarr is presented as the first settler - “er first fann Ísland”. The redaction contradicts itself. As Jakob Benediktsson says in his review of Sveinbjörn Rafnsson’s Lund thesis, “This must be a piece of information which Sturla took from his normal exemplar and which he forgot to alter after he decided to present Nadoddr as the first discoverer.” See Jakob Benediktsson, Review of *Studier I Landnámabók. Kritiska Bidrag till den Isländska Fristatens Historia*, Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, *Saga Book XIX* (London), 313.

²⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 34 and p. 36 (S).

²⁸ *Landnámabók*, p. 34 and p. 36 (S).

²⁹ See M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York, 1995), p. 29 for a description of how explorers from Magellan onwards performed a ‘double deed of circumnavigation’ by travelling around the globe and then writing their experience of it.

Sturlubók others start to call it after him.³⁰ Garðarr stays there over the winter before returning, and out of his company emerge the first settlers of Iceland:

Um várit, er hann var búinn til hafs, sleit frá honum mann á báti, er hét Náttfari, ok þræl ok ambátt. Hann byggði þar síðan, er heitir Náttfaravík.³¹ (*Sturlubók* version)

During the spring when he was ready to put out to sea, a boat drifted off course from his ship with a man aboard who was called Náttfari, and a slave and a bondwoman with him. He lived from then on at a place called Náttfaravík.

Garðarr... kom á fjörð þann, er hann kallaði Skjálfanda; þar skutu þeir báti ok gekk á Náttfari þræll hans; þá slitnaði fetrin, ok kom hann í Náttfaravík fyrir utan Skuggabjörg. En Garðarr kom öðrum megin fjarðarins ok var þar um vetrinn; því kallaði hann þar Húsavík. Náttfari var eptir með þræl sinn ok ambátt; því heitir þar Náttfaravík.³² (*Hauksbók* version)

Garðarr... sailed into a fjord which he called Skjálfandi; there they launched the boat and Náttfari his slave went aboard; then the rope snapped, and he drifted into Náttfaravík beyond Skuggabjörg. But Garðarr made land on the other side of the fjord and stayed there during the winter; because of that he called the place Húsavík. Náttfari dwelt there afterwards with a slave and slave-woman; because of that the place is called Náttfaravík.

This incident is curious indeed. Although it is not made explicit by the author, Náttfaravík is the name of a place on an estuary called Skjálfandi in Iceland, and what is being described here is essentially the first recorded permanent settlement in the country. But this is in no obvious way flagged up by the author: no grand claims are made for Náttfari's achievement and clearly successful habitation. Why might this be the case? Is it perhaps somehow shameful to admit that the first settler of the country

³⁰ *Landnámabók*, p. 35 (H) and p. 36 (S).

³¹ *Landnámabók*, p. 36 (S).

³² *Landnámabók*, p. 35 (H).

only managed establishment because he was driven off course and forced to land there by accident? Perhaps his status as a mere servant precludes him from celebration and renown.

3. The Problem of Náttfari: An *Excursus*

How accidental did the redactors believe Náttfari's landtake to be? Both stories are rather short on the mechanics of his separation. The *Hauksbók* account is longer, however, and makes much more of the drama of the event, as well as the *accidental* nature of it. *Sturlubók* is less clear on how this accident might have occurred: it is more ambiguous in its laconism, though even still the *Hauksbók* redactor does not attempt to explain why Náttfari is placed on a separate vessel.

Another couple of variations in the redactions are to be considered. The separation of slave and master occurs at different points in Garðarr's journey. In *Sturlubók*, it happens just as Garðarr is about to put out to sea and return home: he has already visited Húsavík and made his houses there. But in *Hauksbók* Garðarr has just sailed into Skjálfandi looking for somewhere to spend the winter before returning home, and he puts in at Húsavík at this stage in the story. One might have thought that if Garðarr were staying the whole winter then he might have made an effort to find his slave. But if Garðarr were in the process of putting out to sea and catching favourable winds to return him home, a few slaves gone missing would be a low-priority issue. It compels one to consider whether these thoughts crossed the redactors' minds when they wrote their accounts, or whether it could simply be a meaningless detail which two different traditions happen to render differently.

Both redactions share, on the other hand, the presence in their accounts of a slave and bondwoman. In this detail it is reminiscent of other instances in *Landnámabók* where slaves are taken along in an escape bid. The first slaves who make a bid for freedom are Hjörleifr's. After they murder him and his men, they escape to the Vestmanneyjar with the dead men's wives and goods. The next to vanish is Karli, one of a pair of slaves belonging to Ingólfr Arnason, the other being called Vífill. After Ingólfr takes land, according to both *Hauksbók* and *Sturlubók*, Karli expresses his disapproval of his master's choice:

Þá mælti Karli: „Til ills fóru vér um góð heruð, er vér skulum byggja útnes þetta.“ Hann hvarf á brutt ok ambátt með honum. Vífli gaf Ingólfr frelsi, ok byggði hann at Vífilstóptum; við hann er kennt Vífilfell; þar bjó hann lengi, varð skilríkr maðr. Ingólfr lét gera skála á Skálafelli; þaðan sá hann reyki við Ölfusvatn ok fann þar Karla.³³

Then Karli said, “There's not much point in us travelling through such good country just so that we can live on this remote headland.” He vanished and took a slave-woman with him. Ingólfr gave Vífill his freedom, and he dwelt at Vífilstóptir; from him Vífilfell takes its name. He lived there a long time and proved himself to be a trustworthy man. Ingólfr had a hall built at Skálafell, and from there he noticed some smoke at Ölfusvatn, and it was there that he found Karli.

There is no further information given about Karli. One does not know whether he was punished, or allowed to remain in the dwelling he had built for himself. Because the fates of the two slaves are spliced together - one hears of Karli's disappearance, followed by Vífill's obedience and happy outcome, and then of Karli's being found - one suspects that the description of what Vífill gains - freedom, land, a good reputation and a long, settled life - is intended to suggest what was denied to Karli

³³ *Landnámabók*, p. 45 (S). This story only appears in the *Sturlubók* redaction.

when his master eventually found him. Although the silence might suggest that Karli's fate was not known to those writing his story, the splicing could suggest that one is meant to deduce what was thought to have happened to him. But he is represented, like Hjörleifr's slaves and Náttfari, as having had female company, whether under duress or by consent.

Other slaves who attempt an escape are Flóki and Skorri, the slaves of Ketill gufa. Again, running away with women is mentioned. They abscond from Ketill with two women and a considerable sum of money, hide themselves away in Skorraholt, and are then killed at Flókadalr and Skorradalr.³⁴

Therefore, one has to infer the possibility that Náttfari too made an escape in the minds of the redactors. Bearing these examples of absconding with women in mind, the different positions of the slaves in the narrative of Náttfari's story are potentially very important if one examines the passages about him one more time. In *Sturlubók*, the slaves are mentioned when Náttfari drifts apart from Garðarr - they are clearly with him at the point when the separation occurs. But in *Hauksbók* they seem to appear miraculously once Náttfari has settled down, as if he found them there. It is only Náttfari who breaks loose in the narrative. By putting textual space between Náttfari on the one hand and the slave man and woman on the other, it suggests rather less than in it does in *Sturlubók* that the former took the slaves with him.

³⁴ *Landnámabók*, pp. 166-7 (H and S).

There is another odd detail in the *Hauksbók* account. It would appear that Náttfari did not go with fellow slaves - *Hauksbók* states that he was in Náttfaravík with *his* slave and bondwoman. This would imply that Náttfari, a slave himself, owns slaves: property owns property. Perhaps the redactor thought that, upon his landtake, Náttfari became ‘free’, as other slaves who had been granted land in the settlement period became. Auður en djúpúðga is a good example of someone who frees her slaves on arrival in Iceland and grants them land within her landtake.³⁵ In the case of Náttfari, though, the redactor has not made it clear how this is conceived to have happened. There is perhaps another explanation. Given the delay in the mention of the two slaves, perhaps he was envisaged to have acquired the slaves after others had come to settle Iceland.

Both redactions relate Náttfari’s tale in a confusing and confused manner, a confusion only amplified by the differences between the two texts. Closer inspection has revealed that there is something deeply unsettling about Náttfari’s settlement.

4. The ‘First’ Settler: Ingólfr Arnason

Flóki Vilgerðarson is the next to travel in the direction of Iceland, looking for Garðarr’s Island in *Sturlubók* and Snowland in *Hauksbók*. He too makes a stay on the island (he gives it the name “Ísland” - “Iceland”), and, along with his crew, brings back mixed reports of the country. The stage is then set by the author of *Landnámabók* for the entry of Ingólfr Arnason. The importance of his settlement is expressed in its careful dating:

³⁵ *Landnámabók*, p. 140 (S). Auður and Unnr are interchangeable variants of the same name. For consistency I refer to this character in my text as Auður throughout the thesis, even when I translate passages in which the variant Unnr is used. There are also variations on the spelling and translation of her nickname, “the Deep Minded” or “Wealthy”. I shall refer to her as ‘en djúpúðga’ throughout the thesis.

Sumar þat, er þeir Ingólfr fóru til at byggja Ísland, hafði Haraldr hárfagri verið tólf ár konungr at Nóregi: þá var liðit frá upphafi þessa heims sex þúsundir vetra ok sjau tígir ok þrír vetr, en frá holdgan dróttins átta hundruð <ára> ok sjau tígir ok fjögur ár.³⁶

The summer when Ingólfr went to settle Iceland, Haraldr inn hárfagri had been king of Norway for twelve years: that was 6073 years since the beginning of the world, and 874 years since the incarnation of our Lord.

This is a most momentous occasion in the country's history (a fact highlighted by the mention of the birth of both the world and Christ) and requires precise dating. The phrase “at byggja Ísland” suggests that Ingólfr's trip has a weighty sense of purpose. Although the phrase could mean “settle in Iceland” it could also mean “settle Iceland”. The implication might be that he does not simply wish to live there himself but rather to colonise it and make it habitable for all mankind. The author of *Landnámabók* tells Ingólfr's story of how he came to leave Norway for Iceland, and to conclude notes that:

Ingólfr var frægastr allra landnámsmanna, því at hann kóm hér at óbyggðu landi ok byggði fyrstr landit; gerðu þat aðrir landnámsmenn eptir hans dæmum.³⁷ (*Sturlubók* version)

Ingólfr was the most famous of all the landtakers, because he came here when the country was uninhabited and was the first to settle in Iceland; other landtakers then followed his example.

Oddly, the *Hauksbók* version only differs in one word from the quotation above: instead of “óbyggðu”, it has “auðu” - meaning empty, void, desolate. In light of this difference it is tempting to read the *Sturlubók* version as an acknowledgement of the

³⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 42 (H and S).

³⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 46 (S).

presence of *papar*: if it were empty, then there would be no one in Iceland at all, but if it were uninhabited, this might suggest that there were no permanent settlers there. This description, however, does not rule out the existence of seasonal visitors such as Irish hermits. Stranger still is the previous mention of Náttfari's prior settlement in Iceland. Even within this one text there are competing views of who was the first settler: although a great deal is made of Ingólfr's settlement, Náttfari clearly has beaten him to it, as has been demonstrated in the *excursus* above. It is odd that the author of *Landnámabók* still chose to include Náttfari's story, and not simply deny him his place in the history of Icelandic landtaking, even if he is eventually overshadowed by the figure of Ingólfr in the text.

Íslendingabók also supports Ingólfr as the first settler. But unlike in *Landnámabók*, Ari has oral claims of authority for his historical account:

Ísland bygðisk fyrst ór Norvegi á dögum Haralds
ins hárfagra Hálfðanar sonar ins svarta, í þann tíð
- at ætlun ok tölu þeirra Teits fóstura míns, þess
manns er ek kunna spakstan, sonar Ísleifs biskups,
ok Þorkels, föðurbróður míns, Gellissonar, er
langt mundi fram, ok Þuríðar Snorra dóttur goða,
er bæði var margspök ok óljúgfróð, - er Ívarr
Ragnars sonr loðbrókar lét drepa Eadmund hinn
helga Engla konung. En þat var DCCCLXX vetrum
eptir burð Krists, at því er ritit er í sögu hans.³⁸

³⁸ *Íslendingabók*, p. 48.

Iceland was first settled from Norway in the days of Haraldr inn hárfagri, who was the son of Hálfðan enn svarti, at the time - according to the opinion and calculation of Teitr, my foster-father and the man whom I know to be the wisest, the son of Bishop Ísleifr, and of Þorkell Gellisson, my paternal uncle, who could remember far back in time, and of Þuríðr, the daughter of Snorri goði, who was both greatly learned and reliable, - when Ívarr, the son of Ragnarr loðbrók had the blessed Edmund, the king of the English, killed. And that was 870 years after the birth of Christ, as it is written in his saga.

The fact that Ari relies on the memories of people who were close to him does not inspire as much confidence as he perhaps intended: it would seem hardly surprising that he thinks very highly of the wisdom of both his foster-father and his uncle. But the difference with oral history is that, unlike with written sources, those who were disinclined to believe what Ari has written would have had to gainsay the claims of these important, contemporary personages. The past seems less debatable and closer to Ari's present when it is the folk memory which is being relied upon.³⁹

For events further back in time, however, such as the birth of Christ, he depends on written sources.

Following this dating and information regarding his sources, Ari then begins Iceland's history proper, and, unlike *Landnámabók* in which there is a gradual build-up to the settlement with various sightings and expeditions, the story begins with Ingólfr:

³⁹ See Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, p. 2. "...*Íslendingabók* is the written text that most clearly shows its connection to the tradition which preserved the official version of history before the arrival of writing. Ari is the only author who gives a systematic account of his oral informants. In medieval historical writing it was common to refer to great predecessors as authorities, *auctoritates*, who were supposed to lend scholarly credibility to the exposition. As the first person to *write* Iceland's history, Ari was forced to build exclusively on oral authorities."

Ingólfr hét maðr norroæn, er sannligt er sagt, at
føri fyrst þaðan til Íslands, þá er Haraldr inn
hárfagri var XVI vetra gamall, en í annat sinn fám
vetrum síðarr.⁴⁰

There was a man called Ingólfr, a Norwegian, it is
told for certain, who was the first to go out to
Iceland from there, when Haraldr inn hárfagri was
sixteen winters old, but for a second time a few
winters later.

The intensifying phrase “er sannligt er sagt” endorses the claim: Ingólfr was *definitely* the first settler. It could, although this reading is less likely, imply that there has been some debate on the matter: perhaps others in later years pressed for the overshadowed Náttfari’s claim? But in the detail that Ingólfr went out, came back and then went out again both *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* concur.⁴¹ The settlement of Iceland again is represented as being no accident, no desperate move, but a considered strategy.

As can be seen, *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók* approach Iceland, so to speak, from two different directions, according to their organising principles. But how do the sagas approach the shore? They tend less to attempt to reconstruct the general pattern of settlement, focusing rather on the fate of the individual as he/she makes his/her decision to move and acquire land in the new country. In order to answer this question I shall now examine how the saga authors represent the new land and the reasons they give for the settlement of Iceland.

⁴⁰ *Íslendingabók*, p. 48.

⁴¹ It is strange to think of Ingólfr in *Landnámabók* as holding a sacrifice before the second trip to Iceland, but not the first. However, the author describes how on his return “varði Ingólfr fé þeira til Íslands” - “he staked all his money for the journey to Iceland.” Clearly the first expedition is a viking raid: the real good luck is needed for the risky business of permanent settlement. It is significant that a Christian author upholds the importance of sacrifice to the pagan gods in this tale. See *Landnámabók*, pp. 41-2 (S) and below for more on the issue of the sacrifice, and Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, pp. 139-40.

5. The First Settlers: Intrepid Colonizers or Banished Outlaws?

A number of the saga accounts deal with the perception of the first settlers from the point of view of others contemplating the move, and I shall examine the differences in these accounts. First of all I shall take a closer look again at the representation of the so-called first settler, Ingólfr Arnason, but this time with saga narrative drawn into the focus.

Both *Flóamanna saga* and *Landnámabók* recount the story of the outlawed sworn-brothers Hjörleifr and Ingólfr and their being forced to leave Norway and settle in Iceland.⁴² The story told in *Landnámabók* is as follows: the two blood-brothers go on Viking raids with the sons of Atli jarl, and after a successful expedition one of these men, Hólmsteinn, vows to marry a certain Helga, in whom the author hints Hjörleifr has a romantic interest. The two men part on cool terms, and when Hjörleifr and Ingólfr set out on their raiding the next season, the two parties encounter each other and fighting ensues in which Hólmsteinn and then Hersteinn (later) are killed. Because of these killings, the blood-brothers are forced to leave Norway, and they set sail for Iceland. The story of the initial settler's involvement in outlawry provides an inauspicious backdrop for the supposed fresh start in Iceland. It certainly runs contrary to the aims of one of the redactions of *Landnámabók*, the *Þórðarbók* version. In the introduction of this text the redactor states that *Landnámabók* was written to allay suspicions that Iceland was settled by criminals.⁴³ The person hailed by many to be the first settler and founder of the nation was in fact compelled to leave having killed former allies in disagreement and jealousy over a marriage, or so *Landnámabók*

⁴² *Landnámabók*, pp. 38-47 (H and S).

⁴³ See Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards (trans), *The Book of Settlements. Landnámabók* (Manitoba, 1972), p. 6.

states. There is an unashamed honesty in the telling of Ingólfr's deeds, especially those in connection with his paganism, prior to his arrival in the new country.

In *Flóamanna saga* the story is told slightly differently.⁴⁴ More details are added, and the important marriage proposal scene is especially fleshed out. There is a greater focus on the relationships between Atli jarl's sons and the sworn brothers, and a good amount of detail given on their family backgrounds. It is mentioned, for example, that the fathers of Ingólfr and Hjörleifr had to leave Telemark because of some killings ("fyrir víga saka"),⁴⁵ a fact that is used against the brothers as a taunt when the marriage proposal does not go Hersteinn's way. It would appear that there has been a family precedent for killings followed by outlawry. Interestingly, the author of *Flóamanna saga* does not mention specifically that Ingólfr was the first settler of Iceland, but instead refers the reader to *Landnámabók* for more information about him. Is this a deliberate omission? Perhaps it is the case that the saga author expected everyone to know that Ingólfr was regarded as the first settler. It was maybe not a fact which needed repeating. Or it might be the case that the saga author is taking care to present the initial settlers in as favourable light as possible by not drawing attention to the outlaw Ingólfr's history and status as 'first settler'? Whereas *Landnámabók* is open about his expulsion from Norway, the author of *Flóamanna saga* seems more guarded in his selection of details.

⁴⁴ See Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds), *Flóamanna saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII (Reykjavík, 1941), pp. 233-38 for the episode of the sworn-brothers' dealings with Atli jarl's sons and their subsequent outlawry.

⁴⁵ *Flóamanna saga*, p. 233.

But in *Flóamanna saga* it is not just the sworn-brothers who are made to quit Norway: Hallsteinn Atlason, the man who pronounces the verdict in the outlawry of the sworn-brothers, is also forced to flee immediately after the sworn-brothers' emigration is related. In this saga it is not only the guilty but also the blameless who have to move:

Víð þetta stökk Hallsteinn undan ok út til Íslands
fyrir þessum ófriði, sem þá gerðu margir gildir
menn...⁴⁶

Because of this unrest Hallsteinn fled to Iceland,
just as many other worthy men had done...

It is perhaps necessary to make explicit the fact that even those with an untarnished reputation have had to make the move in order to make sure that Hallsteinn is not tarred with the same brush as the outlawed sworn-brothers. It also may serve as an assurance that not all of the first settlers of the country had a dubious record. Although the first settler has an outlaw past, other noble men follow closely in his footsteps. Hallsteinn's crime, however, is that his father opposed Haraldr konungr and would not yield his throne to him. The legacy the father leaves him is the bitter enmity of the Norwegian monarch, and the son is forced to move.

Is it wise, though, to conceive of Ingólfr and Hjörleifr as being equally tarnished with regard to their reputations? Hjörleifr, as shall be seen later, is not a success in Iceland: through a series of bad choices he comes to a sorry end in his attempts to settle. Certainly, also, it is Hjörleifr who had the quarrel originally with the brothers in both stories. One could read Ingólfr's position in the light of his inability to escape the loyalty owing to their blood-brotherhood in this case: arguably

⁴⁶ *Flóamanna saga*, pp. 237-8.

he is to be implicated less in the killing of Atli jarl's sons. In *Flóamanna saga* it says of the first encounter, at which Ingólfr was not present, that Hersteinn fell, and of the second, where they were both present, Hólmsteinn fell. In *Landnámabók* (in both *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* versions) it similarly states that in the fighting, two brothers (but in this account, Hólmsteinn and Hallsteinn, not the other brother Hersteinn) 'fell'. Often narratives of battles are explicit in their detailing of who felled whom, but there is no named perpetrator in these accounts. Who dealt the blows which decided the fate of the blood-brothers? How would one have to change one's perception of the affair if either of the brothers was named specifically as the killer? Again, the saga author is not explicit in detailing the past crimes of the first settler. There are gaps in his account.

Vatnsdæla saga seems also to suggest that there was a stigma attached to settling in the new country. In a discussion of the merits of a move, Ingjaldr, a farmer from Hefni ey in Norway, says that worthy men no longer regard it shameful to emigrate to Iceland ("Ingjaldr... kvað marga ágæta menn láta sér nú sóma at fara til Íslands..."),⁴⁷ echoing Ingimundr inn gamli's earlier advice to Sæmundr inn suðreyski that men of honour and worth have gone there.⁴⁸ This implies that it *was* shameful at some point in the past. Could this be due to a potential association with that first and famous outlawry? The saga author neglects to say *why* it is shameful, (rather an odd thing, I believe, to leave hanging without an explanation, lest it cast worse aspersions on the country's history than need be the case). Grímr Ingjaldsson, in the same saga, joins in the praise of the new land, although into his speech too there creeps some of the anxiety about one's reputation if one were to move:

⁴⁷ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Vatnsdæla saga*, Íslenzk Fornit VIII (Reykjavík, 1939), pp. 30-1.

⁴⁸ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 27.

...ætla ek nú í sumar til Íslands og vit báðir bræðr,
ok láta sér nú þat margir sóma, *þótt* göfgir sé...⁴⁹
[my italics]

...I now intend to go to Iceland in the summer
with my brother, and many now consider it an
acceptable thing to do, *even though* they are of
noble birth...

From the telling conjunction “þótt” there emerges an unease about the early history of Iceland’s settlement. The author of *Vatnsdæla saga* wishes to express some discomfort regarding the moral fibre of the first settlers, but does not reveal his hidden agenda. Why should this detail be included without explanation?

A different approach to this question is found in both *Laxdæla saga* and *Þórðar saga hreðu* in which it is stressed that noble people settled the island. In the former, Björn inn austroeni wishes to follow the example of eminent men and leave Norway (“Ek vil gera at dæmum göfugra manna ok flýja land þetta...”),⁵⁰ and in the latter saga relatives and friends urge Þórðr hreða to leave, remarking that several important people have already done so because of Haraldr:

Frændr þeira ok vinir fýstu þá at selja jarðir sínar
til lausafjár ok lögðu þat til, at Þórðr skyldi leita til
Íslands, sögðu þangat margt stórmenni komit ok
hafa landflótta orðit fyrir Nóregskonung.⁵¹

His relatives and friends urged them to sell their
estates for moveable property, and added that
Þórðr should try to go to Iceland, saying that many
noble men had gone there having been exiled by
the Norwegian king.

⁴⁹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 31.

⁵⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Laxdæla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit V (Reykjavík, 1934), p. 5.

⁵¹ Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Þórðar saga hreðu*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIV (Reykjavík, 1959), p. 168.

He responds by stating that he never intended to flee his ancestral homeland, but since other noble men have done it, he may end up sharing the same fate.⁵²

What does it mean in this context to be a noble man? Is it purely an indication of being high-born or does the term also extend to cover a man's moral character and reputation? It may be the case that later writers would not be especially worried about the reputations of the first settlers as long as they were clearly of aristocratic Norwegian blood. But one remembers the anxiety of the *Þórðarbók* version of *Landnámabók* that people will think Iceland to have been populated by people fleeing the law. Is a noble man being set up purely in contradistinction to the first two outlaw settlers Ingólfr and Hjörleifr? It could be the case that the saga author wishes to make sure that just because these men have fled 'authority' does not mean that they are of disreputable character.

A good example of the difficulties of translating the nuances and force of the Icelandic occurs in *Eyrbyggja saga*, which also states that many distinguished men were forced to leave Norway ("Fyrir þeim ófriði flýðu margir göfgir menn óðul sín af Nóregi..." - "Because of hostilities many distinguished men fled from their ancestral land in Norway...").⁵³ However, some of these so-called distinguished men feel the need to return to plunder Norway in the summer, the saga author relates, causing the remaining farmers to complain to Haraldr.⁵⁴ The image of the noble, wronged Norwegian landholder is rather tainted by this account: those who have remained are punished in raids inflicted on their property by those who decided to make the move.

⁵² *Þórðar saga hreðu*, p. 168.

⁵³ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (eds), *Eyrbyggja saga*, Íslensk Fornrit IV (Reykjavík, 1935), p. 3.

⁵⁴ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 3.

The author of *Eyrbyggja saga* seems to explain perfunctorily a rather complicated and contradictory narrative. Do those who have remained behind and attempted to retain their ancestral lands become ‘fair game’? Are they somehow to be punished for their allegiance/forbearance of Haraldr?⁵⁵ Or perhaps one can infer that these attacks were an expression of age-old rivalries and feuds which had come to be played out on an international scale.

6. The Quality of the New Land

Reports on the quality of the land are similarly mixed. A highly positive representation from one of the earliest explorers in *Landnámabók* depicts Iceland as a promised land of abundance. Þórolfr smjör, one of Flóki Vilgerðarson’s men, claims that butter drips from every blade of grass (a strange proleptic claim which describes a product of a highly wealthy and long-settled society - one has to have reared cows and have an established dairy farming industry for butter to be in such abundance, after all),⁵⁶ and although they call the island Snowland, the people who stumble across Iceland *en route* to the Faroes are full of praise for the new country.⁵⁷ However, the others on board Flóki’s ship are not as enthusiastic about what they have found: Herjólfur gives a fair and balanced assessment of its merits and demerits, but Flóki himself on the other hand has nothing positive to say about Iceland.⁵⁸ Thus the author of *Landnámabók* alerts us to the possibility of the existence of differing opinions and accounts of the new land.

⁵⁵ In *Haralds saga hárfagra* Snorri Sturluson writes that many powerful men who had fled from Haraldr and settled in the Hebrides and Orkneys for the winter months came back to raid Norway in the summer, and they caused great damage. See Snorri Sturluson, *Haralds saga hárfagra*, in *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit XXVI (Reykjavík, 1961) p. 76.

⁵⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 38 (H and S). His nickname, smjör, means “butter”.

⁵⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 37 (H).

⁵⁸ *Landnámabók*, p. 38 (S). Other narratives of plenty occur in *Landnámabók*: see Ásólfr alskik’s Christian good luck with fish, pp. 62-4 (S), and the story of Þuríðr sundafyllir’s filling of the sound with fish by means of her witchcraft in a time of famine, p. 186 (H and S).

Other positive representations abound: the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* relates that the settlement of Ingólfr Arnarson had become very famous, and that those men who had been there said that there was good land to be had.⁵⁹ Eyvindr Þorsteinsson in *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu* says that he has heard good reports of it,⁶⁰ as have Björn inn austroeni and Helgi bjólan in *Laxdæla saga*:

Björn ok Helgi vildu til Íslands fara, því at þeir þóttusk þaðan mart fýsiligt fregnt hafa; sögðu þar landskosti góða, ok þurfti ekki fé at kaupa; kölluðu vera hvállrétt mikinn ok laxveiðar, en fiskastöð öllum missarum.⁶¹

Björn and Helgi wanted to go to Iceland because they had heard many attractive accounts of the place; they said there was an excellent choice of land there, and one did not need to hand over a penny for it; they said that there were plenty of opportunities for picking up stranded whale, and for salmon fishing, with fishing-grounds all the year round.

Their father is significantly less enthusiastic about the prospect of living at what he terms a fishing station despite their glowing reports, and opts instead for Scotland, where he hears there is good living to be had.⁶² It is a possibility that the author of *Laxdæla saga* is playing on the notion of there having been different accounts of the quality of the newly-discovered land. A similar dual description to that of the sons is offered in *Vatnsdæla saga*, with mention of huge forests, excellent fodder provision and good fishing.⁶³ Again, though, there is an alternative view expressed. Ingimundr in a previous chapter refers to Iceland as a desolate outcrop, calling it an “eyðisker” - “a wild rock or skerry.”⁶⁴ Once more, conflicting accounts are to be found within the

⁵⁹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, Íslenzk Fornrit X (Reykjavík, 1940), p. 151.

⁶¹ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 5.

⁶² *Laxdæla saga*, p. 5.

⁶³ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 31.

⁶⁴ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 27.

same saga. One recalls the name given to Greenland by Eiríkr rauði in order to encourage people to think that the country was an attractive place - did he foresee that there would arise competing reports as had happened with Iceland?⁶⁵ The sagas and *Landnámabók* certainly entertain the possibility of varied perceptions of the new lands, a fact that is hardly surprising if one considers the geographical reality of Iceland. The landscape was then, as now, immensely varied in its prospects, and one's view of the island was almost certainly to be determined by where one happened to pitch up: if one found oneself in, say, a part of the fertile south with good soil, then one was going to be rather more cheerful about the notion of living in Iceland than someone who had managed to find himself perched on some sheer cliffs on the east coast.

7. Reasons for the Migration and the Modern Historians

How was Iceland perceived by those living in mainland Scandinavia? The sagas often involve accounts, reports and opinions of Iceland when the migration question arises for Norwegians experiencing one difficulty or another in their ancestral lands. Therefore the question becomes tied up with 'why should one move to Iceland?' - especially in such numbers. Halldór Hermansson points to the extraordinary nature of the event : "[a]n exodus like that from Norway during the Icelandic colonial period has very few parallels in history."⁶⁶ Before considering the reasons which the saga authors give, I shall explore possibilities from other disciplines and fields, bearing in mind Hastrup's opinion that "[I]t is impossible to give any final answer to the

⁶⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and M. Þórðarson (eds), *Eiríks saga rauða*, Íslensk Fornrit IV (Reykjavík, 1935), p. 201.

⁶⁶ *Íslendingabók*, introduction, p. 4.

question of *why* the settlers were attracted in large numbers to this far northern island.”⁶⁷

Over-population and lack of space have been argued as two key factors in the migration. In *A History of the Vikings* Gwyn Jones states that “[T]he motivating force... was a need for land and pasture.”⁶⁸ Similarly, Foote and Wilson in *The Viking Achievement* write that “[A] principal reason for the emigration was the long-standing dearth of land in western Norway...”.⁶⁹ Else Roesdahl also sees lack of good land in this particular geographical location as the major deciding factor:

The reason that the settlers chose to live in isolated communities at the edge of the known world must have been above all a desire for good land, so that they could support themselves and their families better than at home, where the soil may have been poor or become impoverished, or may have fallen into other hands by inheritance.⁷⁰

These last lines constitute an odd statement. Why should the soil, managed for centuries, suddenly become impoverished? And what of the inheritance issue? The *óðal* system of property and inheritance had served in this region for many years, and there is no indication that it had started to create problems. Perhaps Haraldr did create difficulties for those who wished to keep their own lands, but this is not the same as losing one’s property ‘by inheritance’. Roesdahl does not cite any evidence for these last suggestions. Bruce Gelsinger echoes the idea that lack of land was the crucial factor, and draws attention to the difficulties of the Norwegian landscape in sustaining a burgeoning population:

⁶⁷ Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 8.

⁶⁸ G. Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, second edition (Oxford, 2001), p. 269.

⁶⁹ P. G. Foote and D. M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (London, 1970), p. 52.

⁷⁰ E. Roesdahl, *The Vikings* trans. S. M. Margeson and K. Williams (Harmondsworth, 1991), p. 263.

Overpopulation during the Viking times existed to some extent in all Scandinavia, but nowhere more than in mountainous Norway where good farmland was scarcer than in either Sweden or Denmark. Since Iceland offered land free for the taking, economic reasons must have been among the most important for sacrificing an old home in Norway in order to make a new one in Iceland.⁷¹

This, too, is rather an odd idea. Certainly Norway has less farmable land, but presumably the populations had grown up in relation to the amount of land available and producing. Each land has its own threshold over which conditions become too crowded. Therefore to suggest on these terms that Norway faced a particular difficulty does not make logical sense. In contrast, Hastrup prefers not to see the pressure on the land and of over-population as particularly a west Norwegian one, but instead places the migration to Icelandic firmly within the more general pattern of economic, religious and social changes which the continent of Europe was experiencing as a whole at that time. She interprets these changes as the inception of a 'new order' which was "marked by an increase in population, in changing notions of landownership expressed in feudalism, in centralization of political power, and in the process of Christianization."⁷² Sveinbjörn Rafnsson in turn suggests a slightly different take on land pressure, namely that a reason for over-population in Norway might have been the abundance of slaves. As a product of the Viking expansion the slave-trade flourished: accordingly, over-population was not "purely a demographic event but a socio-economic one", and "possession of slaves called for an opportunity to utilize them."⁷³

⁷¹ B. E. Gelsinger, *Icelandic Enterprise: Commerce and Economy in the Middle Ages* (Columbia, S. C., 1981), p. 4.

⁷² Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 9.

⁷³ Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, "Comments on the Settlement of Iceland", *Norwegian Archaeological Review* X (1977), 69.

This reasoning, that the migration was caused by land shortages in Scandinavia, would certainly seem plausible, but no evidence is offered by these various scholars in support. But although it is hard to see how the fact of over-population on farmland in these areas could be proved, it does seem a likely situation. Another possibility offered is that Viking colonies in the British Isles were beginning to experience some sort of resistance, and that the Viking expansion was checked in this region by the Norsemen's suffering defeat at the hands of the native population.⁷⁴ The expansion, it is argued, faced setbacks not only in the British Isles and but also in continental Europe round about the year 900.⁷⁵ As Jesse Byock writes:

Iceland in the late ninth century looked especially attractive to Norse colonists, in part because of the growing resistance to Viking expansion in some parts of Europe. In England, as well as in Ireland, native populations under leaders such as Alfred the Great were counterattacking and defeating the invaders.⁷⁶

These setbacks can be supported by historical evidence although, of course, their part in the motivation for the migration cannot so easily be made. It is argued that difficulties in this part of the Northern Atlantic were an important factor for those who had made their home in the British Isles in the decision to seek new space to inhabit. So a connection between these setbacks and population movement from both Norway and the British Isles is posited. Iceland, with no native population (potentially there were only the *papar* with which to deal if the later written sources are to be believed), must have presented just such an attractive space if this motivation is correct. It is important to remember that Iceland in terms of its climate and environmental conditions was a much different country than it is today. Thanks to paleological,

⁷⁴ O. Bjarnarson *et al.*, "The Blood Groups of Icelanders", 427.

⁷⁵ Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, p. 281.

⁷⁶ J. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Enfield Lock, 1993), p. 53.

zooarchaeological and place-names research, amongst other disciplines, one can draw some conclusions as to what conditions in Iceland were like before the Norse settlement.⁷⁷ One often mentioned feature is that a far larger percentage of the country was wooded: Ari himself mentions this in *Íslendingabók* (“Í þann tíma var Ísland viði vaxit á milli fjalls ok fjöru” - “At that time Iceland was densely wooded from mountain-side to sea-shore”).⁷⁸ It was capable of sustaining crops in the first few generations of settlement also. As such, Iceland may have presented itself as precisely the new direction the Viking expansion needed to take.

Although it is not often posited as a reason in itself to settle in Iceland, references are made by some scholars to the fearless Viking spirit and love of adventure as being a motivating factor in journeying to new lands. Jones alludes to “restlessness” and “ambition or emulation”, as if bored Vikings suddenly decided that they would attempt to out-do one another in a daring settlement programme.⁷⁹ He writes: “[T]he presence of a vast and for the most part unsailed ocean to the west of Norway and the British Isles was a constant challenge to the land-hungry, wealth-hungry, fame-hungry Vikings of Scandinavia.”⁸⁰ That the settlement of Iceland may have been a difficult process seems, according to Jones, made it all the more attractive as a prospect for the Scandinavians. Else Roesdahl also points to a “spirit of adventure” as playing its part,⁸¹ and ties *Wanderlust* in with the reason (matters political in Norway at the time of the Icelandic settlement) offered by saga authors:

⁷⁷ See Smith, “*Landnám: the Settlement of Iceland...*”, 323-4.

⁷⁸ *Íslendingabók*, p. 48.

⁷⁹ Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, pp. 279-81.

⁸⁰ Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, p. 269.

⁸¹ Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, p. 263.

...according to Icelandic literature, the desire for liberty was an important incentive: many Norwegian chieftains departed in order to avoid subjection to King Harald Finehair. None of the North Atlantic pioneer communities had a king or an earl, and they remained republics of farming magnates with a certain democracy and a high degree of independence until long after the Viking Age.⁸²

Whereas certain saga authors are adamant that Haraldr was the *only* reason that anyone would have moved to Iceland from Norway, it would seem that many scholars are reluctant to suggest Haraldr as the main factor, perhaps due to their wariness of agreeing with what must be highly-biased sources. One has to keep in mind when reading the medieval saga accounts not only the prejudices of the past, but the uneasy relationship which the two countries had experienced during the so-called 'Golden Age' of Iceland, and the increasing pressure which the island community was facing from Norwegian royalty at a time when some versions of the sagas extant today were being written down. Jones is a good example of an historian who is uneasy about pinning all motivation on the machinations of the Norwegian king:

Icelandic tradition in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was insistent that Iceland was settled mainly *fyrir ofríki Haralds konungs*, because of the tyranny of king Harald, and offered chapter and verse for it. But we shall not be far from the truth if we conclude that the usual compulsions, land shortage, pressure of population, restlessness, ambition or emulation, prospects of trade and hope of easy pickings, played a part in the colonization of Iceland, in addition to the special factors of the Viking setbacks around 900 and the 'tyranny' of Harald Fairhair after Hafrsfjord.⁸³

⁸² Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, p. 263.

⁸³ Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, pp. 279-81.

Gelsinger shows similar reluctance when he writes about the insistence of Icelandic writers on Haraldr's power moves and tyranny: "[y]et despite what the saga writers say, political motivation was probably not the only reason to move to Iceland; the great majority of settlers could not have been so directly affected by King Harald's tyranny."⁸⁴ It would certainly seem sensible to take the view that there would have been more than one reason for the migration, and Gelsinger helpfully introduces what surely must have been the case: that different people would have moved for different reasons.

Hastrup takes another line. As was noted above, having detailed the social and political upheaval in Europe as a whole, she goes on to relate how these changes motivated Haraldr in his kingly ambitions. She prefers to read Haraldr himself as responding to pressures from continental Europe, and bringing Norway into line with the developments of his southern neighbours.⁸⁵ Byock too sees this process of change as something which affected Norway in particular but also Scandinavia as a whole:

In Scandinavia, the expansion of royal authority continued throughout the Viking period. In particular, Norway, the homeland of most of the Icelandic settlers, was in the late ninth century experiencing major political and social adjustments. The long-standing tradition of local independence was challenged by Haraldr hárfagri (Fairhair), a petty king from southeastern Norway who became the first ruler to seek control over the entire country.⁸⁶

This is certainly the most frequent explanation offered in the literature for the migration, but in their detail the saga accounts of the migration to Iceland are just as various and contradictory. These accounts involve not only reports on the quality of

⁸⁴ Gelsinger, *Icelandic Enterprise*, p. 4.

⁸⁵ Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 9.

⁸⁶ Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, p. 53.

the new land, but also on the quality of the people who have decided to settle there. Some sagas labour strenuously to deny the claims that Iceland was settled by rogues who were fleeing the law. One recalls again the *Þórðarbók* version of *Landnámabók* which expresses this anxiety and similarly refutes the allegations that the contemporary inhabitants were all descended from scoundrels or slaves.⁸⁷ But from what certain sagas tell us, some settlers *do* appear to have made the move because of their outlawry in Norway. Nevertheless by the far the most overwhelming reason for the migration to Iceland cited in the literature is the kingship of Haraldr inn hárfagri.

8. Haraldr inn hárfagri

Accounts differ in their condemnation of and vitriol against the Norwegian king, and varying explanations of his motives and ambition are related.⁸⁸ On a few occasions trouble in Norway is described without ‘naming names’ - crimes and misdemeanours are kept general and vague. For example, Grímr Ingjaldsson in *Vatnsdæla saga* is attracted to Iceland by the prospect of there being freedom from the assaults of kings and criminals (“frjálsir af ágangi konunga ok illræðismanna”).⁸⁹ Similarly, just as in *Vatnsdæla saga* Haraldr’s name does not appear in conjunction with tyranny and violence in Grímr’s speech, the author of *Finnboga saga* relates how Asbjörn dettiáss

⁸⁷ See Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, *The Book of Settlements*, p. 6.

⁸⁸ There are other accounts of Haraldr’s kingship outside of saga literature in various histories of Norway. These tend to be more congratulatory of his exploits. In *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* his usurping of the sole rulership of Norway is described as an impressive achievement built on his father’s success and as a political move which brought peace to the country: see M. J. Driscoll (ed.), *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum: a Twelfth Century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway* (London, 1995), pp. 2-5. In *Fagrskinna* the representation of Haraldr is favourable. He is perfect in his accomplishments. However, it does say that he used a variety of means in order to make the kingship his own, including tough battles, fair language and deep cunning: see Bjarni Einarsson (ed.), *Fagrskinna – Nóregs Konunga Tal*, Íslenzk Fornrit XXIX (Reykjavík, 1985), pp. 58-65. In Snorri Sturluson’s *Haralds saga hárfagra*, the nineteenth chapter deals with the settlement of Iceland and the Faroe Islands. It does not say by whom exactly: whereas the further-flung parts of Norway are settled by his enemies (“fjándmann hans”), Iceland and the Faroes are passively discovered and settled in this time of unrest (“Í þeim ófriði”). The remainder of Haraldr’s kingship is a seemingly balanced, objective view of the ruler’s ambitions and actions: see *Haralds saga hárfagra*, p. 76 for the nineteenth chapter; pp. 59-98 for the entire saga.

⁸⁹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 31.

fled to escape “those who were in power”, and does not mention Haraldr specifically: the saga author writes of injustices and outrages in general with no explicit apportioning of blame.⁹⁰

There are also sagas in which the author attempts to present a balanced account of Haraldr, his actions and his kingship, of which *Víglundar saga* is one such example. The king of Norway is described as follows:

Haraldr inn hárfagri... tók ungr konungdóm.
Haraldr var allra manna vitrastr ok vel búinn at
íþróttum öllum, þeim er konungligri tign byrjaði.⁹¹

Haraldr inn hárfagri took the throne when he was a young man. Haraldr was the wisest of all men and well equipped for all those accomplishments which were appropriate to his royal position.

The saga author then goes on to describe his faults, and chooses not to omit in his representation the less flattering aspects of Haraldr’s kingship. The Norwegian king surrounds himself with men of prowess and rewards them well for their loyalty and service, but those who go against his commands suffer at his hands:

...sumir urðu landflæmdir, en sumir drepnir;
kastaði konungr þá sinni eign á allt þat, er þeir áttu
eptir, en margir mikils háttar menn flýðu ór
Nóregi ok þoldu eigi álögur konungs, þeir sem
váru af stórum ættum, ok vildu heldr fyrirláta óðul
sín ok frændr ok vini en liggja undir þrælkan ok
ánauðaroki konungs, ok leituðu mjök til ýmissa
landa. Um hans daga byggðist mjök Ísland, því at
þangat leituðu margir þeir, sem eigi þoldu ríki
Haralds konungs.⁹²

⁹⁰ Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Finnboga saga ramma*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIV (Reykjavík, 1959), p. 253.

⁹¹ Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Víglundar saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIV (Reykjavík, 1959), p. 63.

⁹² *Víglundar saga*, p. 63.

...some were banished from the country, and others were killed; the king then seized all the property which they left behind, and many men of high rank fled Norway since those who were of noble lineage did not endure the king's taxation, and they wished rather to leave behind their ancestral lands and family and friends than be subjected to slavery and the yoke of the king's oppression, and they migrated in numbers to many different lands. It was during that time that Iceland became widely settled because many people had migrated there who would not endure the control of the king.

This description sets up fine distinctions whilst simultaneously making clear the likelihood of one's fate under Haraldr's rule. If one can withstand the pressure from above, one may enjoy the benefits a generous and loyalty-loving king might bestow; if, on the other hand, one cannot stomach his over-ambitious rulership, then one must leave quickly or face the unpleasant consequences. *Vatnsdæla saga* similarly shows the two sides to Haraldr's rulership: he grants lands to those that support him, but drives from the land, maims or kills those who are against him.⁹³ Also, Ingimundr inn gamli is supported in his decision to move to Iceland by the Norwegian king.⁹⁴ In both of these sagas, this decision is based on personal choice: one can attempt to co-operate with the king and decide to remain in Norway in peace and prosperity, or one must leave the country if one does not wish to submit to the yoke of the king's rule.

Grettis saga concentrates attention on those who oppose Haraldr: the author relates how those who fought against the king incurred his wrath, resulting in the confiscation of their property and condemnation to outlawry.⁹⁵ By mentioning this, the author points to motivation other than simple greed and ambition on the part of

⁹³ *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 25-6.

⁹⁴ *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 33-4. Rather comically, Haraldr alludes to the fact that going to Iceland has become a rather fashionable thing ("sem nú tekr mjök at tíðask").

⁹⁵ Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Grettis saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit VII (Reykjavík, 1936), p. 6.

Haraldr: he wishes instead to rid his new kingdom of those whom he can no longer trust. It would seem common sense to punish those who had dared to commit themselves in battle against him - an example of strong and sensible kingship. This is yet another representation of the Norwegian king which attempts to explain the migration to Iceland in terms of personal clashes and differences of opinion, as opposed to blind, indiscriminate greed. *Laxdæla saga* differs in its approach to Haraldr's ambition. In this instance it is Haraldr's quest for the title of overall ruler, a quest propelled more by the title's glamour than by any real desire for rulership, that prompts one character, Ketill flatnefr, to feel compelled to leave Norway:

...ríki Haralds konungs ins hárfagr, svá at engi fylkiskonungr þreifsk í landinu né annat stórmenni, nema hann réði einn nafnbótum þeira.⁹⁶

...Haraldr konungr gained such power that no provincial king nor men of rank could thrive in the country unless he alone controlled their titles.

This seems a rather less tyrannical approach: either one submits to the yoke of Haraldr's rule, leaves the country, or attempts to withstand his violence. It is not even that he wishes to control the wealth of the country and exploit its prosperity (although one might imagine that similar demands for tribute could be made in a situation like this); rather, he wants simply to be *called* the ruler of all the land. This implies that people can still maintain their lands as they did before (they still have the potential to thrive - "þreifa"), with the one exception that their property would not strictly be called theirs anymore.

⁹⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 4.

One important advantage in some accounts seemed to be the assumption that one could live a free and independent life in Iceland. In *Þorsteins þáttr tjaldstæðings* the eponymous character has to leave Norway because of some troubles and his opposition to Haraldr inn hárfagri. He expresses his intention of settling in Iceland (“Nú vilda ek hér staðfestast ok vera frjáls” - “Now I want to establish myself here and be free”).⁹⁷ The notion of a permanent new abode is introduced through the use of the verb *staðfesta*, which is stronger than Þorsteinn simply stating that he wishes to live or settle in Iceland. In the new country one has the possibility to establish oneself permanently on the land as one was used to on one’s ancestral territory without having to bow to Haraldr. The difference between the stability of land tenure in Norway and the potential ‘free-for-all’ in Iceland must have been a cause of anxiety for those considering the move, but in this *þáttr* the possibility of reproducing the old security in one’s new land is portrayed. However, the author of *Þorsteins saga tjaldstæðings* describes another ambition of the king’s - he says that the reason that Haraldr brought Norway under his control was for tribute purposes (“at sköttum”).⁹⁸ Here Haraldr’s actions are seen to be financially motivated, and not out of a question of disloyalty, an over-ambitious expansion of his kingdom or even a wish to be called king over all. The pursuit of riches is portrayed as Haraldr’s only interest.

Similarly in *Bárðar saga*, the author describes how Haraldr proceeded to tax the entire population once he had won the kingdom of Norway:

⁹⁷ Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds), *Þorsteins þáttr tjaldstæðings*, Íslensk Fornrit XIII (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 430. As Clunies Ross writes, “Being on the wrong side of the king is... a kind of shorthand for signalling an individual’s espousal of the value of independence and the kind of gritty determination that led people to seek a new life in Iceland.” See Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, p. 94.

⁹⁸ *Þorsteins þáttr tjaldstæðings*, p. 426.

Ok er hann var fullgerr í því starfi, varð hann svá ríkr ok ráðgjarn, at sá skyldi engi maðr vera í milli Raumelfar suðr ok Finnabús norðr, sá er nökkurs var ráðandi, svá at eigi gyldi honum skatt, jafnvel þeir, sem saltit brenndu, svá sem hinir, sem á mörkinni yrktu.⁹⁹

And when he had fully accomplished this task, he was so controlling and power-hungry that there could be no man between Raumelfr in the south and Finnabú in the north who did not pay him tribute, neither those who burned seaweed nor those who worked the fields.

There is an inevitability expressed in these lines: the hero of the saga cannot expect better treatment from the king, so he prepares to leave the country. No one can escape Haraldr's control, as the saga author eloquently reinforces it. He is taxing even the poorest of the country's inhabitants with the implication that they could not have easily afforded it. The author seems to be describing a process of extortion here.

Other saga authors are more inclined to suggest that one simply had no choice *but* to leave the country. *Harðar saga* states that some Norwegians felt they could no longer endure the injustice and tyranny of Haraldr (“...vildu þeir heldr flýja eignir sínar en þola ágang ok ójafnað, eigi konungi en öðrum manni” - “...they would rather flee their own lands than endure aggression and injustice, either from the king or from another person”).¹⁰⁰ Örlygr Böðvarsson is just one example of many settlers in *Landnámabók* who have to leave because of his unexplained oppression (“fyrir ofríki Haralds konungs hárfagra...”).¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds), *Bárðar saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII (Reykjavík, 1941), pp. 106-7.

¹⁰⁰ Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds), *Harðar saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 3.

¹⁰¹ *Landnámabók*, p. 196 (H and S). Interestingly, this follows immediately an account of how Þórólfr fasthaldi went to Iceland with Haraldr's approval - “með ráði Haralds konungs”: see *Landnámabók*,

Egils saga contains the blackest portrait of Haraldr in particular and royal authority in general. Early on in the saga when the discovery of Iceland is described, Haraldr is seen making his own landtake, but with other people's land in Norway. Once he has taken over the kingdoms he has recently won, he keeps an eye out on the other powerful landowners, giving them the option of entering his retinue or leaving the country, or, the saga author comments sardonically, being injured or killed:

Haraldr konungr eignaðisk í hverju fylki óðul öll
ok allt land, byggt ok óbyggt, ok jafnvel sjóinn ok
vötnin, ok skyldu allir búendr vera hans
leiglendingar, svá þeir, er á mörkina ortu, ok
saltkarlarnir ok allir veiðimenn, bæði á sjó ok
landi, þá váru allir þeir honum lýðskyldir.¹⁰²

Haraldr konungr took over in each province the
ancestral estates and all the land, inhabited or
uninhabited, and even the seas and the lakes, and
all the farmers had to be his tenants so that those
who worked in the forests, those who dried salt
and those who hunted, both at sea and on land, all
had to pay him homage.

These actions are portrayed in a negative light, since he is needlessly taking those things over which he can have no definite control. The comprehensiveness of his claim is represented as being insatiable and greedy as he devours even that which he can have no real use for, the seas and the uninhabited areas. Haraldr's actions are later contrasted with the generosity of Icelanders. Skalla-Grímr freely gives the prestigious newcomer Óleifr some land, but immediately following this the saga author tells how Haraldr confiscates the lands which Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr leave behind, and how his hatred of the family and anyone associated with them

p. 196. Hrollaugr Rögnvaldsson jarls is another example of one travelling with the king's permission: see *Landnámabók*, pp. 316-7 (H and S). Not everyone, then, is represented as incurring the king's wrath.

¹⁰² Sigurður Nordal (ed.), *Egils saga*, Íslensk Fornrit II (Reykjavík, 1933), pp. 11-2.

increases in its venom.¹⁰³ Icelandic open-handedness is set against Norwegian tight-fistedness: Skalla-Grímr recognizes a worthy man when he sees one, whereas Haraldr punishes good men without good reason.

Conclusion

In the analysis of how different texts approach Iceland and the initial settlement, I have explored the possibility that each text might have its own agenda. Each author has his own presuppositions and concerns which, when examined, can reveal a morass of differences and contradictions within what have hitherto been considered uniform ideas and standard procedures across the textual evidence. There is even disagreement within the versions of *Landnámabók* as to who arrived when. The representation of the approach to Iceland upholds what was posited in the preface - that there is scant consensus when reconstructing the past with regard to land and landownership. As Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn write in *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World*, "...the Icelanders' conceptualisations of space and place and their connections to them are highly individualized and sometimes deeply contradictory."¹⁰⁴ However, this chapter, especially in its discussion of Haraldr, has also demonstrated that there may have been differences in what *actually* happened to those first settlers who made the move. Some might have moved because of Haraldr's enmity, such as Kveld-Úlfr in *Egils saga*, but others, such as Ingimundr in *Vatnsdæla saga*, may have gone with the Norwegian king's blessing. We must contend with the different actual experiences of

¹⁰³ *Egils saga*, pp. 76-7.

¹⁰⁴ G. R. Overing and M. Osborn, *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World* (Minneapolis, 1994), p. 48.

individuals as well as individual saga authors' different attempts to reconstruct the past.

Chapter Two: LANDTAKE IN ICELAND

Introduction

There is much to be gained from archaeological evidence in building up a picture of how Iceland was settled. As was mentioned in chapter one, the archaeological agenda in Iceland has changed in recent years from asking questions of dating to attempting to ascertain where and how the first settlers took land and decided to build their farms. As Orri Vésteinsson states:

[i]nstead of questions of when and where from, the aspect of the *landnám* most in need of study is how. While we can be fairly certain when Iceland was settled, we can only hope to understand where the settlers came from and, possibly more importantly, why they came, if we can appreciate how they went about colonising the country and what sort of society they built for themselves in the tenth century. Research into this aspect of the *landnám* also has the potential to increase our understanding and appreciation of the Sagas.¹

This potential is an exciting prospect. I intend, therefore, to compare different literary accounts of various aspects of the landtaking process, and, where appropriate, draw attention to archaeological evidence which could shed some light on as to why certain settlers' stories have been told in a certain way. Much can be, and is now, known about the process of settlement in Iceland from the discoveries of archaeology. For example, it took time for the settlers to build up the practice of constructing and using shielings for the purposes of summer pasturing of their livestock. Cattle seemed to be very important in the early stages, but sheep became the preferred livestock later on, and from artefact

¹ Orri Vésteinsson, "Patterns of Settlement in Iceland...", 5.

assemblages it would appear that earlier on in the settlement there was not quite as much foreign trade and contact as was originally supposed: home-grown artefacts exist in a higher ratio to foreign objects at the beginning of the Norse colonisation.² However, what I shall concentrate on in regard to Icelandic settlement is what archaeology can tell us about where and how the process took place and within what time-scale. I shall then go on to examine the textual accounts with their varying *landnám* tales and, where appropriate, highlight where archaeology and the written tradition might coincide. But, as throughout the thesis, the main focus is the differing representations of landtaking and landownership offered by the authors of the family sagas, and the startling variations to be found in *Landnámabók*.

1. Where and when did the settlement first take place?

One imagines that in the earliest journeys to the new country, where the settlers landed was wholly decided by where the currents and wind took them. Only as more and more geographical information became available could settlers make informed choices about where the best land was to be had.

There was only a certain percentage of Iceland's total landmass that was available to be used for farming and for habitation. The large interior of glacial ice which advanced and retreated with the seasons provided a natural barrier for those farms which were furthest inland, and an insurmountable obstacle to travel in winter. Iceland inevitably exists as a "socialised margin [which] interacts with

² All of these observations are taken from Smith, "*Landnám: the Settlement of Iceland...*", 329.

and is conditioned by the spatial centrality of wilderness”,³ or as Hastrup puts it, “Icelandicness seems premised by an acute sense of liminality being the normal state of affairs...”⁴

Given the harsh reality of Iceland’s geographical situation, the coast would have seemed a good place to start a new farm. As K. P. Smith states, “medieval descriptions of the settlement process are in accord with current archaeological data. Both suggest initial settlement on the coast, initial use of the interior for non-residential activities and a late spread of settlements out from the coastal cells.”⁵ Orri Vésteinsson also posits two phases in the settlement of Iceland: first, the founding of large estates in wetland areas, followed by large estates in less accessible areas when all of the good land had been taken (no one would have preferred to have farmed these remoter areas given the choice):⁶

It has been suggested that the very first settlers preferred to locate their farms in areas of flooded wetlands; that such settlements were inhabited by large numbers of people and quickly formed into large estates with a wide and varied economic base. Latecomers had to make do with slices of land in between these large estates. When all the really good and easily occupied had been seized, a second phase was entered wherein land of lesser quality was chopped up into small units and sold or rented out to new arrivals or second-generation Icelanders.⁷

³ Overing and Osborn, *Landscape of Desire*, p. 52.

⁴ K. Hastrup, *A Place Apart: An Anthropological study of the Icelandic World* (Oxford, 1998), p. 199.

⁵ Smith, “*Landnám: the Settlement of Iceland...*”, 329.

⁶ Orri Vésteinsson, “Patterns of Settlement...”, 21.

⁷ Orri Vésteinsson, “Patterns of Settlement...”, 26. From the place-name evidence it would appear that the same was true of the Norse settlement in Scotland. See B. E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester, 1987), p. 104.

Which part of the coast was settled first, though? There is a paucity of very early sites in the north and east of the country, and although this may be due to the relative lack of archaeological research in these areas as well as the lack of tephrochronological evidence, it “may suggest that southern and western Iceland’s broad plains and warmer climate were more attractive to the first settlers than the narrow and snow-blanketed mountain valleys of the north and east.”⁸ Does this analysis correlate with what is found in the literary-historical tradition? The two main texts which detail the settlement of Iceland, *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*, do not represent the time scale in a way which makes comparison with archaeological material possible. In the former, the landtake is organised by geographical area (the account goes clockwise around the island, noting settlements and settlers), and, consequently, there is no sense of the relative chronology of the habitation of different areas. As Smith states:

Landnámabók’s model of the settlement process is defined more in terms of social actions than fixed chronology. Thus the distribution of settlers across the landscape, the areas of their land claims, their alliances, who gave land and who received it are described in detail. In contrast, information on the sequence of settlers’ arrivals or the spread of settlements across the landscape is only sketchily developed and may be contradicted in different versions of the document.⁹

Íslendingabók, as has been mentioned, does not interest itself in the stories of individuals but rather in the grander narrative of Icelandic history. However, it does mention who settled the different quarters of the country in a section entitled

⁸ Smith, “*Landnám: the Settlement of Iceland...*”, 328.

⁹ Smith, “*Landnám: the Settlement of Iceland...*”, 321. Orri Vésteinsson suggests the possibility that the earliest sites might have been picked for their ability to sustain animal husbandry. See Orri Vésteinsson, “*Patterns of Settlement...*”, 10.

“Frá landnámsmönnum ok laga setning” - “Of the Landtakers and the Laying
Down of the Rule of Law”:

Hrollaugr, sonr Rögnvalds jarls á Mœri, byggði
austr á Síðu; þaðan eru Síðumenn komnir.

Ketilbjörn Ketilson, maðr norrœn,
byggði suðr á Mosfelli inu efra; þaðan eru
mosfellingar komnir.

Auðr, dóttir Ketils flatnefs, hersis
norrœns, byggði vestr í Breiðafirði; þaðan eru
Breiðfirðingar komnir.

Helgi inn magri, norrœn, sonr
Eyvindar austmanns byggði norðr í Eyjafirði;
þaðan eru Breiðfirðingar komnir.¹⁰

Hrollaugr, the son of Rögnvald jarl from
Mœri, settled in the east at Síða; from there
the men of Síða are descended.

Ketilbjörn Ketilson, a Norwegian man,
settled in the south at Lower Mosfell; from
there the men of Mosfell are descended.

Auðr, the daughter of Ketill flatnefs, a
Norwegian noble man, settled in the west at
Breiðafjörðr; from there the men of
Breiðafjörðr are descended.

Helgi inn magri, a Norwegian, the son
of Eyvindr austmann, settled in the north at
Eyjafjörðr; from there the men of Eyjafjörðr
are descended.

With this division into quarters, the new country in *Íslendingabók* is made from
the beginning a controllable and controlled area: Iceland becomes both physically
and conceptually easier to manage. It is even divided up textually in both extant
manuscripts of *Íslendingabók*, A.M. 113a, fol. (“B”) and A.M. 113b, fol. (“A”):
each quarter is indented as if beginning a new paragraph, and the section stands
out from the page because of this indentation.¹¹ But, importantly, both
Landnámabók and *Íslendingabók* fail to engage with the notion of a fixed
chronology with regard to the time-scale of the settlement, and, although the

¹⁰ *Íslendingabók*, p. 49.

¹¹ See Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók Ara Fróða A.M. 113a and 113b, fol.*, introduction by
Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík, 1956).

former does give indications of who arrived first and who came later within each of the regions, there is no strong sense of the settlement spreading inland over time as more and more people arrive, nor is one able to make comparisons regarding which areas became settled the most quickly. The landtake and organisation of Skalla-Grímr's property is an ideal example of the discrepancy in timing between the archaeological evidence and the written tradition. In *Landnámabók* and *Egils saga* (as will be examined in closer detail later) it is stated that Skalla-Grímr took land and then positioned other people on it at various farms. However, the archaeological evidence does not point this way: "...the historical sources suggest that this entire process took place within the lifetime of single individuals... who directed much of the process. Archaeological data, in contrast, suggest that the process took at least a century and was characterized by local diversity and experimentation, rather than planning", according to Smith.¹²

The early chronology of the landtake in the texts evades not only correlation with the archaeological evidence, but also the date by which the process of settlement had terminated. According to Ari, Iceland was "*albyggd*" - fully-settled - within the space of sixty years.¹³ *Albyggd*, one supposes, must surely mean that, after a while, people stopped coming to the island: this is the most plausible inference. Because of the impenetrable, dangerous, vast centre of the island, it cannot have implied that the entirety of the country was being farmed to its fullest extent. It seems as though *albyggd* may be a convenient short-hand

¹² Smith, "*Landnám: the Settlement of Iceland...*", 340.

¹³ *Íslendingabók*, p. 49. In *Egils saga*, the author explains the term *albyggd* in another way: he states that all of the original *landnámsmenn* had all died, and that their sons and grandsons now were living on the land. See *Egils saga*, p. 240.

term which implied that those parts of Iceland which could be settled were taken, without the author having to engage with the question of numbers or the large, intractable space with its hazards in the middle of the island. The term certainly lends to the representation of the country the notion of completeness and stability which any mention of the uninhabitable area might upset. If one were used to thinking of one's country as being at capacity in terms of population numbers, then it might have posed difficulties to conceive of the time when it was deemed 'full enough' for the migration to stop. Orri Vésteinsson suggests another way to interpret Ari's use of the term *albyggð*: it "only has to mean that all land had been claimed, not that all land was already utilized by 930. In fact, it is natural to expect the full utilization of the land to have been a long process of exploration and making of mistakes; woods had to be cleared and knowledge had to be established on how to make the most of available resources."¹⁴ Smith makes a similar point:

Currently available archaeological data do not refute the medieval texts' chronology for the country's discovery or initial settlement, but it is clear that the frontier of settlement was still expanding into the interior of Iceland long after the AD 930 date by which Iceland was said to have been fully settled.¹⁵

Perhaps, then, Ari too was envisaging that all the people who moved to Iceland had done so within sixty years of the initial settlement, and that, in geographical terms, the settlement was still happening beyond that point as the inhabitants moved inland in search of new resources. His concept of *albyggð* might have been a purely demographic one. But the word, 'all-settled' manages to convey more

¹⁴ Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power, and Social Change* (Oxford, 2000), p. 11.

¹⁵ Smith, "*Landnám*: the Settlement of Iceland...", 339-40.

than a sense of population control, but a physical security, and a means of mastering the chaos the uninhabitable, mysterious centre represents.

2. Who made the move and in what numbers?

It has been pointed out by both E. Paul Durrenberger and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen that the business of moving to Iceland would have been an expensive one. The former asserts that only chieftains would have had the capital, and that they moved their households *en masse* in order to bring to the new country a semblance of the old Norwegian economic and social order.¹⁶ Sørensen suggests that, because one needed to be rich, only those from the wealthiest parts of Norway could afford to make the move.¹⁷

The idea that the richest might have moved with their entire household is supported by the archaeological evidence. A common sense approach is taken by Orri Vésteinsson:

The sheer size of the original estates and the number of households they later sustained in later centuries suggests that they were from the beginning worked by large groups of people.

¹⁶ E. P. Durrenberger, *The Dynamics of Medieval Iceland: Political Economy and Literature* (Iowa City, 1992), p. 29.

¹⁷ Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, p. 13. See also p. 28: "In daily life the territorial community therefore became more important than the old family ties. The basis for the new grouping was already established before landfall by the shipboard fellowship. These groups of twenty to thirty people set off together and had, so to speak, converted all their lives into what could be carried on board a ship, fitted between its ribs. After their arrival they built one or more farms in the same area."

The principal reason why a large number of people were required on each estate seems to have been the perceived need to maximise the utilisation of the greatest variety of resources. This probably far exceeded the bare minimum needed to survive, especially after the initial phase of settlement, and may suggest an economy geared towards equipping a chosen few with the means to eat, drink and show off.¹⁸

This certainly is a plausible theory - such huge estates would have required a large number of workers to maintain them. But what of the archaeological evidence for early settlement sites being inhabited by large groups of people? The best evidence offered for this is the discovery that a number of these early sites in Iceland had more than one long-house, or main hall. At Herjólfssdalur, Reykjavík, Bessastaðir and Granastaðir two long-houses have been found at each site, as well as other “extra” buildings such as byres, cooking house and pit-houses with spaces for human habitation incorporated. At Hvítarholt there are three long-houses (just as there are at L’Anse aux Meadows in North America, the celebrated Norse out-post in Vinland).¹⁹ Later medieval sites tend only to have one long-house. Therefore, it has been suggested that the two houses at these sites were not used at the same time. However, as Vésteinsson states there is:

...nothing to suggest this in the stratigraphy of any of these sites and this is not the way in which people rebuilt their houses in later centuries. Excavations of Icelandic farm mounds have shown that people normally rebuild their houses on top of the earlier ones, often preserving both the shape and size of the earlier building.²⁰

¹⁸ Orri Vésteinsson, “Patterns of Settlement...”, 26.

¹⁹ Orri Vésteinsson, “Patterns of Settlement...”, 13-6.

²⁰ Orri Vésteinsson, “Patterns of Settlement...”, 14.

Do these “extra” buildings indicate that these early sites were inhabited by more than one household? Why not build a large hall which could accommodate everyone? What is the logic of having two or more long-houses? We might think again in the direction of Vínland and remember that in *Grænlendinga saga* the households, owing to the machinations of Freydís, are separated: her company resides in Leifr’s houses and the merchant brothers Helgi and Finnbogi are forced to build their own accommodation.²¹ But other reasons could also explain the situation. If separate families had joined together to make the move to Iceland in “economic co-operation” (Orri Vésteinsson’s term), then these households may still have wished to retain something of their independence and status in the new country.²² Two heads of two families might not have managed for pride’s sake to have shared a hall: one would have had to have been the “guest” (sitting in the place termed “öndvegi it úæðra” - the lower or second high-seat) according to the formal seating arrangements which were customary for the Norse in this period.²³ Even if this were not the case, there is yet the fact that these early sites must have had enough inhabitants, be they from separate households or not, to fill these buildings.

What evidence is there in the sagas and *Landnámabók* for these large groups making the initial settlements? Where do the textual accounts mention these grand establishments? Certainly the big landtakers, such as Auðr en djúpúðga, bring with them good numbers of family members and slaves, but the usual pattern is for these groups to be given their own lands to farm, and for

²¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (eds), *Grænlendinga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit IV (Reykjavík, 1935), p. 265.

²² There are many examples still today of ‘co-operative units’ in rural cultures (for example, in Ireland and Italy) in which a farmyard is shared by two, three or four families.

²³ See R. Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon (eds), *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, second edition W. Craigie (Oxford, 1957), pp. 764-5.

latecomers to rent or buy from them (see below for these practices). There are occasions (also explored below) in which later travellers stay with established settlers whilst they decide where to make their own landtake, but this would hardly warrant extra buildings and facilities in the meantime. It would seem likely, as Smith suggests, that these processes of expansion were greatly speeded up in the textual recounting of the settlement, and therefore where different families were given farms within the lifetime of the original settler, in reality they might have moved out from the main farm as late as a couple of centuries afterwards.

There are a few of examples in *Landnámabók* where the author details which people make the journey across the water to Iceland together. On board Örlygr enn gamli's ship is his blood brother, plus Þórbjörn spörr, Þorbjörn tálkni and Þorbjörn skúma.²⁴ These men are not relatives of Örlygr, and must represent different households who decided to make the move together. Another example can be found in Hrómundr Þórisson's voyage. His landtake is described in both the *Hauksbók* and *Sturlubók* redactions, and then later the landtake of his shipmate Ásgeirr austmannaskelfir is mentioned.²⁵ These men are not related, but have simply travelled on the same ship. These clues support the notion that more than one household would migrate together.

²⁴ *Landnámabók*, pp. 52-3 (H and S).

²⁵ *Landnámabók*, pp. 84-6 (H and S).

There are a couple of other clues in *Landnámabók* as to the presence of these larger dwellings. There are three instances in which, I believe, the author is attempting to explain why some farms have exceptionally large provision, but does so unconvincingly and confusingly.

Atli Valason and his son Ásmundr go to Iceland and take land between Fura and Lýsa. Ásmundr lives at Þórutóptir in Langaholt and marries a woman called Þóra. It is at this point that the manuscripts disagree as to details of what happens next. Both *Þórðarbók* and *Melabók* say that the place once called Langaholt is now called Þórutóptir.²⁶ In *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* it is stated that Ásmundr lived at Þórutóptir *in* Langaholt, and that he married Langaholt-Þóra. As later witnesses, *Þórðarbók* and *Melabók* are, one supposes, better placed to comment on what the place was called after the events described. According to a footnote in the Íslenzk Fornrit edition of *Landnámabók*, Langaholt has been identified, but not the place which was called Þórutóptir: guesses have been made, but there is no convincing proof.²⁷ It is odd that both *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* have the name Langaholt-Þóra. Why was she called this? Was she called this prior to her marriage with Ásmundr or after the event? And, why, if she was called this, does her name reside in the other place-name, Þórutóptir?²⁸ The story becomes even more confusing:

Ásmundr bjó í Langarholti at Þórutóptum;
hann átti Langaholts-Þóru. Þá er Ásmundr
eldsisk, bjó hann í Öxl, en Þóra bjó þá eptir ok
lét gera skála sinn um þvera þjóðbraut ok lét
þar jafnan standa borð, en hon sat úti í stóli ok
laðaði þar gesti, hvern er mat vildi eta.
(*Sturlubók*)

²⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 102, note 5 (S).

²⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 102, note 5 (S).

²⁸ The problems of place-names and landownership will be discussed in chapter four.

Ásmundr bjó í Langarholti at Þórutóptum; hann átti Langaholts-Þóru. En þá er Ásmundr eldisk, skilðisk hann við Þóru fyrir mannkvæmð ok fór í Öxl at búa til dauðadags.²⁹(*Hauksbók*)

Ásmundr lived at Langaholt at Þórutóptir; he married Langaholt-Þóra. When Ásmundr grew older, he lived at Öxl, but Þóra remained behind there after he left and had herself a hall built athwart the road and there was always food on the table, and she sat outside on a chair and invited in there every guest who wanted to some food to eat.

Ásmundr lived at Langaholt at Þórutóptir; he married Langaholt-Þóra. But when Ásmundr grew older, he divorced Þóra because of all the guests she was bringing in, and went to Öxl and lived there until he died.

What has happened to this account? Firstly, looking at the events described in *Sturlubók* there is the odd tale of the unusually large provision made by Þóra. It is not related why she was left behind, and why she has another hall built. Presumably at Langaholt Ásmundr had already built himself an hall when he first arrived and took land with his father. But this does not clarify why Þóra did not inhabit the house which she had shared with her husband previously. It might also be noted that Ásmundr moves to a place, Öxl, which is not within his landtake (it is not between Fura and Lýsa): the author does not mention why this might be. The wife has been left with two halls as well as space and provision whilst the husband is not even on his own landtake any longer. What is the real story behind this confusing and elliptic description of events? Might it be that the author is attempting to explain why there were originally two halls where he only knew the existence of one family of settlers? There must be some reason behind

²⁹ *Landnámabók*, p. 102 (S); p. 103 (H) and p. 105 (H).

this intriguing story of the woman with her doors always open in her second, purpose-built hall, and I suspect that the author of the *Sturlubók* account has half of an idea as to why the dwellings there were so large, but has only succeeded in producing a rather garbled explanation of events.

The *Hauksbók* version looks as though it is attempting to make sense of the episode as recounted in *Sturlubók*. It cites the large provision and open invitation as the reason why the couple separates, but does not mention anything of the new hall. Neither does it explain why the husband moves outside of his own landtake after the divorce. If it is not the case that this version is an attempt at a simplification of the events described in *Sturlubók*, it is still at best a laconic and odd entry in *Landnámabók* which makes little sense.

The motif of large hall space occurs in two further episodes in *Landnámabók*. Geirríðr, the sister of Geirrøðr, is given a farm in Borgardalr by her brother, but then carries out her own building project in a description which is very similar to that of Þóra's behaviour:

Geirríðr sparði ekki mat við menn ok lét gera skála sinn um þjóðbraut þvera; hon sat á stóli ok laðaði úti gesti, en borð stóð inni jafnan ok matr á.³⁰

Geirríðr didn't spare any expense when it came to feeding folk, and she had herself a hall built across the road; she sat on a chair outside and invited guests inside where the table was always laid with food.

³⁰ *Landnámabók*. n. 127 (H and S).

Both passages are very close in detail and choice of expression: both women have a hall built athwart the main road; they sit outside on a chair and invite people in, and the table inside the hall is always prepared. It almost has the quality of a folk-tale motif. Geirríður is a widow whose son has gone off on Viking raids, and Þóra is separated from her husband, so perhaps it is meant as a pitiful image of the husband-less woman with no family for which to cater. More likely, it is a literalisation of the approval of hospitality: having two halls could be another metaphorical marker of generosity for the woman who provides for everybody. But there is also a possibility that these narratives are a means of explaining farmsteads with more than one central hall.

There is one more tale in *Landnámabók* which bears similarities to those above. Þorbrandr ørrek takes land and lives at Þorbrandsstaðir where he has built a hall so big that all those who go along that side of the river have to ride through it with their packhorses. He too provides generous hospitality for those who need it in the form of standing invitations to dinner for everyone.³¹ As Jakob Benediktsson points out in his edition of *Landnámabók*, there is not much call for such hospitality in such an isolated area: Þorbrandsstaðir is situated in a remote part of the mountains.³² Why, then, the need for the huge hall? Is the author of Þorbrandr's tale recounting a story which attempts to explain why there was such a large hall at such an isolated location? Certainly, there is not the mention of two halls, but there is the recurrence of the generosity motif as well as a description of a very large building. Did Þorbrandsstaðir, Þórutóptir and the farm in Borgardalr witness the occupation of a large initial group of settlers, perhaps comprising

³¹ *Landnámabók*, p. 234 (H and S).

³² *Landnámabók*, p. 234, note 5 (H and S).

more than one household, of which later commentators were unaware? Did stories which tried to make sense of the large dwellings grow up around these places which had become abandoned or ruined?³³ These curious narratives, I think, support the idea suggested by archaeological finds that the initial settlers came over in large groups, perhaps of more than one household, but later writers have sought other stories to explain large, maybe deserted, farmsteads in the absence of clear knowledge of the history of the sites.

Having focused on what can be known about the settlement of Iceland through archaeological advances, and attempting to find corresponding information from the literary tradition to support these finds, I shall now change the focus to the textual representation of *landnám*, and, where appropriate, turn to other disciplines for corroborative evidence.

3. Help from Norway in Icelandic Landtaking

In the textual representation of landtaking there is to be found a mythologisation of different practices and procedures for successful settlement. There are several instances in these texts of the practice of throwing overboard one's high-seat pillars on the journey from Norway to Iceland.³⁴ It would appear that these high-

³³ See *Landnámabók*, p. 197, for mention of the large ruins of Hella-Björn's hall at his second farm, which had been abandoned by the author's time.

³⁴ There appear to be two different items cast overboard used in this practice: *setstokkr* and (öndvegi-/öndugi-) *súla*. According to Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon's dictionary the former appears to be a beam or post which stood between the *set* and the centre of the hall, and there are more often than not more than one (see, for example, Eiríkr rauði's annoyance when Þorgestr does not return his *setstokka*, *Landnámabók*, pp. 130-1 (H and S), and R. Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 525, and p. 765). The latter is the upright or pillar found on the side of a hall's high-seats. These were often carved with images and were held to be religiously significant. There were only two high-seats in a hall, one for the

seat pillars were taken from the temple of one's household in Norway and, having been cast into the sea, the gods of the Norwegian temple came ashore at the place where one ought to take land in the new country.³⁵ Hallsteinn Atlason provides a good example of the practice in successful operation in *Flóamanna saga* (“Hallsteinn skaut setstokkum fyrir borð í hafi til heilla sér eptir fornum síð” - Hallsteinn cast his pillars overboard into the sea for good luck according to the ancient custom”).³⁶ Although his ship breaks up, he makes a successful landtake in the area where his pillars come ashore.³⁷ As Margaret Clunies Ross writes, “[t]he authors of *Landnámabók* and many sagas attribute to their ancestors the desire to ratify their actions in claiming land by reference to the perceptible signs of divine guidance and supernatural authority...”.³⁸ Both the blessing of the native spirits and the use of the high-seat pillars are the two most significant supernatural means of ratifying one's landclaim. The process of landtaking is taken out of human control and thus sanctified and made more binding.

Eyrbyggja saga has a detailed account of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg's experience of the practice of casting pillars. His high-seat pillars are thrown overboard and at once display their magical properties by the rapidity of their movement through the water. The crew comes ashore to explore the site, and having found Þórr in the form of his pillars, Þórólfr takes land there:

master of the house, and one for the guest of honour. See also Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, pp. 143-5 for a discussion of high-seat pillars.

³⁵ Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn discuss the parallels of taking the pillars from one's Norwegian home with the Carthaginian practice of transporting the sacred hearth in the form of clods of earth when they founded the new Rome. See Overing and Osborn, *Landscape of Desire*, p. 54.

³⁶ *Flóamanna saga*, p. 238. It is not made clear in the saga what sort of good luck Hallsteinn expects with the execution of this procedure: good luck with his landtake in general, good luck in finding a favourable spot, or good luck in reaching and taking land at all?

³⁷ *Flóamanna saga*, p. 238.

³⁸ Clunies Ross, “Saint' Ásólfr”, p. 31.

Hann mælti svá fyrir, at hann skyldi þar byggja á Íslandi, sem Þórr léti þær á land koma. En þegar þær hóf frá skipinu, sveif þeim til ins vestra fjarðarins, ok þótti þeim fara eigi vánum seinna.³⁹

He stated thus, that he would make his home in Iceland where Þórr caused them [the pillars] to reach the shore. And as soon as they were thrown overboard, they were tugged into the westernmost fjord, and they seemed to travel less slowly than one might have expected.

Eptir þat könnuðu þeir landit ok fundu á nesi framanverðu, er var fyrir norðan váginn, at Þórr var á land kominn með súlurnar...⁴⁰

After that they explored the land and found that Þórr had come ashore with the pillars on a promontory facing north out to sea...

In contrast, Björn Ketilsson's use of his high-seat pillars in *Laxdæla saga* is represented with a degree of ambiguity. He roams around his first landing site and deems it a good area in which to settle. By marvellous happenstance, after he has made his decision, he finds his pillars on the very same land.⁴¹ This discovery verifies the sagacity of his choice and at the same time introduces the inkling of the saga author's doubts. Perhaps the author wished to air the notion of hedging one's religious or superstitious bets, being slightly uneasy with the mythologisation of landtake, and decided to introduce an element of rational choice into where one claimed property. It may have been the case that he was unwilling to lend support to the idea that supernatural powers were at work in guiding Björn. He was not so uneasy, however, as to abandon the myth altogether, and the author comments that "þótti þeim þá á vísat um bústaðinn" -

³⁹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 7. See also *Landnámabók*, pp. 124-6 (H and S). The latter account says that the image of Þórr is carved on the high-seat pillars, whereas the former states that only one of them had the image carved on.

⁴⁰ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 8.

⁴¹ *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 5-6.

“it seemed to them that they had been guided”.⁴² Skalla-Grímr too does not take land immediately at the place where his “high-seat pillars” (i.e. his father’s coffin: see below for this variation on the practice) come ashore in *Egils saga*. Arriving in a different ship to the one on which Kveld-Úlfr had been travelling before his death, Grímr disembarks and explores his surroundings first (“Síðan kannaði Skalla-Grímr landit...”).⁴³ In *Laxdæla saga* the practice is represented differently again: Auðr finds her pillars after her extensive landtake, and deems that she has been shown where in particular to build her farm by the discovery of her high-seat pillars (“váru þar reknar á land öndvegissúlur hennar; þótti henni þá auðvitat, hvar hon skydi bústað taka” - “her high-seat pillars had been washed ashore there, and it seemed that it had been clear to her where she should make her home”).⁴⁴

The blood brothers Ingólfr Arnason and Hjörleifr Hróðmarsson also position themselves one on either side of the religious fence. The former holds a sacrifice in the winter to learn what the future holds for in store for him before he settles in Iceland, but Hjörleifr, it is said, would never sacrifice to gods.⁴⁵ A strange variation on this practice occurs when the latter sets sail for the new country. Hjörleifr drifts before making land, and runs out of drinking water, so his Irish slaves concoct a mixture of flour and butter in order to relieve thirst. Before they have to partake of this *minnþak*, though, it begins to rain, and so the crew collects the rainwater from the sails to drink, arguably a miraculous piece of

⁴² *Laxdæla saga*, p. 6.

⁴³ *Egils saga*, p. 72.

⁴⁴ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 9. Very few women take land according to the written tradition.

⁴⁵ *Landnámabók*, p. 42 (H and S). Sacrifices could also be used for evil purposes. Végeirr, having fallen out with Hákon jarl, holds sacrifices once he makes land, but Hákon also makes sacrifices on the same day to bring them ill fortune. Végeirr is persuaded by his brothers to leave the sacrificing, but when they put out to sea their ship is wrecked. See *Landnámabók*, pp. 188-91.

good fortune.⁴⁶ The redundant mouldy mixture is cast overboard instead of pillars, and it finds land. Rather than making any worthwhile attempt to find new land, Hjörleifr makes a mess of the whole enterprise, the implication being that his strange Irish recipe is certainly no replacement for one's fine, Norwegian pillars.⁴⁷ It is significant to note that Hjörleifr and his men meet a sorry end at the hands of his slaves in the new land: they are murdered, and in a twist of fate their bodies found by those who are searching for Ingólfr's pillars.⁴⁸ With this in mind, one is left to draw one's own conclusions as to whether consulting oracles and throwing over high-seat pillars might have been a wiser choice after all (Ingólfr says himself that according to his own experiences, such sad fates always befall those who do not hold sacrifices).⁴⁹ Here, Hjörleifr provides a counter to Ingólfr, demonstrating that the first settler needed sound judgment, sensible plans and good luck in order to make successful his landtake. Hjörleifr's function as a foil draws attention to the literariness of the text: the contrast between the two blood brothers serves to bring the exemplary character of Iceland's heroic first settler Ingólfr Arnason to the foreground.

Kveld-Úlfr Bjálfason himself provides a variation in the practice too. He has a modicum of success in landtaking in a rather different way. He makes the ironic comment whilst aboard a ship from Norway, that, although he is ill, it will

⁴⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 43 (H and S).

⁴⁷ Curiously, though, the site where the substance comes ashore gives rise to the naming of the landscape, according to *Landnámabók*: "Minnþakseyrr". It is difficult to follow the logical development of this naming: how was its landing witnessed and subsequently identified in an as yet unpopulated land? Here, the author of *Landnámabók* seems to have had problems imagining and explaining how early naming of the land might have happened; the act of naming is discussed in more depth in chapter 3. See O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, pp. 20-1.

⁴⁸ *Landnámabók*, p. 44 (H and S). See Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, pp. 139-40.

⁴⁹ *Landnámabók*, p. 44 (S).

not be surprising if he takes land in the new country.⁵⁰ His guess is correct. On his death, at his behest, he is placed in a coffin and put overboard in a strange adaptation of the practice of casting one's high-seat pillars into the sea in order to find direction towards land and new prosperity. Kveld-Úlfr's death and arrival in Iceland might be read as a symbol of how the Norwegians and the Norwegian way were projected onto the new territory. Obviously Iceland was not only colonised from Norway, but Icelandic society developed out of the laws and customs by which they had lived on the mainland. One might also think of Kveld-Úlfr's death and burial as intensifying the claim to ownership of land for the family: if one's relatives are buried there, one could be said to have an "ancestral" connection with the land. In the same way that the birth of the young Snorri Þorfinnson in Vínland in *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlandinga saga* is an event which draws the foreign space closer to the Norse settlers, the death of the old Kveld-Úlfr strengthens the yet tenuous link between Norwegians and Iceland.⁵¹

Other accounts betray their authors' unease at believing in the validity of the practice. In *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, Þórðr skeggi claims land upon his arrival in Iceland and lives happily there for ten years. But he then discovers that his high-seat pillars washed up in an entirely different place, so he sells his land and moves to where they came ashore:

⁵⁰ *Egils saga*, p. 71. See Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, pp. 145-6.

⁵¹ *Eiríks saga rauða*, p. 233; *Grænlandinga saga*, p. 262. See also Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, pp. 145-6.

Þórðr skeggi... nam lönd öll í Lóni fyrir norðan Jökulsá millum ok Lónsheiðar ok bjó í Bæ tíu vetr. En er hann frá til öndsvegissúlna sinna í Leiruvági fyrir neðan Heiði, þá seldi hann lönd sín Úlfljóti lögmanni, er þar kom út í Lóni.⁵²

Þórðr skeggi... took all the land as far north as Jökulsá to Lónsheiði and lived at Bær for ten years. But when he heard that his high-seat pillars had come ashore at Leiruvágr below the heath, he sold his land to Úlfljótr lögmaðr who had landed there at Lón.

No comment is made by the saga author as to whether the former settlement was unsuitable or not meant for him; nor is the new site described as being preferable to the old in terms of location and potential for wealth and success. There is no condemnation of superstitious belief in pagan rituals, neither is there endorsement of the motivation for the move. Would anyone wish to start up a new farm from scratch after such a great length of time had elapsed just because of their high-seat pillars? It is also interesting to note the convenience of Úlfljótr's turning up when he does: is this perhaps a hidden intrigue as to his abrupt move? Is this a euphemistic way of saying that Þórðr was driven out by this soon-to-be-important newcomer? It is Úlfljótr who first establishes lawcodes in Iceland, based on the West Norwegian judicial system from the district from which he had come. This is narrative of the later discovery of the high-seat pillars could have been inserted to fill a gap in the author's sources - a gap between Þórðr's occupation of the farm and Úlfljótr's. This same pattern of settlement happens also to Loðmundr enn gamli, Hrollaugr Rögnvaldsson jarls and Hásteinn Atlason in *Landnámabók*.⁵³

⁵² Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds), *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*, Íslensk Fornrit XIII (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 341. See also *Landnámabók*, p. 312 (S).

⁵³ *Landnámabók*, pp. 302-6 (H and S); pp. 316-8 (H and S); pp. 370-2 (H and S).

There is a possibility that the authors of these accounts are attempting to seek explanations for settlement abandonment other than failure and a poor choice first time around (this, of course, must have happened to at least some of the settlers but is not recorded). As Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson state, “[t]he idea that the earliest settlement sites were not necessarily those which later became important centres is interesting. It has an inherent logic given the likelihood that mistakes were made and that environmental and social conditions must have changed.”⁵⁴ These mistakes may account for the high number of early sites (revealed by recent excavations) which were abandoned within a century or two of the initial settlement.

Ögmundur Kormáksson has a quite different experience with his high-seat pillars in *Kormáks saga*. He casts them overboard and finds them washed up on shore, only to discover subsequently that Miðfjörðr-Skeggi already lives on the site:

Eptir þat sigldu þeir í haf; þá kastar Ögmundur út öndvegissúlur hans, köstuðu þar akkerum. En í þann tíma réð þar fyrir Miðfjarðar-Skeggi; hann reri til þeira ok bauð þeim inn í fjörðinn ok svá landskosti.⁵⁵

After that they sailed out to sea; then Ögmundur cast overboard his high-seat pillars, and they cast their anchor there [i.e. where the pillars had ended up]. But at that time Miðfjörðr-Skeggi controlled the whole area; he rowed out to them and invited them into the fjord and gave them their choice of land.

⁵⁴ Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson, “Creating a Past: A Historiography of the Settlement of Iceland”, in *Contact, Continuity and Collapse: The Norse Colonization of the North Atlantic*, ed. J. H. Barrett (Turnhout, 2003), p. 151.

⁵⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Kormáks saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII (Reykjavík, 1939), p. 205.

This detail opens up an array of doubtful questions to be asked of the practice. Ögmundur approaches Skeggi who then gives him a choice of land: this would appear a remarkable stroke of luck. It seems to imply in this case that the Norwegian home gods were directing him to the man to whom he should apply for land, instead of to where he should claim land for himself. This account brings to the foreground the challenges for the later settler. It is difficult to understand how one was supposed to take land in the new country if someone had already taken control of the area where one's pillars were washed up.⁵⁶ This example problematises the historicity of the practice.

Kráku-Hreiðarr, on the other hand, is portrayed as having very firm beliefs on the question of casting overboard one's high-seat pillars: he does not trust the practice at all. Perversely, the writer of *Landnámabók* relates that Kráku-Hreiðarr believed instead in asking Þórr for guidance:

...en er þeir kómu í landsýn, gekk Hreiðarr til siglu ok sagðisk eigi mundu kasta öndvegissúlum fyrir borð, kvezk þat þykkja ómerkiligt at gera ráð sitt eptir því, kvezk heldr mundu heita á Þór, at hann vísaði honum til landa, ok kvezk þar mundu berjask til landa, ef áðr væri numit.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ This episode raises further questions regarding feudalism and Iceland's early history. Skeggi essentially rules over the entire district, and it appears that the suggestion might be that he has tenant farmers. It does not state how he brings other landtakers under his control and with what justification. I shall explore these issues of tenancy and hints of feudalism in greater detail in the fifth chapter, and explore the possibility of a clash between social myths of origin and historical reality. See Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, pp. 19-20: "[c]oncerning the actual circumstances of the settlement we have little certain knowledge. *Landnámabók* provides a rough relative chronology for the settlements in individual regions. The settlers who came first are often described as having taken great tracts of land which they later divided among their kinfolk and dependents. But the real circumstances were quite probably the reverse: the most powerful immigrants, when they had established themselves, began to exert their influence over the surrounding farms. Thus we have an example here of how the later power relations may have influenced the depiction of events. The families that dominated these areas in 1100 had an interest in a peaceful, historical explanation of their dominance."

⁵⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 232 (H and S).

...when they came within sight of land, Hreiðarr went to the mast and said that he would not throw overboard his high-seat pillars; he said that he thought it was of little use to seek guidance in this way. He stated that he would rather call upon Þórr to show him the way to his land, and he said he would fight for the land there if in the event it had already been taken.

This seems rather contradictory: perhaps the author of *Landnámabók* thought that his high-seat pillars were controlled by another specific Norse god, and not Þórr, or indeed controlled by other forces altogether. The author has assimilated information about old pagan practices and interpreted it in his own fashion according to his understanding, and in doing so has given an indication of the unease with which the earliest Icelandic writers handled landtake myths; the author of *Landnámabók* incorporates all of these different variations on the locating of one's land without lending support to any method in particular, but by recording them all with unbiased detachment. The gaps in time as well as cultural and religious values have shaped this representation. Furthermore, Hreiðarr is prepared to fight for the land which he considers to be destined for him and sanctioned by the gods. Perhaps it is as Sørensen says: "[b]ecause the sources are silent, we must content ourselves with the assumption that, here as elsewhere, might made right."⁵⁸ In Hreiðarr's case, he does not have to fight. He is advised

⁵⁸ Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, p. 20. "None of the historians of the Free State has explained how the many mutually independent settlement groups came to an understanding with one another and created a society. Among the many hundreds of conflicts that are recounted in sagas and *Landnámabók* only a few turn on the right to ownership of land and hardly any take place in the period of settlement itself. The predominant viewpoint of the historical accounts is that everything proceeded in an orderly and peaceful way. According to the medieval historical understanding, society was thus born in an ideal state that was menaced by conflicts only in the following generations. At the beginning of the settlement period, as long as there was land enough, this perception may very well have been accurate, but afterwards when the habitable land was taken, the need for some social organization must have become pressing, and it would have been especially necessary to regulate the distribution of land. But in view of the stubbornness and belligerence characteristic of the vikings, it is improbable that this regulating and organizing was

to seek out the wise man of the district, Eiríkr of Guðdalir, who gives him land, saying that Þórr must have guided him to the right person.⁵⁹ It seems as if Hreiðarr has to be placated with an alternative holy sign so that he will not press his claim which appeared to have divine sanctification.

Hallsteinn, the son of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, gets the whole process in the wrong order. He takes land and then holds sacrifices to Þórr, asking that the god send him some high-seat pillars. A large tree trunk then is washed up on his land, and out of the wood high-seat pillars for all the farms in the area are carved.⁶⁰ Certainly one would need new furniture for one's hall, but why would one need new pillars? Where the pillars from his homeland? References to high-seats are common enough in Old Norse/Icelandic literature, but it is rare that the pillars are mentioned outside the context of deciding where to settle. Why are his pillars important to him after the event? Is it part of a post-landtake justification for his property? There is maybe a suggestion here that there is something rather doubtful and tenuous to the claim for legitimate ownership of the land if it has not been divinely sanctioned. This example of a different order of events undermines the representations of successful practice of using one's high-seat pillars as guidance as to where to take land. Or maybe, knowing that Þórólfr Mostrarskegg has already successfully managed to find land through his pillars, one is meant to see this narrative as an expression of the son's striking out on his own. One cannot use the same pillars twice, and so perhaps the son did not have any to

peaceful. Because the sources are silent, we must content ourselves with the assumption that, here as elsewhere, might made right."

⁵⁹ *Landnámabók*, pp. 232-3 (H and S).

⁶⁰ *Landnámabók*, pp. 163-5 (H and S).

throw overboard on his voyage. Acknowledgement of a legitimate claim is therefore necessarily delayed in his case.

Another famous settler, Helgi enn magri, seems also to have preferred direct intervention from the gods: although he believes in Christ, he prefers to refer matters of importance to Þórr, and is thus depicted in *Landnámabók* as consulting an oracle in the matter of his landtake.⁶¹ Flóki Vilgerðarson employs a tried and tested sailing method in order to locate Iceland in the first place, by releasing three ravens.⁶² Of the first two he sets free one flies back to the stern and the other straight up in the air, but the third flies straight ahead over the prow. Upon following the bird's directional guidance, the crew find land.⁶³ The author seems not to be aware that the practice of releasing birds was more normally used to gauge how close a ship was to land. If a bird flew back in the direction the sailors had come from, then the ship was closer to the land from which they had departed; if the bird flew straight up, then one supposes this to be the mid-point of the sea-journey (since the bird cannot decide which shore is closer): and if the bird flew over the prow ahead of the boat, then one's destination was the nearer coast. In *Landnámabók*, though, the bird determines the direction in which Flóki shall travel to claim land. Again, assimilation and interpretation of sailing practices and old stories produces a garbled response from a writer unfamiliar with the phenomenon.

⁶¹ *Landnámabók*, p. 250 (S). This episode takes a comic turn when Helgi's son betrays his scepticism in the oracle and asks his father if he would go into the Arctic Circle if Þórr told him to do so.

⁶² *Landnámabók*, p. 34 (S).

⁶³ *Landnámabók*, p. 36 (S).

One of the more outlandish accounts of help from mainland Scandinavia is the description of Ingimundr inn gamli's landtake in *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Landnámabók*. Ingjaldr, the farmer from Hefni ey, holds a magic ritual over which a Lapp sorceress presides and at which Ingimundr is present. The sorceress predicts what fate holds in store for each of them: Ingimundr is adamantly not interested in this, but she tells him his future anyway, and informs him that he will settle in Iceland. This does not please him, and he snorts his disbelief. But as proof the sorceress says that an amulet is missing from his purse, and it will now only be found in the place where he will settle in Iceland. He becomes angry, but the next morning he discovers the amulet missing. Haraldr inn hárfagri then attempts to persuade Ingimundr to make the move, who replies that he is indeed curious to know whether his amulet will turn up where the sorceress said it would.⁶⁴ He then decides to employ some more Lapps in order to find out:

Ingimundr segir, at hann vill kaupa at þeim, - „ok vil ek gefa ýðr smjör ok tin, en þér farið sendiferð mína til Íslands at leita eptir hlut mínum ok segja mér frá landslegi.“ Þeir svara: „Semsveinum er þat forsending at fara, en fyrir þína áskorun vilju vér profa. Nú skal oss byrgja eina saman í húsi, ok nefni oss engi maðr,“ - ok svá var gört.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 29-36. See also *Landnámabók*, pp. 216-20 (H and S). In both accounts the expectation is that Ingimundr will find his amulet when he digs for his high-seat pillars. No further explanation is given as to why he should imagine that they are buried, and not simply look along the shoreline for them as other settlers do. The pillars seem in this respect to form part of the Lappish magical logic, and that they will transport themselves, like the amulet, to Iceland.

⁶⁵ *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 34-5. There seems to be a play on the word *hlutr*, which appropriately here bears the sense not only of a talisman, but also of one's lot in life as well as a portion of land.

Ingimundr says that he wants to strike a bargain with them, - “and I will give you butter and tin if you go on this errand of mine to Iceland, to look for my talisman and tell me about the lie of the land.” They answer, “This is a highly dangerous journey to embark on, but in reply to your challenge we would like to have a go. Now we are to be enclosed alone together in a shed, and our names must be told to no one,” - and so it was done.

One might be forgiven for thinking that Ingimundr was intending to send the Lapps on a reconnaissance mission in person: in fact, they make, as it is told in *Landnámabók*, a *hamfarir*, or a shape-change journey.⁶⁶ The mission is partly successful: the sorceress’ spell is too powerful for them to retrieve the talisman, but they bring back what proves to be reliable information regarding Ingimundr’s future landtake. It should be pointed out that not only is this story unique, but it offers an early example of the saga author’s preoccupation with magic and sorcery.

4. The Guardians of the ‘New’ Land

In *Landnámabók* Grélöðu, the Irish wife of Ánn Grímsson, detects a nasty smell coming up from the earth in the place where she and her husband originally settle.⁶⁷ This disturbs her so much that they are compelled to move, and, fortunately for them, the grass on their new farm smells as sweet as honey (“hunangsilmr”).⁶⁸ Interestingly, Grelutóttir, the place to which they move, is a site which has been excavated by archaeologists, and the evidence gathered suggests that there was first a dwelling built on the shoreline. This was then

⁶⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 218 (H and S).

⁶⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 177 (H).

⁶⁸ *Landnámabók*, p. 177 (H). Of course, there is the possibility that this nasty smell is volcanic, sulphurous gas. But the fact that it is only the Irish woman who detects it suggests an underlying supernatural reason.

abandoned and another built farther inland. Orri Vésteinsson posits that the shoreline on first arrival would have been the only place not grown over with trees, and that when the early settlers had cleared the area they then decided to relocate: “[s]uch relocations of farms over short distances seem to have been common (several traditions to this effect are recorded in the *Landnámabók*) but they will not have greatly altered the resource strategies or the land claims of the farmers in question.”⁶⁹ Has the author of *Landnámabók* felt the need to explain why there is an abandoned settlement on this section of property? As shall be demonstrated later with other relocations, the authors of *Landnámabók* never recount abandonment of a settlement as a straight-forward decision to move to a better, more farmable place: there is always a little ‘founding myth’ attached to the history of the property.

Ari in *Íslendingabók* certainly suggests that Iceland is not a *tabula rasa* on which the Norwegian settlers can make a first impression: as has been mentioned in chapter one he envisages Iceland as always having been a Christian space owing to the presence of the Irish *papar* who inhabited the island before the Norse peoples. As an historian he is aware that “[i]n space, what came earlier continues to underpin what follows...”,⁷⁰ and therefore seeks to make sense of the present by examining the history of different landscapes. Just as the Irish hermits left behind evidence of their existence, so the presence of the *Skrælingar* (the name the Icelanders gave to the native people of Greenland) can also be detected. Both in the eastern and western parts of the land the Icelandic explorers found human

⁶⁹ Orri Vésteinsson, “Patterns of Settlement...”, 12. See also J. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London, 2001), pp. 35-7 for a further discussion of the archaeological finds at Grelutóttir.

⁷⁰ Lefebvre *The Production of Space*, p. 229.

dwelling places, fragments of skin boats and stone implements.⁷¹ Ari writes that one can tell that the same people who inhabited Vínland also settled in Greenland (“er af því má skilja, at þar hafði þess konar þjóð farit, er Vínland hefir bygt ok Grœnlendingar kalla Skrælinga” - “from this it could be deduced that the same kind of people as had inhabited Vínland have settled there, the people that the Greenlanders call Skrælings”).⁷² The heathen newcomers forced out the Irish hermits, it seems, because the latter felt that they could not co-exist with the pagan Norse, as, indeed, the Inuit people who have been dwelling in Greenland previously had been displaced from the areas of the Eastern and Western settlements when foreigners begin to make their settlement. The parallel of anthropologically iconic objects each group has left behind is striking.

Perhaps Grélöðu is envisaged because of her Celtic ethnicity somehow to be sensitive to implications of good and evil in the landscape. It is she, after all, and not her husband who is specifically mentioned as being the one who detected the problem. Celtic identity and settlers who have arrived from the British Isles seem to be closely associated with Christianity, such as Auðr en djúpúðga and Ørlygr enn gamli.⁷³ The latter relies on the second sight of Patrekr byskup of the Hebrides who tells him before he travels to Iceland about the lie of the land on which he will eventually settle, as well as providing him with Christian talismans, including timber, a bell, a plenarium and consecrated earth which are to be used in the church which Ørlygr is to build.⁷⁴ Land previously occupied by Christians seems also to have been perceived to have held dangers for the heathen Norse:

⁷¹ *Íslendingabók*, p. 51.

⁷² *Íslendingabók*, pp. 51-2.

⁷³ See Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, pp. 147-9, for observations on how Auðr's landtaking differs from a man's.

⁷⁴ *Landnámabók*, pp. 52-5 (H and S).

once more, what has come before continues to underpin what follows. Ketill hinn fíflski, a Christian, settles at Kirkjubær, where *papar* had previously dwelt and where no heathen man was allowed to remain.⁷⁵ Later, after a few transactions and following Ketill's death, Hildir Eysteinnsson decides that he wishes to stay at Kirkjubær, not appreciating why a heathen cannot live there. When he approaches the homefield, he drops down dead immediately.⁷⁶ The *papar* seem to have left more behind them than just simply their books, bells and crosiers: the landscape is imbued with their numinosity.

Iceland is not a virgin territory owing to the presence also of *landvættir*, the spirits who already dwelt in the land.⁷⁷ This explains why Iceland is not always represented as a space which can be appropriated without difficulty by the newcomer, since, as guardians of the land, they defended Iceland fiercely from malignant visitors. One such visitor is a warlock sent by the Danish king Haraldr Gormsson to find out what the people in Iceland have been saying about him:

En er hann kom til landsins, fór hann vestr fyrir norðan landit. Hann sá, at fjöll öll ok hólar váru fullir af landvættum, sumt stórt, en sumt smátt.⁷⁸

But when he arrived within sight of land, he went to the west of Iceland, going north around the coast. He saw that all the mountains and hills were full of guardian spirits, some large and others small.

Not discouraged by their presence, the warlock attempts to come ashore, only to be met with a dragon, frogs, snakes, birds, a bull and a hill giant as the land's

⁷⁵ *Landnámabók*, p. 324 (H and S).

⁷⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 326 (H and S). See Clunies Ross, "'Saint' Ásólfr", p. 39, for Ásólfr alskik's Christian 'good luck' with the land.

⁷⁷ See Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, p. 127.

⁷⁸ Snorri Strulúson, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk Fornrit XXVI (Reykjavík, 1961), p. 271.

spirits rally against him at all points along the coast. He is defeated, and the king turns his fleet back towards Denmark.⁷⁹ Other strange creatures are associated with the land. In the case of Grímr Ingjaldsson, he manages to catch hold of a merman whilst on a fishing trip. At this point in the narrative he is not permanently established in Iceland, but is staying temporarily on an island now known as Grímsey. He asks the merman what the future holds in store for him, and whereabouts he ought to settle in the new country. The merman replies that he will not take land, but that his son will, and the foretelling is proved correct.⁸⁰

However, these spirits could be appeased and harnessed as a force for good, as in the example of Hallfreðr in *Hrafnkels saga*.⁸¹ Hallfreðr transfers his farmstead to Geitdalr, but moves quickly once more after he is warned in a dream that his fortune is not to be found in this location. The advice is helpful, since, on the day he leaves, a landslide obliterates the site.⁸² A reason for representing landtakers as having friendly dealings with the *landvættir* might be that writers, by doing so, confer luck and happy circumstances on later descendants of landtakers in a form of historical flattery, as well as supporting later descendants' landownership rights. As Clunies Ross writes, "...how ancestors laid claim to territory with divine backing must have had an important legitimising function for those who claimed descent from them."⁸³ Sometimes these friendly dealings are

⁷⁹ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, pp. 271-2. These fierce protectors of the land still feature in the Icelandic coat-of-arms. See Overing and Osborn, *Landscape of Desire*, pp. 82-3.

⁸⁰ *Landnámabók*, pp. 94-6 (H and S). See Hermann Pálsson, "A Foundation Myth in *Landnámabók*", *Mediæval Scandinavia* XII, 24-28, for the classical sources of this foundation myth.

⁸¹ *Hrafnkels saga*, p. 59. See O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, pp. 36-7, for a discussion of the historicity and fictionality of *Hrafnkels saga*. Hallfreðr does not have a nickname, nor is the reader told who his father was.

⁸² Hrafn hafnarlykill shares similar good fortune when he foresees a volcanic eruption and moves his house to escape its aftermath: see *Landnámabók*, p. 328 (H and S).

⁸³ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, p. 124.

represented as good luck in the new land, as in the case of Hrafnkell and his second farm (which shall be examined below). Skalla-Grímr also could not have picked better land: on his landtake he has an abundance of fish, seals, eggs, driftwood, whales and animals which, unaccustomed to human inhabitants, never flee the hunter (“... allt var þar þá kyrrt í veiðistöð, er þat var óvant manni.”).⁸⁴

The *landvættir* seem to have made their presence felt in other situations. Just before a volcanic eruption an old, blind man miraculously sees a malicious character row into the estuary, walk up to a farm and begin to dig at a sheep pen; it is there that the natural disaster occurs during the night.⁸⁵ Hafr-Björn gains increased wealth and fortune having dreamt that a cliff-giant offers him partnership which he accepts:

Eptir þat kom hafr til geita hans, ok tímgæðisk þá svá skjótt fé hans, at hann varð skjótt vellauðigr... Þat sá ófreskir menn, at landvættir allar fylgðu Hafr-Birni til þings, en þeim Þorsteini ok Þórði til veiða ok fiskjar.⁸⁶

After that a billy goat came to join his goats and his livestock began to increase so quickly that he soon became a very wealthy man... People who had second sight could see that all the *landvættir* accompanied Hafr-Björn when he went to the *þing*, and also Þorsteinn and Þórðr when they went out to fish.

That people were scared of the power of the *landvættir* is evident from the account of Ölvir Eysteinnsson. He takes land at Grímsá, “þar hafði engi maðr þorat at nema fyrir landvættum, síðan Hjörleifr vart drepinn...” - “where no one had dared take land for fear of the *landvættir*, since Hjörleifr had been killed there.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ *Egils saga*, p. 75.

⁸⁵ *Landnámabók*, p. 98 (S).

⁸⁶ *Landnámabók*, pp. 330-1 (H and S).

⁸⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 333 (H and S).

This of course ties in with the fact that Hjörleifr had not sacrificed or thrown over high-seat pillars: he is perceived by other landtakers to have angered the Icelandic native spirits. This anger is demonstrated to have ramifications which continue long after Hjörleifr's sorry passing. It also suggests that the power of the home-gods is not limited to their native land, and that there is an underlying assumption of their authority over the *landvættir*. The *landvættir* are a Norse creation, even though the Icelandic spirits were envisaged to have inhabited the island before humans did. They must have been perceived as being further down the supernatural hierarchy than a *goð*.

The native spirits could themselves be frightened by the new settlers according to *Þorsteins þátr uxafóts*. In this text it is related that the first law in the pagan code was that no one was to sail a ship with a dragon's head on it, or, at least, they were to remove such prows before approaching Iceland and "sigla eigi at landi með gapandi höfðum né gínandi trjónu, svá at landvættir fældist við" - not to sail ashore with gaping heads and yawning snouts which would frighten the *landvættir*."⁸⁸ This seems rather odd: why would it be necessary to make this into a law? What would happen if one were to frighten the *landvættir*? Perhaps the author of the *þátr* thought that if gaping and grinning prows had upset the native spirits it might have caused them in turn to distress others already settled in the country: one would have thought that there would have had to have been some interest in the public good for such an instruction to be made law, and perhaps this was the author's reckoning. Clunies Ross suggests that, "[i]t seems likely that the

⁸⁸ *Þorsteins þátr uxafóts*, p. 342. In the story of Kráku-Hreiðarr, as was mentioned above, the direction in which the prow was pointing seems to be an indication of where one should take land, see *Landnámabók*, pp. 232-3 (H and S). See also Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, pp. 132-8. According to her, this passage quoting the early law about the gaping heads is usually regarded as being authentic, even though there are no extant versions of Úlfljótr's law.

function of the gaping heads was protective of those on the ship and of its cargo and threatening to the seafarers' enemies, whether these were human aggressors or spirit beings that controlled natural forces."⁸⁹ Crucially, once more the native spirits are represented as needing to be placated: in a way, they are the indigenous dwellers whom the new arrivals must be careful not to anger. Iceland does not wholly belong to those who turn up in their ships to settle.

5. The Later Settlers

So far I have analysed the different representations of landtaking with regard to the very first people who arrived in Iceland. But what of those who came later in the settlement? Iceland is represented as being owned entirely by a small number of voyagers early on in the country's settlement period who then allow people to live within their landclaim. Ingólfr Arnason as the first settler of the country sets the standard for the first Norwegians who arrive and take all they see.⁹⁰ Upon his arrival he claims possession of all the land between Ölfúsá and Hvalfjörður, including all the Nesses, an unmanageably large area for one settler.⁹¹ But Þórður skeggi then settles upon land claimed by Ingólfr with his approval ("Þórður fór til Íslands ok nam land með ráði Ingólfs í hans landnámi...").⁹² Representations of similar patterns of the early settlement of Iceland are to be found especially in *Landnámabók* and also in the family sagas. Given the way in which Icelanders, especially of the later medieval period, prided themselves on their kingless

⁸⁹ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, p. 135.

⁹⁰ It has also been suggested, however, that in some cases early settlers may have been attributed enormous land claims in *Landnámabók* to account for areas where there was no information available on the original owners. See Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson, "Creating a Past..", p. 147.

⁹¹ *Landnámabók*, p. 45 (H and S).

⁹² *Landnámabók*, p. 48 (S).

democracy, these portrayals might have come to seem problematic in their suggestion of feudalism. These representations seem to hold a difficult stance between the practicalities of landtake and its political ramifications. The silence, or partial silence, on the part of some writers shows that they evaded the issue lest, perhaps, they be forced to engage with a quasi-feudal past. The political stance of the writer has shaped the representation of history.

Often it seems that later settlers have temporary accommodation in Iceland before permanently settling down. Ketill blundr decides to spend the first winter with Skalla-Grímr. Come the spring, the latter then instructs him on where to set up his farm.⁹³ Örn from Arnarnes decided to spend the winter at Tjaldaness because even at the winter solstice he could see the sun there (“Hann sat um vetrinn á Tjaldanesi, því at þar gekk eigi af um skammdegi.”).⁹⁴ In *Grettis saga* Ófeigr grettir and Þormóðr skapti spend the winter at Þorbjörn laxakarl’s house, and then take land after that.⁹⁵ Þórðr hreða is not so lucky, and has to rent land from Eyjólfur, a farmer from Óss, for the winter months. The transaction seems to work in his favour in that he takes over the farm and Eyjólfur moves to another one which he owns, in *Þórðar saga hreðu*.⁹⁶ Ketill hængur prefers also to explore first and claims land after a winter in *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar*.⁹⁷ Bárðr, son of Heyjangr-Björn goes one step further in his calculations, using empirical observations to make his choice. Whilst living at Lundarbrekka, he gauges the temperature of the winds, and deduces that the land south of the moors would be

⁹³ *Landnámabók*, p. 73 (S).

⁹⁴ *Landnámabók*, p. 176 (H and S).

⁹⁵ *Grettis saga*, p. 15.

⁹⁶ *Þórðar saga hreðu*, pp. 171-2.

⁹⁷ Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds), *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 397.

better. He sends out his sons to explore and they report back on the vegetation of the landscape before he eventually makes the move.⁹⁸

6. Placing People

The representations of living within another's original landtake do not concur on what grounds one was permitted to settle. In the majority of cases, *Landnámabók* does not explicitly state if there are any particular reasons to determine whether one is granted approval to establish one's farm: for several, the process is related as being a straight-forward matter, and not dependent on one's acquaintance with the landed settler. There are a couple of examples where certain individuals are certainly not wanted: Ketill Bresason and his brothers decide that they do not wish Hrosskell Þorsteinsson to stay at Akranes ("þá ömuðusk þeir Ketill bræðr við hann" - "then Ketill and his brothers objected to him"), so he is compelled to go elsewhere,⁹⁹ and Óláfr belgr is driven away from Ólafsvík by Ormr enn mjóvi.¹⁰⁰ Hróðgeir enn spaki and Oddgeir from Oddgeirhólar are treated rather better: the two brothers initially live in the territory claimed by Hafnar-Ormr and Finnur enn auðgi. The latter pair thinks that their area is too crowded, and so they pay the brothers to move away.¹⁰¹ This is a far more attractive offer, especially since the terms on which the newcomers were allowed to live there in the first place are not made explicit: the author remains silent on this issue. Relatives are certainly offered land: when Geirríðr, sister of Geirröðr from Eyri, for example, comes out

⁹⁸ *Landnámabók*, pp. 273-4 (H and S).

⁹⁹ *Landnámabók*, p. 83 (H and S).

¹⁰⁰ *Landnámabók*, p. 159 (H and S). It is odd that, even though he is driven away, the place still bears his name: Ólafsvík.

¹⁰¹ *Landnámabók*, p. 68 (S).

to Iceland, her brother supplies her with land, as was mentioned above.¹⁰² The offer, however, was not always accepted (see below in the section entitled “Duellists and Arrivistes”). Another means of acquiring land in the *landnám* period was in the form of a dowry. Both Þórodda Önundardóttir and Ásvör Herjólfsdóttur come to their marriage with impressive gifts of property.¹⁰³

Geirmundr heljarskinn, the noblest settler according to *Landnámabók*, had control of four farms: one he ran himself, one was run by his steward and the other two by slaves, and he was accustomed to riding between the four.¹⁰⁴ The notion of a steward (“ármaðr”) is an odd Norwegian throw-back in the context of new opportunities in Iceland. Helgi bjólan does the same, sharing land with his shipmates and placing people where he thought best (though the criteria on which he judges where to position people is not made clear).¹⁰⁵ Sæmundr inn suðreyski experiences difficulty with one of these placements in *Vatnsdæla saga*: he positions the troublesome Hrolleifr inn mikli on a good estate, but the neighbours start to complain (“þótti Sæmundr hafa sent þeim illt rekald” - “it seemed to them that Sæmundr had sent them a nasty bit of driftwood”) and he is forced to move him again.¹⁰⁶ These examples, along with those discussed above, all support the archaeological suggestion that people moved to the island in large groups.

¹⁰² *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 13.

¹⁰³ *Landnámabók*, p. 74 (S); p. 298 (H and S). See chapter four for more on dowries.

¹⁰⁴ *Landnámabók*, pp. 154-6 (H and S).

¹⁰⁵ Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Kjalnesinga saga*, Íslensk Fornrit XIV (Reykjavík, 1959), p. 3. This example provides further representational evidence in the matter of who settled and in what numbers. Helgi bjólan seems to have come over not just with his extended family.

¹⁰⁶ *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 50-6.

Egils saga, though, is unusual in stating the nature of the control the first settler (Skalla-Grímr Kveld-Úlfsson) had over his landtake, and the people who were allowed to settle within it. Egill Skalla-Grímsson relates his family's history whose importance permits him to enjoy the status he now holds and uses to arbitrate:

...hef ek þar upp þat mál, er Grímr, faðir minn, kom hingat til lands ok nam hér öll lönd um Mýrar ok víða herað ok tók sér bústað at Borg ok ætlaði þar landeign til, en gaf vinum sínum landakosti þar út í frá, svá sem þeir byggðu síðan...¹⁰⁷

I begin the case at the point when Grímr my father came to this country and claimed here all the land around Mýrar and widely throughout the district. He made his home at Borg and controlled the landownership, and he gave his friends the best of the land beyond there, on which they settled afterwards...

Only friends are given opportunities to hold lands, and they are positioned in very specific places according to Skalla-Grímr's wishes. As mentioned above, the archaeological evidence suggests that this process of placing people would have happened over a longer period of time: a large, central, multi-household establishment on a large estate eventually became a series of smaller farms rented out by, or at least under the control of, the main farmstead of the property owner.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ *Egils saga*, p. 287.

¹⁰⁸ E. P. Durrenberger, "Production in Medieval Iceland", *Acta Archaeologica* LXI (1990), 18.

7. Buying Land

There are a number of settlers who in *Landnámabók* are depicted as buying land from the lucky landed few when they first arrive in Iceland, including Asbjörn enn auði,¹⁰⁹ Ketill blundr, who buys land from Örnólfr from Örnólfsdalr,¹¹⁰ and, strangely, given the account in *Egils saga* (only friends are given land in specific places, as has been noted above), Rauða-Björn, to whom Skalla-Grímr sells land.¹¹¹ In one case, a settler misjudges the number of people to whom he has sold: Molda-Gnúpr sells so many people part of his landclaim that the district becomes too thickly populated, and people eventually have to move.

Molda-Gnúpr seldi mörgum mönnum af landnámi sínu, ok gerðisk þar fjölbyggt, áðr jarðeldr rann þar ofan, en þá flýðu þeir vestr...¹¹²

Molda-Gnúpr sold many men land from his original claim, and it became very crowded indeed, before the area was covered over by volcanic fire, and they then fled westwards...

Again, there is an admission that the land has become crowded. However, if there is such pressure on the land that too many have settled in the one area, then how can all of these people find alternative homes when forced to move on? It is intriguing to note that Molda-Gnúpr conveniently does not have to evict people from his land: nature's forces do that for him. Perhaps the saga author here has hedged his bets about the reason for the exodus, since he mentions both economic and volcanic reasons for it.

¹⁰⁹ *Landnámabók*, p. 84 (H and S).

¹¹⁰ *Landnámabók*, p. 84 (H and S).

¹¹¹ *Landnámabók*, pp. 88-91 (H and S).

¹¹² *Landnámabók*, pp. 330-1 (H and S).

Þorsteinn hvíti is rather lucky when he capitalises on another's mis-management of an initial landtake. He moves to Iceland following the death of his father, but the entire country is already settled. He buys land from the spendthrift Steinbjörn körtr, who then runs short of money and becomes more and more in debt to Þorsteinn. Eventually Steinbjörn has to hand over the rest of his property in repayment.¹¹³ In *Landnámabók* the story is slightly different: Þorsteinn buys land off Eyvindr vápni, but then acquires another piece of land by claiming repayment of a debt by Steinbjörn körtr (the latter had nothing with which to pay except the land). In this account, then, the repayment is not a means of initial landtake.¹¹⁴

By way of contrast with Molda-Gnúpr's over-willingness to sell, Steinuðr en gamla is a person who is desperate to buy. She is offered land but states that she would prefer to buy it, and offers an inexpensive spotted coat in exchange.

Steinuðr en gamla, frændkona Ingólfs, fór til Íslands ok var með Ingólfi enn fyrsta vetr. Hann bauð at gefa henni Rosmhvalanes allt fyrir utan Hvassahraun, en hon gaf fyrir heklum flekkóta ok vildi kaup kalla; henni þótti óhættara við ríptingum.¹¹⁵

Steinuðr en gamla, a kinswoman of Ingólfr's, went to Iceland and stayed with Ingólfr for the first winter. He offered to give her Rosmhvalaness and further out all round Hvassahraun, but she gave him a spotted cloak with a hood and wanted to call it a sale; it seemed to her there would be no danger of any legal problems because of this.

Presumably she is anxious about how legally binding a gift of land might be: by offering an item in exchange she feels she has entered into some sort of contract

¹¹³ Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, Íslensk Fornrit XI (Reykjavík, 1950), pp. 3-4.

¹¹⁴ *Landnámabók*, pp. 290-1 (H and S).

¹¹⁵ *Landnámabók*, pp. 392-3 (H and S).

which will enable her, should the question arise, to uphold her claim on the property.¹¹⁶ Once more, the authors of *Landnámabók* incorporate a variety of representations, without committing to the frequency or accuracy of one over another.

Önundr tréfótr might well have wished that he had come to a more formal agreement on his land in Kaldbak. He puts off going to Iceland and when eventually he does make the move, he struggles to find anywhere, trying a few places before resigning himself to poor quality land.¹¹⁷ In *Grettis saga* the anxious expression of the later settlers over the nature of the land holdings is found. In the Kaldbak region a great dispute arises over the question of the ownership of lands which lay within Eiríkr snara's original landclaim.

Engi varð áskilnaðr með mönnum þar, meðan inir ellri menn lifðu; en þá er Eiríkr var látinn, þótti Flosa Kaldbeklingar eigi hafa lögligar heimildir á jörðum þeim, er Eiríkr hafði gefit Önundi...¹¹⁸

There was no discord between the men there as long as the older generation was alive, but when Eiríkr was dead, it occurred to Flosi that the inhabitants of Kaldbak had no legal title to the lands which Eiríkr had given Önundr...

This dispute highlights the uncertainty about whether these later landowners were tenants of the first settler, or whether they were granted their land as pure boon with legal implications of ownership. Perhaps it might not have been a question

¹¹⁶ See W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland*, (Chicago, 1990), p. 107. "...a gift of land, it was feared by some, might indicate a long-term subordination of the recipient and his successors to the giver and his heirs because nothing but a return gift of the same land could extinguish the obligation. Instead of disfavouring the mercantile mode, prospective recipients might try to shift the classification of the transfer of purchase and sale, or to expropriatory modes in which the act of taking clearly indicated the taker's dominance. The social distance of purchase was just what Steinud the Old wanted..."

¹¹⁷ *Grettis saga*, pp. 21-3. Ketill gufa has a similar problem in *Egils saga*, p. 240.

¹¹⁸ *Grettis saga*, p. 26.

of money; maybe allegiance was offered on the part of the later arrivals.

Whatever the reality of the historical situation, this episode epitomises the instability which several different representations in *Landnámabók* produce. The details and the logic of these initial transactions have been lost in the gap of time, and have only been partially recorded in the re-telling.

Curiously, though, in the dispute over the land of Kaldbak, the case of Steinuðr en gamla is cited. The two parties go to the Alþingi to settle the matter:

Þórkell máni hafði þá lögsögu; var hann þá beiddr órskurðar. Honum kvezk þat lög sýnask, at nökkut hefði fyrir komit, þótt eigi væri fullt verð, - „því at svá gerði Steinuðr in gamla við Ingólf, afa minn, at hon þá af honum Rosmhvalanes allt ok gaf fyrir heklu flekkóta, ok hefir þat ekki ript orðit; munu þar stærri rið í vera; en hér legg ek til ráð,“ segir hann, „at skipat sé brotgeiranum, ok hafi hváirtveggju at jafnaði...”¹¹⁹

Þórkell máni was the lawspeaker at that time; the debated question was put to him. He said that the way he interpreted the law, something had to be handed over, although it need not amount to the full value. “So it was in the case of Steinuðr en gamla and Ingólfr, my grandfather. She had from him the whole of Rosmhvalaness and she gave in exchange a spotted cloak with a hood, and so no legal problem occurred afterwards, and that was of far greater importance than the current debate; and I advise in this case”, he says, “that the lands be divided and that each of the two has an equal portion...”

This citation of Steinuðr’s case moves towards the notion of legal precedent, an idea which is not frequently encountered in textual representation of Icelandic land law. Although the debate is not decided by the point of law which arises

¹¹⁹ *Grettis saga*, pp. 31-2.

from her case, the two parties are advised for future reference that something should have been given in exchange for the land. Given the numerous examples in *Landnámabók* where no money is said explicitly to have changed hands when land was being granted, it is odd that the example of Steinuðr should be held up as the ideal way in which to receive *landnám* property. In any case, there can be no second situation, no second landtake where this rule might apply. The author of *Grettis saga* departs from other representations of receiving land and by doing so succeeds in portraying the precarious predicament of the later settler.

One more curious detail in the matter of Steinuðr's landtake is that, after she has acquired it in the *Hauksbók* version of events, she grants land to other people:

Eyvindr hét frændi ok fóstri Steinunnar;
honum gaf land millim Kvíguvágabjarga ok
Hvassahrauns...¹²⁰

There was a man called Eyvindr who was the
kinsman and foster-son of Steinunnr; she gave
him land between Kvíguvágabjarg and
Hvassahraun...

It seems strange that someone so anxious of her own rights would be less careful in granting her land. It is not mentioned whether there was anything given in exchange for the land by Eyvindr. But it is certainly not called a “kaup” or “sale” which is what she had wanted to term her arrangement with her kinsman Ingólfr. Perhaps in this case what is being described is more of an inheritance issue, a foster-son standing to inherit from his foster-mother.

¹²⁰ *Landnámabók*, p. 393 (H). She is called Steinunn, an orthographical variant of the name Steinuðr, in this redaction.

Another situation in which people were granted land was in the case of slaves who were made freedmen.¹²¹ Although this is nowhere explicitly stated, one might interpret the fact of their landownership as a mark of their improved status: a new Iceland has created for them a new identity. Skalla-Grímr gives two of his freedmen farms,¹²² and Auðr en djúpúðga includes slaves in the group who enjoy her generosity.¹²³

Hrafnkell Freysgoði is perhaps unusual in how he comes to take his property. He happens one day to stumble upon an uninhabited valley which is perfect for building a second farm.¹²⁴ Despite being a second generation settler, he is able to act like an original settler, by taking all of the land he desires, building a main farm (Aðalból) and then positioning men on his land who will be subject to him. Hrafnkell has the unbelievable good fortune to happen across land of superb quality which no one has noticed before. But there is also a touch of the uncanny about Hrafnkell's second farm which he occupies after his eviction at the hands of Sámr Bjarnarson. He buys it (from whom? the saga author remains silent about this) and is remarkably lucky with both the weather and the fish stocks,¹²⁵ in a manner reminiscent of the blessed Ásólftr alskik's Christian good

¹²¹ The question of slaves and freedmen holding property is an issue which resurfaces throughout this thesis. For more detail and further examples of this particular practice see R. M. Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* (New Haven, 1988), p. 129 and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, "The Position of Freed Slaves in Medieval Iceland", *Saga-Book XXII* (1986-9), 33-49.

¹²² *Landnámabók*, p. 88 (H and S).

¹²³ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 10. Oddly, *Landnámabók* tells a little narrative regarding one of Auðr's slaves, Vífill. Initially he is not given a farm, and he asks why he has not been treated like the other slaves. She replies that it is not at all important for him to have land, since he will be a man of quality wherever he is. However, she does grant him land. See *Landnámabók*, p. 141 (S) and also *Eiríks saga rauða*, pp. 196-7. Clunies Ross points out that Vífill was an ancestor of Guðriðr Þorbjarnardóttir, and that this must account for the odd little narrative in *Landnámabók*: the redactors must have wanted to flatter important Icelanders of later generations who were descended from her. See Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, p. 171.

¹²⁴ *Hrafnkels saga*, p. 36.

¹²⁵ *Hrafnkels saga*, pp. 77-8.

fortune with fish which seem to follow him in great numbers wherever he goes.¹²⁶ The miraculous discovery of the untouched valley and Hrafnkell's fortune with his second farm is the stuff of fairy and folk tale. *Hrafnkels saga* focuses on the actions of a very small number of characters and does not set itself in the Icelandic genealogical structure and pattern of cross-district relationships and struggles. Untouched by forces from outside of the district (apart from the brothers from the west) and of the plot, the saga mostly operates in this fourth dimension of luck and reversing fortunes. In *Landnámabók* there seems to be some unclaimed land between Þorsteinn Skjöldulfsson's and Hákon from Hákonarstaðir's land, and so they both give it to the temple.¹²⁷ There also happens to be a bit of land that no one seems to have noticed in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, a stroke of good fortune for the protagonist.¹²⁸

8. Duellists and Arrivistes

One less sociable option was represented as being available to men with an over-active pioneer spirit - fighting for one's patch of land. With no indigenous peoples to combat for the land, such as the *Skrælingar* in Greenland and Vínland, the early settlers are forced to squabble amongst themselves. Sæmundr enn suðreyski almost has a battle on his hands in striving to retain his land. The aggressive newcomer Kráku-Hreiðarr is advised against challenging Sæmundr to a duel by Eiríkr of Guðdalir, who states that combat in general turns out badly, and that, at any rate, it is absurd to quarrel when the land is so thinly populated at

¹²⁶ *Landnámabók*, pp. 62-3 (H and S). See Clunies Ross, "'Saint' Ásólfr", pp. 29-49.

¹²⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 294 (H and S).

¹²⁸ Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson (eds), *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, Íslensk Fornrit VI (Reykjavík, 1943), p. 302.

this early stage of the settlement.¹²⁹ Ísólfr from Búlandi, however, arrives rather later in the settlement and challenges Vilbaldr Dofnaksson to single combat for his land.¹³⁰ This well-attested method was often represented as being employed by unscrupulous people in Norway to obtain land from either the childless, who would have no one to avenge their death should they perish in the duel, or the defenceless who would not risk any more men in a dispute.¹³¹ In *Eyrbyggja saga* a similar situation arises: Þórólfr Bjarnarson thinks that there is not enough land for him, and so challenges an old, childless man to duel for his land.¹³² Unfortunately for the latter, he wins. Despite these harsh tactics, there seems to be no indication in these representations that this kind of landtake was socially stigmatised.

Hallkell Oddsson in *Landnámabók* is motivated to offer single combat by a different reason. He is offered land, but deems it unmanly to be given it, and so challenges another man, Grímr from Grímsnes, to a duel for the land he owns (“Hallkatli þótti lítilmannligt at þiggja land ok skoraði á Grím til land eða hólmgöngu” - “Hallkell thought it unmanly and mean to accept land and challenged Grímr for his land or to a duel”).¹³³ This betrays once more a strange mistrust on the part of the later writers of depicting someone as being offered land and not paying or doing something in order to obtain it. This mistrust is in some ways a product of later laws which set out in great detail the procedures one must go through in order to buy or sell land: perhaps later writers simply could not abandon this sense of legal requirement. Hallsteinn Þorólfsson also thinks it

¹²⁹ *Landnámabók*, p. 233 (H and S).

¹³⁰ *Landnámabók*, p. 328 (H and S).

¹³¹ See G. Turville-Petre (ed.), *Víga-Glúms saga* (Oxford, 1960), p. 6 and *Grettis saga*, p. 61.

¹³² *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 13-4.

¹³³ *Landnámabók*, p. 388 (H and S).

belittles his reputation to accept land from his father in *Eyrbyggja saga*.¹³⁴

Turning down such offers perhaps also represents some of the uncertainty about how land would be inherited in Iceland as the original settlers passed away.

These young men are represented as feeling uneasy about what might happen in this legally formative period, and later writers differ in how they envisaged the emergence of a social practice.

Some people are not so lucky as to have their landtake reduced or given the option of a duel, but are driven out entirely by newcomers to Iceland. Saxi Álfarinsson is fortunate: although he is driven out by Grímkell Úlfsson, he manages to obtain somewhere else.¹³⁵ Máni from Mánafell too has to find somewhere else, and poor Náttfari, who has bothered to stake his claim using trees as markers, is forced to go elsewhere by Ketill, who then provides him with alternative lands.¹³⁶ *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu* has a slightly different version of the same story. Eyvindr Þorsteinsson gives Náttfari a choice: either he takes the land offered to him or he gets nothing at all.¹³⁷ As the redactors of *Hauksbók* and *Sturlubók*, as well as the author of *Reykðæla saga* add, this is the same Náttfari who came out with Garðarr Svávarsson and remained behind and who thus has a very early claim on the territory.

¹³⁴ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 11. Interestingly, the same phrase is used as in *Landnámabók* - “Hallsteini Þorólfssyni þótti lítillmannligt at þiggja land at föður sínum... - “It seemed to Hallsteinn Þorólfsson an unmanly, mean thing to do, to accept land from his father...”.

¹³⁵ *Landnámabók*, p. 110 (H and S).

¹³⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 282 (H and S); pp. 276-7 (H and S).

¹³⁷ Björn Sigfússon (ed.), *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, Íslensk Fornrit X (Reykjavík, 1940), p. 151.

One later settler in particular finds that he has the opposite problem. Uni Garðarsson, the son of the man who discovered Iceland, comes to Iceland at the suggestion of Haraldr with the intention of conquering it, since the king had promised to make him his jarl. In this sense he is a true arriviste, full of grand hopes and ambition. However, when his neighbours become aware of the fact, they do not make his stay an easy one, and he is forced to move twice before making a permanent residence (although even this luxury is short-lived since he is killed soon after for an illicit liaison).¹³⁸

Conclusion

An overview of representations of landtake confirms that there were many aspects on which Icelandic authors did not concur. Each writer re-creates a different narrative of the early settlement according to how he has assimilated and interpreted the myths, genealogies and other information surrounding landtake. Within these different narratives abide many contradictions, though no more so than in the question of the nature of settlement within the bounds of a *landnámsmaðr*'s original claim. This seems a problematic area indeed for the Icelandic authors and it is not unusual to encounter competing narratives. I think it is possible to see a pattern emerging in the examples in which newcomers purchase or are given land. It could be the case that being 'given' land acts as a euphemism for tenantry, whilst buying land entitles one to have one's own tenants. However, more investigation is needed before claiming the existence of such a pattern. Nevertheless, this chapter has demonstrated clearly the usefulness

¹³⁸ *Landnámabók*, pp. 299-302 (H and S).

of founding myths in stabilising for the later Icclander uncertainties concerning the new country and how it was first settled, especially those myths which legitimise land claims through divine sanctification.

Chapter Three: BOUNDARIES

Introduction

In this chapter I shall examine the few representations of boundaries connected with landtaking and landownership found in *Landnámabók* and in family saga narrative. There is much to be written on how space is divided in medieval Icelandic texts, be it religious space, political space, or supernatural space, but for the current project I am confined only to that which impinges on the idea of ownership. I do, however, make a start at analysing other types of space in my final chapter, which addresses the space of the outlaw and the space of the vagrant.

Even more so than in the first two chapters it will be noted that the first few sections, which are concerned still with the period of settlement in Iceland, demonstrate huge variability in their representations of boundary construction. There are no two examples which concur exactly in their details of any given procedure. As I have done in the last two chapters, I shall attempt to categorise this variability where possible as I outlined in the Introduction.

1. Beating Boundaries: Hallowed Land

My first few examples look back to the last chapter and the act of landtaking, for there are a number of narratives in which new settlers in Iceland perform a ritual around the periphery of their landtake. By no means is this practice well-attested: only a few are represented as carrying out such a ceremony.

In these few examples, taking fire around the boundary of one's claim is the most frequently mentioned of such ceremonies in the sagas and in *Landnámabók*. Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, portrayed in *Eyrbyggja saga* as a character who invests much effort in maintaining the sanctity of holy places, marks his boundary and cleanses his claim with fire.¹ In *Vatnsdæla saga* it is even stated that the practice was an established one. Sæmundr inn suðreyski sets out carrying fire to lay claim to land:

... hann fór með eldi at fornum sið, ok nam sér land þar er nú heitir Sæmundarhlíð í Skagafirði ok gerðisk þroskamikill maðr.²

... he went with fire according to the old custom, and took land at the place which is now called Sæmundarhlíð in Skagafjörður, and became an increasingly important man.

The phrase “at fornum sið” - “according to the old custom” stands in direct contrast to the representations of landtakes already analysed in chapter two. Given the scant number of representations of the practice it can hardly be described as a custom: those who are depicted as taking fire around their boundaries are in a very small minority indeed. The implication could be that it was considered ‘old-fashioned’ to perform the rite, but this probably pushes the interpretation too far. The idea of an old custom employed in the Icelandic settlement would also appear to be anachronistic: no one for generations in Norway would have taken land and had to hallow it in this way. The phrase “at fornum sið”, therefore, demonstrates to the reader that the saga author believed (or rather, wished his audience to believe) that carrying fire around the boundary was what every settler did when he/she claimed land in the settlement. What is also

¹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 8.

² *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 27-8.

perhaps significant is the syntax of the quotation: there seems to be a link between the fact that Sæmundr followed the ancient custom and that he grows to be a man of importance. Not only does the author inform the audience of how their forebears took land, but he also implies that this reverent practice informs his noble character.

Helgi inn magri builds great fires where every lake empties into the sea in order to hallow the district (“... gerði eld mikinn við hvern vatsós ok helgaði sér svá allt herað”).³ Helgi is one of the settlers (already discussed in chapter two) who takes a large *tranche* of land and is then said to grant others permission to live within his landclaim. *A propos* of this it is interesting to note that the author of *Landnámabók* describes him as hallowing the whole district (“allt herað”). This would appear to be an anachronistic description. The word “herað” is more usually employed to describe a large area in which several farms might be found. It normally expresses the idea of a community: individuals cannot own an entire district. This anachronism therefore suggests that Helgi’s past actions had important ramifications for the later inhabitants of the area.

The *Hauksbók* redaction instead states that Helgi hallowed all of the fjord between the headlands.⁴ In both redactions, however, there is no explanation given for why the points which drained into the sea were singled out for ceremonial focus. This constitutes a variation on the practice which was

³ *Landnámabók*, p. 252 (S).

⁴ *Landnámabók*, p. 251 (H). (“Þann vetr bjó Helgi at Bíldsá, en um sumarit kannaði hann herað allt ok nam Eyjafjörð allan millim Sigluness ok Reynisness ok gerði eld mikinn við hvern vatsós við sjó ok helgaði sér svá allan fjörðinn nesja millim.” -“That winter Helgi lived at Bíldsá, but during the summer he explored the whole district between Siglunes and Reynisnes, and built a great fire at the points where rivers emptied out into the sea and thus hallowed for himself the whole fjord between the headlands.”).

represented in *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. But the audience is not enlightened as to why the fire-building of one of the foremost settlers might be different.

In *Víga-Glúms saga*, fire is taken around the boundary of the farm Þverá from which Glúmr Eyjólfsson is being evicted. This is the only example in the family sagas where carrying fire around the boundary is used outside of the context of landtaking. Hallbera Þóroddsdóttir ousts the chieftain with her talk of bringing fire to Þverá, the farm which will now be owned by her son.

Sittu heill, Glúmr, en ekki er hér nú lengr at vera; komit hefi ek nú eldi á Þveráland ok geri þik nú á brott með allt þitt, ok er helgat landit Einari syni mínum.⁵

You may be seated there comfortably at the moment, Glúmr, but you can stay here no longer; I have come now with fire to Þveráland and I am turning you and all your kin away, and the land has been sanctified for my son Einarr.

The land seems in this case to be claimed as an original settler might have done, but, furthermore, the land is cleansed of the traces of Víga-Glúmr's past malicious actions and evil schemes. They are eradicated with fire and ceremony. Because the fire is used in a different context, it gives further clues to the meaning assigned to the practice by authors who used it when describing the actions of landtakers. It seems to have been perceived as having a cleansing, purifying function. This unique decontextualisation, I would suggest, is a strong marker of fictionality. The practice has been appropriated by the saga author to serve his own, fictional ends.

⁵ *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 46.

Einarr Þorgeirsson klaufa is also represented as performing a unique procedure when he settles in Iceland. Whilst travelling around his claim, he and his companions set up an axe in Øxarfjörðr, an eagle at Arnarpúfa and a cross at Krossáss, and by doing this they hallow the whole of the fjord (“Svá helguðu þeir sér allan Øxarfjörð.”).⁶ Perhaps this tale is more a convenient way of explaining way these places are so named, and less a description of how the men are represented to have marked out their land. As shall be demonstrated in the following chapter, myths which explain how certain place-names come about indicate the possibility that the account is fictional: these narratives are most likely to be *post hoc* explanations. Once more, though, the author of *Landnámabók* is untroubled by incorporating another variation on the theme of hallowing the boundary. He is silent on the meaning of the individual objects, and the significance of their erection. Such silence suggests that this narrative has been constructed purely to make sense of the place-names.

Yet another variation on landtaking and hallowing procedures is represented in *Svarfdæla saga*. Having driven out Ljótólfr goði and his men, Þórsteinn svörfuðr is very particular about the way in which he claims the land for himself:

Hann ferr til fjalls ok gerir þar kennimark, sem hann kom framast, ok braut þar í sundr kamb sinn ok kastaði niðr kambsbrotunum ok lætr eptir silfr í þremr stöðum, hálfa mörk í hverjum stað, ok er sá rimir kallaðr at Kambi; ok nefnir Þórsteinn sér vátta, ok fyllir hann með því dalinn sér til vistar ok gaf af sér nafn ok kallaði Svarfaðardal.⁷

⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 285 (H and S).

⁷ Jónas Kristjánsson (ed.), *Svarfdæla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit IX (Reykjavík, 1956), p. 151.

He went into the mountains and erected a boundary line at the highest reaches and broke a comb and threw the pieces of it down on the ground and had silver placed in the earth in three places, half a mark in each spot, and that elevated strip of land is called Kambi; and Þorsteinn named witnesses, and made the valley his domicile, and gave it a name and called it Svarfaðardalr.

These many and various procedures are evidently meant to strengthen as well as demarcate his boundaries, but what do they mean? Did the saga author know what importance these practices had when he represented Þorsteinn as performing them? It seems as if he is incapable of explaining the full implications of Þorsteinn's actions. The silver-burying and comb-breaking are unique textual representations,⁸ and the naming of witnesses and declaration, although commonly represented as having happened in other legal procedures, is not attested anywhere else in this context of landtaking.⁹ Certainly no one else is depicted as being so thorough, with several different (what we must assume are) expressions of ownership, which seem to have both religious and legal force: Ljótólfr can have no recourse either to the spirit world or to a court of law.

A few things in this passage require further comment. The place-name Kambi ties in with the breaking of the comb, but there is no corresponding name given for the place at which the silver was buried. Thus, it could suggest that the explanation of place-names cannot be the full driving force behind this strange narrative. In the same way that Hallbera brings fire to Þverá to cleanse the farm

⁸ However, *Laxdæla saga* does provide another instance in which a lost comb results in a place-name. See *Laxdæla saga*, p. 9, and chapter four for a discussion of place-names.

⁹ For example, neighbours and witnesses were required for the court of confiscation. See V. Finsen (ed.), *Grágás: Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*, Heft 2 (Copenhagen, 1853), p. 85 (hereafter *Grágás* (Codex Regius)). For an example from saga narrative, note the trouble caused by Guðrún and Bolli's failure to acquire the requisite number of witnesses for their land purchase: *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 146-7.

of the traces of Víga-Glúmr, Þórsteinn is perhaps being careful to ensure that the driven-out Ljótólfr and his men have no comeback whatsoever should they return to make claims on the land. The likelihood is that this is another example of a landtaking practice being used outside of its normal context, but this cannot be stated with certainty since it is the only representation of a procedure of this kind to be found in saga narrative. Whatever the individual actions may have meant remains lost to us, as it might have already been lost for the author, but the thoroughness of Þórsteinn is impressed upon the reader in the representation of his bold landtake.

There are examples of settlers who are fearless and ruthless enough to take parts of someone else's landclaim whilst they are hallowing their boundaries. Skefill from Gönguskarð shows great temerity in his landtake: he decides to assert ownership of land while Sæmundr who arrived before him is preparing to walk with fire around his claim:

Skefill hét maðr, er skipi sínu kom í Gönguskarðárós á enni sömu viku ok Sæmundr. En meðan Sæmundr fór eldi um landnám sitt, þá nam Skefill land allt fyrir utan Sauðá; þat tók hann af landnámi Sæmundar at ólofi hans, ok lét Sæmundr þat svá búit vera.¹⁰

There was a man called Skefill who came in his ship into Gönguskarðáróss the same week as Sæmundr. And whilst Sæmundr was going round his landclaim with fire, Skefill took all the land above Sauðá; he took it without Sæmundr's permission, but Sæmundr let things stand as they were.

It is difficult to see how Skefill made the claim stand, especially since the story does not detail any measures he may have taken to assert his ownership.

¹⁰ *Landnámabók*, p. 229 (H and S).

Furthermore, Sæmundr's reaction to Skefill is omitted. This character is Sæmundr inn suðreyski, who features in *Vatnsdæla saga*. In that saga there is no mention of poaching or even of a character named Skefill. It cannot be known whether the saga author knew of this version and chose not to include it, or whether he was working with another tradition. Would it have coloured the representation of the noble Sæmundr if this unfortunate incident in his early Icelandic experience had been narrated in *Vatnsdæla saga*? Certainly the *Landnámabók* episode might suggest that Sæmundr had taken too much land: if he cannot defend it all, there is little expectation that he will *need* it all.¹¹ But there are other, respectable settlers who perform this practice and are represented as experiencing nothing of this kind. Once more, *Landnámabók* represents all of these different procedures without favouring one over the other. Famous and highly regarded settlers such as Helgi inn magri who carry fire around their boundaries co-exist in textual space with Sæmundr's experience in *Landnámabók* for whom the procedure does not work.

Önundr víss also takes advantage when Eiríkr of Guðdalir is about to set off to mark his claim:

En þá er Eiríkr vildi til fara at nema dalinn allan allt fyrir vestan, þá felldi Önundr blótspann til, at hann skyldi verða víss, hvern tíma Eiríkr mundi til fara at nema dalinn, ok varð þá Önundr skjótari ok skaut yfir ána með tundröru ok helgaði sér svá landit fyrir vestan ok bjó milli á.¹²

¹¹ Jesse Byock comments on the problems of owning too much land in relation to farm productivity and the emergence of tenant farmers. "Landowners faced the reality that adding more slaves or long-term labourers did not increase their farmsteads' productivity. At the same time, holding excess land could be dangerous, since excess property had to be defended against encroachment." See Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, p. 88.

¹² *Landnámabók*, pp. 233-4 (H and S).

But when Eiríkr was journeying to take possession of the valley to the west, Önundr cast the divination chip so that he could ascertain the time at which Eiríkr was going to set out to take his landclaim, and Önundr was the quicker of the two and shot a tinder-arrow over the river to hallow for himself the land west of it, and then lived in between the two rivers.

Behind this incident seems to lie the assumption that land which has not yet been hallowed is still potentially available to be claimed. Önundr employs the practice of divination not, as might be expected, to find out where he ought to take land, but in order to learn the time at which Eiríkr's ritual will take place. Timing, then, is all important: hallowing must be such a binding process between man and land that Önundr could not have taken his section west of the valley if Eiríkr had already hallowed it. However, there is no reason given as to why Önundr cannot simply claim the land before Eiríkr sets out to hallow it. This process of divination does not make sense unless one is to assume that some ritual power associated with walking with fire only permits landtaking at certain times. Also, we are faced in this example with the clash of two different landhallowing procedures. If Önundr can claim the land with as much holiness as a quick arrow-shot, then why does Eiríkr not do the same?

In *Landnámabók*, as has been discussed throughout the thesis so far, variations on different myths of settlement are represented within the confines of a single text: the author does not favour one practice over another. But in this example one is forced to confront the peculiar difficulty of two different practices co-existing in the same narrative. There seems to be no homogeneity whatsoever in these representations of landtaking procedures.

2. Staking one's claim

There are only a very few examples of settlers in *Landnámabók* who are represented as taking any trouble to mark the full extent and compass of their boundary on the physical landscape. The most dramatic and insistent demarcation of boundaries is perpetrated by a character who was discussed above in relation to the title of first settler of Iceland: Náttfari. The conclusion to his tale can be found in both *Landnámabók* and *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*. The versions are all slightly different, but common to both the *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* redactions and *Reykðæla saga* is the description of Náttfari making clear the extent of his land claim by marking the boundary of his territory on trees.¹³ This is the only mention of such a practice: it is almost as if the authors of *Landnámabók* and *Reykðæla saga* imagined that he would come into some difficulty regarding his claim when later settlers arrived because he was not supposed to be in Iceland. He was there, so it seems, purely by accident, coming ashore when his master Garðarr was making his way back to mainland Scandinavia. Is his marking on trees an insistent, desperate move because he realises that, as a slave, his status as accidental 'first settler' and landtaker must be precarious?

One must also consider that there would have been a certain ghostly quality about a claim made on trees for the later medieval Icelfander. The land that had been widely forested between mountain and seashore when the settlers first arrived was significantly altered within even the first couple of centuries of Norse settlement, mainly by widespread deforestation and subsequent soil erosion, according to the paleoecological data (as has been mentioned above). The

¹³ *Landnámabók*, pp. 276-77 (H and S); *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, p. 151.

nebulousness of Náttfari's hold on the valley would have had more impact on an audience unused to extensive woodland.¹⁴ Does the marking on trees allude to the impermanence of his claim on the land? His unexpected settlement in Iceland and his strange markings make him a shadowy, mysterious character.

However, it must further be noted that in *Grágás* there is a law specific to the marking of notches on trees:

Ef maðr hōgr scyle hōG aviðe eða scefr sva at
spell se at. þat varðar utlegð. oc averc vi.
avra.¹⁵

If a man hews notched into a tree or scrapes it
so that it is damaged then he incurs a
compensatory fine of six ounces.

There is a strong possibility that the audience of *Landnámabók* might have thought that Náttfari was breaking the law when he marked his landtake on trees, and that he deserved to lose his land. Because of Iceland's wide-spread deforestation, trees would have perhaps needed such laws as the one in *Grágás* in order to be protected. As the soil could no longer support forestry, any trees that did remain standing in the later medieval period would have been valuable and rare commodities.

There are two examples in *Landnámabók* in which territory is marked on by setting up poles. Ævarr enn gamli, who appears to have had problems initially when looking for suitable land, eventually comes across some land and decides to mark it:

¹⁴ The nebulousness of his hold recalls for me the words of Catullus when he states that the words of a woman to her eager lover should be written on the wind and flowing water. See Catullus, *The Complete Poems*, trans. G. Lee (Oxford, 1990), pp. 122-3.

¹⁵ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), p. 110.

Ævarr fór upp með Blöndu at leita sér landnáms, en er hann kom þar sem heita Móbergsbrekkur, setti hann þar níðr stöng háva ok kvezk þar taka Véfrøði syni sínum bústað. Síðan nam hann Langadal allan upp þaðan ok svá þar fyrir norðan háls...¹⁶

Ævarr went up the Blönd river to look for some land to take, and when he came to the place which called Móbergsbrekkur, he set up a tall pole and declared that he had claimed the land for his son Véfrøðr to dwell on. After that he took all of Langadalr from that point to north of the ridge...

Here, the pole has been set up for a person *in absentia*: Véfrøðr Ævarsson has not yet arrived, and this seems to be his father's method for ensuring that no one lays claim to the site before his son reaches the country. It does not state whether Ævarr sets up a pole for his own property. This differs from the examples discussed in chapter two in which settlers claim all the land that they can possibly take, and then give some to their family as and when they join them in Iceland. This family is represented as doing something uniquely different: this practice goes against the general pattern of landtakes already analysed. There is no explanation given as to why this family bucks the trend.

Hrosskell at Ýrarfell has a pole set up for a different reason. When he gets approval to take land within Eiríkr of Guðdalir's landclaim, he sends out his slave Roðrekr to find more land in the mountains. The slave sets up a pole in a ravine which in the author's time still bore the slave's name: Roðreksgil. Having set up the pole of newly-cut birch wood, called Landknower, he heads back ("... þar

¹⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 225 (H and S).

setti hann niðr staf nýbirkðan, er þeir kölluð Landkönnuð, ok eptir þat snýr hann aptr.”).¹⁷

The story is strange, and clearly in parts fictional, for several reasons. We are told that Roðrekr is sent off on a search of the land (“í landaleitan”), but it does not say specifically that he claims his land for his master, for example in the way that Ævarr does for his son. The term is rather unhelpfully vague: it does not make clear whether he is simply on a survey or a hunt for land which his master can potentially own. A ravine is not an especially attractive piece of land to acquire but the author does not provide clues to the desirability *qua* property of the newly-discovered territory. Furthermore, if Hrosskell wanted the land for himself, why is it forever afterwards named after his slave? The more usual pattern of naming is that the land carries the name of the person who owns it. Is there a suggestion that the slave stayed there and took the territory for himself? Is this why the author is careful to add the curious detail that he ‘headed back afterwards’? The name of the pole is also intriguing, and seems to bear no relation to landowning, but to land exploration. It is almost as if the author, aware of the problem that the land was named after the slave, wanted to make sure that his story made sense, and leave no suggestion that Roðrekr was a landtaker but merely a slave acquiring land on his master’s behalf. Given that this little account does not make any sense in the details it presents, it would suggest strongly that the author here has ‘lost the plot’, and thus reveals himself at this point of disturbance in the text as being ‘at work’.

¹⁷ *Landnámabók*, pp. 230-1 (H and S).

What also arouses suspicion is the flurry of other expeditions which Roðrekr's mission instigates. When Vékell enn hamrammi hears about it, he sets off south into the mountains to see for himself what is there:

Hann kom til hauga þeira, er nú heita
Vékelshaugar; hann skaut milli hauganna ok
hvarf þaðan aptr.¹⁸

He came to the mounds which are now called
Vékell's Mounds; he shot an arrow between
the mounds and turned back from there after
that.

Again, an expedition is made, and an act performed - an act which has strong associations with landtaking. As is noted above, shooting an arrow is how Önundr víss stakes claim to his land: the flight of the arrow describes the extent of the property. However, in this incident the actor returns home without further ado.¹⁹ The land is named after Vékell, just as the land was named after Roðrekr who set up the pole. Mounds are usually associated with burial mounds, and tend to be named after the people who were buried in them. Drumlins or other natural hillocks are not normally denoted by the word "haugr". As Margaret Clunies Ross writes in *Prolonged Echoes, Vol. II*, "[t]he custom of burial in a mound is often associated with important early settlers in Iceland, sometimes, though by no means always, with men who wished to assert their presence after death as well as during life...".²⁰ Might one then assume that the more likely narrative is that Vékell himself was buried in the mound, but that the author did not know of any settlement or story attached to the place and was familiar only with a later, erroneous narrative of exploration?

¹⁸ *Landnámabók*, pp. 231-2 (H and S).

¹⁹ *Landnámabók*, pp. 233-4 (H and S).

²⁰ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes, Vol. II*, p. 35.

The expeditions continue. When Eiríkr of Guðdalir hears about Vékell's journey, he sends off Rönguðr to explore the mountains further. Eiríkr's slave comes across men's tracks coming from the south, builds a cairn (called - "Rangaðarvaðr" - "Rönguðr's Cairn"), and returns home. His discovery is important in terms of communication and travel: as the author says, people after that made their way between the North and South Quarters through the mountains ("... þaðan af tókusk ferðir um fjallit milli Sunnlendinga fjórðungs ok Norðlendinga.").²¹ Is this the only reason behind the inclusion of these expeditions? Certainly it is recorded as an important break-through in the visualisation and conception of Icelandic space, as well as being a helpful, practical discovery for travellers. But what about the pole, the arrow, the cairn, and the insistence that all three explorers returned home straight after seeming to have claimed land in the middle of the mountains? The triple repetition of the slave who goes out exploring and then returns, leaving behind his name, looks fabricated, and suggests that the author was either covering up for a lack of details regarding these sites, or was confused by the details that he did have. It is perhaps significant that this group of narratives concerns land in the interior. From the archaeological evidence it can be ascertained that there are a number of farms towards the centre of the island (and therefore at higher altitude and in a less favourable micro-climate) which were abandoned not long after they were settled. There is a possibility this set of stories in *Landnámabók* constituted a tradition which explained why there were places in the interior which were named. Perhaps the long-forgotten reality of the situation was that these places were the sites of early settlements which came to be abandoned.

²¹ *Landnámabók*, p. 232 (H and S).

3. Marking and Taking

There are some accounts in the sagas and in *Landnámabók* in which boundaries are both a means of demarcating space as well as determining how much land individuals can own.²² In *Bárðar saga*, early on in the narrative and in the settlement period, a slave is rewarded for the killing of other slaves with as much land as he can plough and fence in three days as well as his freedom.²³ His capacity for labour fixes the boundary. Such a reward is highly practical: as has been explored above with the landtake of Sæmundr inn suðreyski in *Landnámabók* there is not much point in owning so much land that one cannot travel across it or work it within the space of a few days. This practice ensures that the space one had acquired was manageable according to the strength and fitness of its owner who would have to labour in it.²⁴

Vébjörn Sygnakappi, the landtaker who does battle with sacrifices against Hákon jarl, claims as much land as he can walk round in a day, as well as a little bit extra - a plot of land called Folaþótr, which provides a little variation on the practice.²⁵ However, in this example, unlike the last, Vébjörn does not seem to be constrained in any way to claim only this area of land: it merely serves as a convenient description of how much he took. There is no one who dictates to him how much land he is entitled to own.

²² See A. Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, trans. G. L. Campbell (London, 1985), p. 56.

²³ *Bárðar saga*, p. 121. ("Fyrir þat gaf Einarr honum frelsi ok land svá vítt sem hann fengi unit ok gert um þrjá daga; þat heitir Hreiðarsgerði, ok bjó hann þar síðan."). The same incident is related in *Landnámabók*, p. 108 (S).

²⁴ *Bárðar saga*, p. 121. Unlike in the case of Gefjon, who manages to take more land than Gylfi had anticipated she could plough in a day and a night, there is no trickery involved: see Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. A. Faulkes (London, 1988), p. 7. See also M. Clunies Ross, "The myth of Gefjon and Gylfi and its function in *Snorra Edda* and *Heimskringla*" in *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* XCIII (1978), 149-65.

²⁵ *Landnámabók*, pp. 188-90 (H and S).

Þorgerðr, the wife of Ásbjörn Heyjangers-Bjarnason, measures her landtake in a similar fashion. In the *Sturlubók* version of events, she loses her husband at sea on the journey to Iceland, but she presses on with her sons and takes land upon her arrival in Iceland.²⁶ But in the *Hauksbók* version it states that “[e]n þat var mælt, at kona skyldi eigi víðara nema land en leiða mætti kvígu tvævetra várlangan dag sólsetra <í> millim, hálfstalit naut ok haft vel” - “it is said that a woman could only take as much land as she can lead a two year old heifer, half-stalled and yoked well, around on a spring day from sunrise to sunset”, and this is what she does.²⁷ The impersonal construction, “it is said” does not help in locating a source for this idea that a woman was limited in her landtake in this way. Certainly other female landtakers are not portrayed as being hampered by this edict: Auðr en djúpúðga is certainly not described in any of the texts in which she is mentioned as being thus constrained. It makes sense, perhaps, to represent a slave as having been limited in the amount of land one can acquire: one did not want a generous offer on the part of a master to be taken too far. But who could limit a free woman in this way? - there is no mention in the *Landnámabók* narrative of the presence of a third party to ensure that this edict was carried out.

These three narratives communicate a closeness with the land the area of which is personally tailored to one’s needs and strengths. But these narratives contradict the several cases discussed in the first two chapters in which original settlers take vast tracts of land. Why represent people doing this when most are described as taking all that they could? Certainly, the first is of a slave taking

²⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 320 (S).

²⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 321 (H).

land: as I have indicated, it would hardly be fitting for a slave to take acres and acres from within the landclaim of his master. Limiting them in this way is not only for a practical reason (how much they can work), but also is an expression of hierarchy which separates freeman and slave. But there is no reason why Vébjörn and Þorgerðr should have been so constrained. Is this a convenient way to explain how the settlement of Iceland took place without recourse to violence and ‘might making right’? By mentioning this procedure, one ensures that there is an amicable, civilized description of the last phase of the settlement, when surely bitter animosity informed the battle for the last scraps of farmable land. Is this limiting procedure another means of obscuring the probable reality of the situation in Iceland?

Perhaps Þorgerðr and Vébjörn act out of fear of Norwegian royal authority. It is stated in the *Hauksbók* redaction of *Landnámabók* (that is, the redaction in which both are described as measuring out their land) that Haraldr inn hárfagri intervened later on in the settlement, when newcomers complained that the very first settlers had taken too much land:

Sumir þeir, er fyrstir kómu út, byggðu næstir fjöllum ok merkðu at því landskostina, at kvikféit fýstisk frá sjónum til fjallana. Þeim mönnum, er síðar kómu út, þóttu hinir numit hafa of víða land, er fyrri kómu, en á þat sætti Haraldr konungr þá hinn hárfagri, at engi skyldi víðara nema en hann mætti eldi yfir fara á degi með skipverjum sínum. Menn skyldu eld gera, þá er sól væri í austri; þar skyldi gera aðra reyki, svá at hvára sæi frá öðrum, en þeir eldar, er görvir váru, þá er sól var í austri, skyldi brenna til nætr; síðan skyldu þeir ganga til þess, er sól væri í vestri, ok gera þar aðra elda.²⁸

²⁸ *Landnámabók*, p. 337 and p. 339 (H).

Those people who had first come out to Iceland had settled as far up as the mountains, and laid claim to the best parts so that their livestock increased in the areas between the sea and the mountains. Those men who came out later in the settlement period thought that those who had come out before had taken too much land, so that Haraldr inn hárfagri settled it that no one was allowed to take more land than they could carry fire over in a day along with their ship-mates. Men had to build the fires with the sun in the east, then they had to make other smoky fires so that one fire could be seen from the next one, and those that were made with the sun in the east had to burn until night-fall; afterwards they had to walk until the sun was in the west, and build other fires there.

No other text refers to this royal command, and although Þorgerðr, Vébjörn and the slave Hreiðarr, do perform a similar procedure, they are not represented as following these precise instructions. In fact, no one is represented as following this agreement. It is incomprehensible that Haraldr would have any such authority in Iceland, and that he could possibly have enforced the agreement even if he had. It is also nonsensical that Haraldr would care in the slightest as to how these *émigrés* came to take their land.

By contrast, *Íslendingabók* tells of another way in Haraldr is meant to have imposed restrictions on the settlement of Iceland:

En þá varð för manna mikil mjök út hingat ór Norvegi, til þess unz konungrinn Haraldr bannaði, af því at honum þótti landauðn nema. Þá sættusk þeir á þat, at hverr maðr skyldi gjalda konungi v aura, sá er eigi væri frá því skiliðr ok þaðan fœri hingat. En svá er sagt, at Haraldr væri LXX vetra konungr ok yrði áttæðr. Þau hafa upphöf verit at gjaldi því, er nú er kallat landaurar, en þar galsk stundum minna, unz Óláfr inn digri gærði skirt, at hverr maðr skyldi gjalda konungi hálfa mörk, sá er fœri á milli Norvegs ok Íslands, nema konur eða þeir menn er hann næmi frá. Svá sagði Þorkell oss Gellisson.²⁹

And then a great migration of people came to Iceland from Norway until Haraldr konungr forbade it, because he thought that the country would be laid waste. Then they settled it that every man who was not exempted and who went from Norway to Iceland should pay the king five ounces. And so it is said that Haraldr was king for seventy years and lived into his eighties. These were the origins of the tax which is now called land-ounces, but it fluctuated in value rather until Óláfr inn digri declared that everyone who went between Norway and Iceland should pay the king half a mark, apart from women and those men who were exempted. So Þorkell Gellison told us.

This practice is not alluded to in any other medieval Icelandic text. However, this attempt at restricting the migration to Iceland is at least more plausible; it would have been easier for Haraldr to collect the tax from Norwegians leaving his ports (though not an easy task by any means) than it would for him to dictate how much land his countrymen and -women, and other nationalities over whom he presumably had *no* control whatsoever, could take in Iceland. This account informs us that the measure was not simply another manifestation of Haraldr's tyranny towards those who would not bow to his wishes, but a long-standing tax policy which extended into Óláfr inn digri's reign (that is, Saint Óláfr, who

²⁹ *Íslendingabók*, p. 48.

reigned from 1015-1028, which was 84 years after the end of Haraldr inn hárfagri's reign). It was, in all probability, a port-authority tax which was imposed on all ships which left harbour in Norway; similar taxes were doubtless placed on all vessels heading for foreign destinations. Nevertheless, these two narratives must be a reflection of the Norwegian crown's later interest in Iceland in the years just before and after Iceland lost its independence to Norway. The control which Haraldr is depicted as having over the migration to Iceland is somewhat at variance with other representations of the new land as being the ideal place to escape the tyranny of ruling monarchs (as discussed in chapter one).

4. Natural Boundaries

Having discussed the few examples in which boundaries are carefully marked and sanctified, it must again be emphasised that, for the most part, in both the context of landtaking and landownership in general, one's farm is described by natural features and/or boundaries. A typical example is the natural boundary between the lands of Eyvindr Loðinsson and Þórir leðr-háls: they are separated by a stream.³⁰ Also in *Landnámabók*, the extent of Kalmann enn suðreyski's land is described as being determined by nature: his landclaim stretches as far east up to the icefields as the grass would grow.³¹ He can only have as much land as the glacier will allow him, which might be assumed to vary from year to year as the ice advances and retreats due to yearly climatic fluctuations. Thus, although a natural boundary might at first glance seem the most permanent, stable and

³⁰ *Landnámabók*, p. 273 (H and S).

³¹ *Landnámabók*, p. 81 (H and S).

incontrovertible type of division, Icelandic land was subject to change, and sometimes extreme change.

There are a few landtakes in which the author of *Landnámabók* details a change in the topography of the country. For example, when describing the landtake of Sigmundr kleykir, it is stated that Grímsá and Kerlingará used to flow west of Höfði (“Sigmundr kleykir son Önundar bílds nam land milli Grímsar ok Kerlingarár, er þá fell fyrir vestan Höfða”).³² The suggestion is that the river has changed course since the initial landtake took place. This has certainly occurred in, for example, Njála country, where Rangá has altered its course dramatically since the saga-age. This means that *Landnámabók* could not have been a wholly certain means of verifying later landclaims: if physical boundaries had moved since the *landnám* period, then the mapping of landholding would have been a rather more difficult affair with possibility for dispute and disagreement. If the land itself was different in parts from the time of the saga author, it is hard to envisage how arguments over historic boundaries and former ownership could have been settled. Because of the powerful geomorphic and climatic forces which ravage the island, Iceland’s landscape has always been subject to terrain-changing flux. Even *Grágás* admits that one could expect the landscape to change: the lawcodes make provision for when boundary streams detach pieces of land when they change their courses and cut into the earth.³³

³² *Landnámabók*, p. 333 (H and S).

³³ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), pp. 97-8.

Streams which form a boundary division between adjoining lands can also be changed in their course by the work of man. Irrigation issues cause great strife in *Landnámabók* between Grímr köggur and Ljótr enn spaki:

Ljótr kaupir slátr at Grími til tuttugu hundraða ok galt læk, er fell meðan landa þeira; sá hét Ósómi. Grímr veitti hann á eng sína ok gróf land Ljóts, en hann gaf sök á því, ok var fátt með þeim.³⁴

Ljótr bought some meat off Grímr to the value of twenty hundreds, and paid him with the stream that ran between their lands; it was called Dishonour. Grímr irrigated his fields with it and dug up part of Ljótr's land, and Ljótr brought a case against him because of it, and there was a bit of an atmosphere between them.

The boundary stream has in this case been used as payment, and then subsequently in irrigation. One assumes that Ljótr's particular quarrel is with the digging up of his land, and not the purpose to which the stream has been put by his neighbour. It is a very unusual complaint, that a man has interfered with another's land: it is almost as if, by selling the stream and its neutrality and power as a boundary, Grímr has now no respect or sense of where his property ends and Ljótr's begins. When possessed by only one party, its force as the dividing line between two farms is deactivated. It is an odd transgression. The name of the stream - Dishonour - is also curious. The stream embodies Grímr's dealings in the affair: by acquiring the river his attitude towards his neighbour's property takes a turn for the worse.³⁵

³⁴ *Landnámabók*, p. 184 (S).

³⁵ *Grágás* contains sections on the proper procedures of lawful irrigation and where how one can legally 'use' another man's land. See *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), p. 95 and pp. 97-8, and pp. 93-4 respectively.

Loðmundr enn gamli's landtake experiences flux, but not through the natural causes of wind and soil erosion. Loðmundr does battle with another local warlock, Þrasi Þórólfsson, with the water of Jökulsá. Both attempt to flood one another's land:

Síðan veitti hvárr þeira vötnin frá sér, þar til er þeir fundusk við gljúfr nökkur. Þá sættusk þeir á þat, at áin skyldi þar falla, sem skemmst væri til sjóvar. Sú er nú kölluð Jökulsá ok skilr landsfjórðunga.³⁶

After that each of them diverted the water away from his farm until they met each other at a certain ravine. Then they agreed that the river should flow where there was the shortest distance to the sea. The river is now called Jökulsá and divides the Quarters.

This supernatural battle of the elements traumatises the notion of the permanency of a topographical boundary, but at the same time toys comically by having a different twist on the notion of a dispute over boundaries. The fact that the two sorcerers decide in the end to have the river flow where the distance is shortest to the sea is rather tongue-in-cheek - the geographical circumstances could hardly have had it otherwise. This is a blatant, self-conscious betrayal of the fictionality of the account: it is a supernatural myth of origins of the later, important Quarter Boundary.

A similar, supernatural effect on the landscape of Iceland occurs in *Landnámabók* in the curious story of Hvítá and Kalmann enn suðreyski's grandson, Bjarni. When he decides to become a Christian, the course of the river changes, thus enabling him to take possession of more land.³⁷ The change in faith

³⁶ *Landnámabók*, pp. 304-6 (H and S).

³⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 81 (H and S).

works greatly to his profit, and suggests that Christians are deserving of more and better, since the change in faith and the change in boundary resulting in an increase in land are presented as a simple ‘cause-and-effect’ process. These tales are created not to deal with the boundaries and former landclaims, but to explore mythical, supernatural power amongst earlier generations of Icelanders, and perhaps to explore in ‘just-so’ fashion why these rivers might have changed their course over time. But, critically, they undermine, albeit fantastically, the permanence of the physical landscape, whose shifting and eroding nature has always been a cause for concern for the Icelandic.

In *Þorvalds þáttr víðförla*, a tale which is largely a conversion narrative, a stream is employed to separate the heathen and the Christian at a wedding feast. But this natural boundary is not enough, and so following the line of this stream, which runs through the middle of the hall, a curtain is set up to divide Christian space from heathen space.³⁸ This reminds one of Þorbrandr örrek’s hall in *Landnámabók* which was discussed in chapter two: his hall is so large that people have to ride through it on their packhorses. Because the heathens and the Christians do not want to have anything to do with each other whatsoever, the curtain is put up: clearly simply dividing the two groups with the stream is not sufficient. What follows is a miracle performed by the bishop in which he walks through fire unscathed; many are converted after witnessing this. Although it is understandable that heathens and Christians might want to be separated, it is less easy to comprehend why a stream might be represented as running through a hall, especially since its dividing force appears to be redundant if the curtain is

³⁸ Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Þorvalds þáttr víðförla*, Íslendinga Sögur VII (Reykjavík, 1947), p. 449.

required. The significance of these divisions are quite lost to the reader, as perhaps they were for the author of the *páttr* too.

5. The Religious Boundary

Obviously, the example from *Þorvalds þáttr víðförla* is unique, in that a stream (a natural boundary) is employed not to separate land belonging to different people, but to divide two antagonistic religious groups. However, religious space and the power of the Christian boundary does inform landownership in *Landnámabók*.

Ketill enn fíflski's land, Kirkubær, is a space in which ownership and sanctity conflict (already touched on briefly in the last chapter). The author of *Landnámabók* states that before Ketill, a Christian, took his land, the *papar* had lived there, and because of this no heathens were permitted to dwell on the land.³⁹

When Ketill dies, his neighbour's son, Hildir Eysteinnsson, decided that he would like to live on Ketill's farm at Kirkubær, not understanding why a heathen should not be allowed to farm there. However, when he steps inside the home meadow he drops down dead, and he is buried in a mound there which now bears his name.⁴⁰ The power of crossing the boundary and the potency of the Christian space overcomes the heathen. Dick Harrison introduces this concept into his article on notions of liminality and centrality. In discussing medieval space which is charged with significance, be it, for example, religious, political or supernatural, "notions of taboo and invisible power were closely associated with the idea of liminality: something happened when you crossed a border."⁴¹ Perhaps Hildir's

³⁹ *Landnámabók*, pp. 322-5 (H and S).

⁴⁰ *Landnámabók*, p. 324 and p. 326 (H and S).

⁴¹ D. Harrison, "Invisible Boundaries and Places of Power: Notions of Liminality and Centrality in the Early Middle Ages" *The Transformation of Frontiers from Late Antiquity to the Carolingians*, ed. W. Pohl, I. Wood and H. Reimitz (Leiden, 2001), p. 91.

case was not helped by attempting to take another man's land; why he should think that he has a claim to the land is not made explicit. The genealogy of Ketill enn fíflski is given along with his story, but it does not state why his son or his grandson were not farming at Kirkjubær. As Margaret Clunies Ross writes of the incident:

[b]oth the name of his farm and the prohibition preventing heathens from settling there suggest that this was consecrated ground and that Ketill belonged to the same religious persuasion as the *papar*. However, unlike them, he did not refrain from a social and a sexual life, and his many descendants included such men as the lawspeaker Sighvatr Surtsson (1076-83). This narrative would have assumed added significance for medieval Icelanders who recognised that the sanctity conferred on Kirkubær by the *papar* and upheld by Ketill was realised in the Christian era through the foundation of the Benedictine convent there in 1186.⁴²

Clunies Ross offers here a means of understanding why things had to be represented in the way they did, by interpreting a Christian foreshadowing of future events and significances. This narrative also provides us with another mound. If one recalls that, according to Clunies Ross in *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, that “[t]he custom of burial in a mound is often associated with important early settlers in Iceland, sometimes, though by no means always, with men who wished to assert their presence after death as well as during life...”, then there appears to be another difficulty in making sense of the story.⁴³ There seems no obvious solution to the question of why an interloper, who has no right to the land and drops down dead upon walking inside its boundaries, should be incorporated near

⁴² Clunies Ross, “‘Saint’ Ásólfr”, p. 39.

⁴³ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes, Vol. II*, p. 35.

the sacred space and commemorated in such a way.⁴⁴ It is incomprehensible that he could be buried on land to which he had no claim. And so although Clunies Ross can help with the interpretation of some of the difficulties of this narrative, there is still much that remains unanswered.

The saintly Ásólfur alskik has an effect on his natural surroundings with his good Christian influence. Not being too happy with proximity to the heathen, he keeps out of their way, and does not accept anything from them, not even food. Others become curious as to what he survives on, and they discover that in a stream on his land he is supplied with an abundant source of fish. The locals drive him out, but only to find that the fish follow him wherever he goes, for in his new abode he is still in receipt of piscine blessing, whereas his old land is now quite barren. After moving a second time (the same thing happens again with the fish and the jealous heathen) his kinsman puts him up, but at Ásólfur's request, in a separate house, because he wishes to be apart from other people, one supposes in religious solitude.⁴⁵ Christian and heathen space in this example remain separate, but where Ásólfur was buried becomes a church in Christian times. "That holiness, expressed in and through Ásólfur's mortal remains, directly sanctified the site of the church at Innrihólmur. It lay there, as it were, ready and waiting to be recognised when the Christian moment came."⁴⁶

However, the miracle of the fish is not reserved for the devout Christian. During a famine Þuríður sundafyllir causes each sound in her district to fill with

⁴⁴ According to Jakob Benediktsson, there is a place named Hildishaugur in the vicinity of Kirkjubæjarklaustur. See *Landnámabók*, footnote 1, p. 326 (H and S).

⁴⁵ *Landnámabók*, pp. 62-4. See Clunies Ross, "Saint" Ásólfur, 40-47 for the differences between the *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* redactions.

⁴⁶ Clunies Ross, "Saint" Ásólfur, p. 44.

fish by means of her witchcraft.⁴⁷ Her witchcraft saves the people from starvation, and she takes a ewe from each farmer in return for her work. With the examples of Ásólfr alskik and Þuríðr sundafyllir one can recognise once more that religions are represented as having a positive impact on the lives of the earliest settlers: one is not favoured over the other, although, of course, the early history of the sites of later convents and churches would have had a greater relevance and importance for the later medieval Icelandic.

Another who feels the power of Christian space strongly, though with less devastating effects, is Björn inn austroeni. When his siblings invite him to share their life and wealth in the Hebrides, he realises that they have abandoned their pagan ways and taken up the new religion, of which he does not approve:

Björn varð þess viss, at þau höfðu annan átrúnað, ok þótti honum þat lítilmannligt, er þau hafnat fornum sið, þeim er frændr þeira höfðu haft, ok nam hann þar eigi ynði, ok enga staðfesta vildi hann þar taka...⁴⁸

Björn became aware that they had a different belief, and he thought it degrading, that they had formerly held the faith which their kinsmen had all had [but had now abandoned it], and so he took no pleasure in the place, and did not want to settle himself there...

Although the land is not sanctified as such, the difference between the two religions, manifesting itself in alienation from his family, is too much, and Björn cannot share the space with them. Religion sets up a boundary in this instance between members of the same family. The alienation is less a supernatural force but more of an oppressive cultural difference which means that Björn cannot

⁴⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 186 (H and S).

⁴⁸ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 10.

participate in a sense of family-belonging and or feel attachment to the family farm.

6. Later, Manmade Boundaries

Just as there are only a few examples at the time of the settlement in which the construction of a physical boundary is represented, there are only a small number of cases in which walls and fences feature in saga narrative. Later authors sometimes allude to structures which were built in the earlier period and could still be seen in their own time. This lends support to the authenticity of the saga narrative. These ‘permanent markers’ are where past and present meet. Just as wall forms a long line on the land, its representation in saga narrative extends horizontally across, connecting the saga account with the physical reality of the author’s present. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, for example, the remains of the wall which Arnkell goði had built across the headland where the troublesome revenant Þórólfr bægifótr had been buried were visible at the time of writing, according to the author.⁴⁹ The same is true of the handiwork of Ásbjörn vegghamarr, the itinerant wall builder in *Fljótsdæla saga*: some of his creations in the East Fjords had apparently stood the test of time.⁵⁰

However, this continuity between past and present which a physical boundary provides is not its only function in saga narrative. The hired assassin and outlaw Þorgrímr, a man from Vatnsdalr, sent to kill Finnbogi rammi manages to get himself in the employ of the hero with his wall building skills, sorely

⁴⁹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 95.

⁵⁰ Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Fljótsdæla saga*, Íslensk Fornrit XI (Reykjavík, 1950), p. 258.

needed because the home field is always being trodden all over from a lack of masonry in *Finnboga saga*. He alludes to the long-standing reputation of his handiwork:

Hann kvaðst engi íþróttamaður vera, - „ en ef skal alllítit til finna, þá þykist ek garð leggja eigi verr en annarr maður; hefí ek ok þat mjök gert, ok hefir engi fallit, heldr setna þeir í jörð niður.[“]⁵¹

He said that he was not an especially talented individual, “But if you had to pick out something I was good at, I consider myself to be able to build a wall no worse than the next man; I have made many, and none has fallen down, but rather they have all settled down into the earth.”

In this case the inclusion of the specialist wall builder is more of a plot device: the assassin has to be hired for some reason in order that he might get close to his intended victim, and wall-building, here portrayed, as it must have been, a specialist skill, is an ideal cover under which Þorgrímr can operate. But it is interesting that Finnbogi says he needs the builder because people keep trampling all over his home field. The representation suggests that access to one’s home field was an issue and commonplace, if the author is trying to make the employment of the builder as seamless and naturalistic as possible.

Walling work and path clearing become a labour of love for Halli the berserkr, who wishes to marry Víga-Stýrr’s daughter. Stýrr, following the advice of Snorri goði, decides to set some tasks for the berserkr in order to win his daughter’s hand. It has the hallmarks of the seemingly impossible task of romance literature, but of course the berserkrs are of such immense physical

⁵¹ *Finnboga saga*, p. 325.

strength that, although it requires a great effort, they manage to complete the task. After they have made the path and built a boundary wall across the lava between Stýrr's land and Vermundr inn mjóvi's (traces of which can still be seen according to the saga author), Stýrr kills the exhausted workers after having trapped them in a specially-built bath house designed, it seems, for the purpose.⁵² Because of the underlying motive (and the knowledge of the involvement of the crafty and conniving Snorri goði), the task appears to be a pointless one, an exercise in tiring the berserks of their superhuman strength. Whether the walling work was really necessary comes secondary to the importance of killing off the troublesome berserks. This makes it hard to determine whether one would actually have required walling work to separate boundaries, since the wall-building in this instance is represented as an impossible challenge and not a quotidian task.

However, the most famous example in family saga narrative of a problematic, physical boundary occurs in *Víga-Glúms saga*. Glúmr's in-laws obtain in inheritance a sizeable proportion of Glúmr's property, and are keen to increase this portion at the expense of their marriage-relatives.⁵³ They therefore move a boundary fence ("garðr") on Víga-Glúmr's property whilst he is abroad, which leaves him with less land than he had before, and acquire by stealth the entire rights to a cornfield which they and Glúmr had jointly owned previously.⁵⁴ According to *Grágás*, concealing, falsifying or moving boundary markers incurred the penalty of lesser outlawry.⁵⁵ A harsher penalty is meted out in

⁵² *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 70-5.

⁵³ *Víga-Glúms saga*, pp. 7-10.

⁵⁴ *Víga-Glúms saga*, pp. 10-12.

⁵⁵ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), pp. 82-3.

literature. One of the perpetrators, Sigmundur Þorkelsson meets his end in the cornfield, when Glúmr hews him down for his stealthy acquisition of his land,⁵⁶ thus starting a feud. This is the only example I have found in the family sagas in which a boundary wall is moved in order to increase one's portion of land.

These few examples show that, outside of the context of landtaking, walls and fences are mentioned not only to connect the present with the past by acknowledging the presence of centuries-old constructions which yet inform the landscape, but also when they play a part in the narrative. *Grágás* would suggest that walls were of great importance in Icelandic society.⁵⁷ The lawcodes make mention of the necessity of walling work: if damage was incurred through the absence of a wall, then the people who had neglected to put it up were legally responsible. Neighbours had to be called to help with the task, and it had to be completed within a certain time scale. *Grágás* even stipulates the required width of the wall (it had to be five feet at the bottom and three feet at the top), and it states that even walls themselves did not have absolute immunity. If there was not a gate in the wall for access, then it could be knocked down in order to facilitate a right of way on a highway. Therefore even walls which divided land had to allow the free movement of people. But such laws do not seem to impinge on the sagas. There are no narratives of characters knocking down walls or demanding right of way or complaining that a wall was not of the right thickness. There is a disparity between the representation of physical boundaries offered by the lawcodes and the sagas. The latter does not concern itself with the regulations

⁵⁶ *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 14.

⁵⁷ *Grágás*, (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), pp. 89-98.

described in the former. Instead, saga narrative only concerns itself with how walls can inform the authenticity or aid the fictionality of the saga author's account.

7. Incursion of the Boundary

What happens when boundaries, either natural, manmade or imaginary, are crossed? In the family sagas there are very few examples of trespass, and there is no specific law of trespass in *Grágás*: the only example which alludes to crossing the boundaries of another man's property is the provision made for those who must walk across land which they do not own in order to reach their summer shielings.⁵⁸ The act of trespassing, as it is depicted in both *Grágás* and the sagas, is not a prominent or important one. However, Jesse Byock, in his book *Viking Age Iceland*, contends that "[a] basic tenet of Icelandic law was that trespass forfeited a person's immunity to attack, and a trespasser while still on someone else's land could be killed with impunity."⁵⁹ But yet again, there is scant, explicit reference to this forfeiture of immunity in either the family sagas or the lawcodes. Certainly outlaws had their own, prescribed space out of which if they stepped, they could be killed with impunity.⁶⁰ But illegal trespass by a person who was not an outlaw is a rare occurrence in saga narrative, thus on this the representations of the family sagas and the lawcodes concur.

⁵⁸ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), pp. 91-2.

⁵⁹ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, p. 213.

⁶⁰ See the final chapter for a discussion of the space of the outlaw and the space of the vagrant.

There are, however, numerous examples of grazing animals crossing boundaries. Grazing disputes are most common in the family sagas, and are well-represented by various laws in *Grágás*.⁶¹ In any society largely dependent on animal husbandry, grazing disputes must be commonplace. Saga authors must have often exploited this fact, since grazing animals are excellent fictional devices. Animals, be they sheep, horses, or cows, are unwitting instigators of dispute. Driven by hunger and *Wanderlust*, they search for pastures new without thought to the feuding and bloodshed which arises from their movements. Because their wanderings are entirely arbitrary, any conflict between neighbours (even if there is no prior enmity) can be started at any time by the employment of grazing beasts. This being said, however, there are still a number of examples in which deliberate unlawful grazing takes place: unscrupulous individuals deliberately lead their beasts to others' pasture.

In *Gull-Þóris saga* Helgi from Hjallar grazes his animals wherever he pleases, and even allows his bulls to trample Eyjúlfr inn auðgi's hay which is about to be gathered (Eyjúlfr is a kinsman of Gull-Þórir). This lack of respect for others' property leads Þórir to sell the land at Uppsálinn to Þorgerðr because she cannot continue to farm in Þorgeirsdal while Helgi is grazing his animals there.⁶² Þórir then farms the land which the displaced woman had owned previously, but Helgi is not deterred in the least by the change in personnel. The dispute between the two factions eventually leads to an attempt on Þórir's life by Helgi's sons.

⁶¹ *Grágás* is sensitive to the problems of grazing, with, *inter alia*, laws on unlawful grazing, what to do with straying livestock, and the problems which might arise with jointly-owned pasture land. See *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), p. 92, pp. 112-3 and pp. 113-5 respectively.

⁶² It is assumed that Þorgerðr is a mistake for Þorgeirr, since the valley in which she lives until she moves is called Þorgeirsdal. See Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds), *Gull-Þóris saga*, Íslensk Fornrit XIII (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 204. *Gull-Þóris saga* is also known as *Þorskafirðinga saga*, but I use the former name throughout the thesis to refer to this text.

The venture ends badly for them: all of their party are killed. Þórir does not pay compensation for these killings, but hands over the land at Þorgeirsdalr in compensation for the killing of Þórarin ákafi at the hands of one of his men (Vöflu-Gunnarr).⁶³

In *Vatnsdæla saga* a man and his party, without care or consideration for others, graze their horses on land which does not belong to them. Þorsteinn Ingimundarson's workers notice a party of ten men and one woman grazing their horses in their master's meadow:

Þau sá einn dag, at tíu menn áðu í enginu, ok var kona eitt; þeir váru allir í litklæðum. Vesl hafði einn yfir sér ok slæður af góðu klæði; þau sá, hvat þessi maðr gerði; hann brá sverði ok sneið af neðan, þat er saurugt hafði orðit í reiðinni, ok kastaði á braut, - þat var spannarbreit, - ok mælti svá at þau heyrðu, at hann kvazk eigi vilja reiða eptir sér saur. Eigi hittu þau mennina, en illa þótti þeim gört at æja í engjum manna. Griðkona tók þat, er hann hafði af skorit, ok kvað þenna mann mega heita inn mesta ofláta.⁶⁴

⁶³ It is interesting to note that Þórir does not own Þorgeirsdalr for long: it is convenient that the land which he obtains he has to give away almost immediately. This is especially useful if there is no history of a man called Þórir settling on that farm. See chapter five for more fictionally convenient farm-swaps.

⁶⁴ *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 84-5.

One day they saw ten men grazing their horses in the meadow and there was a woman with them as well; they were all in fancy, coloured clothing. One of the men was wearing a cloak and a long, trailing gown; they observed what this man did; he drew his sword and cut off a piece from the bottom of the cloak which had become muddy from riding, and he tossed the piece away - it was a hand's width - and, speaking so that they could hear, said that he did not want to ride around covered in filth. Þorsteinn's workers did not meet these men, but they thought it highly improper that they were grazing their horses in another man's meadow. A serving-woman picked up the piece of cloth which the man had cut from his cloak, and said that this man might well be labelled a most arrogant show-off.

This scene heralds the arrival of Bergr inn rakki, the nephew of the famous Finnbogi rammi. The arrogance of wasting an expensive garment matches the arrogance of illegal grazing. This incident is not itself a dispute over grazing - no lawsuit is made against Bergr for his misdeed - but by introducing an impulsive and headstrong character with these two actions (offhand extravagance and unlawful grazing), the saga author immediately alerts the audience to the newcomer's character: he is a man of whom the reader must instantly disapprove.

In *Hrafn's þáttr Guðrúnarsonar* Sighvatr from Melar in Hrútafjörður has a large portion of land but little cash. He suggests to his wife Guðrún that he sell some land. She is not keen, and offers her gold arm-ring instead. Although his wife warns him against it, he goes to Þorgrímr from Staðr to sell the arm-ring, but Þorgrímr admonishes him by saying that it is ignoble to sell one's wife's jewellery, and he demands the strip of land called Grœnateig to be sold to him instead, since he needs the hay and grazing area.⁶⁵ When Guðrún hears about this,

⁶⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Hrafn's þáttr Guðrúnarsonar*, Íslensk Fornit VIII (Reykjavík, 1939),

she predicts that it will turn out badly for them, because Þorgrímr will surely start to graze the rest of their land once he has got a foothold. She is proved to be correct.⁶⁶ Þorgrímr does graze his animals on their pasture, and when the hapless Sighvatr drives them away, the aggressor kills him. Guðrún has to wait until her son Hrafn grows up before she gets revenge for her husband's killing.⁶⁷ By playing with ideas of decorum Þorgrímr manages to get what he wants and places himself perfectly in order to exploit the cash-strapped farmer. Once more, the animals are not to blame for the feuding and death.

Landnámabók provides a supernatural dispute over grazing. Dufþakr from Dufþaksholt quarrels with Stórolfr Hængsson over meadowland:

Þá skilði á um beitingar. Þat sá ófreskr maðr um kveld nær dagsetri, at björn mikill gekk frá Hváli, en griðungr frá Dufþaksholti, ok fundusk á Stórolfsvellinu ok gengusk at reiðir, ok mátti björninn meira. Um morguninn var þar sét, at dalr var þar eptir, er þeir höfðu fundizk, sem um væri snúit jörðinni, ok heitir þar nú Öldugróf. Báðir váru þeir meiddir.⁶⁸

The pair of them fought over grazing. Then one evening around about sunset a man with second sight saw a huge bear leave Hváll, and a bull from Dufþaksholt, and they encountered each other at Stórolfsvellir and they began to fight furiously, with the bear getting the best of it. In the morning it could be seen, that there was a valley where they had met, looking just as if the earth had been churned over, and the place is now called Öldugróf. Both men were seriously injured.

Grazing issues are a rarity in *Landnámabók* since the settlers are not settled enough to start disputes with each others: it is a book of landtakes, after all, not a

p. 320.

⁶⁶ *Hrafn's þáttr Guðrúnarsonar*, pp. 319-21.

⁶⁷ *Hrafn's þáttr Guðrúnarsonar*, p. 322.

⁶⁸ *Landnámabók*, pp. 355-6 (H and S).

book about landownership and its trials in general. But in the case of the quarrel between Dufþak and Stórolfr, there is an important myth of origins being narrated in this incident. In ‘just-so’ fashion, the creation of the valley (“dalr”) where the two men fought is related. But there is perhaps another narrative at work here, that of the friction between the Norse and the Celtic worlds. According to William Sayers, what is witnessed in this account is the sparring for supremacy between Norse and Celtic magic:

Cattle were at the basis of the Irish economy and the bull, no less than the horse, was associated with the Irish kingship. The widespread Arctic cult of the bear invites speculation that the anecdote was intended to illustrate that Norse magic (with its Sámi or Finnic admixture) was superior to Celtic magic.⁶⁹

This is the only description of this scene in *Landnámabók* in which an attempt is made to explain the significance of the two animals. I think that Sayers is on dubious ground when he links Norse magic and Finnish magic: there is much evidence from, for example, the sagas (and especially the kings’ sagas) which suggests that Finnish magic was considered as Other and quite strange. Whether this was also the case at the time of the settlement is obviously debatable, but the identification of things Norse with things Sámi or Finnic is probably a tenuous one. But certainly this is the only sensible attempt at uncovering the meaning behind this strange supernatural episode which grew out of a commonplace grazing dispute.

⁶⁹ W. Sayers, “Management of the Celtic Fact in *Landnámabók*”, *Scandinavian Studies* LXVI, (1994), 142.

In *Egils saga* an argument over grazing between Steinarr Önundarson and Þorsteinn Egilsson occurs. Háflœkr, a stream, marks the boundary between the two properties, but Steinarr's cattle begin to wander over it to graze:

Háflœkr réð þar landamerkjum at fornu fari;
en á várum gengu naut Steinars mjök á
Stakksmýri, er þau váru rekin útan at Háflœk,
en húskarlar Þorsteins vönduðu um.⁷⁰

In the old days Háflœkr marked the land boundary there; but in the spring Steinarr's cattle wandered on to Stakksmýr frequently when they were driven over towards Háflœkr, and Þorsteinn's servants objected to it.

A bitter dispute between families arises out of this incursion. As mentioned in the introduction to this section, the animals do not know better. The same is true in *Króka-Refs saga*, in which a river forms the boundary between Þorbjörn's land at Sauðafell and Steinn's land at Kvennabrekka. The former's land is overcrowded, and this pressure leads the animals to seek pasture on Steinn's land where there are far fewer beasts.⁷¹ This reminds us too that natural boundaries are only charged with meaning for the human: the animal world does not recognise the significance placed on streams and other natural 'markers'. Steinn wants his wife to sell the land after his death and move away because he fears that Þorbjörn will prove a difficult neighbour. But she does not have the heart to let go of it since it is beautiful and good in every respect ("því at henni sýndist þat fagrt ok at flestu gott.").⁷² But without a husband with which to reckon the grazing problem worsens and Þorbjörn's animals wreak havoc on her farmland. Her subsequent attempts to sell prove useless because now that everyone knows about the problem, no one wants to buy. Even the employment of a farmhand, Barði, to

⁷⁰ *Egils saga*, p. 277.

⁷¹ Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Króka-Refs saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIV (Reykjavík, 1959), p. 120.

⁷² *Króka-Refs saga*, p. 121.

watch over the land, is only a short-term remedy, since Þorbjörn kills him when he finds out that he has been keeping his livestock off Þorgerðr's land.⁷³ This crime, however, is a decisive moment for the eponymous hero: he leaves behind his soft, cowardly ways and kills Þorbjörn in his bed when he refuses to pay compensation.⁷⁴ In these examples from *Egils saga* and *Króka-Refs saga* animals are to blame for the beginnings of the disputes, but lack of respect for the boundaries of others on the part of their owners leads to the continuation of the feuding and enmity.

Conclusion

The boundaries of individuals, although focused on infrequently in family saga narrative and in *Landnámabók*, form interesting and contentious disputes when they are represented textually. Perhaps this is because walls, streams and fences only become boundaries when a hostile incursion is made: they only become a means of dividing property when that property is contested, threatened or abused. Jackson and Podossinov note this in connection with Norwegian boundaries mentioned in Old Norse texts. Norwegian boundaries, if they are described at all, are named only in the north and east (or sometimes the south). The western border, formed by the sea, is never mentioned in the context of spatial orientation. They conclude that only the boundaries that are realised on land and constitute areas of controversy in 'international relations' are mentioned in the Old Norse texts which they have studied.⁷⁵ But this explanation cannot account for the huge

⁷³ *Króka-Refs saga*, p. 123.

⁷⁴ *Króka-Refs saga*, pp. 123-6.

⁷⁵ T. N. Jackson and A. V. Podossinov, "Norway in Old Norse Literature: Some Considerations on the Specific Character of Scandinavian Spatial Orientation" *Skandinavistik Jahrgang XXVII* (1997), 87.

variability in procedure witnessed in landtaking, such as hallowing the boundary.

So many individual expressions of landownership co-exist textually in

Landnámabók. I have demonstrated the variability in representation and explored the categorisation of this variability. I aim to do the same in the following chapter which deals with the representation of continuity in medieval Icelandic landownership.

Chapter Four: CONTINUITY

Þórólfr Mostrarskegg and Sacred Space

In the last chapter I analysed, as part of the examination of the representation of land sanctification, the landtake of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg in both *Landnámabók* and in *Eyrbyggja saga*. He is portrayed in both of these texts as a character who invests much effort in maintaining the sanctity of places which he deems to be holy, such as his temple and Helgafell. He has great reverence for this hill on his land, and believes that he and his family will enter it when they pass away. It is not mentioned specifically as having any special features which mark it out as a holy space, but the saga author does make it clear that the mountain forms part of the headland called Þórsnes, so called because that is where Þórr, in the shape of Þórólfr's high-seat pillars, came ashore. His rules regarding Helgafell's sanctity are strict:

Þórólfr kallaði Þórsnes milli Vigrafjarðar ok Hófsvágs. Í því nesi stendr eitt fjall; á því fjalli hafði Þórólfr svá mikinn átrúnað, at þangat skyldi enginn maðr óþveginn líta ok engu skyldi tortíma í fjallinu, hvárki fé né mönnum, nema sjálft gengi í brott. Þat fjall kallaði hann Helgafell ok trúði, at hann myndi þangat fara, þá er hann dœi, ok allir á nesinu hans frændr.¹

Þórólfr called the land between Vigrafjörðr and Hófsvágur Þórsnes. On this headland stands a mountain; Þórólfr had so much reverence for it that he would let no man look at unwashed and nothing was allowed to be killed on the mountain, neither man nor beast, unless it died of natural causes. He called that mountain Helgafell and he believed that he and his kinsmen on the headland would enter into it when they died.

¹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 9.

Just as he separated his landtake from that of others and hallowed it with great ceremony, so too does he sanctify and separate his holy hill from the mundane. This is achieved by the special behaviour required of the sacred space as demanded by Þórólfr. There are no explanations as to why these rules were thought to be appropriate; they are presented as if they were merely some whim of the landtaker, similar to the presentation of Þórsteinn svörfuðr's antics with the comb and the silver in *Svarfdæla saga*. The behaviour of the reverent person forms the boundary of this religious space, as well as the geographical prominence of the mountain (a volcanic plug) on an otherwise flat headland.

Þórólfr's belief that he and his family will enter the mountain is proved correct. A shepherd sees the whole northern side of the mountain open up when Þórólfr's son dies. He witnesses Þórsteinn going to join his father feasting inside Helgafell.² This belief is all the more incredible given the fact that Þórólfr is represented as attaching holy significance almost as soon as he has taken land. Although, as we have seen in other examples from *Landnámabók* and the family sagas, some settlers have to move twice or more before making a final settlement, Þórólfr is portrayed not only as having confidence in the holiness of the space from the outset, but also as foreseeing his family's continued association with the land, even after his death. This strong and immediate connection is somewhat startling: Þórólfr creates his family's tradition with determination and alacrity. The blank canvas of Iceland cannot wait for myth to be etched on it slowly: it must be stamped upon it immediately. The saga author represents the connection with the land as instant and compelling.

² *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 19.

Þórólfr, however, does fail in maintaining the sanctity of another place which he sets apart for special care and consideration. At exactly the point where he discovered his high-seat pillars, he sets up a district assembly site:

Þar sem Þórr hafði á land komit, á tanganum nessins, lét hann hafa dóma alla ok setti þar heraðsþing þar var ok svá mikill helgistaðr at hann vildi með engu móti láta saurga völlin, hvárki í heiptarblóði, ok eigi skyldi þar álfrek ganga, ok var haft til þess sker eitt, er Dritsker var kallat.³

There where Þórr had come ashore, at the point projecting out to sea on the headland, he held all the meetings of the court and established a district assembly there, and it was such a holy place that he did not want anyone to defile the field, either in bloodshed, or by anyone defecating there, and there was a skerry, called Dritsker, where one was to go instead.

However, this arrangement causes problems after the death of Þórólfr when the Kjalleklings say that they will relieve themselves on the sacred land, calling Þórólfr's family arrogant in believing that their land is more holy than that of others.⁴ A dispute ensues, with the final result that the sacred space becomes defiled with both excrement and blood. In the subsequent legal wrangling, the space is declared no longer to be holy because blood spilt in anger has sullied it. A new assembly site is found which is the holiest of places; however, it is not forbidden to relieve oneself on it ("Var á því þingi inn mesti helgistaðr, en eigi var mönnum þar bannat at ganga ørna sinna.").⁵

Is the saga author debunking what he sees as a foolish whim on one man's part? The detail that excrement is permitted on the new assembly site is a *volte-face* which admits that the old practice was not tenable. By enforcing the excrement rule

³ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 10.

⁴ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 15.

⁵ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 18.

the Þórsnes folk make the situation far worse by spilling blood and thus rendering it unholy (this in itself seems to undermine the sanctity - why should the whole area be deemed unholy if the rules of its upkeep are broken? This denies the inherent holiness of the space). The saga author probes shrewdly questions of religious and political sites: can space be holy if one man says so? How does one sanctify something in practical terms? Can one area of land be holier than another, as the Kjalleklings claimed the Þórsnes folk asserted? Furthermore, the saga author makes a gentle nod toward the possible root cause of the dispute:

En er Þórsteinn þorskabítr varð þessa varr, vildi hann eigi þola, at þeir saurgaði þann völl, er Þórólfr, faðir hans, hafði tignat umfram aðra staði í sinni landeign...⁶

But when Þórsteinn þorskabítr became aware of this, he would not endure their defiling of the field which Þórólfr, his father, had honoured above all other sites in his landclaim.

A raw nerve is touched when the memory of his father is insulted. The argument is less to do with sacred spaces than it is family pride and arrogance. The saga author manages to debunk subtly the old pagan religion and its seemingly arbitrary arrangements in his discussion of this assembly site. Gurevich writes: "Scandinavian topography is not based on purely geographical co-ordinates: it is saturated in emotional and religious significance, and geographical space represents at the same time religious-mythological space. The one passes effortlessly into the other."⁷ Þórólfr's assembly site becomes for his son a confusing piling up of different spaces: the geographical co-ordinates cannot be divorced from the religious function, and its emotional significance for a devoted son. The power of Þórólfr's belief extends from his resting-place in the mountain he called Helgafell to inform the world of the living.

⁶ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 15.

⁷ Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, p. 49.

Introduction

Þórólfr's preoccupation with the different functions and boundaries of space opens up many of the issues which will be dealt with in this chapter, which analyses the representation of the relationship which the settlers of the Viking age created with their land. As in the example above, I shall explore the space of the dead, and humbler mounds than Helgafell, and how the power of the dead could still influence the progress of the living. I shall also consider the few variations on land inheritance found in saga narrative, and how anxieties about landownership found their expression in the representation of lost allodial estates in Norway. Furthermore, I shall offer a brief survey of issues regarding continuity and place-names. There are a good number of examples which demonstrate how and why naming could be a problematic area for the author: in these difficulties one can see the creative aspect of the author's work in attempting to smooth details or makes sense of complicated narratives.

1. The Location of the Dead

The dead, too, possess land, sometimes the land they owned when they were living. As Henri Lefebvre writes in *The Production of Space*, "... death must be both represented and rejected. Death too has a 'location'...".⁸ Áskell goði in *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, when out travelling in the company of others, points out the place where he would like to be buried, saying that the landscape is good.⁹ The choice in the location implies that the final resting place is of importance to the dead. In *Hænsa-Þóris saga* control over the land in death is made explicit when Oddr

⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 35.

⁹ *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, p. 198. He also states that he does not want to be buried with grave goods, foreshadowing the later era of Christian burials.

Önundarson selects his burial site: he wishes to have a view of the entire headland from his mound, as if in the next life he still possesses the land which had been his whilst living.¹⁰

The presence of the dead provides important continuity with the past. The points in which men lay in the earth were focal points for the Icelfander, not always through knowledge of the deceased, but sometimes as manmade markers, physical impositions on the landscape. This is how the author of *Hrafnkels saga* describes Einarr Þorbjarnarson's cairn. This mound, the author tells us, was used to mark the time of the evening from the shieling "...ok er þaðan haldinn miðr aptann frá selinu".¹¹ Time is embodied in the physical landscape: as Lefebvre puts it "[i]n nature, time is apprehended within space - in the very heart of space: the hour of the day, the season, the elevation of the sun above the horizon."¹² Men, sealed in earth and rocks, become integral to the landscape.¹³

Gurevich argues that the Old Scandinavian peoples in particular lived in co-existence with the dead, since one's ancestors were buried close to the farmstead and their memory was perpetuated through the commitment to genealogy, story-telling

¹⁰ Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (eds), *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit III (Reykjavík, 1938), pp. 46-7. Þorvaldr Eiríksson also selects where he wishes to be buried in Vínland. He chooses a site which he terms "fagrt" - "beautiful" and intends to settle there, but the Skrælling attack makes settlement impossible, and Þorvaldr is fatally wounded by an enemy arrow. He asks to be interred with a cross at his head and feet on the headland where it seemed to him most suitable to live. See *Grænlendinga saga*, pp. 255-6.

¹¹ *Hrafnkels saga*, p. 64.

¹² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 95.

¹³ It is interesting to note the similarities with aboriginal Australian landscape. "In the majority of the ancestral myths, the ancestors are, themselves, transferred into rocks, trees or tjurunga objects as well as into the 'stuff' of the individual tribespeople. Each feature of the landscape... is an objectification of these ancestors and their deeds." See Smith, *To Take Place*, p. 11.

and the belief (and observation) that the younger generations inherited family traits.¹⁴

Burying one's family in one's own ground strengthens the bond between the people and the land. In *Bárðar saga* and *Landnámabók* Sigmundr Ketilsson is buried where he lived, and so too is his son Laugarbrekku-Einarr who inherits the farm after him.

The son is buried close to the father:¹⁵

Laugarbrekku-Einarr var heygðr skammt frá
Sigmundarhaugi, ok er haugr hans ávallt grœnn
vetr ok sumar.¹⁶

Laugarbrekku-Einarr was buried near to
Sigmundr's mound, and his mound is always
green both in winter and summer.

The fact that his mound is green in all seasons strengthens his tie with the land he formerly owned. The verdure signifies a living, burgeoning integration with the land and landscape, and prevents his mound from being a monument to the past, but instead a force with which to be reckoned in the present. Margaret Clunies Ross uses the example of Laugarbrekku-Einarr in her book *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II* to explore issues of authority and legitimacy in land ownership:

¹⁴ A. Gurevich, "Space and Time in the Weltmodell of the Old Scandinavian Peoples", *Mediæval Scandinavia II* (1969), 51.

¹⁵ *Bárðar saga*, p. 121. See pp. 120-1 for more details of the lives, deaths and burials of father and son.

¹⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 108 (S).

This conventional motif, which is to be found in family sagas and in kings' sagas, is associated with individuals who, in the pagan time, are specially close to the god Freyr and share his power to produce rich crops and ensure the fertility of beast and soil... the closeness between human and deity is signalled by the warmth of the ground which keeps the grass or crops always green and twice as fertile as normal ground in cold, northern climates where plant growth is usually not possible in winter. The symbolic warmth of the relationship between human and deity... also promotes an identity of purpose between them; what the landowner, what the king wants, is the fulfillment of a divine desire both for the individual and, through him, for his family or society. Hence, in the *Landnámabók* story, the single sentence describing Laugarbrekku-Einarr's green mound may be understood to signal the legitimacy of and the divine approval of his land claim...¹⁷

Therefore, not only is his connection to the land established and maintained through the verdure, but it is also a symbol of the legitimacy of his ownership of the land which he claimed in the settlement period. This can be extrapolated to include other landtakers, such as Þórólfr Mostrarskegg: his family's entering Helgafell confirms that he was 'right' to take land there in the first place.

In *Flóamanna saga* four burial mounds are invested with great significance. Þórðr Atlason avenges the death of his father Atli Hallsteinsson by killing his killer, Hrafn Þorviðarson, and Hrafn is buried in a mound at the place where he received his death-blow.¹⁸ This happens to be near the place where three members of Þórðr's family, including his father, are buried:

¹⁷ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, pp. 38-9.

¹⁸ *Flóamanna saga*, p. 246.

...ok er þar haugr hand fyrir austan götuna, en fyrir vestan er Atlahaugr ok Ölvishaugr ok Hallsteinshaugr.¹⁹

...and his mound is east of the road, but west of the road is where Atli's Mound, Ölvir's Mound and Hallsteinn's Mound are situated.

There is an extreme contrast marked here. Hrafn, the man who is killed for his crime, is laid to rest without thought: he lies where he has fallen. Miðfjörðr-Skeggi shares the same fate by dying on someone else's land: his burial mound is situated below the farm.²⁰ Stafngrímr Hranason is also buried where he is killed.²¹ The collection of three mounds, though, are all from the same family, descending from Hallsteinn. They are grouped together in death as they were tied together in life by the bonds of close kinship. Their final resting place has been considered and they have been placed there with care. To make the distinction even clearer, the mound of Hrafn and the family mounds are divided by the road, which is invested with meaning in this context. The road is a boundary between good and bad, those dying in the right on one side, and those in the wrong on the other.

Of course, this does not hold for other examples in which men are buried where they fall. The description of Hrafn and Hallsteinn is a unique one, in which a stark contrast between evil interloper and the solid family unit is made. If the bond between man and land is so strong and the custom of burial mounds is clearly recognisable as a marker of legitimate ownership then it is difficult to understand why every individual is not laid to rest on his/her farm. Unfortunately there is not enough evidence from the family sagas alone to construct a hypothesis on the location of

¹⁹ *Flóamanna saga*, p. 246.

²⁰ *Landnámabók*, p. 77 (H and S).

²¹ *Landnámabók*, p. 76 (H and S).

graves and the presence of mounds, and why some are buried on their territory and others where they fall.

The group of mounds also asserts the family's ownership of the land. As Clunies Ross says of the burial mounds of Laugarbrekku-Einarr and his father, the family grave mounds "thus form a kind of mini-Uppsala or Sutton Hoo, replicating in Iceland the aristocratic semiotic of territoriality, legitimacy and power that the mound-burials of Northern Europe conveyed in the Middle Ages in several parts of the Germanic world, including Norway. There... even as late as the fourteenth century it was necessary for people to trace their ancestry back to the family grave mound established by heathen ritual in order to be able to secure their patrimonial estates".²² The incontrovertibility of the identification of one's ancestral dead in their mounds, (which are visible and unmistakable markers), is thus a powerful tool in the assertion of land ownership.

But although the dead must be present in the landscape, they cannot have a final resting-place too close to the farmstead and the life of the living. When Grímkell goði dies in *Harðar saga*, he is buried south of the hayfield wall ("ok var hann jarðr suðr frá garði").²³ As was noted with Miðfjörðr-Skeggi above, he is buried just south of the farm where he fell.²⁴ And in *Eyrbyggja saga* great care is taken to ensure that the dead are placed outwith the boundaries of the living. Þórolfr bægifótr dies in strange circumstances (he dies at home after a disagreement with his son) and in order to prevent him entering the house again, the wall is knocked down in one part, and he is taken out through the gap. After the corpse has been removed, the wall

²² Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II*, p. 37.

²³ *Harðar saga*, p. 52.

²⁴ *Landnámabók*, p. 77 (H and S).

is repaired and sealed again.²⁵ This would appear to be an indication of the belief that the ghost could only enter a house by the same entrance a living person would: the door. By not taking them out of the door and through only a temporary gap in the wall, this presumably was believed to have ensured that the ghost could not plague the living indoors. The boundary of a fixed stone wall, impassable in life, remains so in death.²⁶

However, the precautions taken against Þórólfr bægifótr are not enough. Although he does not walk inside the main farm building, he devastates the entire valley, so that livestock cannot even be grazed on the land which is haunted in *Eyrbyggja saga*.²⁷ When even more properties (Bólstaðir and Úlfarsfell) become deserted through the haunting of the revenant, a farmer comments that it seems as if Þórólfr wants the whole district deserted of both men and livestock so that he might roam and rage in it alone.²⁸ Þórólfr makes farms uninhabitable so that he might have sole ownership of it in death. This is an act which outstrips human scheming over land in terms of greed and selfishness since, as a revenant, he cannot cultivate and benefit from the farms he terrorises. This is an example of continuity with the land being pushed to the extreme.

²⁵ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 92.

²⁶ In their translation of the saga, Paul Schach and Lee M. Hollander explain the practice by stating that a ghost only re-enters a house at the point out of which it was taken out as a corpse. See P. Schach and L. M. Hollander (trans), *Eyrbyggja saga*, (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1977) p. 69.

²⁷ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 93.

²⁸ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 169.

Aggression and violence are certainly the preferred tactics of the ghost Glámr, the surly shepherd who wreaks so much havoc that all the farm labourers flee the household in *Grettis saga*.²⁹ Once the human inhabitants leave, Glámr kills all the livestock and lays waste all the farms inland from Tunga.³⁰ The destructive and evil actions of this revenant mean that it is impossible for the living to co-exist with the dead, causing the living to be exorcised.

In *Laxdæla saga* this desire for sole-ownership is recognised when Hrappr Sumarliðason's corpse interferes with the living. This revenant wishes to remain in charge of his farm even when he is dead. His very particular instructions to his wife about where and how he would like to be buried are ominous:

„...en þá at ek em andaðr, þá vil ek mér láta gröf grafa í eldhúsdurum, ok skal mik niðr setja standanda þar í durunum; má ek þá enn vendiligar sjá yfir hýbýli mín.“³¹

“...and when I am dead, I want you to have me buried in the doorway to the kitchen; and I shall be placed upright underneath the door; that way I can keep a close eye on my household.”

This indicates, in a more disturbing fashion, what has already been noted above: the bond between man and his land is so strong that it transcends even death. It is so strong in this case, that Hrappr's own son, Sumarliði, who farms the land after his father's death, goes mad and dies shortly afterwards owing to the hauntings.³² This is a strange perversion of the natural order: Sumarliði should have been free to inherit after his father and sustain the ownership through his own children and grandchildren: instead, the ghost of Hrappr destroys his family in a bid to keep his farm to himself.

²⁹ *Grettis saga*, p. 115.

³⁰ *Grettis saga*, p. 115.

³¹ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 39.

³² *Laxdæla saga*, p. 40.

In *Eyrbyggja saga* the farmholders have more luck, when they take measures to rid themselves and the farm of the drowned members of their family who come back to sit by the fire every night to warm themselves.³³ They attempt successfully to banish the ghosts through legal means, as if they were living people, by holding a door court. Having legal procedures used against the revenants highlights the very real impact of the haunting on the living: this is a dispute which has to be addressed officially:

...stefndi Kjartan Þóri viðleg, en Þórðr kausi Þóroddi bónda, um þat, at þeir gengi þar um hýbýli ólofat ok firrði menn bæði lífi ok heilsu; öllum var þeim stefnt, er við eldinn sátu. Síðan var nefndr duradómr ok sagðar fram sakar ok farit at öllum málum sem á þingadómum; váru þar kviðir bornir, reifð mál ok dæmð...³⁴

Kjartan summoned Þórir viðleggr, and Þórðr cited Þóroddr the farmer for haunting the house without permission and depriving men of both life and health; all who sat by the fire were summoned. Afterwards a door court was announced and the accusations were named, and the procedure was the same as at a þing court; the neighbours' verdicts were heard, the case summed up, and the judgment given...

Obviously in this case, attempting to move or to cremate the remains of the revenants (the usual means of dealing with hauntings: because Icelanders have always conceived of their dead as larger-than-life, walking corpses, moving or burning the body is an effective way of putting an end to the activities of ghosts) is not a possibility, since all of the men have been lost at sea. The door court is their only option. But given that the land of the living and dead were by no means separate, it is entirely unsurprising that this saga represents a dispute between the living and the

³³ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 149.

³⁴ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 151.

dead just as it would record a feud between the living. When the dead desire to behave as if they were alive, then one must deal with them as if they were.

2. The Representation of Inheritance

In Norway, before the migration to Iceland, the system of landownership had been that of *óðal* land. This was a principle of land tenure which kept property in the family: it “defined a particular relationship between a kin group and a piece of land.”³⁵ Buying and selling to outsiders was a difficult, if not impossible, task. It is for this reason that the crimes against landholders perpetrated by Haraldr inn hárfagri were represented in some sagas as being so abominable: the monarch was taking for himself what had been in the family since time immemorial.

But what happened in Iceland once the first few settlers began to pass away? What system of land tenure did the Icelanders adopt or construct? Hastrup notes the problems which would have been faced by the Norwegians and other nationalities in deciding how the new space was to be inherited:

When the settlers arrived, allegedly after having fled from King Harald Fairhair’s violation of *óðal*-rights, they had no local ancestors. Consequently, the principle of *óðal* had no meaning as a kinship-based relationship to the land.³⁶

However, the sagas and *Landnámabók* do not detail how an Icelandic system of inheritance came into being or developed. There are no examples of formative land inheritance disputes and cases represented in medieval Icelandic texts, with the

³⁵ Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 190.

³⁶ Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 191.

exception of Steinuðr in gamla's landtake as represented in *Grettis saga*.³⁷ Even Ari in his *Íslendingabók* cannot provide that much assistance:

En þá er Ísland var víða byggt orðit, þá hafði maðr austroenn fyrst lög út hingat ór Norvegi, sá er Ulfljótr hét, - svá sagði Teitr oss, - ok váru þá Ulfljóts lög köllut. Hann var faðir Gunnars, er Djúpdælir eru komnir frá í Eyjafirði. En þau váru flest sett at því sem þá váru Gulapings lög, eða ráð Þorleifs ins spaka Hörðakárasonar váru til, hvar við skyldi auka eða at nema eða annan veg setja.³⁸

And when Iceland had become widely settled, then a man from Norway called Ulfljótr was the first to bring the law here from Norway (so Teitr told us) and that legislation was called Ulfljótr's Law. He was the father of Gunnarr from whom the men of Djúpadalr in Eyjafjörðr are descended. But these laws were mostly modelled on the Gulaping law as it was at that time, but with additions, omissions and alternative suggestions being made on the advice of Þorleifr inn spaki, the son of Hörða-Kári.

This still leaves the modern scholar none the wiser. There is no version of Ulfljótr's law extant, and only one medieval manuscript in which the Gulaping law is preserved. Even if one had more evidence, one could not easily say what laws were implemented in the country's early history owing to the alleged intervention of Þorleifr inn spaki.

It is difficult to build up a clear picture of the representation because examples of inheritance cases in family saga narrative are mostly uncomplicated and ordinary: there is nothing to arouse suspicion or cause much contradiction. There are a good number of examples of land being seamlessly passed on from generation to generation in straight-forward cases of patrilineal inheritance, such as is represented in the eponymous hero's family in *Egils saga*.³⁹ In *Kjalnesinga saga*, when Helgi bjólan

³⁷ See chapter two for a discussion of her landtake.

³⁸ *Íslendingabók*, p. 49.

³⁹ See *Egils saga*, p. 175, where Egill inherits from his father Skalla-Grímr.

dies, his sons split the inheritance (“Um v́́rit skiptu þeir brœðr föðurarfi sínum...”),⁴⁰ and when Hrafnkell Freysgoði passes away, his two sons do the same in *Brandkrossa þáttur*.⁴¹ Björn Breiðvíkingakappi goes to the farm Kamb to take over the management of his dead father Ásbrandr’s land in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and becomes a more powerful man because of this (“Björn var nú miklu kraptameiri en fyrr.”).⁴²

In other sagas there are examples of different formulae for inheritance. In *Laxdæla saga* Auðr enn djúpúðga makes it widely known that she will pass on her lands to her grandson Óláfr feilan.⁴³ Because she took lands in Iceland for herself after she had been widowed, there is no passing from male to male. Perhaps the author is hinting at the unusual situation of a woman passing on such wealth when he describes Auðr’s public announcement:

Óláfr feilan var yngstr barna Þorsteins; hann var mikill maðr ok sterkr, fríðr sýnum ok atgörvimaðr mesti. Hann mat Unnr um fram alla menn ok lýsti því fyrir mönnum, at hon ætlaði Óláfi allar eignir eptir sinn dag í Hvammi.⁴⁴

Óláfr feilan was the youngest of the children of Þorsteinn; he was a great and strong man, handsome in appearance and the most accomplished of men. Auðr loved him above all others and publicly declared in front of an audience that she intended that Óláfr was to inherit all her possessions and lands at Hvammr.

I have not found another example of such a public announcement of inheritance in saga literature. This incident serves to demonstrate that Auðr was such an impressive woman that she could make such a speech and expect everyone to abide by her

⁴⁰ *Kjalnesinga saga*, p. 6.

⁴¹ Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Brandkrossa þáttur*, Íslensk Fornrit XI (Reykjavík, 1950), p. 183. See also *Hrafnkels saga*, pp. 85-6. In this version, the sons have their share divided by their father when he is still alive.

⁴² *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 109.

⁴³ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 11.

decision. Everyone is impressed by her final, sumptuous feast and the enormous dignity which she retains until her dying day.⁴⁵

The childless Þórðr goddi also selects who will inherit his lands and wealth. Although previously he was married to Vigdís Ingjaldsdóttir, they become divorced, and so Þórðr goddi bequeaths his land to his foster-son Óláfr pái. Immediately after his divorce Þórðr goes to Höskuldr Dala-Kollsson to make his intentions known:

„Eigi skal nú þat þó, því at ek vil gjarna, at þú takir handsölum á öllu fénu. Síðá vil ek bjóða Óláfi, syni þínum, til fósturs ok gefa honum allt fé eptir minn dag, því at ek á engan erfingja hér á landi, ok hygg ek, at þá sé betr komit fét, heldr en frændr Vigdísar skelli hrömmum yfir.“ Þessu játtaði Höskuldr ok lætr binda fastmælum.⁴⁶

“I shall now do something different, because I want you to take charge of all my money. I also want to offer to foster your son Óláfr and leave him everything when I die, because I don’t have any relatives in this country and I think that my money would be better off in your hands than if those of Vigdís’ kin got their clutches on it.” Höskuldr agreed to this and they bound the arrangement with solemn oaths.

Again, the individual takes responsibility in ensuring that his property is passed down as he wishes in a personal transaction. He himself alludes to the fact that he is attempting to do something different from the normal pattern of inheritance. In this case, the property goes straight out of the family owing to a lack of immediate kin in Iceland on the Þórðr’s side. This suggests that Þórðr *does* have kinsmen abroad, but no particular mention is made who they might be, or whether they would be bothered to claim their inheritance in Iceland. Óláfr takes over the farm for his foster-father in

⁴⁵ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 13. Another mark of her greatness is that fact that she is given a ship burial mound, a rare ceremony for any man in the family sagas, let alone for a woman.

⁴⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 37.

the spring before the summer in which he falls ill and dies, and when he is buried the foster-son has a mound raised over him.⁴⁷

In *Gull-Þóris saga*, the eponymous character manages to inherit from his sister-in-law Hallgríma. After she dies the island upon which she lives, Flatey, does not go to her first son Hergils (he has Hergilsey instead), nor her second son, Oddi.⁴⁸ No explanation is offered for this, and the arrangement does not come under pressure later in the saga. Just as in *Laxdæla saga*, the representation of inheritance seems to be more contingent on personal choices as opposed to automatic legal assignation of assets.

There is also in *Laxdæla saga* a dispute between half-brothers for shares in their mother's estates. Þorgerðr, one of the daughters of Þorsteinn rauðr, has a son from her first marriage, Höskuldr Dala-Kollsson, and one from her second, Hrútr Herjólfsson. The former holds in his possession money owing to the latter, who returns from Norway to claim it and visit his kinsmen.⁴⁹ Höskuldr is not keen to relinquish his hold on the considerable wealth, and the two come to blows. But eventually Höskuldr listens to the sage advice of his wife Jórunn Bjarnardóttir, and the two split the inheritance and achieve reconciliation.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 66. Jesse Byock adds a further insight to this case: "[b]ecause the childless Thord has no close relatives in Iceland, the farmer's land is especially valuable to the chieftain, as it is not subject to possible counter-claims by Icelandic heirs. Hoskuld will have to contest only the wife's claim." See Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 278-80.

⁴⁸ *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 198.

⁴⁹ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 44.

⁵⁰ *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 44-9.

Laxdæla saga is a particularly useful text for analysing the representation of inheritance: of the few more complicated and unusual inheritance procedures examined above, the majority have come from that saga. But by far the most tortuous inheritance case is that involving the estate of Þorsteinn surts, who inherits the haunted farm Hrappstaðir. He decides to move there to escape pressure from Börkr inn digri and Börkr's brother Þórgrímr Þorsteinsson. But when he moves his household by boat, he runs into difficulties in strange weather conditions. Immediately after they see a strange seal with human's eyes circle their boat, a huge gust capsizes the vessel, and all are drowned except for one man, Guðmundr, who survives to become the key witness to the order of the death of the victims.⁵¹

Þórkell trefill, who stands to benefit a great deal from the multiple drownings through his wife's family, starts to interfere with the order in which Guðmundr has related the deaths:

Þórkell sendir þegar orð þessum manni, Guðmundi, er þar hafði á land komit; ok er hann kemr á fund Þórkels, þá slær Þórkell við hann kaupi á laun, at hann skyldi svá greina frásögn um líflát manna, sem hann segði fyrir; því játti Guðmundr. Heimtir nú Þórkell af honum frásögn um atburð þenna, svá at margir menn váru hjá. Þá segir Guðmundr svá, kvað Þorstein hafa first drukkna, þá Þórarin, mág hans; þá átti Hildir at taka fét, því at hon var dóttir Þórarins; þá kvað hann meyna drukkna, því at þar næst var Ósk hennar arfi, móðir hennar, ok lézk hon þeira síðast; bar þá fét allt undir Þórkel trefil, því at Guðríðr, kona hans, átti fé at taka eptir systur sína.⁵²

⁵¹ *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 40-2.

⁵² *Laxdæla saga*, p. 42.

Þorkell immediately sent for this man Guðmundr who had managed to come ashore; and when they met, Þorkell struck a secret bargain with him so that he was to give an account of the drownings of the people on board according to what Þorkell dictated; Guðmundr agreed to this. Þorkell now asked him to give his account of the incident when many men were present. Then Guðmundr recounted thus, that Þorsteinn was the first to have drowned, then Þórarinn, his kinsman; in these circumstances Hildr would take the inheritance, because she was the daughter of Þórarinn; then he said the girl died next (so that Ósk, her mother, would be next in line for the money), and then Ósk was the last to die; this meant that everything was to go to Þorkell trefill, because his wife Guðríðr was her sister Ósk's heir.

Þorkell circulates this account, but runs into difficulty because Guðmundr had already given a different version events to others before he got to him. The kinsmen of Þórarinn (a man from Breiðafjörðr) argue that half of the estate is theirs based on Guðmundr's first account, but Þorkell maintains that the inheritance is all his. The argument gains momentum, until a turf-ordeal is called to test the truth of Þorkell's account. Þorkell manages to rig this too, and so ends up with all of the moveable property, leaving Hrappstaðir derelict again.⁵³

The passing down of land and wealth through the giving of a dowry is well-attested in the sagas. In *Gísla saga* the farm Sæbol is given as the dowry for Þórdís, the sister of Gísli and Þorkell, in her marriage to Þórgrímr Þorsteinsson.⁵⁴ In *Bárðar saga* Þórodda, the daughter of Önundr Úlfarsson and Geirlaug, has a dowry which is

⁵³ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 43. In *Grágás* in the additional laws section, there are two conflicting laws regarding several people dying in the same accident. One states that if after the incident it is learned that some live longer than others, then the order of inheritance tallies with the order of deaths. The other makes clear that, where people drown or meet some other fate all at once, then one must organise the inheritance as if all the victims died at once. See V. Finsen (ed.), *Grágás efter det Arnamagnænske haandskrift nr. 334 fol. Staðarhólsbók* (Copenhagen, 1879), p. 95; p. 71 (hereafter *Grágás* (Staðarhólsbók)).

⁵⁴ Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (eds), *Gísla saga*, Íslensk Fornrit VI (Reykjavík, 1943), pp. 18-9.

half of the farm Breiðabólstaðr: literally. They seem to split the farm down the middle (“Henni fylgdi heiman hálfir Breiðabólstaðr, ok váru gervar ór tvær jarðir eðr bæir.”).⁵⁵ Einarr Sigmundarson’s daughter Hallveig is also given land as a dowry in *Eiríks saga rauða*.⁵⁶

But in *Njáls saga* Unnr Marðardóttir’s and Hallgerðr Höskuldsdóttir’s dowries are much less straight-forward. In the arrangements of the wedding of Unnr and Hrútr Herjólfsson, there is a lot of talk of money at the betrothal, and who is to own what. Mörðr gigjá is clear in his own mind straightaway as to what his daughter’s dowry will be:

„Hugsat hefi ek kostinn. Hon skal hafa sex tigi hundraða, ok skal aukask þriðjungi í þínum garði, en ef þit eigið erfingja, þá skal vera helmingarfélag með ykkur.“⁵⁷

“I’ve worked out precisely what the dowry shall be. She’ll have sixty hundreds from me, and you shall increase this from your own holdings by a third, and if you have descendants then you shall halve the estate equally between the two of you.”

The recovery of this dowry following their divorce proves to be the main generator of feud and dispute in the saga. When the other troublesome bride Hallgerðr is to be betrothed to Glúmr Óleifsson, her property is valued. The arrangements are set so that Glúmr is to put up an equal sum, and they are to share the whole estate equally.⁵⁸ It is less certain in the case of *Gull-Þóris saga* whether the land that Hallsteinn Þórólfsson gives Gull-Þórir is a dowry or not, since his daughter’s hand seems to be thrown into the bargain along with the gift of a farm (“Hallsteinn fekk honum búfé ok

⁵⁵ *Bárðar saga*, p. 132.

⁵⁶ *Eiríks saga rauða*, p. 202.

⁵⁷ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XII (Reykjavík, 1954), p. 9.

⁵⁸ *Njáls saga*, p. 45.

Þuríði, dóttur sína, til forráða” - “Hallsteinn gave him a farm and his daughter Þuríðr to manage.”).⁵⁹

One other, particular problem with giving land as a gift occurs. As was explored in chapter two, many of the original settlers are represented as freeing their slaves and setting them up with their own farms and land. The difficulty with this is that the possession of land in the sagas seems to have gravitated back towards the original family who gifted it or divided it amongst friends and relatives. Childless freedmen who had been given land by their masters had to be cautious in their dealings: unless they made over their land to another party, the land would revert to the former owner. Úlfarr the freedman in *Eyrbyggja saga* does foresee this problem with his land and makes it over to Arnkell Þórólfsson before he dies, but the latter still experiences difficulty from the sons of Þórbrandr who expect the land to revert to them as a matter of course since Úlfarr was their freedman.⁶⁰

The same difficulty crops up in *Flóamanna saga*. Böðvarr, a freed slave, is given part of the forest Viðiskog, by Özurr inn hvíti his master, with the condition that, if the freedman should die before him, then the land would pass back to him.⁶¹ Özurr does die before his slave, so Böðvarr keeps his land whilst Özurr’s uncle, Hrafn Þorviðarsson, takes over the other properties of the deceased. Problems arise when Böðvarr is accused of theft. He goes to the powerful Atli Hallsteinsson for support,

⁵⁹ *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 194.

⁶⁰ *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 87-90. Jesse Byock deals with this episode and its legal intricacies at length in *Viking Age Iceland*. He also examines other instances where men assign their land to others for protection (“*handsal*”). Although I touch on this in the next chapter when I discuss Kári Sölmundarson handing over his property in *Njáls saga*, I have purposely avoided in this project any overview of this practice, especially where slaves and freedmen are involved. Byock offers a comprehensive reading of *handsal* and the problems of men of lesser rank holding property, but I believe that there are many more, contradictory and problematic episodes from saga narrative to be analysed, which cannot, unfortunately, be presented here. See Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 99-117, and pp. 233-51.

⁶¹ *Flóamanna saga*, pp. 242-3.

who lives closer than Hrafn. Atli takes control of Böðvarr's property in trust and manages to throw the case out of court. Shortly afterwards, Böðvarr dies, and Hrafn claims the land, producing the agreement between master and former slave, and he denies Atli use of the forest. The result of the dispute is a fierce battle between the two sides, and the death of Atli.⁶²

3. Inheritance anxieties

Therefore it can be seen that alongside the numerous examples of straight-forward passing down of land, there are also several potential problems associated with inheritance, such as the recovery of a dowry or the reversion of a former slave's land. But the real inheritance anxieties which agitate family saga narrative are the difficulties Icelanders have with their Norwegian land. There are many examples of saga characters making the trip across the North Sea in order to defend and secure their *óðal* lands. It would seem that the most bitter and hotly contested inheritance disputes take place in Norway.

Egils saga is the *locus classicus* for this anxiety. As was noted with regard to Haraldr inn hárfagri in chapter one, this saga seems especially troubled by royal authority. Apart from the ancestral lands which the family has to forfeit when they first make their move to Iceland to escape the wrath of the king, Egill Skalla-Grímsson loses the lands of Björn Brynjólfsson (the lands are seized by Berg-Önundr) which his wife Ásgerðr should have inherited as the only child of Björn's first marriage (Berg-Önundr is the husband of a daughter from the second marriage).⁶³

⁶² *Flóamanna saga*, pp. 242-6.

⁶³ *Egils saga*, p. 151.

The seizer of the lands, Berg-Önundr, appears to have the support of the Norwegian monarchy. Egill has to fight relentlessly in order to claim his inheritance, seeking redress both in court and with violence (he murders Berg-Önundr in a night-raid), before he succeeds in his claim by killing Atli, Berg-Önundr's brother, in a duel.⁶⁴

Other characters in the sagas face similar difficulties. In *Njáls saga* Hrútr has to leave at an inopportune moment (he is supposed to be getting married to Unnr) when his brother Eyvindr dies. He has to leave immediately in order claim the inheritance before his enemies seize it.⁶⁵ But unlike Egill, Hrútr gains the support of royalty, especially that of the queen Gunnhildr, and the recovery of his estates is not so long-drawn and difficult an affair.

Björn, the son of Ketill flatnefr, has some difficulty in attempting to retrieve his father's estates which have been confiscated by the king in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Ketill manages only to secure the Orkneys and not the Hebrides as the head of Haraldr inn hárfagri's army and abandons this part of the mission, and so the king seizes his land. When Björn attempts to win back the estates, he too is outlawed and hunted by the king's men.⁶⁶ He eventually follows his family to the Hebrides, and from there goes to Iceland where he claims land.⁶⁷ Björn, nicknamed inn austroeni (the Easterner, or Norwegian), hankers after what he and his family have left behind, and this looking back to Norway and the old ways manifests itself in the dislike of the new religion which his family appears to have taken up in the Hebrides, as was discussed in

⁶⁴ *Egils saga*, pp. 210-11.

⁶⁵ *Njáls saga*, pp. 10-11.

⁶⁶ *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 5-6.

⁶⁷ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 11.

chapter three. Unlike with Hrútr and Egill, though, his bid to secure what is rightfully his fails.

In *Flóamanna saga* both father and son strive to retrieve their estates. Þórðr Atlason decides to go back to Norway to claim his lands in Sogn, but his wife Þórunn is not so happy with the idea, and refuses to go. She predicts that he will get no benefit from either his money in Iceland or in Norway. Þórunn predicts correctly: her husband's ship is lost at sea and he is never seen again.⁶⁸ Her son, Þórgils, attempts the same thing fifteen years later, with eventual success. Although his first try is unsuccessful when he comes up against Eiríkr konungr and his mother Gunnhildr, he goes to Hákon jarl when he takes over the throne in Norway, and, having proved himself worthy, the earl gives him back the lands of his kinsmen.⁶⁹ Strangely, though, there is a reversal in the usual anxieties regarding inheritance in this saga. Having successfully carried out his mission to reclaim his Norwegian inheritance, Þórgils begins to worry about his estates in Iceland:

Þorgils sagði Þorsteini, at hann vill vitja eigna sinna á Íslandi, - „því at þeir varðveita, er mér er ekki um; hefi ek nú látit skip búa ok flutt þangat til mikit fé, en jarðir þessar, er ek á hér, skaltu varðveita til handa Þorleifi, syni mínum...”⁷⁰

Þorgils said to Þorsteinn, that he wanted to visit his estates in Iceland, - “because I don't think much of the people looking after them in Iceland for me; I've prepared a ship and have put on board much wealth and many goods, but the lands which I have here, you shall have in your custody on behalf of my son Þorleifr...”

⁶⁸ *Flóamanna saga*, p. 248.

⁶⁹ *Flóamanna saga*, pp. 252-64.

⁷⁰ *Flóamanna saga*, p. 264.

One is given the impression that he is an anxious man who is struggling to bridge the gap between Norway and Iceland and having to divide his time between the two places.

In *Egils saga* another man lives in the shadow of his father. When Skalla-Grímr is offered the chance to become one of the king's landholders, he replies that he does not want to be a landholder while his father is still alive, because he is his superior as long as he lives.⁷¹ This is another, subtler way of demonstrating how the Norwegian king distorts the notion of *óðal* landholding. If Grímr were to hold estates for the king, he would be disrupting the natural order of patrilineal inheritance of ancestral lands. This detail suggests that the title of landholder was a high rank which conferred superior status. To be his father's equal in rank whilst he was still alive would therefore make Grímr uneasy.

In chapter one I demonstrated that there are many examples of Norwegians who were represented as being only too keen to abandon their old lives, and the Scandinavian mainland, for the freedoms afforded by the newly discovered Iceland. And yet in some sagas there are deep anxieties about the ancestral land still portrayed. Why, if one has abandoned Norway for Iceland, should one wish and expect to be able to hold land across the sea? The representation of such a still strong tie is effective for the saga author because it is firstly a means of continually drawing the contrast (seen in chapter one) between the tyranny of the Norwegian monarchy and Iceland's kingless democracy. Furthermore, at the time when the sagas were being written, Norway and Iceland were moving politically ever closer (culminating in the

⁷¹ *Egils saga*, p. 13.

Icelandic capitulation to the Norwegian crown in the period 1262-4). Being represented as being able to hold land in any other country also confers considerable prestige on an Icelander. It is a mark of a character's valour, bravery and tenacity to be able to stave off enemies from his Norwegian properties, and sustain the continuity of their relationship with his former homeland as well as that of his lands in Iceland.

4. Naming

To conclude my overview of continuity between landowner and land, I shall briefly explore place-names in saga narrative. Obviously, this task is beset with difficulty for the non-specialist. I have no wish to offer my own methodology for Icelandic place-names, nor do I hope to produce any definitive answer to the peculiar problems with the names of farms one encounters in saga narrative. But I do, however, wish to demonstrate how names can be manipulated by saga authors, and to examine cases where authors have constructed narratives around place-names.

F. T. Wainwright's classic text *Archaeology and Place-Names and History* provides the starting point for this brief exploration. The majority of farm names in Iceland today still bear the same name that they bore in saga times. Often, where farms have sprung up in more recent times close to a 'saga-time' farm, the new establishments are given the same name and then numbered (for example, Glaumbær II, III and IV in Skagafjörður). This, according to Wainwright, and other specialists, is exactly what one might expect to find.

Since place-names arise from and are influenced by living language they are, of course, subject to the rules that govern the development of language, but in at least one respect they stand apart from other elements in living language. As they are names attached to places, not to objects, they quickly become identificatory labels rather than descriptive words, and so they tend to lose their original meanings for those who use them...⁷²

Ordinary words fall out of use when they cease to be meaningful, but place-names remain in use for centuries after they have become meaningless as words, for they still effectively perform their basic function of identification.⁷³

Thus it is unsurprising that today one can travel around Iceland and recognise many of the farm names as survivals from the saga age. Although the name of the person after which a farm is named might not mean anything to the passer-by or even the current owner, the name persists since it is the identificatory function of the name which is most important.

In the sagas, the names of the first settlers therefore might be expected to, and certainly do for the most part, permanently remain in the landscape in the name of their farm. Byock comments on the close relationship between the person and the land.

The site of the dwelling has ‘grown together’ with its owner so intimately that neither is conceivable without the other. A man’s full name consists of his own name and the name of the farmstead in which he lives.⁷⁴

⁷² F. T. Wainwright, *Archaeology and Place-Names and History. An Essay on Problems of Co-ordination* (London, 1962), p. 10.

⁷³ Wainwright, *Archaeology and Place-Names and History*, p. 11.

⁷⁴ J. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 148. Bearing the name of one’s farm was a practice in use in England as late as the Reformation: the priest of Morebath often identified householders in his parish by a single-word reference to their farm as well as using occupations and family names for other cases, and in Scotland minor lairds are still addressed by the name of their estates. See E. Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven, 2001), p. 4.

The organic image is useful, and Byock goes on to explain the importance of the tight bond between man and the land as an assertion of ownership.⁷⁵ Furthermore, with the combination of the patronymic system of naming and by the owner taking the name of his land, a person's name might become a chronotope of sorts.⁷⁶ S/He places her/himself in the genealogical flow of linear time and makes her/himself a feature of the Icelandic landscape. This chronotope therefore pronounces ownership with a double force. A simple example of this practice is the name of the farm in *Fljótsdæla saga* where Þórgerðr the poor widow lives: Þórgerðarstaðir.⁷⁷ This uncomplicated concurrence in name between farm and farm occupier is the norm in family saga narrative and in *Landnámabók*.

A slightly tongue-in-cheek episode in *Brandkrossa þáttr* highlights perfectly the relationship between persons and place-names typical of saga-narrative. When the farmer from Krossavík Grímr and his brother Þórsteinn are searching for Geitir hálfbergrísi, they come across an old man and they ask him if he knows anything about this man:

Þá kómu þeir um síðir til karls í afdal nökkurn ok spurðu hann at Geiti, ok kvazk hann eigi kenna hann. Þá spurði Þorsteinn, ef nökkur ornefni vissi hann, þau er Geiti væri kennd við. Hann kvað heita Geitishamra ok sagði þá þeim til þeira.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic saga*, pp. 149-50.

⁷⁶ See M. M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Towards a Historical Poetics", in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, 1981), p. 84.

⁷⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 14.

⁷⁸ *Brandkrossa þáttr*, p. 188.

They finally came across an old man in a remote valley and they asked him if he knew of Geitir, and he said that he didn't know him. Then Þorsteinn asked if he knew of any place-names which had the name Geitir in them. He said there was a place called Geitishamrar and told them how to get there.

This pokes fun at the conventions of saga narrative, suggesting that it is a simple task to locate any character, because they all leave traces of themselves in the landscape in place names.

Þórðr goddi provides the first potentially problematic example. The author of *Laxdæla saga* states that the farm where he lived has been called Goddastaðir ever since (“Þórðr goddi hét maðr, er bjó Laxárdal fyrir norðan á: sá bær heitir síðan á Goddastöðum.” - “There was a man called Þórðr goddi who lived north of the river: his farm has been called Goddastaðir ever since.”).⁷⁹ However, the saga author then goes on to mention that Þórðr bought the land where he lived, which suggests that there was a former owner. Thus the author both endorses the fact that new owners of land would change the name of the property to bear their own name but denies the possibility that anyone would change the name of the farm after a famous saga character has lived there. A counter-example is Stafngrímr Hranason's land, in *Landnámabók*. The farm where he lives is called Stafngrímsstaðr, but the author tells the reader that the name was then changed to Sigmundarstaðr.⁸⁰ Stafngrímr obviously did not have the requisite fame and fortune to ensure his name would forever be ‘above the door’ where he used to live. Of course, though, place-name theory does allow for the possibility of name-change. In his book *Fanes and Farms of Ancient Norway*, Magnus Olsen explains:

⁷⁹ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 20.

⁸⁰ *Landnámabók*, p. 76 (H and S).

As long as the structure of society was not menaced the farm-names were faithfully handed down from generation to generation. Historic events might, indeed, now and then cause a break in the tradition, so that farm and name disappeared. Or a farm might rise in the eyes of the world round it, because something new of a certain importance supervened - for instance a church, or a prominent man -, causing a new mental aspect to push to old association of place and name into the background, and a new name to grow up: Kirkevoll, Saksvik (from the high-born Saxi ór Vík), Stafngrímsstaðir (i.e. the dwelling-place of Stafngrím) "which is now called Sigmundarstaðir (i.e. the dwelling-place of Sigmund)". But such cases are exceptions...⁸¹

And so one can see that there is possibility for change, and therefore that there is not necessarily something suspicious afoot when two place-names are given, or if there is a variant name for a certain farm. As Wainwright also contends, these changes are rare occurrences:

The point is that place-names, unlike pots and manuscripts, arise spontaneously without conscious intention on the part of those who make them and they develop without a conscious attempt to mould them to a particular plan or design. There are occasional examples of names deliberately formed or changed, but these are comparatively rare exceptions to the rule. This spontaneity and lack of calculated human interference seems to be one to most important characteristics of place-names.⁸²

Therefore one can assume that a character has to make a real mark in order for a name to be changed, since, on the whole, names (free of their original meaning but *almost* immutable as identificatory labels) resist change. One might logically assume then, that if a character is especially famous, a place-name change might occur, as with Þórðr goddi. In the case of Ölvir Hallsteinsson the change occurs after he dies.

⁸¹ M. Olsen, *Fanes and Farms of Ancient Norway* (Oslo, 1928), pp. 15-6.

⁸² Wainwright, *Archaeology and Place-Names and History*, p. 46.

Whilst he is alive his place is called Stjörnusteinar but after he dies, it is called Ölvistóptir.⁸³ Of course, although one can be grateful to the author for correctly recording a place-name change, one cannot rely on him to give an accurate time as to when the change took place. It would seem strange that Ölvir's farm only carried his name after he died. Ölvir dies when he is very young, and the author of *Flóamanna saga* does not mention any great deeds or heroic exploits which he might have achieved in his short life. Why, then, does the farm name change after his premature death?

However, some of the more famous saga characters do not have their farms named after them, such as Gunnarr Hámundarson of Hlíðarendi, and Auðr enn djúpúðga at Hvammr. These appear to be important, contradictory examples to the place-names theories. Why would some of Iceland's most renowned sons and daughters not be commemorated in the landscape? I turn again to Magnus Olsen for an explanation, which hinges on what was discussed in chapter two, namely the fact that the earliest and largest landtakers established other relatives, friends and freedmen on their vast properties, whilst they themselves resided on the largest, best and central farm:

⁸³ *Flóamanna saga*, p. 240.

Every Icelandic farm may, indeed, be named after its owner, without any regard to its size or social rank; thus we find *Gullberastaðir*, named after one of the greatest land-takers, in the same class as Eirík the Red's new-settled farm *Eiríksstaðir*. But this possibility, existing in theory, was under certain circumstances not made use of, viz. where the following two factors came into play: 1. A particular farm rose in the social scale overtopping the surrounding farms which were roughly equals in rank - the chief's farm as against the 'clients' farms - , 2. Great distances divided such a farm from others of the same rank. For instance: Skallagrím's farm in the centre of the dominion he claimed, had no need to be designated by a person's name; Skallagrím was raised to such elevation above the heads of his followers that it would have been unnatural to speak about *Skallagrím's* dwelling-place in contradistinction to, for instance, *Pursstaðir*, *Jarlangsstaðir*, and *Stangarholt*. Ingolf, Aud, and the other land-takers of the same magnitude lived so far away that nobody thought of talking about **Skallagrímsstaðir*, or **Grímsstaðir* in contradistinction to **Ingólfsstaðir* or **Auðarstaðir*. The whole matter, then, is as clear psychologically as it is in its social and historical aspects.⁸⁴

In the same way, then, that the main residence on a large British estate up to the beginning of the last century would be ubiquitously called 'the Big House', the main farms on large Icelandic estates in the saga age would not have required to bear the name of the original landowner. On closer examination place-name theory (and the very particular, careful study of Olsen into Icelandic and Norwegian farm-names) answers some of the seemingly problematic issues regarding naming in saga narrative.

But in some of the following examples the saga author is seen to manipulate and construct narratives around place-names. No theory can then come to his rescue, as he betrays the fictionality of his account in their handling. One clear example of

⁸⁴ Olsen, *Fanes and Farms*, pp. 86-7.

this is pre-emptive naming. The family sagas and *Landnámabók* contain many instances where the reason for a place-name is detailed. Referencing such places before the reason is given is often difficult for authors, but can be solved by a pre-emptive naming before the event has taken place. For example, when Hallfreðr moves from the place where his bondwoman died, his new farm is called Geitdalr.⁸⁵ But the reason for its name only occurs when Hallfreðr moves out again: two goats are killed by a landslide on the day he departs. And if one compares the same story in *Landnámabók*, an even more curious situation is detailed. Hrafnkell Freysgoði, having been warned off his property in Skriðudalr by a dream, lays claim to Hrafnkelsdalr and lives at Steinrøðarstaðir.⁸⁶ Once again, there is a pre-emptive naming in the case of the valley, but if Hrafnkell was the first person in this part of the country, then who was Steinrøðr who owned and named the farm before him? In this bizarre example, the author of *Landnámabók* makes no attempt to explain, or even to ‘cover up’, the past history of the place, whereas the author of *Hrafnkels saga* changes names to ensure that no awkward questions are posed by the reader. As Heather O’Donoghue states:

These differences can be explained in two ways: either the author of the saga only had a vague and imperfect memory of the *Landnámabók* story, or was even recalling another version of the same basic tradition; or else he deliberately altered the story for his own purposes. The first possibility suggests that the tradition was authentic, and that the saga author was reproducing it. The second would reveal an author of historical fiction at work, adapting his sources.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Hrafnkels saga*, p. 59.

⁸⁶ *Landnámabók*, p. 299 (H and S).

⁸⁷ O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 38.

Brandkrossa þáttur complicates this situation further. It concurs with the events described in *Landnámabók*, but goes on to mention that when Hrafnkell died, his sons inherited his land and divided it between them, Þórir taking the farm his father had lived in, and Ásbjörn the farm called Lokhilla, which, according to the author of the *þáttur*, is now called Hrafnkelstaðir.⁸⁸ In *Hrafnkels saga* Þórir is given Hrafnkelstaðir, and Ásbjörn stays at Aðalból with his father because he is younger.⁸⁹ If one looks again at *Landnámabók* it states that Ásbjörn was the father of Helgi, and Þórir was the father of Hrafnkell, who was a chieftain, but no further mention is made of the farms which they occupied.⁹⁰ The names of the characters and places which make up the famous events described in *Hrafnkels saga* are thus seen to be unstable: the three different authors accordingly offer their individual view to suit their own purposes.

Some attempts at explaining can be better than others. In *Fljótsdæla saga* when Þorvaldr Þiðrandason acquires a new farm, his mother Arneiðr Helgadóttir comes to look after the running of it for him, and because of this the place-name was changed to bear her name: Arneiðarstaðir.⁹¹ Is it likely that because a woman who managed the farm for four years (she dies and is buried outside the hayfield wall shortly after she is introduced in the saga) would be immortalised in such a way?⁹² To return to *Hrafnkels saga* for another similarly unlikely immortalisation, Hallfreðr's first farm is named after a foreign bondswoman who died there the winter before he moves to his new farm Geitdalr ("Um vetrinn andaðisk útlend ambátt, er Arnþrúðr hét, ok því heitir þat síðan á").⁹³ The reason why a foreign slave's passing would give

⁸⁸ *Brandkrossa þáttur*, pp. 183-4.

⁸⁹ *Hrafnkels saga*, pp. 85-6.

⁹⁰ *Landnámabók*, p. 299 (H and S).

⁹¹ *Fljótsdæla saga*, p. 233.

⁹² *Fljótsdæla saga*, p. 234.

⁹³ *Hrafnkels saga*, p. 59.

rise to the farm name of a prestigious settler such as Hallfreðr is difficult to imagine, but it is less a leap for the imagination to surmise that the saga author was attempting to make sense of the names which were present in his tradition and felt the need to add this detail to tie up the loose ends of his narrative. The farm was clearly well-known as Arnþrúðarstaðir, and he had to construct a narrative which not only explained the reason for the name, but also tied in with the person he represents as owning it for a time. Just as men give names to the places where they lived, so too do they give names to the places where they died. Runaway slaves who are pursued and killed become immortalised in the landscape. At one point in *Egils saga* there are too many for the saga author to bother to name, it would seem: he states “[b]eir hendu þrælana en fleiri; þar sem síðan eru ørnefni við kennd” - “they caught other slaves at places which are also named after them now”.⁹⁴ Is it likely that slaves would be important enough to permanently feature in the landscape? As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen writes in *Saga and Society*, there are real doubts to the authenticity of many place-names which have a ‘just-so-story’ attached. One recent hypothesis is that “[t]he names of the settlers and their companions were constructed on the basis of existing place-names which originally contained not personal names, but animal names or names deriving from natural features.”⁹⁵ He cites Auðr en djúpúðga’s landtake as a classic example of these *post hoc* explanations:

Ok um várit fór hon yfir Breiðafjörð ok kom at nesi nökkuru, ok áttu þar dagverð; þar er síðan kallat Dögurðarnes... Síðan helt hon skipi sínu inn eptir Hvammsfirði ok kam þar at nesi einu ok átti þar dvöl nökkura; þar tapaði Unnr kambi sínum; þar heitir síðan Kambsness.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ *Egils saga*, p. 241. See also *Landnámabók* (S) for the place-names in the Vestmanneyjar where Hjörleifr’s slaves are caught and killed, pp. 44-5.

⁹⁵ Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, p. 4.

⁹⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 9.

And during the spring she went across Breiðafjörður and arrived at a certain headland, and she had breakfast there; the place has been called Dögurðarnes ever since. Afterwards she took her ship in and along Hvammsfjörður and came to another headland where she stayed awhile; there Auður lost her comb; and it has been called Kambsness ever since.

What does the saga author gain by constructing such a narrative in a case such as this?

There is no need for him to have to explain these place-names in this way, unlike the author of *Hrafnkels saga* who has to deal with fundamental problems in the tradition of the story. His narrative would have made perfect sense without these place-name explanations. But the author realises that there is importance in the powerful act of naming. The author represents Auður as a strong figure whose impression on the land is stamped on her tour of the district. Her history lives on in the place-names, even the most trivial aspects of her history, such as where she breakfasted, and the saga author gains status for his character by her transition into local folklore: her esteem is embedded in the very rock. Auður is depicted as immediately being in control of the unfamiliar surroundings. Sylvia Mayer writes “[a]s especially postcolonial theory has pointed out, topographical naming is, first and foremost, a means of establishing authority and control.”⁹⁷ Other impressive and protracted naming episodes occur in, for example, *Bárðar saga*, in which the eponymous character lavishes toponyms on Snæfellsnes,⁹⁸ and in *Vatnsdæla saga*, in the journey north in search of the valley revealed to Ingimundr inn gamli in the Lapps’ prophecy.⁹⁹ Both characters are represented as embarking upon a naming spree, bestowing the landscape with markers as they explore the new country. The naming for them is the natural response to

⁹⁷ S. Mayer, “The Traveller as Topographer: Jonathan Raban’s *Bad Land: An American Romance*”, in *Spatial Change in English Literature*, ed. J. Frenk (Trier, 2000), p. 177.

⁹⁸ *Bárðar saga*, pp. 11-13.

⁹⁹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 39-40.

familiarise new territory as they pass through it and divide it up for themselves, and so physical features are referenced, and not just putative dwelling-places.

Conclusion

As Rockwell Gray writes, “[w]e convert landscape into story and legend, lending it much of what we wish to find there.”¹⁰⁰ In the sagas the landscape is converted into the stories of the settlers. Once more, Iceland is seen to be familiarised immediately and controlled from the very beginning of the Norse settlement. And the value of the act of naming is recognised for the prestige it confers on the greatest of the original settlers. Since the place-names of the first settlers remain in the Icelandic landscape, the saga author’s account is provided with instant verisimilitude. The fact that the names are the same as they were in the saga age is one of the reasons that the sagas were held to be historically accurate for so long. Place-names are a symbolic marker of the continuity, represented in the sagas and examined in this chapter, between the settler and the land, and the past and the present.

¹⁰⁰ R. Gray, “Travel”, in *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*, ed. M. Kowalewski (Athens; Georgia, 1992), p. 34.

Chapter Five: CHANGE

Introduction

In the last chapter, “Continuity”, I explored the representation of the close bond between the landowner, the owner’s family and the land in family saga narrative. Men live on through place-names in the landscape, and the near location and potency of the dead strengthen the connection of the land to the living. Egill Skalla-Grímsson exhibits this close bond to the land: before he arbitrates in a land dispute case involving his son and their neighbours, he recounts the details of his family’s pedigree, his predecessor’s landtake, the extent of his property and wealth, and his personal reputation:

...héf ek þar upp þat mál, er Grímr, faðir minn, kom hingat til lands ok nam hér öll lönd um Mýrar ok víða herað ok tók sér bústað at Borg ok ætlaði þar landeign til, en gaf vinum sínum landakosti þar út í frá, svá sem þeir byggðu síðan... Vitu vér at allir, Steinarr, hvar landamerki eru milli Borgar ok Ánabrekku, at þar ræðr Háfslöekr... því at þú, Steinarr, ok þit Önundr meguð þat vita, at Áni þá land at Grími, feðr mínum...En fyrir þat, Steinarr, er þú hugðisk ræna mundu Þorstein, son minn, landeign sinni, þeiri er hann tók með mínu ráði ok ek tók í arf eptir föður minn, þar fyrir skaltu láta laust þitt land at Ánabrekku ok hafa eigi fyrir fé.¹

¹ *Egils saga*, p. 287.

...I begin the case at the point when Grímr my father came to this country and claimed here all the land around Mýrar and widely throughout the district. He made his home at Borg and controlled the landownership, and he gave his friends the best of the land beyond there, on which they settled afterwards... We all know, Steinarr, where the land boundaries are between Borg and Ánabrekka, and that Háfslœkr marks them... You both, Steinarr and Önundr, must have known that Áni had that land from Grímr, my father... And because, Steinarr, you thought you would deprive my son of the land to which he is legally entitled, which he took over from my control and which I took as my inheritance from my father before me, you shall lose your lands at Ánabrekka and not get any money for them.

These aspects seem inextricably linked: his success as a person has been informed by the success and wealth of his father and his good fortune with the initial landtake. Egill has certainly not lacked money, livestock and land. His prowess abroad has informed his standing as one of Iceland's greatest men, and the continued prosperity of his holdings has provided well for his kinsmen. The history of his family and its relationship to the land have shaped Egill's character, and certainly legitimise his position as a suitable arbitrator. He states clearly his indissoluble tie to his family's lands.

But in this depiction of continuity with the land one can detect change. There is a different way in which to interpret Egill's speech. Jesse Byock offers such a reading in his book *Viking Age Iceland*:

There is a history to these lands. Steinar's grandfather was a trusted follower of Thorstein's grandfather Skallagrim, who granted Steinar's grandfather his farm at Anabrekka from the core of Skallagrim's original land-take. Now, later in the tenth century, relationships between the families have changed. This conflict among the grandchildren of the *landnámsmenn* is told as a saga example of Thorstein's attempt to hold on to what remains of his family's diminished authority and property.²

The fact that Egill has to make his speech prior to his arbitration demonstrates his 'diminishing authority'. His right to preside in the outcome of the case has to be voiced: it is not taken for granted and recognised without Egill's having to declare it. The relationships between the families have changed, and also, therefore, the relationships between the families and the land. In one example both continuity and change are exposed. Alongside representations of a permanent bond with the land in saga narrative are representations of property changing hands. Land conveyance is portrayed as easy, convenient and, in some cases, more desirable than staying on and keeping a hold on one's family property. This betrays a contradiction in the representation of landownership. One might expect that if such a close bond were represented as having existed, then there would accompany it a difficulty in buying, selling or exchanging: no one would wish to lose their family's *landnám* property or swap it for that of another.

Before I deal with legal means of land conveyance, that is, compensation, confiscation, forfeiture, buying, selling and exchanging, I shall examine conflicts over land, brought about by greed, lust for power and the problems of joint ownership. Although there are many forms of theft that are perpetrated in the

² Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, p. 212.

sagas (such as the stealing of timber and the contravention of drifting rights), I shall focus in this section on deliberate and malicious attempts to deprive others of their territory.

1. Land and Aggression

Bullying tactics are represented as having been employed by powerful men who capitalise on their authority. Guðmundr inn ríki is one such example:

Guðmundr var höfðingi mikill ok auðigr; hann hafði hundrað hjóna. Hann sat yfir virðingu allra höfðingja fyrir norðan Øxnadalsheiði, svá at sumir létu bústaði sína, en suma tók hann af lífi, en sumir létu goðorð sín fyrir honum. Ok er frá honum komit allt it mesta mannval á Íslandi: Oddaverjar ok Sturlungar ok Hvammverjar ok Flótamenn ok Ketill byskup ok margir inir mestu menn.³

Guðmundr was a great and wealthy chieftain; he had a hundred servants in his household. He ruled over all of the other chieftains to the north of Øxnadalsheiði in such a way that some he drove from their properties, some he killed and others he forced to give up their chieftaincies. All of the greatest families in Iceland are descended from him: the Oddaverjar and the Sturlungar and the Hvammverjar and the Flótamenn, as well as Ketill byskup amongst other important men.

It is a significant marker of Guðmundr's power that he rules over other chieftains. Chieftains are powerful in their own right, but Guðmundr even wields control over them. It is not clear why these people might be expelled; what is significant is the power held by one individual. The saga author does not seem to wish to engage in a representation which would describe the detail of the chieftain's control, but only wishes to express his influence. It is significant that the author of

³ *Njáls saga*, pp. 285-6.

Njáls saga highlights the fact that all of the great families of the Sturlung age are descended from Guðmundr, for at that time all of Iceland lay in the hands of a few, powerful men who vied against each other to gain control of the country and as much land as possible. All of the chieftaincies were held in these large families. Thus Guðmundr's actions foreshadow this turbulent period in Iceland's history.

Guðmundr inn ríki is not alone in the exploitation of his position as chieftain. Þorgrímr, a farmer from Hörgsland abuses his power: "Hann fór illa með sínu goðorði. Hann tók góz fyrir bændum, bæði yxn og hesta." - "He abused his chieftaincy. He took property from his farmers, both oxen and horses."⁴ This course of action, understandably, leads Þorgrímr to be the most unpopular man in the district as well as the most influential. In *Hávarðar saga Ísafirðings* Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson is a character with similar tendencies: he is well-born, powerful (he too owns a *goðorð*) but a very unjust man. No one has the strength to oppose him, and so he steals people's daughters and kinswomen and keeps them for a while and then sends them back when no longer has any use for them. He also steals people's possessions and drives some off their land.⁵ He gets his comeuppance when the eponymous character kills him in revenge for the death of his son Óláfr.⁶

⁴ Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, Íslensk Fornrit XIV (Reykjavík, 1959), p. 343.

⁵ *Hávarðar saga Ísafirðings*, p. 291.

⁶ *Hávarðar saga Ísafirðings*, pp. 326-7.

In *Njáls saga* attempts are made to frame a great man with accusations of theft and aggression. Þorgeirr Starkaðarson offers his kinsman Mörðr Valgarðsson money to come up with a plan to bring about the downfall of Gunnarr Hámundarson. He suggests that Þorgeirr accuse Gunnarr of breaking a settlement by not handing over the land which was given as compensation to Þorgeirr's father for the death of one of his sons. Far from stealing the land (by failing to hand it over) Gunnarr has offered cash payment or alternative land instead. Mörðr also claims that Gunnarr has stolen a cornfield from Þorgeirr Otkelsson.⁷ The action fails, however, when Njáll clarifies the issue on behalf of his friend:

„Eigi er þat sættarrof,“ segir Njáll, „at hverr hafi lög við annan, því at með lögum skal land vart byggja, en með ólögum eyða.“ Sagði Njáll þeim þá, at Gunnarr hafði boðit land fyrir Móeiðarhvál eða annat fé.⁸

“It's no breach of settlement,” says Njáll, “for someone to make genuine legal arrangements with another, for with laws shall our land be settled, but with lawlessness shall it be made desolate.” Njáll explained to them that Gunnarr had offered alternative land for Móeiðarhváll or a cash payment.

The attempt to bring down Gunnarr thus fails. However, although Þorgeirr Otkelsson is forced to pay compensation for his part in the business, no mention is made of his cornfield in the court-case. It may be that the saga author has forgotten to tie up this loose end: the cornfield disappears as quickly and completely as the false charges.

⁷ *Njáls saga*, p. 167.

⁸ *Njáls saga*, pp. 172-3.

In *Vatnsdæla saga* the reader is left guessing as to whether or not a theft has occurred. Már Jörundarson loses some sheep: their whereabouts are a mystery. He sends out his shepherd to look for them, who not only finds the sheep, but also a plot of rich-soiled land in the woods (the sheep have become fat from grazing there).⁹

However, the ownership of this land is unclear. Már asks the shepherd if it is his land. He replies bluntly that it could be his if he wanted it, but that it lies immediately next to the land belonging to the sons of Ingimundr inn gamli. However, the plot can only be accessed from Már's land. Following an inspection in which he deems the land of good quality, he decides that he is the owner ("Már sá landakostinn, ok þótti góðr ok eignaði sér."). Instead of checking with his neighbours, Már allows the desirability of the plot to decide the question of ownership.¹⁰ It is difficult for the reader to imagine that such a piece of land should have gone unnoticed. The land is not said to be hidden, for example, in trees, or some distance away inland where it might more credibly have gone undetected. However, Már can only be in the second generation of settlers, and so perhaps one is to assume that this plot has been hitherto unclaimed because there are still other areas unsettled.

But the land becomes a source of dispute between the sons of Ingimundr and Már, and a battle ensues. The matter then goes to the assembly, and Már offers Þorsteinn Ingimundarson self-judgement. The latter decides that Már should have the property, because it can only be reached from his land, but he has

⁹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 75-6.

¹⁰ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 76.

to then pay the sons of Ingimundr one hundred in silver (“Már skal eiga Hjallaland, því at ór hans landi at eins upp ganga, en gjalda oss bræðrum hundrað silfrs.”).¹¹ It is not clear whether this payment is compensation, or whether Már is actually being forced in the judgement to purchase the land. It would seem that the only reason Már has claim to the land is the fact that he has access. The settlement still leaves one in doubt as to who owned the land in the first place, and thus whether or not a theft has been attempted.

2. The Problems of Joint Ownership

A further area where there appears to be both uncertainty and complication is in co-ownership. Jointly holding land is a well-attested practice in the sagas and appears in *Grágás* also, in the form of communal land. It is rare indeed for a saga author to mention harmonious joint ownership: inevitably, one only encounters the phenomenon when some other dispute or quarrel divides the partnership. Often two family members own land jointly, but neighbours and friends are also depicted as sharing property. In *Landnámabók* an arrangement between Þormóðr enn rammi and Óláfr bekk, two men outlawed from Norway who settle in the same area, provide the template for the latter type of joint ownership in the later period. This is the ideal solution to their dispute over the land which they both want and claim. The deal which they strike effects their reconciliation:

Hann deildi um Hvanndali við Ólaf bekk ok
varð sextán manna bani, áðr þeir sættusk, en
þá skyldi sitt sumar hvárr hafa.¹²

¹¹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 81.

¹² *Landnámabók*, p. 246 (H and S).

He [Þormóðr] quarrelled over Hvanndalr with Óláfr bekk and the dispute was the death of sixteen men before they agreed that each would have it every other summer.

The same arrangement, however, proves an impossibility when one party becomes greedy for sole ownership in *Víga-Glúms saga*. The productive field Vitazgjafi (Sure-Giver) becomes a great bone of contention which results in the death of Sigmundur Þorkelsson.¹³ A similar deal between Hólmgöngu-Ljótr and Þorbjörn from Eyrir over an excellent, trenched meadow goes awry in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*. How and why this arrangement was ever made is not related, but it is agreed that each is to have the use of the pasture every other summer. The stream that runs into the pasture runs past Ljótr's farm, and has well-constructed sluice gates in it, but when it is Þorbjörn's turn to have the land, he does not get any water. Ljótr also starts to spread rumours that Þorbjörn does not have any rights to the land and makes it clear that Þorbjörn should not dare to assert his ownership of it. When the two meet by chance on the boundary between their lands one day, Ljótr gives the other man two options: either to let him do as he pleases, or to be driven off the land. Þorbjörn is forced to buy the land from Ljótr at a price which the latter sets.¹⁴ Þorbjörn's young sons (aged ten and twelve) are enraged by this, and, against all odds, they kill Ljótr for the injustice.¹⁵

There are occasions in which jointly-owned property is divided amicably to mutual benefit. Two brothers, Þorgrímr hærukollr and Þorgeirr flöskubakr, divide what they own jointly in a friendly manner. Þorgrímr takes the movable property and Þorgeirr the land, and the former then moves to Miðfjörðr and buys

¹³ *Víga-Glúms saga*, pp. 12-4.

¹⁴ *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, pp. 336-7.

¹⁵ *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, pp. 338-9.

land with the support of Miðfjörðr-Skeggi.¹⁶ They both profit and prosper because of the division. In *Droplaugarsonar saga* Ketill þrymr and Graut-Atli, the sons of Þiðrandi, divide their jointly-owned farm.¹⁷ This does not occasion any quarrel between the two brothers. However, in the same saga and in the same family a similar division causes strife. Þrum-Ketill, the grandson of Ketill Þrymr, does not enjoy an harmonious relationship with his brother Þorvaldr. After they both inherit their father's Þiðrandi's property, they split their inheritance. However, Ketill insists on his retaining the chieftaincy, an outcome about which Þorvaldr is displeased. *Fljótsdæla saga* goes into more detail about the dispute, and fleshes out the characters. Ketill has a tendency to take charge of their affairs without informing Þorvaldr. Þorvaldr tires of this, and asks to divide their authority and property. But Ketill is unwilling to divide the *goðorð*, and keeps it for himself, leaving Þorvaldr demanding his right to a half of it. However, he is forced to acquiesce in the meantime.¹⁸ The desire to separate land in such cases heralds a parting of the ways in more ways than one for the owners. This occurs in *Gísla saga* at the time of the Moving Days. Þorkell Súrsson wants his brother Gísli to divide the property they have jointly inherited.¹⁹ After an initial protest, Gísli consents. The division does not aid an already cooling fraternal relationship.

In *Eyrbyggja saga* Börkr inn digri is manoeuvred out of his property when Snorri goði decides he wants his patrimony. They are not willing to divide the farm, but they can no longer live together, and so Börkr asks Snorri if he can buy

¹⁶ *Grettis saga*, p. 33.

¹⁷ Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Droplaugarsonar saga*, Íslensk Fornrit XI (Reykjavík, 1950), pp. 140-1.

¹⁸ *Fljótsdæla saga*, p. 222.

¹⁹ *Gísla saga*, pp. 34-5.

him out.²⁰ Snorri says he will choose which one will purchase the land after Börkr has set the price. Unfortunately for the latter, Snorri has more money than Börkr bargains on, and so Snorri has Helgafell to himself.²¹ Drangey poses difficulties for the owners when Grettir Ásmundarson sets up camp there: many people have a share in the island (no fewer than twenty).²² A dispute occurs in which the less well-off farmers become keen to sell. However, a restriction is placed on potential buyers: they must dispose of Grettir who is currently occupying the island.²³ Hjalti Þórðarson is offered the option to purchase shares by some of the farmers, but he passes the opportunity on to his harsher brother Þorbjörn öngull, who ends with up with the majority share in the island. The problems of joint ownership, as has been explored in this section, can be difficult to unravel peaceably, but in this case they are further complicated by the large number of share-holders.

3. Compensation, Confiscation and Forfeiture

I turn now to representations of how land can be acquired and lost through legal action. In the following examples property changes hands after arbitration in a law suit. After the failure of Flosi Eiríksson's case for the land at Kaldbak in *Grettis saga*, Þorkell máni (who introduced the notion of legal precedent by recalling the case of Steinuðr in *gamla*, the kinswoman of Ingólfr Arnason) proposes that the land over which the dispute arose should be shared out equally between the two parties.²⁴ The matter is thus settled, and Flosi then sells his land and moves out of the area. Despite gaining from this settlement (the land had

²⁰ *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 24-5.

²¹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 26.

²² *Grettis saga*, p. 228.

²³ *Grettis saga*, p. 236.

²⁴ *Grettis saga*, p. 32. See chapter two for a discussion of Steinuðr's landtake.

been outside the family since late in the settlement era), he decides to move. The saga author does not explain why Flosi sells up, but one supposes that it would have been unwise to remain in the district in fear of a backlash from the bitter dispute.

In contrast, Grímr Þorhallsson is forced to move out after the decision of the arbitrators in *Grettis saga*. After the slaying of Þórir Þorkelsson's sons, Grímr and Atli Ásmundarson are prosecuted. Two men are appointed to fix the arbitration settlement, and they decide that Atli alone should pay the money required but that Grímr should leave the district. This he does, and he relocates south and becomes an eminent farmer.²⁵ The same is true in *Vapnfirðinga saga* of Tjörvi inn mikli. For his part in the dispute which leads to the death of Brodd-Helgi, he is forced by the Alþingi to vacate his farm and the district within a year. He complies with the terms of the settlement made in court, and disposes of his land and dismisses his household before the Moving Days.²⁶

In *Hrómundar þáttur halta* the eponymous character buys land at Fagrabrekka when he is outlawed from his district for killing Högni Ingimundarson. The new start seems to work for him too: he becomes an attractive and powerful figure, although it is uncertain why he then has to build defences around his home (“Hann gerði virki mikit um bæ sinn...”).²⁷ Building of defences around a farmstead is not mentioned anywhere else in Iceland in the

²⁵ *Grettis saga*, pp. 142-3.

²⁶ Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Vapnfirðinga saga*, Íslensk Fornrit XI (Reykjavík, 1950), pp. 49-50. It is difficult to ascertain the exact circumstances under which Tjörvi is prosecuted owing to a lacuna in the text just before this point in the saga.

²⁷ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Hrómundar þáttur halta*, Íslensk Fornrit VIII (Reykjavík, 1939), p. 305.

family sagas. Perhaps he too, like Flosi, is attempting to fend off a backlash in retribution for his actions.

But when arbitrators are fixed, settlements are represented as less amicable. In *Brandkrossa þáttur* an inventive way of getting hold of land is concocted by Bersi inn spaki for his brother-in-law Helgi Ásbjarnarson. They set up some games with some troublesome characters, and when a man is killed, Helgi takes up the prosecution for the victim's family:

Helgi Ásbjarnarson tók við vígsmálinu. Þá leituðu menn um sættir, en engi var kostur annarr en Bersi gerði einn um, ok varð svá sætt þeira, at Bersi gerði litla fjársekð, en gerði Odd í brott af bústað sínum ok ór heraði. Oddi líkaði stórilla málalok, en þó urðu þessi at vera, af því at margir váru honum unnandi ófararinnar. Helgi Ásbjarnarson leysti Oddsstaði aptir til sín ok þó við mikinn óþokka Odds.²⁸

Helgi Ásbjarnarson took up the prosecution case. When men were casting around for who should be the arbitrator, the only suitable man to make the award was Bersi, and the case was settled by Bersi imposing a small fine on Oddr but sentencing him to forfeit his farm and leave the district. Oddr was enraged at the conclusion of the case, but the sentences had to be enforced because many men thought that he deserved to have a hard time of it. Helgi Ásbjarnarson bought Oddsstaðir for himself afterwards, to Oddr's great displeasure.

But things do not proceed quite as smoothly as Helgi and Bersi plan. On the day when Helgi is due to move in, Oddr has a bull killed and cooked for a feast, which he dedicates to Freyr, asking that the god cause Helgi to move from the land with

²⁸ *Brandkrossa þáttur*, p. 185.

no less sorrow than with which he now leaves.²⁹ Although Helgi acquires the much-needed land, Oddr procures for himself a divine advantage for the injustice he receives in court.³⁰

An arbitration is also rigged in *Víga-Glúms saga*. When Víga-Glúmr finally admits in court to the killing of Þorvaldr krókr at Hrístateigr, he is ordered to give half of his land at Þverá to the son of the dead man, and to sell the other half and forever after be banished from the district.³¹ This is a pre-arranged deal: Þórarinn Þórisson tells Einarr Eyjólfsson that he will make sure that the latter is given the opportunity to buy Þverá at no higher a price than Glúmr paid for it himself, and he keeps his word.³²

In *Gull-Þóris saga* land changes hands many times throughout the course of the saga. The property Uppsálir has a long and complicated ownership history. The first owner is Þuríðr drikkinn, who then sells the land to Oddr skrauti after his marriage to Valgerðr Eyjólfsdóttir.³³ Oddr dies, and their son, Gull-Þórir goes abroad.³⁴ Hof-Hallr drives the widowed Valgerðr from Uppsálir whilst Þórir is overseas, and gives it to Þorbjörn stokkr, a troublemaker who moves to the area

²⁹ *Brandkrossa þáttr*, pp. 185-6.

³⁰ See Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, p. 121. "Sometimes advocates, even as brokers, acted out of high-mindedness (*drengskapr*), charging no fee for their efforts to solve the problems of others. The motivation for such acts of goodwill might be the desire to enhance one's prestige or to reaffirm kinship, political alliances or *goði*-thingman ties. But at other times an advocate might set a fee which was often substantial, perhaps even requiring the transfer of property or inheritance rights in return for his services. The fee, which made it worth the while of a third party to intervene in the affairs of others, is frequently referred to in the sagas by the term *sæmð*, meaning honourable recompense."

³¹ *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 46.

³² *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 45.

³³ *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 178.

³⁴ *Gull-Þóris saga*, pp. 181-2.

from Ísafjörður.³⁵ On his return, along with Hallsteinn Þórólfsson, Gull-Þórir jumps ship with nearly forty men, rows across the fjord, and confronts Hallr at Vaðilseyrr. A battle breaks out at once, and Þórir kills a man. Hallr offers to settle with them, which he does by giving Hallsteinn self-judgement for the killing of Þórarinn Hallsteinsson. He demands two hundred marks of silver and also that the deaths of those men who fell in the battle should balance out the attack. The land at Uppsálir is paid as compensation for the man Gull-Þórir killed at Vaðilseyrr, but the whole settlement is to be invalidated if Hallr does not honour it. Hallr returns home after this and is dissatisfied.³⁶ In effect, Þórir is being forced to hand over formally to his enemies Uppsálir as compensation, even though they already occupy it. Eventually, though, Þórir goes to see Þórðr from Laugardalr and brings a case against him for sending a troublemaker like Þórbjörn south to Uppsálir, which Þórir had inherited from his father. They settle in such a way that Þórir alone arbitrates, and the outcome is that the eponymous hero claims the properties Botn and Uppsálir for the hostilities that he has encountered from Hallr and Þórbjörn.³⁷ However, as was already discussed in the third chapter, the land changes hands again when Þórir helps out Þorgerður by selling it to her because her own property is under threat from the malicious Helgi from Hjallar.³⁸ Certainly there is no evidence in this example of any character forming any sort of attachment to the land. Even Þórir, who inherited Uppsálir from his father and was deprived of it for so long, exchanges the land in order to help a friend in need. Fluctuation is the key element in the representation of the ownership of Uppsálir. There is no continuity whatsoever: all is change.

³⁵ *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 193.

³⁶ *Gull-Þóris saga*, pp. 195-6.

³⁷ *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 204.

³⁸ *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 204. See chapter three for this sale.

Not all cases in the family sagas, obviously, are decided by settlement and arbitration. Where men are outlawed, a court of confiscation can be held in order to dispossess the guilty party of his property. The author of *Hrafnkels saga* provides a helpful introduction to the procedure involved at the court of confiscation. He explains as if the reader/audience would have no understanding of Icelandic law. When Sámur Bjarnason's party goes to enforce Hrafnkell Freysgoði's outlawry at the criminal's farm, Aðalból, Þorgeirr Þjóstarsson asks his brother in which task he would like be involved, and in doing so the saga author describes in detail what is required:

‘...Eða hvárt viltu, Þorkell, nú gera: at sitja hér hjá Hrafnkeli ok gæta þeira, eða viltu fara með Sámi ór garði á brott í örskotshelgi við bæinn ok heyra fíránisdóm á grjóthól nökkurum, þar sem hvárki er akr né eng?’

Þetta skyldi í þann tíma gera, er sól væri í fullu suðri.³⁹

“...What would you prefer to do now, Þorkell: either to stay here beside Hrafnkell and his men and watch over them, or would you rather go with Sámur the distance of an arrow shot from the farmhouse and hold the court of confiscation on stony ground not in field nor meadow?”

This had to be done at the time of day when the sun was full in the south.

The result of the court of confiscation is that Hrafnkell leaves Aðalból with only a few movable possessions; Sámur claims everything else and takes over the running of the farm. It is strange that the saga author takes the time to explain so much of what other authors took for granted in their narratives, such as *vápnatak*, proceedings at the Alþingi and the court of confiscation. Whatever the original

³⁹ *Hrafnkels saga*, p. 76.

reason for their inclusion, *Hrafnkels saga* is a useful text for the later reader because of them.

Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu demonstrates perfectly the difficulties involved with the court of confiscation. Áskell goði summons Eysteinn Mánason at the Alþingi on a charge of slander (Eysteinn alleged that Háls Þórisson had stolen his sheep). Eysteinn is outlawed, and guesses correctly that Áskell and his followers will make their way to his farm afterwards to execute him and hold the court of confiscation. He rides ahead, rounds up all his livestock into his farm buildings, and burns the entirety down. No one knows if he too is burned in the conflagration or makes his escape abroad, but all that is left is the land which he formerly owned, and this is confiscated (“En jarðir þær, sem þar váru eptir, urðu nú sekðarfé”).⁴⁰

Confiscation of property is completely avoided in *Njáls saga* by less destructive means. Kári Sölmundarson assigns his land along with his wife and daughters to Þorgeirr skorargeirr, so that it cannot be confiscated by Kári’s enemies. Upon his agreement all of Kári’s property and the care of his family is formally made over to Þorgeirr.⁴¹

4. Buying and selling

There are a great many instances in family saga narrative in which land is exchanged for either money, other land or, in some cases, ships. As was noted above in chapter two, there are many examples of those who, on their arrival in

⁴⁰ *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, p. 159.

⁴¹ *Njáls saga*, pp. 423-4.

Iceland, buy land. For example, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Arnbjörn inn sterki, who has managed to make a good amount of money abroad, parts with some of it in order to purchase Bakki in Hraunhöfn.⁴² But in this section I shall now turn my attention to those sales which are represented as occurring after the initial settlement period.

So many of these transactions are described as being straight-forward and simple. In *Laxdæla saga* both Þórðr goddi and Hrappr Sumarliðason buy their land.⁴³ Later in the saga Óláfr pái manages to buy Hrappr Sumarliðason's land for a knockdown price because he is haunting the property and no one else is prepared to go near it, and let alone purchase it.⁴⁴ Þorvaldr Þiðrandason, who has been cut out by his brother from their joint *goðorð*, returns from his travels abroad and he manages to acquire land with potential for building works with cash, and builds a good farmstead in *Fljótsdæla saga*.⁴⁵ In *Bandamanna saga* Oddr Ófeigsson makes his home at Mel having put his ship in for the winter there in order to visit friends, and when they entreat him to settle down to live in the area, he purchases land there without hindrance.⁴⁶ Hrafnkell Freysgoði easily manages to purchase land, and not even with cash. When he is forced to move after his outlawry at the hands of Sámr Bjarnason, he relocates to Lokhilla, where he purchases on credit some extensive and wooded land. He buys it at a low price because the farm buildings are poor, but undeterred, he builds the farm up and soon prospers.⁴⁷ This is the only example I have found of someone making a

⁴² *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 106.

⁴³ *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 19-20.

⁴⁴ *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 66-7.

⁴⁵ *Fljótsdæla saga*, p. 233.

⁴⁶ H. Magerøy (ed.), *Bandamanna saga* (London and Oslo, 1981), p. 3.

⁴⁷ *Hrafnkels saga*, p. 77.

purchase on credit in the family sagas, which stands as a testament to Hrafnkell's reputation and authority, even in outlawry, and perhaps also as a testament to the saga author's wishful thinking. Maybe in his imagination credit purchases were a possibility in the earlier, golden age. Also, the author requires the credit strategy, or else his character would have no plausible means of acquiring any land. In these cases the representation is of an easy situation where, although a lasting bond with a particular area of land is desirable, no one is excluded from re-entering the property market should this bond have been broken, or even if no previous ties have existed at all.

There seems only to be one counter-example to this ease of buying and selling, and it is found in *Brandkrossa þáttr*. Helgi Ásbjarnarsonar sells his inherited property to his cousin and goes off raiding for a few years, but when he comes back, he finds it difficult to get a place: as the author writes, no one was keen to part with his land just for Helgi's sake ("...ek var engi þá fúss at rísa upp at sínu landi fyrir Helga").⁴⁸ This sharp comment hints that getting a suitable farm was extremely difficult. Eventually, with the help of Bersi inn spaki's cunning plan (as discussed above) he prevails and settles on a new farm. This underhand and convoluted approach stands in contrast to the ease with which others purchase property.

Apart from the *Brandkrossa þáttr* counter-example, the transactions described above are straight-forward. The saga author in each instance barely elaborates on the detail: the description of the purchase is matter-of-fact and is not

⁴⁸ *Brandkrossa þáttr*, p. 184.

intended to arouse curiosity or invite further speculation. On a few occasions, however, reasons are given as to why certain characters might want to move.

In the run-up to the court case at which his brother Gísli is to be tried for the murder of Þórgrímr goði, Þórkell Súrsson decides to buy land at Hvammr in order to be nearer to his brother-in-law Börkr inn digri, Gísli's enemy, in *Gísla saga*.⁴⁹ This relocation is highly suggestive, and is to be taken as another indication of the ever-growing distance between the two brothers. Þórkell's transferral of allegiance to Börkr's agenda is made explicit in their new geographical proximity. Similarly, Finnbogi rammi relocates to a more sympathetic environment by buying land at Borg to escape the pressure of his enemies in *Finnboga saga*.⁵⁰

Grímr inn litli, a promising youth in *Harðar saga*, attempts to leave his abode under very different pressures. When Signý Valbrandsdóttir, his foster-mother, marries Grímkell goði, he moves with her to their new farm. But when marital relations become fraught, Grímr ends up acting as a go-between, managing to cool tempers as a friend to both husband and wife. Because of his calming influence, he is persuaded on two occasions when he has expressed his intention to quit the household to stay with them, but on the third, Grímkell agrees that it is time to let him go. The saga author writes that Grímr buys land, but his father-in-law Högni puts up the money for this, whilst Grímkell provides the

⁴⁹ *Gísla saga*, p. 63.

⁵⁰ *Finnboga saga*, p. 298.

household equipment. The young man soon proves to be an excellent farmer.⁵¹

He encounters no problems with buying whatsoever.

In *Fljótsdæla saga* Þórdís todda experiences a different sort of pressure again. Known as a generous woman, she asks her husband to sell their land and move, because so many people come to their farm to avail themselves of her hospitality:

Ok er þau höfðu einn vetr ásamt verit, þá bað hun Helga selja land þetta, því at hun þóttist eigi halda mega risna sinni fyrir atkvæmdar sakir, - „ok vilda ek, at þú keyptir landit í Mjóvanesi, því at mér sýnist þá eigi jafnmjök í garðshliði.“⁵²

And when they had been together for a year, she asked Helgi to sell the land, because she thought that she could not keep up her generous hospitality because of all their visitors, - “and I want you to buy the land in Mjóvanes because I don’t think there’ll be as many folk on the doorstep there.”

Helgi does so, in the belief that fewer guests will be at the gate of their new farm, and their move is successful. This is reminiscent of the abundantly generous women with two halls discussed in chapter two, who through their open-handedness entertain anyone who arrives on their doorstep in need of hospitality. Þórdís is the only character in family saga narrative which I have found who wishes to relocate for this particular reason. Such are the unwritten and pressing rules of Icelandic hospitality that it can be assumed that this was the couple’s only option, although to a reader unfamiliar with renowned Icelandic hospitality the measure of relocating might seem rather extreme.

⁵¹ *Hárðar saga*, pp. 12-5.

⁵² *Fljótsdæla saga*, p. 240.

Others want to move for the desirability of a new location, as well as leaving behind the old district with its problems. Halli Sigurðarson in *Valla-Ljóts saga* achieves his aim of relocating to his ancestral lands very easily, although difficulties later arise with the other prominent men in the district.⁵³ When he attempts to explain to Guðmundr inn ríki why he wants to move out of the great chieftain's domain he emphasises the fact that his kinsmen have always lived in Svarfaðardalr ("Þat hafa búit göfgir frændr mínir..."), but it becomes apparent that he is mostly concerned with his increasing unpopularity under Guðmundr's wing, and the possibilities which would be available for an ambitious man like himself if were to make the move.⁵⁴

Ari Súrsson, Gísli's younger brother (fostered away from home when he was growing up) returns to Iceland, sells his ship and manages to buy land at Hamar in the district where his family lived, despite moving from Norway several years after Iceland was first settled.⁵⁵ These two examples are contradictory in themselves: if the bond with the land is so close that they attempt to move back to where their families originally had their farms in Iceland, it is strange that Halli and Ari have been parted from them in the first place. Having to buy back one's ancestral lands seems to carry with it no suggestion of inadequacy: inheriting property is not represented as being a more desirable method, and in the transactions examined in this section, there are no obstacles to buying back whatsoever.

⁵³ Jónas Kristjánsson (ed.), *Valla-Ljóts saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit IX (Reykjavík, 1956), pp. 238-40.

⁵⁴ *Valla-Ljóts saga*, p. 238.

⁵⁵ *Gísla saga*, p. 118.

5. Cash flow

There are a few examples in saga narrative in which land is sold in order to procure cash, or movable goods by characters who are represented as having a ‘cash flow crisis’. In *Laxdæla saga* Þórarinn Þórisson is in a position where he owns good lands, but not much livestock.⁵⁶ Ósvífr Helgason wants to buy land from him, and since he has the opposite problem, a deal is then struck. In *Fljótsdæla saga* Gróa Þiðrandadóttir (a widow recently arrived in Iceland, who had sold her lands in Norway to buy a ship) asks Droplaug Björgólfsdóttir, her sister, where she can get a homestead. Droplaug replies that she knows some people who are sitting on a good homestead with large household and little ready money who might be willing to part with their land, and this is precisely what happens.⁵⁷ Droplaug helps her out with provisions and livestock. The sisters are represented as capitalising on the cash flow crisis of others.

Ófeigr Skíðason suffers from the same predicament in *Bandamanna saga*, in that he owns a lot of land, but little money. Being a man of distinction and wisdom, however, he manages to make ends meet as well as keeping up a reputation as a generous host.⁵⁸ Clearly, being short of cash does not hamper him in his advancement too much, and he does not need to part with any of his extensive territory. Sighvatr, though, is not so clever with his money in *Hrafn's þáttur Guðrúnarsonar*. The farmer from Melar also encounters this problem that he owns good land, but spends all his cash until he is running too short.⁵⁹ He is

⁵⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 86.

⁵⁷ *Droplaugarsonar saga*, p. 237.

⁵⁸ *Bandamanna saga*, pp. 293-4.

⁵⁹ *Hrafn's þáttur Guðrúnarsonar*, pp. 319-21. See chapter three for their grazing problems.

forced into selling a strip of land for hay and grazing to Þórgrímr, their rich neighbour, and thus their troubles begin.

In *Gísla saga* the eponymous character is able to sell his land for cash payment, which makes the transaction much easier for him as an outlaw (“...hann selr landit Þorkatli Eiríkssyni ór Keldudal ok tók fyrir lausafé, þat er honum var mjök innan handar” - “... he sold the land to Þorkell Eiríksson from Keldudalr and took a cash payment for it which was much more convenient for him to handle”).⁶⁰ This is not the first time that Gísli has made this sort of arrangement. After they have set two farms alight and killed the occupants, Gísli and his companions have to sell their lands in Norway, buy a ship, and move to Iceland.⁶¹ A ship is obtained in a direct exchange when a Norwegian wants his payment in land because he cannot marry without it in *Njáls saga*. Flosi Þórðarson offers him land at Borgarhöfn in exchange for his vessel.⁶² Not only is the land market is represented as fluid, but there is a great deal of flexibility in the manner in which these transactions might be conducted.

6. Procedural Problems and Special Arrangements

I turn now to a few counter-examples to this description of trouble-free conveyancing, in which transactions either are deemed not to have been carried out legally, or take the form of highly personalised sales in which specific and sometimes unusual terms are made by individuals.

⁶⁰ *Gísla saga*, p. 66. It is only in redaction Y that it is made explicit that a cash payment is better for someone in Gísli's position. See note 3 on p. 66.

⁶¹ *Gísla saga*, pp. 12-3.

⁶² *Njáls saga*, p. 426.

Ljótr Ljótólfsson is accused of being in breach of the law in *Valla-Ljóts saga*. He performs a land division when snow is covering the boundary markers, and decides to take a line of sight in front of his witnesses:

Ljótr skipti löndum þeira bræðra; snær var falinn á landamerkin; hann skipti löndum ok tekr sjónhending í stein nökkurn, en ór steininum í ána ok ferr rétt svá fram ok nam staðar við ána ok skar þar upp torfu eða jarðcross ok mælti: „Svá kann ek at gera landaskipti.“⁶³

Ljótr was dividing the brothers' lands; snow had fallen and covered the boundary markers. He divided the lands and took a line of sight to a certain stone, and from the stone to a river and followed that line straight along and took his position from the river, and there he cut up some of the turf in a cross-shape and said: "This is how I perform the land division."

However, Halli Sigurðarson is not happy with the procedure. Alan Berger in his article on this subject discusses this particular episode.⁶⁴ At first glance, one suspects that the snow on the boundary markers might be the reason trouble and dispute arise from this land division: perhaps Halli is unhappy with simply taking a line of sight. But, as Berger points out, the snow is a "blind legal motif", since one does not *have* to postpone. If everyone is satisfied because they know the land well, then it can go ahead. If there is too much snow, then one marks the boundary, and then returns up to seven days later to check that it is correct. Ljótr was not legally bound to postpone the division on grounds of snow at all.⁶⁵ However, it is not stated that Ljótr divided the land inaccurately even though hampered by the wintry conditions: the contentious aspect is his division on a

⁶³ *Valla-Ljóts saga*, p. 241.

⁶⁴ A. Berger, "Lawyers in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas: Heroes, Villains, and Authors", *Saga Book XX* (1978-81) 70-9.

⁶⁵ Berger, "Lawyers in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas...", 78.

holy day, St Michael's. Interestingly, Berger cites a law in *Grágás* which gives an exemption to cut earth crosses and markers for boundaries on holy days:

Since no one in the saga gives any indication that Halli is bluffing or mistaken, and since the saga author could not have coincidentally invented a fictitious violation corresponding so closely to a specific exemption from the laws governing holidays, the saga author must have attributed to the newly-Christian saga age a law which lacked the exemption.⁶⁶

That aside, what is important is that in this representation of a boundary dispute, the atmosphere of legislation presents more opportunities for even more disputes to occur in a never-ending chain of cases, for it has become possible to litigate even though there has been no substantive infringement of rights where there has been a procedural short-coming.

A paradigm of this occurs in *Laxdæla saga* when Kjartan Ólafsson profits from a mistake made in the sale of land, and manages to deprive his one-time companion Bolli Bollason of his much-needed land.⁶⁷ Bolli and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir are keen to acquire more land near their current property, and so come to an arrangement with the present owner over the terms and conditions of the sale. However, the sale was not properly witnessed (“En því var kaupit eigi váttum bundit, at eigi váru menn svá margir hjá, at þat þætti vera lögfullt” - “But the sale was not properly tied up, because there were not enough men present for the deal to be considered legally binding”),⁶⁸ and so Kjartan uses this mistake to press home his advantage and purchase the land for himself. In these accounts, the pressure to conduct matters correctly is great. The accuracy with which these

⁶⁶ Berger, “Lawyers in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas...”, 77.

⁶⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 146-7.

⁶⁸ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 146.

proceedings are carried out is of the utmost concern, not because inaccurate practice creates injustice, but because litigious minds will pick over every detail in order to find any flaw which will work to their gain.

That is not to say that there were not also substantive problems raised by the division of land by way of legal means. A miscalculation on the part of Hrútr in *Laxdæla saga* costs his freedman dear.⁶⁹ Höskuldr Kollsson takes revenge through his son by killing the freedman whom Hrútr Herjólfsson has mistakenly let farm a portion of Höskuldr's land. Höskuldr Kollsson becomes annoyed that the freedman is doing so well under his nose, and demands that he pay him for the land which he states belongs to him. Concerned, the freedman consults Hrútr, who tells him to ignore Höskuldr, but he admits that he is not sure who owns that part of land. Höskuldr's son Þorleikr takes revenge for his father by killing the freedman and claims the land for himself and his father as well as all the riches he has earned ("en Þorleikr eignaði sér fé þat allt ok föður sínum, er lausinginn hafði grætt").⁷⁰ Hrútr consults legal experts, but they find in favour of Höskuldr and he has to abandon the case. Þorleikr then builds a boundary between the two men's properties.⁷¹

The next example, which also comes from *Laxdæla saga*, is a strange and unsuccessful attempt made to coerce Halldórr Ólafsson into selling his land.⁷² Þorsteinn Kuggason decides to make an offer to Halldórr for Hjarðarholt with the help of Þorkell Eyjólfsson. The former wants this land the most of all, and is hopeful that Halldórr will agree to sell since he is short on stock owing to the

⁶⁹ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 70.

⁷⁰ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 71.

⁷¹ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 70.

⁷² *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 218-221.

compensation payments he has been making to the Bollasynir. Although the meeting is at first amicable, Halldórr's guess as to their intentions is proved right when Þorsteinn and Þorkell ask to talk with him outside. At Halldórr's request, Beinir the slave accompanies them and sits with an axe held aloft above the strange encounter, which sees the two visitors sitting so close on either side of their host that they are almost sitting on his cloak. The beginning of the encounter seems to bode well for a sale, but Halldórr becomes evasive and is forced to show his hand: he is unwilling to sell. Þorsteinn takes this revelation badly, and gives him two choices: either to sell now and gain his friendship and support, or to be forced into selling his land immediately (presumably because he thinks Halldórr to be outnumbered). Halldórr leaps to his feet, tearing his brooch from his cloak in the process (they have moved so close to him that presumably they *have* sat on his cloak), and predicts that before he is forced into doing anything, a slave will bury an axe in his head. Þorkell seems not to have noticed the presence of Beinir behind him, and so issues another threat, declaring that by such words and actions Halldórr has forfeited his land without payment. Halldórr is compelled then to make another prophecy: that Þorsteinn will embrace the seaweed in Breiðafjörður (a prophecy which does come true) before he is forced to sell his land. The scene ends with Halldórr going back to his house and Þorkell urging restraint in the Holy Season. It transpires that Þorkell could not have noticed Beinir's presence, since he asks Þorkell why he was reluctant to press home the threat of violence.

This encounter is rather baffling. Whether Þorkell expected to be taken seriously when he declares that Halldórr has forfeited his lands by his behaviour is not made clear in the saga. Certainly, there are no laws in *Grágás* which suggest

that Þorsteinn could make such a claim; perhaps the declaration should be read as the clutching at straws of a man desperate to acquire his favoured, valuable lands. Furthermore, the fact that Halldórr pretends at first to be interested in a sale is an odd move on his part: there seems to be no tactical advantage to be gained from this strategy. It seems as if the saga author had in his mind a clear image of the situation (the two men sitting closer and closer to Þorsteinn so that eventually they sit on his cloak, and the slave behind with the axe held aloft) but unfortunately could not make the scene fit his narrative. At some point in his assimilation and interpretation of the material something has been lost which might have made secure the logic of the scene within the narrative.

In *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, strangely enough, the same, odd motif reappears. Þorkell trefill with his party of men visit Gunnarr Hlífarson in the middle of the night, in order to put pressure on him to give his daughter Þuríðr in marriage to Hersteinn Blund-Ketilsson, a man in his company.

Þorkell sagði: „Setjumsk vér niðr, því at vér eigum mart at tala við þik, Gunnarr.“ Þeir gera svá, setjusk niðr á tvær hendr honum ok svá nær, at þeir sátu á skikkjunni, er Gunnarr hafði yfi sér.⁷³

Þorkell said: “Let’s sit down here, so we can chat a bit more with you, Gunnarr.” They did just that, sitting down either side of him, and so close, that they were sitting on the edges of the cloak that Gunnarr had wrapped around himself.

Either this is a common folk-motif, which happens only to turn up in these two sagas, or, more likely, the author of *Hænsa-Þóris saga* has borrowed the idea from *Njáls saga* (which was a most popular saga if the number of manuscript

⁷³ *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, p. 29.

witnesses is a reliable indication). But the author of *Hænsa-Póris saga* has managed to adapt the idea which he has borrowed and employ it in a different context from that of the saga in which he found it.

Another bizarre and highly personalised transaction is encountered in *Harðar saga*. Torfi Valbrandsson and Grímkell goði are not on good terms, especially since Grímkell married Torfi's sister against his wishes. Eventually circumstances lead the two men to seek arbitration, and it is deemed that Torfi has to pay Grímkell compensation.⁷⁴ Grímkell is not happy with the small amount due to him, but states that his son Hörðr will have the money as an inheritance from his mother (who died whilst living temporarily with her brother). But Torfi replies that the son will only get the money if he turns out to be a better man than his father. There is a commotion at the outcome of the case, but the settlement is nominally kept.

After fifteen years abroad Hörðr Grímkelsson returns and asks for his money. Torfi recalls this old deal when Hörðr asks for it to be transferred to him.

Síðan... [Hörðr] hitti Torfa ok heimti fé sitt. Torfi kveðst eigi vita glöggst um fjárheimtur þær, - „því at ek er ekki skyldr til at gjalda þér féit, ef þú ert verrfeðrungr.“⁷⁵

Afterwards... [Hörðr] met Torfi and claimed his property. Torfi said that the claim was not all that clear-cut to him, “because I do not have to give you the property if you are a worse man than your father.”

⁷⁴ *Harðar saga*, pp. 27-8.

⁷⁵ *Harðar saga*, p. 53.

Despite the difficulties between the two interested parties, a property deal is struck. Torfi wants proof that Hörðr is a worthy man, and so he sets him up on a nearby farm in order to monitor his behaviour. Illugi inn rauði acts as a third party between uncle and nephew, who embark on a difficult relationship together following this manoeuvre.⁷⁶

In *Njáls saga*, an extraordinary deal is sought after, but not gained. Lýtingr from Sámstaðir wants Höskuldr Þráinsson to make a special arrangement with Njáll Þorgeirsson for him which would allow him to keep his farm.⁷⁷ However, all that Njáll Þorgeirsson advises Lýtingr to do is to move out of Sámstaðir and sell his land. It is clear from his advice that Njáll does not favour helping such a disreputable character.

7. Farm Swaps

The most highly personalised form of land transfer is the practice of farm-swapping, found especially in *Njáls saga*. First of all, Þórarinn Ragabróðir hands over Varmalœkr to Glúmr Óleifsson and Hallgerðr Höskuldsdóttir. He goes to Laugarnes to live and they own Engey jointly.⁷⁸ Glúmr offers to exchange farms with Þórarinn again, but he declines the offer.⁷⁹ However, Þórarinn does mention that if he were to outlive Glúmr, then he would move back to the property which he had formerly owned, and this is exactly what happens.⁸⁰ Later in the saga, when disputes are raging at their hottest, Flosi Þórðarson offers Höskuldr

⁷⁶ *Harðar saga*, p. 54.

⁷⁷ *Njáls saga*, pp. 253-4.

⁷⁸ *Njáls saga*, p. 45.

⁷⁹ *Njáls saga*, p. 47.

⁸⁰ *Njáls saga*, p. 52.

Þráinnsson the farm at Skaptafell instead of riding back west, and Þorgeirr, Flosi's brother, is to take over the farm at Ossaboær.⁸¹ Höskuldr declines the offer, though, to his misfortune. Also, *Njáls saga*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* all tell of the swapping of farms of Gúðrun Ósvífrsdóttir and Snorri goði,⁸² and, furthermore, so that no vengeance can be taken on him, Kári Sölmundarson arranges for Þorgeirr Þórisson to swap farms for Björn hvíti because he provided support to the chief avenger of the Burning. Björn is to have a fully-equipped farm near Þorgeirr so that no harm can easily come to him.⁸³

Why there should be so many instances in one saga of this practice and hardly any mention of it in other texts is difficult to understand (I have found only one other, different example, in *Landnámabók*). It is perhaps prudent, therefore, to consider whether it is a device that the author of *Njáls saga* particularly favours. In the case of the first swap Hallgerðr is only positioned at the farm for the duration of her marriage to Glúmr. The swap allows the saga author to divorce Hallgerðr from family, friends and past complications to start a new life with her new husband. However, the troublesome slave Þjóstólfr, a remnant from her past, comes between man and wife by killing Glúmr, and thus, it seems, because Þórarinn survives Hallgerðr's husband, the swap in farms is reversed. The distancing in space by the author focuses the attention on the over-crowded marriage: no other agents or circumstances can play a part in the misfortune that befalls Hallgerðr's second husband. Also, with the reversal of the swap, there are

⁸¹ *Njáls saga*, p. 279.

⁸² *Njáls saga*, p. 286; *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 169-70; *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 153.

⁸³ *Njáls saga*, pp. 436-7.

no historical inaccuracies to gloss over: the landscape and pattern of ownership remain unruffled by this glitch in her story.

In the case of the second swap, Höskuldr does not take the option of avoiding danger and death by accepting the opportunity which Flosi Þórðarson arranges for him. If one reads the offer as a narrative device, then two things emerge: Höskuldr is cast even more as a victim of the envy and malice of evil men - he could have changed his fate but is destined to suffer - and Flosi's characterisation as essentially a good man (who is forced by circumstances to play his role in the inevitable outcome of bitter feud and dispute) is given more weight.

The other two swaps in *Njáls saga* do not easily support readings which imply that the author uses the swapping of farms as a literary device. However, although the reasons for these swaps might not be apparent to the modern reader, there may have been contentious issues in the saga for his contemporary audience which he resolved by moving characters to different locations. And, of course, there is also always the possibility that the saga author does recount actual historical events. Importantly, though, the issue of farm swapping within *Njáls saga* makes the reader aware of the possibility that several aspects of an author's representation of land and landholding may be ways of simply propelling or facilitating his plot.

There seems only to be one other example of the 'straight swap', and this is found in *Landnámabók*. The strange character Illugi enn rauði appears to give his farm away to Músa-Bölverkr, and then goes to farm in Reykjadalr. But he

decides to move again by exchanging farms with Hólm-Starri. But they do not stop at the land alone:

Síðarst bjó Illugi at Hólmi iðra á Akranesi, því at hann keypti við Hólm-Starra bæði löndum ok konum ok fé öllu. Þá fekk Illugi Jórunnar, dóttur Þormóðar Þjóstarssonar af Álptanesi, en Sigríðr hengi sik í hofinu, því at hon vildi eigi mannakaupit.⁸⁴

Lastly Illugi lived at Outer-Hólmr at Akranes, because he exchanged both lands and wives and all his possessions with Hólm-Starri. At that time Illugi was married to Jórunn the daughter of Þormóðr Þjóstarsson from Álptanes, but Sigríðr hanged herself in the temple because she could not bear the new arrangement.

This story has several, confusing gaps. Firstly, there is no reason given as to why Bölverkr simply gives his first farm away: his generosity is commendable though scarcely credible. There is also no clue as to why he needs to move farm a third time by swapping with Hólm-Starri, and no clue as to why Hólm-Starri might find such an exchange desirable. Furthermore, why would both parties wish to swap absolutely everything, especially their wives? Sigríðr's tragic suicide is heartlessly caused by the wife-swap, and heartlessly related by the author who offers the scantest of description of the extraordinary events which lead to her death. The tale, bizarre enough in its content, baffles all the more from the lack of explanatory detail, and pushes the idea of a farm swap to its most ridiculous extent. There cannot be a more 'personalised' arrangement found in saga narrative or in *Landnámabók*.

⁸⁴ *Landnámabók*, pp. 78-80 (H and S).

8. Permission to Settle

In a few sagas the practice of buying land for someone else is encountered. In *Grettis saga*, Ásmundr hærulangr Þorgrímsson buys on Þorgils Máksson's behalf the land at Lækjamót where he lives:

Með Ásmundi óx upp sá maðr, er Þorgils hét; hann var kallaðr Þorgils Máksson; hann var náskyldr frændi Ásmundar. Þorgils var sterkr at afli ok græddi mikit fé með umsjá Ásmundar; keypti hann til handa Þorgils landit at Lækjamóti, ok bjó hann þar.⁸⁵

There was a man who grew up with Ásmundr called Þorgils Máksson; he was a close relative of Ásmundr. Þorgils was physically a strong man and he earned a great deal of money with the support of Ásmundr; he bought on Þorgils' behalf the land at Lækjamót, and Þorgils went to live there.

It is not made explicit by the saga author why Þorgils needs Ásmundr to buy the land for him. It is stated that under Ásmundr's guidance Þorgils made a good amount of money, so one supposes that it is not out of financial need that the purchase is made on his behalf. Either the saga author assumes that his audience would know the underlying reason why this type of sale would take place, or he himself does not know why it occurred and does not venture an explanation. The same is true in *Droplaugarsonar saga* when Ketill Þrymr buys for Ormarr Rögnvaldsson.⁸⁶ No background information is presented for the audience.

⁸⁵ *Grettis saga*, p. 88.

⁸⁶ *Droplaugarsonar saga*, p. 140.

In *Kormáks saga* Bersi Véleifsson purchases land for Þórveig from Steinsstaðir who is finding it difficult to settle in Miðfjörður owing to the opposition of Kormákr.⁸⁷ Because of the enmity between her sons and Kormákr (which results in their deaths, for which Kormákr refuses to compensate) the latter tells the sorceress that he is opposed to her living in the fjord and issues her with an ultimatum to leave the district. The reasons for the intense animosity between the two parties is clear, but the author does not enlighten the reader as to why Þórveig has to ask Bersi to purchase land for her, unless she is short of money now that her sons lie dead and uncompensated. Does Bersi's standing and reputation allow him to make purchases where others would fail?

In *Valla-Ljóts saga* a clue is offered as to why this type of sale occurs in family saga narrative. Halli Sigurðarson asks Þórir Vémundarson whether he knows of any land on the market. He does, and offers to buy it for Halli, even though he advises him against moving.⁸⁸ The saga author mentions that he did not ask for *byggðarleyfi*, which literally means "permission to dwell".⁸⁹ He does not mention from whom this permission should be sought, or indeed any other details about this permission. This implies that the land market was not open: people were not at liberty to live where they chose, and they were subject to a higher authority. It is strange that the author should mention *byggðarleyfi* if it does not impact on the plot: it suggests that this failure to attain permission might be significant later in the story, but it is a narrative *cul de sac*. However, further

⁸⁷ *Kormáks saga*, p. 225.

⁸⁸ *Valla-Ljóts saga*, p. 240. "Síðan fór hann á fund Þóris Vémundarsonar ok sagði honum sitt ærendi ok vildi land kaupa ok spyrr, hvarr hann veit land falt" - "Afterwards he went to meet Þórir Vémundarson and told him his plan and that he wanted to buy land and asked him whether he knew any land on the market."

⁸⁹ *Valla-Ljóts saga*, p. 240. "Ekki var byggðarleyfis beðit" - "Permission to settle was not asked for."

on in the saga, Guðmundr Eyjólfsson makes a similar offer to Halli to acquire new land: as Þórir Vémundarson does, he issues a warning, saying that he is happy to purchase land for Halli in order for him to get out of the dispute with Ljótr, but he will not help him if he remains in his present locale.⁹⁰ Halli declines the offer, expressing his intention of sticking it out. Once more details are lacking: do Guðmundr and Þórir stand to gain anything by offering to purchase land for Halli? It might very well be the case that one is meant to understand that it would be desirable for them to position certain allies in certain places. Where Halli lives could be decisive in future power struggles for chieftains and other men of influence and power.

Although Halli does not experience any difficulty despite not having asked permission, Hávarr Kleppsson in *Fóstbræðra saga* is not so fortunate. He first of all lives in Akranes but has to leave on account of some killings, and moves to Jökulskelda. But soon his son Þorgeirr and his sworn-brother Þormóðr Bersason begin to cause trouble in the district, leading people to complain to the wise man of the district, Vermundr Þorgrímsson. Vermundr calls the fathers of the two unruly young men and upbraids them:

⁹⁰ *Valla-Ljóts saga*, p. 243. “„...Vil ek nú ráða þér, at þú komir eigi út þangat; síðan mun ek kaupa þér hér land, en ábyrgjask þik eigi út þar“” - ““ 1 wish to advise you that you do not return there; afterwards I will buy you land here, but I will not answer for you out there.”” This recalls the entreaties of the Þjóstarssynir at the end of *Hrafnkels saga*: they attempt to persuade Sámr to move to their district because they cannot wage war on Hrafnkell from afar.

„Ertu, Hávarr, útansheraðsmaðr,“ segir hann, „ok hefir sezsk hér niðr at engis manni leyfi. Höfum vér ekki amazk við byggð þína hér til, en nú sýnisk mér standa af Þorgeiri, syni þínum, órði ok stormr. Viljum vér nú at þú færir bústað þinn ok byggð brott ór Ísafirði, en Bersa ok son hans munu vér af því eigi á brott reka, at þeir eru hér kynjaðir; væntum vér ok, at minni stormr standi af Þormóði, ef þeir Þorgeirr skiljask.“⁹¹

“You, Hávarr, “ he said, “are not from this district, “and you have settled down here without permission from anyone. Up until now we haven’t objected to your living here but now it seems that your son is involved in all sorts of wrangling and unrest. We want you to move your farm and your home out of Ísafjörður, but Bersi and his son will not be driven out, because they are from this area, and we hope and expect that Þormóður will be less troublesome if he and Þorgeirr part company.”

It would seem there is some sort of co-operative in operation, which vets prospective neighbours before allowing them to join the district. In *Svarfdæla saga* permission seems to have to be granted by the bully of the district, but the notion of community approval is absent. Successful settlement lies in the hands of Þórsteinn svörfuðr:

Um várit fór hann til Steindýra ok setti þar bú saman, ok hafði mjök skapazt um by[gg]ðir síðan, meðan hann hafði brottu verit; urðu flestir at leita til vináttu, þar sem váru aðrir hvárir, Þórsteinn eða Ljótólfr. Nú leitar Gríss þar til, sem Þórsteinn er, en hann tekr honum ekki fljótt, en sagði þó, ef Gríss kynni hóf sitt, at hann mundi ekki amast við byggð hans - „en þó er mér lítit um byggð frænda Ljótólfs þessum megin ár“ - -⁹²

⁹¹ Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson (eds), *Fóstbræðra saga*, Íslensk Fornrit VI (Reykjavík, 1943), pp. 125-6.

⁹² *Svarfdæla saga*, p. 153.

During the spring he [Gríss] went to Steindýrr and established his farm, and much had changed in the district since he had been away; most men had to look towards either of two men for friendship, Þorsteinn or Ljótólfr. Now Gríss approached Þorsteinn, who does not take to him first off, but he said, though, that if Gríss behaved sensibly, that he would not object to his living there - “though I am not so happy about the kinsmen of Ljótólfr settling down on this side of the river.” - - -

This seems more in keeping with a ‘might makes right’ approach, and the individualistic nature of the permission means that the whole process is less fair, and more subject to the whim of would-be tyrants. One can compare this with the balanced and sensible way of tackling the problem of a difficult neighbour in *Vatnsdæla saga*. When the troublesome Hrolleifr inn mikli, Sæmundr inn suðreyski’s nephew, turns up in Iceland with his mother demanding a farm, Sæmundr advises him to go to Unadalr, make friends with the settlers there, and ask for permission to stay there. Hrolleifr goes with bad grace, and succeeds in turning the whole district against him (“Bratt tóku menn at hatask í móti, ok þótti Sæmundr hafa sent þeim illt rekald.” - “Soon men begin to take against them, and they thought that Sæmundr had sent a rotten piece of driftwood in their direction.”).⁹³ When Hrolleifr becomes responsible for killings in the district, Sæmundr does the honourable thing and removes Hrolleifr from his estate, and looks for somewhere else to place him. In this instance the powerful and influential Sæmundr uses his authority to remove a troublemaker from the district in response to the pressure and disapproval of the community. Both incidents represent one man in command of the situation: Þorsteinn who acts independently

⁹³ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 50.

of the needs and wants of the community, and Sæmundr who respects the wishes of the district to which he sends Hrolleifr.

9. Suggestions of Tenancy

It is not clear in any of the examples above in which land is bought on another person's behalf if the land then belongs to the occupant or to the buyer. If the latter were the case, then the occupant could be said to be a tenant. Explicit mention of renting is made in *Fljótsdæla saga*, however. Ásbjörn vegghamar rents land to farm in order to support himself and his family, but he can only manage to do so for a year because the farming is so hard. He eventually decides, in a heartless move, to ask to be taken into Þrum-Ketill's service and abandon his family. He hopes that Ketill, being a powerful man, will dissuade his family from asking for help from him as his dependants.⁹⁴ Because of his desertion, the care of his family becomes the task of those from whom he was renting.

In *Gísla saga*, Börkr inn digri becomes angry with one of his tenants, Ingjaldr from Hergilsey, for helping his brother's murderer, Gísli Súrsson. He threatens him and states that his behaviour is not befitting that of a tenant of his.⁹⁵ It is clear from this statement that Börkr expects more than prompt payment of rent from his tenant. Ingjaldr is beholden to his landlord so that he must offer his allegiance and support in his own personal vengeance cases. This ties in with what was discussed above in relation to Halli Sigurðarson in *Valla-Ljóts saga*: it is potentially very useful for a man to be able to position his supporters and allies,

⁹⁴ *Fljótsdæla saga*, pp. 268-60.

⁹⁵ *Gísla saga*, p. 84. The incident is also recounted in *Gull-Þóris saga* but in this saga the fact that Ingjaldr is Börkr's tenant is not made explicit. See *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 198.

and rely on their help, and, in this case, punish them if they offer help to the other side.

In *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa* Kálfr illviti is leased some land by the eponymous hero, who, finding it difficult to run two farms after the acquisition of his father's farm, is happy for a while with this arrangement. Eventually, though, he has enough livestock to manage both. Björn and Kálfr do not see to eye to eye for a time, but when they enter into financial dealings together, they become better disposed toward each other. Kálfr buys some land for himself, and just after the move from Björn's leased property, Þórðr Kolbeinsson skáld, their new neighbour's son, convinces Kálfr's son Þorsteinn that their old landlord is scheming in an underhand fashion:

Þórðr mælti: „Viztu görla vinfengi hand til yðar? Mik minnir, at hann lýsti til fjár á hendr yðr í sumar á alþingi, ok mun svá ætla at gera á hendr yðr stelafé, at þér finnið eigi, fyrr en hann hefir sekðað yðr, ok mun þá ætla sér landit, þat er þið búið á, ok mun hann nýta at eiga land jafnt fyrir vestan heiði sem fyrir austan eða sunnan.“ Þorsteinn kvazk þat ekki spurt hafa.⁹⁶

Þórðr said: “Are you quite sure about his friendship towards you? I remember last summer at the Alþingi he publicly laid claim to the land in your custody, and he must be intending to charge you with theft so that you don't find out in advance, before he has you outlawed, and then he can have for himself the land that you are living on, and it will benefit him no end to have as much land west of the heath as he has to the east and south.” Þorsteinn said he had not heard about that.

⁹⁶ Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (eds), *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, Íslenzk Fornrit III (Reykjavík, 1938), p. 164.

The result is that Þorsteinn makes an unsuccessful attempt on Björn's life, which costs him his own. It is hard to understand what the malicious rumour means, since it appears to make no sense. Clearly it is serious and threatening enough to motivate Kálfr's son in his murder-attempt, but the claim that has been made about Björn's dealings is problematic. Despite the fact that his murder-attempt renders Þorsteinn Kálfsson outside the protection of the law, Björn still offers Kálfr compensation, saying that he feels beholden to Kálfr because they had once lived on his land and that they still have financial dealings with one another.⁹⁷ Here, it is almost as if the roles are reversed: one would have thought that the person who would have to do the apologising and back-tracking would be Kálfr.

These few examples of tenancy are the only explicit ones I have managed to find in family saga narrative. Obviously vagrants and dependent household members are encountered frequently (I shall explore the representation of landless people in the next and final chapter) but the representation of tenancy in the family sagas is meagre. Jesse Byock in his book *Medieval Iceland* contends that "[i]t is apparent that renting of land was a widely established practice by the late eleventh century, when the sources become more reliable."⁹⁸ Presumably when he states that the sources become more reliable, he is referring to the contemporary sagas, in which power structures and landownership are portrayed quite differently.⁹⁹ Jakob Benediktsson takes his usual common sense approach towards the issue of tenancy:

⁹⁷ *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, p. 167.

⁹⁸ Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, p. 99.

⁹⁹ There are different difficulties associated with separating fact and fiction, and historicity and fictionality in the contemporary sagas which there is not space enough to discuss here.

It is by no means certain that the free people who received land in the larger settlements were quite independent of the chieftains... tenancy of land cannot have been unknown to the settlers and it seems likely that they understood the economic advantage that could be derived from tenants.¹⁰⁰

He suggests that tenant farming could very well have existed from the earliest settlement period. The fact that it is not represented is highly suggestive. It is an omission of the greatest significance. Is it possible that, in the depiction of an earlier, heroic, golden age, the saga authors could not, or did not want to, imagine the possibility that in their new land and society, all Icelandic farmers were not free landowners? As Benediktsson writes further, “[i]t is possible that the old and somewhat romantic picture of the old Icelandic society as a community of free yeomen with formally equal rights needs a thorough revision: the facts may have been more complicated and the distinction between classes of chieftains, the heads of great families, on the one hand, and of small farmers and poor tenants on the other, may be older than usually accepted by earlier scholars”.¹⁰¹ I have demonstrated that, although one cannot determine what ‘actually’ happened, there is in the representation of landownership some suggestions and tantalising hints of tenancy and feudalism in the minds of at least a few of the authors of the family sagas. Such small clues are rare: this, as I have mentioned, could be suggestive in itself. Could there have been a conscious attempt on the part of the authors to disregard and thus mis-represent their ancestors’ feudal past?

¹⁰⁰ Jakob Benediktsson, “Some Problems in the History of the Settlement of Iceland”, in *The Vikings. Proceedings of the Symposium of the Faculty of Arts of Uppsala University, June 6-9, 1977* ed. T. Andersson and K. I. Sandred (Uppsala, 1978), p. 164.

¹⁰¹ Jakob Benediktsson, “Some Problems in the History of the Settlement of Iceland”, p. 165.

10. Farm Abandonment

In *Grágás* there are few laws which indicate that complete control over one's land was impossible: it would appear that there were other circumstances under which one could not do precisely what one wanted with one's land. Perhaps the most interesting of restrictions is the one which forbade landowners to let their land go to waste.¹⁰² If the land was going to ruin, the owner had to seek tenants if he himself could not maintain it. This suggests that land was scarce and difficult to obtain: in vast continents one can easily allow tracts of land to become barren, but this law shows land to be at a premium, particularly at the time at which the saga authors were writing: here the contemporary anxiety about a crowded land informs the account of an earlier period. Similarly, if one were lucky enough to own a section of woodland, one had to use the old trees in order to have the benefit of the new growth: older timber could not be allowed to rot and go to waste.¹⁰³ This law is charged with the anxiety of wastage.

In the sagas though, there are a few instances where land becomes abandoned for a short time through troublesome revenants, notably Hrappstaðr in *Laxdæla saga* and Þórhallstaðr in *Grettis saga*.¹⁰⁴ *Grágás* does not make provision for supernatural, extenuating circumstances.¹⁰⁵ In literary terms, the ghost's actions would have greater ramifications given the serious nature of the crime of dereliction according to the lawcodes. Curiously, though, when the author of *Laxdæla saga* introduces the character of Hrappr Sumarliðason, he says

¹⁰² *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), p. 92.

¹⁰³ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), pp. 111-12.

¹⁰⁴ *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 66-7; *Grettis saga*, p. 115.

¹⁰⁵ The New York State Supreme Court did grapple with this very issue in *Stambovsky v Ackley* 572 NYS 2d 672 (1991) (App Div) in a rescission of contract for sale of land on grounds of non-disclosure of the existence of poltergeists on the property. Because of their presence, the land, it was argued, could not be said to be vacant.

of his farmstead “þar er nú auðn” (“there it is now deserted”).¹⁰⁶ Although the site is derelict during the course of the saga, the use of “nú” might be construed as indicating the period of time in which the saga author was writing.

There are several examples in the sagas where the author pauses to note that where once a farm stood, there now lies only derelict land. In *Harðar saga* where Grímkell goði first lived is now a sheep pen (“...eru nú sauðahús”).¹⁰⁷ Similarly, a sheep pen now stands on the headland where the farm Hreiðarstaðir was once positioned in *Fljótsdæla saga*.¹⁰⁸ The farm given to Melkorka to get her out of her rival’s sight in *Laxdæla saga* is abandoned by the time the author is writing.¹⁰⁹ In *Droplaugarsonar saga* the place where Atli Þiðrandason lived (Atlavík) is now home to derelict sheep-pens, not even ones in use.¹¹⁰

However, it must be mentioned that various archaeological and other interdisciplinary studies have found startling levels of farm abandonment in the medieval period as well as the post-medieval.¹¹¹ Despite the disputes over land represented in saga narrative and the punishment facing those who let land go to ruin stipulated in *Grágás*, a variety of factors seemed to have forced people from their farms, and especially those which were at a relatively high altitude and/or were far inland.¹¹² In cases in which land is described as derelict, no explanation

¹⁰⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁷ *Harðar saga*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁸ *Fljótsdæla saga*, p. 252.

¹⁰⁹ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 28.

¹¹⁰ *Droplaugarsonar saga*, p. 140.

¹¹¹ Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, *Farm Abandonment in Medieval and Post-Medieval Iceland* (Oxford, 1992) p. 16.

¹¹² Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, *Farm Abandonment*, p. 17. See also Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 15 - “Sometime in the tenth century the basic settlement pattern was fully

is offered by the saga author as to why it lies empty. These hints of farm abandonment in the sagas provide yet more contradictory material against the notion that one could never be parted from one's ancestral, *landnám* farm. If one recalls the physical reality of available land in Iceland (a small strip of habitable land encircling a vast and dangerous centre) and the levels of farm abandonment in the medieval period discussed in the third chapter, then representations of struggles with the supernatural provide a neat fit where other narratives would be less satisfactory. The haunting of revenants is one way to explain why people with such strong links to the land would leave their properties: tales of hardship and poverty would be another. As will be detailed in the next chapter, the sagas rarely deal with the misfortunes of the poor and needy, but rather with the rise and fall of history's great figures who shape the development of Icelandic society. Hauntings may have provided a convenient way of covering up the less glorious aspects of that society.

Conclusion

I have compared this chapter, "Change", with the previous chapter, "Continuity", in which I explored the close bond between landowners and their properties represented in the sagas. This chapter has shown the opposite to be the case: the land market is represented as fluid, with many possibilities and different means of and reasons for conveyance. Close bonds with inherited land lead one to expect that land sales would be rare occurrences, yet such transactions are portrayed frequently. Furthermore, despite on one hand the closeness of the family to the

established. Farms were located in river valleys and in the lowlands along the coast and the few ill-advised attempts to settle at higher elevations were soon abandoned."

land, and on the other, the apparent ease of buying, selling and exchanging land, greed and feuding over land is still a key part of the representation of land and landownership in saga narrative.

However, despite these larger, generalized contradictions I have supported, there is yet much variation in conflict and conveyance between representations in individual sagas. This is especially true in the highly personalized arrangements and agreements for land sales, which are highly suggestive of fictionality in their uniqueness. In a few examples it is clear that the saga author is unsure of the procedure about which he is writing. In responding to his own uncertainties the saga author allows the reader to observe the difficulties he has with understanding the account he wishes to write. Such variability and contradiction destabilises the representation of land and landownership. What further destabilises the representation is the use of conveyance and ownership as narrative devices. Shared land becomes a symbol of the relations between the joint owners, and the practice of exchanging farms can be used by the saga author as a convenient aid to the plot. This chapter in particular has made important headway in categorising the different types of variability in the representation of land and landownership.

Chapter Six: THE LANDLESS

Introduction

The representation of landless people in saga literature is limited: as a social group they are marginalized. In medieval Icelandic texts the reasons behind vagrancy, the details of a vagrant's day to day existence, and the hardships of such a lifestyle are not offered for consideration by the reader.

For the most part, landless people are not named, and their physical characteristics are not described. Their genealogy is never detailed. Saga narratives are supported by, and indeed grow out of, the listing of ancestors and descendants (a linear construct which lends itself to plot propulsion and the connection of time past and time present). But these are the ancestors and descendants of landowners: vagrants do not have a place on this Icelandic time-line. They are mostly anonymous characters, with no recounted history and no textual future. Their shadows flit momentarily across the page.

In his book, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland*, William Ian Miller similarly asserts that what one might call the 'reality' of the experience of the economically destitute of medieval Iceland, is not recorded.

The lot of the lowly cotters, the poor and even middling farmers, are seldom worth the saga-writers' attention unless it immediately impinges on the problems of the wealthier people. The lives and struggles of the poor are for the most part lost to us. We are relegated to the law codes regulating poor relief, labor contracts, debt-slavery, tenancies, or treatment of beggars to try to get some sense of their condition.¹

Although wanderers, vagrants and beggars are ever present in saga narrative, their position is never centre-stage. Their narratives are not the pressing concern of the saga author. When they do appear in saga narrative, they largely serve fictional purposes: their actions, spontaneous or schemed, are devices which facilitate the propulsion of the plot. As nameless, shadowy entities which require no introduction or leave-taking they spread gossip, barter their information and cause trouble. As such they are ideal fictional devices. Throughout the course of this chapter I shall examine their usefulness as fictional devices, and question more thoroughly what particular aspects of the condition of vagrancy make landless people so suitable as go-betweens and performers of underhand deeds.

In the quotation above Miller goes on to suggest that one way in which one might gain a sense of that lost record of experience is to analyse non-literary textual documents. In this chapter I shall follow this suggestion. I intend to analyse the earliest lawcodes, *Grágás*, to explore what representation of vagrancy they offer to their reader. The sagas offer one picture of landless people, and the lawcodes another, as I mentioned in the introduction. Near the beginning of the chapter I shall look at a few examples from saga narrative where the stigmatisation of vagrancy emerges clearly from the text. Both the lawcodes and the sagas share in this stigmatisation of

¹ Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland*, p. 6.

vagrants: in both, landless people are associated with lawlessness, poverty of spirit and character, and evil. The underlying assumptions of both the sagas and the lawcodes are that vagrants are a destabilizing force on Icelandic society who are governed not by laws and by the societal norms, but who are participators in the destructive and anarchical and chaotic. If farmsteads and boundary enclosures represent an ordered, civilised society, then the landless people stand for a return to chaos and a world devoid of law and order.

According to Gurevich, the farmstead of the landowner served as a model of the universe. Inside home territory, within the homefield - *innangarðr* - represented in microcosm *Miðgarðr*, whereas *Útgarðr* was embodied as an Other space as *útangarðr* - inside or outside of the enclosure.

On this contrast turned the basic concepts of law (individual and collective use of land) and the main structural concept of the cosmos: the human world, the farmstead, the Christian world is a copy of, and finds its divine sanction in, *Ásgarðr*, the enclosure of the gods, the *Æsir*; but this human world is threatened on all sides by the dark, unknown world of terrors and dangers.²

For Gurevich, his formalist perspective characterises law and order as being inside, contained, protected, and lawlessness being positioned outside of this stability: it is a straight-forward dichotomy. But are vagrants represented as being outside? Or do they have their own, circumscribed space? According to *Grágás*, landless people were not permitted to wander over the whole country. In the additional laws section it states that householders were not to give board or food to vagrants who were not from one's commune.³ This, if it was ever a law in practice, must have effectively

² Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, pp. 45-7.

³ *Grágás*, (Staðarhólsbók), pp. 229-30.

restricted the movements of vagrants. If householders followed the letter of this law then the vagrants would have not received support from outside of the bounds of their own commune. By seemingly granting the landless their own territory, *Grágás* represents the striving of the law to limit the movements of those whose movements would otherwise be limitless.

This is also the case with outlaws: the simple dichotomy of inside/outside as a description of civilised space versus anarchic or chaotic space is somewhat misleading as a description of the area which they inhabited. According to *Grágás*, lesser outlaws were only protected within an arrowshot of their three nominated farms (“heimili” – “homes”) and the road to a ship bound for Norway and beyond.⁴ They had to remain within this space in order for their self-preservation: outside of this space they could be killed with impunity. This is a curious turning-inside-out of the notion of trespass which was explored in the third chapter. Men lose their right to the protection of the law if they step inside another’s boundary: incursion is trespass.⁵ But with outlaws, stepping outside of their own space represents forfeiture of their immunity. Lesser outlaws do have their own, circumscribed space in the lawcodes. It is a strange, Other world which offers neither total alienation from nor integration with society.

⁴ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 2 (1853), pp. 88-90. Obviously, too, any foreign space was the prescribed space of the lesser outlaw: see *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 2 (1853), p. 92-4. Full outlaws, however, could be killed with impunity anywhere, either in Iceland or abroad (“Ef þeir menn er her ero görvir scogar menn o ølir oc oferiande. Þa ero þeir iafnt dræpir oc o hægir erlendis sem her fyrir orvm löndum” - “Men who are here made full outlaws, and are not to be aided in any way or given passage, they may be killed with impunity and lose their immunity in foreign countries just as they are to their own countrymen in their own land” See *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 2 (1853), p. 96.

⁵ The *locus classicus* for the forfeiture of immunity by an outlaw who trespasses on another’s land is the case of Sigmundr Þorkelsson in *Víga-Glúms saga*. See *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 16.

Full outlaws, though, were not to be helped or given passage at all.⁶ In the lawcodes they are not granted any space. But the representation of full outlawry is quite different in the family sagas. Grettir Ásmundarson manages to find an Other world when he is declared a full outlaw throughout the whole of Iceland.⁷ *Grettis saga* is a good example of how saga authors treat the figure of the outlaw: although he can be killed with impunity anywhere in the country, Grettir explores his own space in the margin. He is able to engage with the supernatural world of revenants and giants because of his status as an inhabitant of liminal space. This means that he not only fights and wins against ghosts but is also able to help bridge the gap between the two worlds, for example when he names a valley for a half-giant, half-man.

Svá hefir Grettir sagt, at fyrir dalnum hafi ráðit blendingr, þurs einn, sá er Þórir hét, ok í hans trausti hafði Grettir þar verit; við hann kenndi Grettir dalinn ok kallaði Þórisdal. Dætr kvað hann Þóri eiga, ok hendi Grettir gaman at þeim, enda tóku þær því vel, því at þar var eigi margkvæmt.⁸

Grettir said that the valley was ruled by a half-man, half-giant, who was called Þórir, and Grettir was there under his protection; he claimed the valley for the giant and called it Þórisdalr. He said that Þórir had daughters, and Grettir took an interest in playing with them, for which they were very grateful, because there was not much of a crowd where they were.

Grettir gets bored in this idyllic world. He is truly himself only at the boundary in a sort of ‘contact zone’, a space known to those working in the field of post-colonial and travel literature. The contact zone is a social space “where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other”, and although this term more usually denotes “the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic

⁶ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 2 (1853), p. 96.

⁷ *Grettis saga*, p. 147.

⁸ *Grettis saga*, p. 200.

and historical disjunctures, and whose histories now intersect”,⁹ I feel that the term is useful in expressing the friction at the boundary between civilised and uncivilised. Grettir is here in the position of a mediator, acting on behalf of the uncivilised outsider in order that the latter might get recognition from civilised society. Grettir himself receives help in a fight from Hallmundr, a strangely strong man, who lives in a cave with his daughter, another outsider dwelling in the wilderness.¹⁰ His allies are not his kinsmen and supporters, with whom he might lodge (though at danger to his helpers, for example, just as Gísli does in *Gísli saga*: he stays with his wife in his own house, amongst others), but men and creatures in comparable circumstances: cave-dwelling, liminal figures who have no contact with civilized society. In this respect Grettir is himself a buffer zone, or no-man’s land: by going between the two worlds, he creates for himself the area in between both. Whoever passes him must be prepared to enter another realm. In the same way Grendel as *mearcstapa* inhabits the boundaries which divide the human from the (super)natural world, but also establishes those boundaries by virtue of his being there.¹¹ These human boundaries focus attention on the friction between different wildernesses - the home of the outlaw, the penitential hermit and the monster - and its antithesis, civilization.¹² One can now

⁹ See Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, pp. 4-7.

¹⁰ See pp. 175-7 for Grettir’s first encounter with Hallmundr, and pp. 183-5 for details of the fight and his stay with Hallmundr. In *Landnámabók* there is the curious tale of the eighteen cave dwellers, the Hellismenn, who are killed. It is not mentioned why these people have come to live in caves. See *Landnámabók*, p. 75 (S). They are mentioned earlier on in the text, but no further clues are given, except that Hrosskell Þorsteinsson gave land to the family from which the leaders of the Hellismenn came: see p. 83 (S and H). In a footnote in their translation, Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards say that they are “[a]pparently outlaws, who had taken refuge in some caves.” See Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, *Book of Settlements*, p. 30. They are also mentioned in *Harðar saga*, where they are only referred to as Hellismenn (they are only mentioned at all because Torfi, a major character in the saga, was present when they were killed). See *Harðar saga*, p. 132. Another notorious cave-dweller is Bárðr Snæfellsáss. During the course of his saga he becomes troll-like in nature, and a help to those in dire need, and takes to living in large caves. His status as an outsider in the world of ‘normal’ man is matched by his new abode. See *Bárðar saga*, p. 119.

¹¹ J. Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, (Cambridge, 1999), p. 74.

¹² Harrison, “Invisible Boundaries”, p. 85.

appreciate that the polarization of inside/outside is rather more complicated than at first it seemed.

So do vagrants share this liminal space with outlaws? I have already attempted to interpret a picture from the lawcodes to offer the reader: the vagrant can move around freely but only within the boundaries of his district: he has his own, circumscribed space. But how is this space represented in saga literature? From the following examples, in which I examine the usefulness of vagrants as a fictional device, I hope to show that vagrant space is not on the outside of society, or in a liminal zone between the civilized and uncivilized, but in the very interstices of society. However, although vagrants operate as go-betweens and their comings and goings are represented as woven into the social fabric, they still stand in direct opposition to landowning, stable community members in their dark association with the forces of chaos and evil.

1. A Bit of Fun

In *Hrafnkels saga*, Þorkell leppr Þjóstarsson presents a rather romanticised view of the errant, happy-go-lucky wanderer with nothing better to do. He tells Sámr Bjarnason and Þorbjörn from Hól that he is “einn einhleypingr” - “a vagrant”. Not many landless men could have boasted his appearance and clothing:

Sá var hár maðr ok ekki þrekligr, er fyrstr gekk, í
laufgrœnum kyrtli ok hafði búit sverð í hendi,
réttleitr maðr ok rauðlitaðr ok vel í yfirbragði,
ljósjarpr á hár ok mjök hærðr...¹³

¹³ *Hrafnkels saga*, p. 69.

The man at the head of the group was tall but not impressively built. He was dressed in a leaf-green kirtle and had an ornamented sword in his hand. He had a regular face with a ruddy complexion and had a noble demeanour. He had a fine head of light, chestnut-coloured hair...

Pórkell toys with Sámr and Þorbjörn when they first meet, and he keeps them guessing for as long as possible about the reality of his situation. But he eventually gives them an account of his recent movements: he has been in Byzantium for seven years where he was a retainer of the king of Greece (“Hefi ek verit utan sjau vetr ok farit í Miklagarð, en em handgenginn Garðskonunginum.”).¹⁴ Þorkell is clearly no destitute vagrant: the contrast between a poor landless person and a retainer of the Greek king could not be greater. His little joke about his social identity is a bit of fun which serves to highlight the lofty status of his enviable former position. Also, Þorkell’s joke has greater impact because Sámr Bjarnarson’s followers are actual vagrants. Hrafnkell Freysgoði does not rate Sámr’s claim against him because of his own impressive personal standing and company of men, and the fact that Sámr’s þingmenn are “einhleypingar” who have been dressed up, armed and fed. When Hrafnkell hears that Sámr has turned up at the þing, “[H]onum þótti þat hlægiligt.” - “he thought it laughable.”¹⁵ The comparison between the two companies, Hrafnkell’s body of men and Sámr’s meandering vagrants, highlights Sámr’s inferior position to the mighty priest of Freyr. Therefore the joke is, that Sámr is being helped by two sorts of vagrants: people with no land, and an arrogant dandy who thinks it is amusing to tease a man who can only get vagrants to be his followers. The representations of landless men in the sagas and the underlying assumptions and prejudices of *Grágás* are, however, no laughing matter.

¹⁴ *Hrafnkels saga*, p. 69.

¹⁵ *Hrafnkels saga*, pp. 67-8.

2. The Stigmatization of Vagrancy

In *Grágás* vagrants were subject to harsher penalties for the nature of their existence; the laws against their state portray them as the lowest on the social ladder. Even though in terms of wergild *Grágás* only makes a distinction between free(d) men and slaves, the lawcodes entertain many more social categories. These harsher penalties included the fact that they were not allowed personal compensation.¹⁶ The sagas represent vagrancy as a shameful existence in accordance with the prejudices about the underclass apparent in *Grágás*. Víga-Glúmr hangs up expensive wall-hangings and sits in his high-seat on his last day at Þverá, adamant that he will not be evicted like a lowly cottager (“Hann lætr tjalda skálann ok vill eigi svá skiljask við landit sem kotkarlar.”).¹⁷ One supposes that the simile refers to a lowly cottager who has lost his land and is soon to become a vagrant. The noble Víga-Glúmr does not want to experience the shame that a poor man who could no longer afford the rent on his land would have to suffer: he does not want to share in that humiliation. The association of being landless and destitute is something that he wishes to avoid at all costs. The proud ceremony goes some way to keeping the shame of his departure at bay, before he is reminded by the mother of his successor and enemy at the farm that he has lost his property and homestead.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), p. 225.

¹⁷ *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 46.

¹⁸ What I find particularly interesting about this episode is that no one dares to address Glúmr but the old woman. It is almost as if the male newcomers to Þverá are silenced by the shame of the departure: they recognise and respect the humiliation which their enemy is experiencing and cannot bring themselves to comment. Only a woman can voice her disapproval because she does not empathise in the loss of male self-esteem.

Grettir Ásmundarson denigrates a foe by suggesting that he is a vagrant. In *Grettis saga*, the eponymous hero provokes a battle between his men and Kormákr from Melar and his brother Þorgils by drawing a comparison between free-born men and vagrants. He says that, “at frjálsmannligra væri nú at högva sem stærst heldr en berjask með stöfum sem förumenn” - “it is better to fight like free men as nobly as possible rather than fight with sticks like vagrants”.¹⁹ This is clearly an insult aimed at a member of the enemy band, Oddr ómagaskáld, who attacked Grettir earlier at a horse fight with a goading stick. The suggestion of vagrancy and its associated shame is seen here to have currency in the language of slander.

The disgrace which Glúmr tries hard to evade and which Grettir uses to form an effective verbal attack is foisted upon an unwanted child in *Harðar saga*. As has already been discussed, Torfi Valbrandsson does not approve of the fact that his sister, Signý Valbrandsdóttir, was given to Grímkell Bjarnarson in marriage. However, the relationship between husband and wife cools somewhat over time, and Signý spends time away from Grímkell at Torfi’s farm. It is there that she gives birth to a daughter, but the mother does not survive childbirth. At first Torfi wants to expose the child, but after a kind-hearted servant ruins the execution of this scheme, Torfi then plans for vagrancy to wreak havoc on Grímkell’s reputation by giving Sigmundr, an itinerant man, the opportunity of fostering the little girl.²⁰ Sigmundr goes round the country with his wife and son, begging from house to house. This fostering is a massive insult and injurious to Grímkell’s honour. The vagrant

¹⁹ *Grettis saga*, p. 103.

²⁰ *Harðar saga*, p. 23.

Sigmundur visits Grímkell's farm with the little daughter, Þorbjörg, and reveals Torfi's underhand doings:

Grímkell mælti: „Heyrið, hvat göngumaðrinn segir; þú mundir vera barnfóstri þinn, allra stafkarla armastr; ok eigi er eins konar fjandskapr Torfa við mik; deyddi hann fyrst móðurina, en rak nú barnit á húsgang.“²¹

Grímkell said, “Listen to what the vagrant says; are you to be the fosterer of my child, the most wretched of all beggars?; Torfi's enmity against me comes in all shapes and sizes; first he kills the mother, and now he has driven the child into vagrancy.”

It is not only Grímkell that feels keenly the insult. The shame of vagrancy lives on for Þorbjörg - “„... Mun mér aldri sá harmr ór brjósti ganga, er ek hefi af fengit, er þau báru mik á húsgang.“” - “The shame which was brought upon me when they took me from house to house will never leave my breast.”²² It is represented as being a matter of grave humiliation for the woman. Because the shame will never leave her breast, one must infer that her former vagrancy is a serious cause for concern despite the fact that her begging from house to house was done against her will when she was an infant. She can hardly have been expected to remember the experience, therefore one must conclude that the very association is enough to trouble Þorbjörg in her adult life.

However, in the lawcodes there are rules surrounding the children of vagrants. They were refused dependent status and thus severely disadvantaged economically. As long as their parents travelled from house to house, they could not be cared for by other relatives. If for some reason they were able to settle in a lodging for a year after vagrancy, then it was lawful for children to be delivered into maintenance. It had to

²¹ *Harðar saga*, p. 24.

²² *Harðar saga*, p. 34.

be the case that both parents, though, were settled, or else the one who was vagrant still had responsibility (unless their situation was irredeemably bad). If the parents ever turned back to vagrancy, then their children became their responsibility once more.²³

For lawcodes so stringent in their tackling and penalising of vagrancy, the rules on dependants and inheritance strangely seem to do their best to perpetuate the existence of this underclass. In matters of inheritance, for example, if a vagrant had no kin, then the person with whom he was residing took over his inheritance if he died on his premises.²⁴ If a so-called perverse vagrant (one who had chosen to lead an indolent way of life by shirking work) did have kin and died on someone else's property outdoors, then the landowner was still entitled to the effects on the person of the vagrant.²⁵ If one was a vagrant through necessity and was given shelter through a sense of Christian duty and love (which implies that *only* those vagrants who were homeless through "necessity" ought to be shown Christian love), then the man who housed the vagrant was entitled to any property, and not the heirs.²⁶ The laws do not make it easy to escape the vicious circle of the landless existence. A man could not be a lawful heir if his parents went begging for food out of perversity. This would mean that a man in this situation who stood to inherit from another relative would be forced into landlessness himself by his parents' vagrant status.²⁷ Is it possible that behind the anxiety and shame of Þorbjörg's vagrant past there lurks the very real possibility that her past could create severe repercussions on her future status? Or is the stigmatisation of vagrancy enough to cause such anguish?

²³ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), p. 225.

²⁴ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), pp. 229-30.

²⁵ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), p. 230.

²⁶ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), p. 230.

²⁷ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), p. 224.

In *Bolla þáttr* Helgi from Skeiði attempts to charge Bolli Bollason with as much as possible in court. He pins on him a charge of vagrancy, because he has been away from home for over a fortnight and has, in that time, lived off other people. This is obviously a ridiculous charge to make against such a noble character as Bolli, as Helgi's wife does not mind pointing out to him. The saga author tells us that he sees no way out of the mess he has gotten himself into, and is more than a little cowed by the whole affair.²⁸ *Grágás* certainly does censure vagrants for the very travelling which forms their itinerant life-style. Fines were incurred by people who made “vaflonar förvm” (“pointless journeys”).²⁹ Thus it would appear that the lawcodes attempt to criminalise this class of people altogether by prohibiting the movements which they required to make to reap the benefit of various householders' generosity. But also, if the laws operated in the way in which the narrative of *Bolla þáttr* suggests, it would be hard to prove in a court of law that one's journeys from house to house did have a 'point'. Obviously Helgi is portrayed as taking the law to ridiculous extremes, but this episode does usefully point out the difficulties that the law banning pointless journeys in *Grágás* could have implemented in actuality. This example in from *Bolla þáttr* shows how hard the law would have been to enforce sensibly, and also how impatient and intolerant the lawcodes were towards the vagrant life-style.

3. Vagrants Put To Work

I shall now examine several examples from saga narrative in which vagrants go between farms and people, intent on passing on information or carrying out errands for others. As Miller says, “[p]eddlers and beggars are depicted wandering from farm

²⁸ Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Bolla þáttr Bollasonar*, Íslendinga Sögur IV (Reykjavík, 1946), pp. 255-6.

²⁹ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 3 (1855), p. 139.

to farm bearing both gossip and goods; they are uniformly painted as an unsavoury lot.”³⁰ In this analysis of the representation of the behaviour and actions of vagrants from family saga narrative, I shall diagnose the reasons why vagrants are useful to the saga author as fictional devices. I am seeking to determine the conditions of vagrancy which make vagabonds ideal tools for the saga author.

In *Víga-Glúms saga*, vagabonds run errands as part of the schemes of landed men: they are paid to do ‘dirty work’ in misleading others, for example, when Víga-Skúta makes an attempt on Glúmr Eyjólfsson’s life:

Eitt sumar kom einn einhleypingr á fund Skútu ok bað sér viðtöku. Hann spurði, hvat honum var á höndum. Hann lézk vera vígamaðr ok eiga óvært í sínum heruðum. Skúta segir: 'Eigi veit ek mér vanda á við þik, eða hvat viltu til vinna ásjá minnar?' Hann svarar: 'Til hvers mælir þú?' Skúta segir: 'Þú skalt fara sendiför til Víga-Glúms...'³¹

One summer a vagrant came to meet Skúta and asked if he would take him in. Skúta asked him what his story was. He said that he had killed a man and was not safe in his own district. Skúta said, “I am not aware that I am under any obligation to you, so what are you prepared to do to gain my support?” He said, “What do suggest?” Skúta said, “You shall run an errand for me to Víga-Glúmr...”

The errand that the vagabond runs is to lure Glúmr to a remote shieling so that Skúta can lie there in wait and ambush him. The false messenger carries out the deed, which pleases Skúta; he allows the vagrant to stay on his farmstead after that. This is a particularly interesting example of where the conditions of outlawry and vagrancy intersect. One had a duty to host vagrants from one’s own area, but one was penalised

³⁰ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 79.

³¹ *Víga-Glúms saga*, pp. 25-6.

for helping landless people from other parts of the country.³² This penalisation is reminiscent of the measures taken against those homeowners who aided and abetted outlaws by offering them food and lodgings. However, the sagas contain many examples of outlaws being helped by hospitable farmers. Gísli is one character who is supported for a great length of time by the generosity of others who appear to disregard the law without fear, and he is never refused shelter. As Frederic Amory contends, outlaws still had a place in the kinship structure of medieval Icelandic society, and they could rely on any friendships they had made before their outlawry to help sustain them.³³

However, what is interesting about the circumstances of this vagrant in particular is that he has no choice but to accept Skúta's offer. In terms of usefulness as a fictional device, this particular vagrant is ideal. No man of principle would deliberately lead someone to his probable doom by setting him up in an ambush. No man who had any common sense would want to risk the retribution which might fall on him and his family if Skúta's plot happened to be unsuccessful. But this vagrant is a man who has absolutely no choice. He has escaped from his district, and either as an outlaw or as a 'foreign' vagrant no farmer would be prepared to take him in. The saga author specifically mentions that he is an "einhleypingr" - a vagrant, and an outlaw. The reader does not know whether the killing which he committed brought about his vagrant status or if he was a vagrant before the deed took place. He has no ties, no family with him who could be punished for his involvement in such a malicious plot. As an added 'bonus', he has already killed a man, and thus might be expected to be able to play his part in the death of another. Another presumption

³² See *Grágás* (Staðarhólsbók), pp. 142-5.

³³ F. Amory, "The Medieval Icelandic Outlaw: life-style, saga, and legend", in *From Saga to Society*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield, 1992), p. 198.

might be made about the killing he has committed: if he had formerly been a landed man, he could have come under the judgement of the law in reparation for his crime, and perhaps sought to make *wergild* payment for his killing, and even seek a reconciliation with the dead man's family. This is presented to the reader time and again in family saga narrative as the proper and honourable way to behave following a killing. But the fact that this wanderer is “óvært í sínum heruðum” - “scarcely welcome in his own district” - sets alarm bells ringing. Either he has committed *morð*, a secret killing, and therefore not announced the death in the usual, formal manner which set the chain of events in motion which would eventually lead to court proceedings, or the family of the slain is enraged and/or violent enough to accept the vagrant's death as the only compensation that would satisfy them. Either way, this reason and the others listed above ensure that this vagrant is the perfect *desperado* for Skúta and the saga author to employ. It would have stretched the bounds of plausibility if a man any less constrained as this sorry vagrant had played the rôle of false messenger.

In *Ljósvetninga saga* a comparison between redactions A and C (the main texts used for editions and translations of the saga) is intriguing.³⁴ In version A a man called Þorsteinn Rindill, a man from the south of Iceland approaches Guðmundr inn ríki and asks him for lodging.³⁵ Guðmundr asks him from which district he comes, and he replies that he is from the south of Iceland. Guðmundr probes further:

Guðmundr mælti: „Hví er þér betra í ókunnri sveit en kunnigri?“ Hann kvezk vera sekr maðr.³⁶

³⁴ Both redactions A and C are fragmentary; however, C has been completed by consultation with a seventeenth century paper manuscript.

³⁵ The word “rindill” means “wren” in Icelandic. It seems that it is being used here as a nickname for a weak, small man.

³⁶ Björn Sigfússon (ed.), *Ljósvetninga saga*, Íslensk Fornrit X (Reykjavík, 1940), p. 42.

Guðmundr then said, “Why is it better for you to be in an unfamiliar district than in your more familiar one? He said that he was an outlaw.

Guðmundr’s question is, one could interpret, asked in an air of feigned naivety: he already knows, or half-guesses why the man is so far from home, but he inquires in order to make sure his surmise. Þorsteinn Rindill is therefore in a similar situation to the vagrant who approaches Víga-Skúta in the last example. For the same reasons as above the outlaw makes an ideal assassin. Once more it is significant that only someone who had no choice would be expected to run the risk of these underhand errands: that is why men from outside of the district who bear no relation to any other of the characters in a given saga and who cannot do anything except acquiesce in order to survive are not only put to work by powerful men, but are also ‘put to work’ by the saga author. As facilitators of plot outlawed vagrants from outside of the district are convenient devices.

In version C, though, the man and their meeting are described somewhat differently. At the end of the assembly, Guðmundr catches sight of a “worthless man”:

...þá sá hann, at maðr gekk í búðina ok bar inn bagga ok söðulreiði. Guðmundr leit við honum ok snýr at Vigfúsi Víga-Glúmssyni ok mælti: „Hefir þú nökkurn þann sét, at síðr sét, at síðr sé nökkurs verðr en þessi maðr?“ Vigfúss svarar: „Eigi veit ek þat þegar.“ Guðmundr mælti: „Eigi hefi ek sét þann mann, er betr sé fallinn til flugumanns en sjá.“³⁷

³⁷ *Ljósvetninga saga*, p. 44.

...then he saw a man going into the booth who was carrying a bag and saddle-gear. Guðmundr took a good look at him and turned to Vigfúss Víga-Glúmsson, saying, “Have you ever seen a more wretched-looking soul than that?” Vigfúss replied, “Not one that springs to mind immediately.” Guðmundr said, “I haven’t seen one who looks better suited to being a hired assassin.”

The depiction of the man with his saddle bag and gear suggests immediately that he leads an itinerant life-style. Combined with the fact that he is “wretched-looking” one suspects that the saga author is inferring that these are the only possessions he has in the world. Certainly no one with a fixed abode could so quickly and without preparation travel to another district. However, unlike version A, in which the vagrant leaves the assembly in Guðmundr’s company, the chieftain does not employ him straightaway. Instead he suggests that the vagrant come to the north of Iceland and seek work at different farms, but not take a job until he has met again with Guðmundr himself.³⁸ This is settled:

Ok er þeir kómu á Eyfirðinga leið, var þar kominn Rindill ok var allhjaldrjúgr við marga menn. Þá Guðmundr mælti: „Hverr er sá maðr, er nef hefir í eyra hverjum manni ok faltar sér misseravistir víða, en ræðr af enga?“ Hann svarar: „Ek heiti Þorbjörn, eða villtu taka við mér, Guðmundr?“ Hann kvezk þat gera, ef hann vildi, - „því at vér þurfu marga vega manna.“ Síðan fór hann þangat til Möðruvalla ok var þar um hríð.³⁹

³⁸ *Ljósvetninga saga*, p. 45.

³⁹ *Ljósvetninga saga*, p. 45.

And when they came to the autumn assembly in Eyjafjörðr, Rindill was there and was free and easy with his speech with many men. Then Guðmundr said, “Who is that man who has his nose in every man’s ear and is looking everywhere for a place without fixing on anywhere? He answers, “I’m called Þorbjörn; will you take me on, Guðmundr?” He said that he would if Þorbjörn wanted to. Then he went to Möðruvellir and was there for a while.

This incident is very strange indeed. Does the saga author expect the reader to believe that Guðmundr has forgotten about Þorbjörn? Or is this some sort of elaborate piece of theatre, staged and directed by the chieftain? But what purpose does it serve? It is not made clear why Guðmundr could not have hired him at the assembly, unless one is meant to assume that Guðmundr was following a law which prohibited him from helping out a vagrant at the assembly. Stiff penalties could be incurred for helping, and during the assembly time it was no different. It was not permitted to bring dependants (either one’s own or those of someone else) to the Alþingi to beg for food; the penalty for this was lesser outlawry.⁴⁰ No one was to give food to vagrants at the Alþingi, and if vagrants entered one’s booth, it was one’s duty to turn them out immediately.⁴¹ However, this incident also takes place at an assembly, albeit at the lower-key autumn gathering. It appears only to illumine the fact that Rindill is very loose-tongued and either that Guðmundr is extremely forgetful or extremely crafty. However, the reader is not given enough information to understand why this strategy is used by Guðmundr. There is something missing from the saga author’s account of the hiring of Rindill. Perhaps it would have made sense to the contemporary audience: maybe they would have read the scene at the autumn assembly as an

⁴⁰ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), pp. 13-4.

⁴¹ *Grágás* (Codex Regius), Heft 4 (1856), p. 14.

example of the chieftain's cunning, a masquerade which reveals the depths of Guðmundr's stratagems.

Guðmundr first of all gives Rindill a scythe and instructs him to mow, but then tells him that it does not look as if he is used to it, and asks him if he would prefer to work for him by sitting in the hot springs for a day instead. Once he has been there a few times, Guðmundr puts him to work as a spy and traitor in the farm of his enemy. The reader is not told whether Rindill was any good at mowing or not, which confirms the idea that Guðmundr has another purpose for him: even if he had been good, Guðmundr wants less honest work from him. It also confirms for the reader that vagrants are indolent, and would prefer to lounge around and bathe than turn in a day's toil.

So many details emerge from this incident in *Ljósvetninga saga*. The motif of the vagrant as being too talkative is a common one which shall be encountered several times in subsequent examples from saga narrative. One might ask why a talkative person should be put to work as a spy: surely a careful and discreet individual would be more appropriate? But Rindill's task is to wheedle his way into the farm of Guðmundr's enemy under the pretence of seeking shelter for the night, and so his 'gift of the gab' is suitable: his rôle is that of a confidence-trickster, not a silent observer. One imagines that this is why Rindill is sent to the hot springs: not only is Guðmundr softening him up in order that he might accept without qualms the dangerous task to which Guðmundr would put him, but also, he is getting valuable 'practice' in talking and listening at the hot springs which were (and are still) the *fora* for serious discussion and passing on of information between males. The whole episode creates a

vivid impression of Guðmundr's power and his scheming mind, and the use to which an idle, chattering, wretched-looking vagrant could be put.⁴² As with the last example, the representation of the characteristics and life-style of this vagrant - he is 'available' immediately, loose-tongued, lazy and capable of deception - make him Guðmundr's ideal spy in his murder plot.

In *Fóstbræðra saga* Þormóðr, when he is outlawed, is forced to live a hermit's existence in a cave. He eventually leaves it through sheer boredom, and comes across a man travelling:

Sá var mikill vexti ok ósinniligr, ljótr ok eigi góðr yfirbragðs. Hann hafði yfir sér verju saumaðs saman af mörgum tötum; hon var feljótt sem laki ok hött á upp með slikri gærð; hon var öll lúsug.⁴³

He was a big man with an unfriendly, ugly and unpleasant appearance. He was dressed in a cloak which was sown out of many tatty bits and pieces; it was as raggedy and crumpled as a sheep's third stomach and he had a hood on his head which was made in the same fashion; it was covered completely in lice.

The vagabond says that his name is Lúsa-Oddi and that he is bound to the district, and says that he mostly wanders about. Þormóðr says that he is a merchant, and that he wishes to trade cloaks with him if Oddi will tell his friends Skuf and Bjarni about the exchange. Under this new disguise, posing as the lousy vagrant, Þormóðr is able to advance on his enemy Þorkell Þórdísarson and kill him.⁴⁴ This motif of swapping clothes is a common one in saga narrative, and the exchange usually occurs between a master and a slave. This allows the more important man to avoid capture and death.

⁴² It is also important that Rindill, the Wren, looks as puny and helpless and miserable as possible, because Guðmundr's whole plan hinges on his enemy taking pity on the poor man when he seeks shelter from a bad storm. See *Ljósvetninga saga*, pp. 49-51.

⁴³ *Fóstbræðra saga*, p. 238.

⁴⁴ *Fóstbræðra saga*, pp. 238-41.

A good example of this occurs in *Gísli saga*: when Gísli wishes to escape from Börkr inn digri he swaps clothes with the cowardly slave Þórðr who is too stupid to realise that he is effectively sacrificing himself for his master.⁴⁵ Börkr's men give chase to the man who they believe to be Gísli on account of the fine blue cloak he is wearing, and a long spear-shot puts an end to their pursuit and Þórðr's life. In the case of the example from *Fóstbræðra saga* Lúsa-Oddi is not in any danger by swapping clothes, but he certainly does not seem to understand the significance of the exchange. For this to 'work', one has to have a gullible person with which to swap, and slaves and vagrants would perhaps have been seen by a saga audience to have fitted the bill easily. Also, peculiarly in this case, the saga 'hero' wishes to dress up as a lower personage, and not the other way around: most clothes-swapping incidents hinge around the desirability of pursuers mistakenly thinking a slave to be their quarry. With the case of Lúsa-Oddi, though, he is such a well-known and easily recognised personality (through his itinerant life-style and particularly foul appearance) that Þormóðr's disguise and appropriation of his persona is utterly convincing: the lousy coat is a sure signifier of Lúsa-Oddi. These features make Lúsa-Oddi the ideal person as whom to disguise oneself. Only such an easily identified and gullible vagrant could do.

Something of the gullibility of Lúsa-Oddi is also seen in another part of *Gísli saga*. A wanderer ("göngumaðr") called Hallbjörn, who travels throughout the country, though always in a group with about ten to twelve others, features in the strange episode which details the death of Þórkell at the hands of Vésteinn's sons.⁴⁶ Hallbjörn raises a booth for himself at the assembly as usual, and he is approached by two youths. They, saying that they are also vagrants, ask for a place in the booth, and

⁴⁵ *Gísli saga*, pp. 64-6.

⁴⁶ *Gísli saga*, p. 89.

the road-traveller replies that he would give shelter to anyone who asks it (“Hann kvezk veita búðarrúm hverjum þeim, er hann vill beitt hafa.”).⁴⁷ The two lads pump him for information from his vast acquired knowledge of chieftains and *goðorðsmenn*, and he happily obliges. Hallbjörn takes the two young men down to the shore and points out some important men and their ships, including Þorkell Súrsson. The elder one then later approaches Þorkell and kills him.⁴⁸ Men later deduce after the killing that these youths must be Vésteinn’s sons who have taken revenge for their father’s death. This is obviously very convenient for the saga author: who else but a vagrant would be able to point out all the men and know about all the chieftains so well in order to indicate them to two young men who had come from outside the district and who are too young to know what their father’s killer might look like? None but a vagrant would be such a good conduit of information. Hallbjörn as a vagrant is unattached to any man in particular, but knows about all of them through his yearly attendance at the assembly and his travels in between times. Asking any other man would arouse suspicion, but Hallbjörn divulges his precious knowledge easily and without thought for the consequences. Once more, the practical usefulness of the vagrant as a fictional device to the saga author is demonstrated clearly.

Disguise plays a part too in *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skúta* when Vémundr köggur pretends to be a vagrant in order to carry out an underhand scheme. Unlike Þormóðr in *Fóstrbræðra saga* he does not need to change places with a vagrant but simply assumes a different persona:

⁴⁷ *Gísla saga*, p. 89.

⁴⁸ *Gísla saga*, pp. 89-91.

En nú nefndisk Vémundr Björn ok kvazk vera reikunarmaðr einn ok sagðisk þar vildu bíða þings, ok beiddi hann bónda viðtöku þessa stund. Þórðr bóndi bað hann kaupí sér mat með sverðinu, því er hann hafði í hendi sinni.⁴⁹

And now Vémundr called himself Björn and said that he was a vagrant and said that he wanted to go to the assembly and asked the farmer if he would take him in for a while. Þórðr the farmer said that he would like him to earn his living with the sword that he had in his hand.

He states that he does not want to earn his living through the use of his sword, but instead he wishes to cut the grass. By posing as a beggar and involving himself in fieldwork he manages to hide himself under disguise well enough to wreak havoc in the affairs of the farmer by whom he has been employed temporarily.⁵⁰ The comment which Þórðr from Vöðlar makes about the sword in his hand is a curious, but ties in with the representation of hiring vagrants for malicious and violent ends which we have previously encountered in *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Ljósvetninga saga*. Here there is a conflation of two motifs, though: disguise as a vagrant, and hiring a vagrant. Both uphold the ideas from other episodes that vagrants have access to any farm and can slip around unnoticed, and that they are capable of underhand deeds. Þórðr has plans for his new employee, but the work which Vémundr plans is even more underhand and subtle: he involves the poor farmer in a dispute with his neighbour so that Vémundr can assign to himself Þórðr's case and land. This gives him the opportunity to prosecute his enemy on the farmer's behalf. His disguise as a vagrant is vital to the success of the plan.

⁴⁹ *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, p. 196.

⁵⁰ *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, pp. 196-7.

However, I turn now to an example where a vagrant offers no practical use to the employer or the saga author, but whose representation confirms that vagrants are indolent and weak of character. In *Grettis saga* after Grettir sees his mother for the last time, he travels north, and having spent time with his kinsmen he then reaches a place called Glaumbær. The author does not say what sort of place it is, and whether or not they stayed there. But when they have just left Glaumbær, they encounter a man:

Þaðan fóru þeir, ok er þeir komu skammt á veg, kom maðr til móts við þá, höfuðmikill, hár ok mjór ok illa klæddr. Hann heilsaði þeim, ok spurðu hvárir aðra af nafni. Þeir sögðu til sín, en hann nefndisk Þorbjörn; hann var einhleypr maðr ok nennti ekki at vinna ok skrumaði mikit ok var hent at honum gaman eða dáruskapr af sumum mönnum. Hann gerði sér við þá dælt ok sagði mart ofan ór heraði frá byggðarlagsmönnum... En með því, at þessi maðr var umfangsmikill ok inn mesti gárungr, átti hann kenningarnafn ok var kallaðr glaumr...⁵¹

They went from there and when they had gone only a short distance a man with a big head, tall and thin and poorly-clothed came up to them. He greeted them and each asked the other his name. They said who they were and he said his name was Þorbjörn; he was a vagrant and did not care to do any work and prattled a lot and for some people he was a great source of amusement and mockery. He behaved in a friendly and familiar manner to them and told them a lot about the people who lived in the district... And because this man was a boisterous fellow and a great buffoon, he had a nickname and was called Glaumr...”

One thing that Þorbjörn tells Grettir is that the men of Glaumbær are curious to learn if Grettir is as strong as he is impervious to the cold: they had seen him previously going about without his hood up in the bitter cold. Grettir looks towards the farm and

⁵¹ *Grettis saga*, pp. 224-5.

remarks that he is unlikely to be afraid of the two young men which he spies pulling on gloves and skulking around in the shelter between the cowshed and the midden.

Þorbjörn is employed by Grettir after he spends time convincing the group to take him on. Grettir takes him to Drangey in his exile with Illugi, and he turns out to be a thoroughly unreliable and lazy character.⁵² To look to *Grágás* for a moment, one can see that the lawcodes make a distinction between two types of vagrant: those who are compelled to adopt a shiftless existence through ill health or old age, and those who are without permanent abode through their own perversity.⁵³ Perverse vagrancy is defined in *Grágás* in the following manner:

Þat er omenzca ef maðr gengr með húsom fyrir
neNingar leysis sacir eða okosta anara þeirra er
goðir menn vilja fyrir þeim söcom eigi hafa þav.⁵⁴

It is perversity if a man or woman goes from house to house because of indolence or such other faults which make good men unwilling to have them.

Perverse vagrancy is considered in *Grágás* a personal fault. The definition suggests that for men who are willing to be so slovenly in their actions, vagrancy is an easy escape from their self-created problems. It seems to be driving at a refusal to labour, and condemning those who chose to live on the support of others when they could easily support themselves. This seems to be the character study of Þorbjörn drawn by the author of *Grettis saga*. Although he is highly amusing and entertaining, he does not care to work, even by his own admission; this does not stop him asking Grettir if

⁵² Glaumr is responsible for a series of disasters: by letting the fire go out, bringing the cursed log to burn and forgetting to pull up the ladder over the cliff, he hastens the party's downfall. See *Grettis saga*, p. 238, p. 251 and p. 255 respectively.

⁵³ The former type seems to have been tolerated and afforded more rights and control over their property: for example, a man compelled to turn vagrant through unfortunate circumstances had the right to personal compensation in legal cases like a man in settled lodgings. However, a panel had to come to a decision on the nature of a man's vagrancy first before he could proceed with a case for compensation. See *Grágás* (Staðarhólsbók), pp. 99-100.

⁵⁴ *Grágás* (Codex Regius) Heft 4 (1856), p. 28.

they are looking for someone to work for them. He has not got himself hired under false pretences unlike Vémundr in *Reykðæla saga*: Grettir knows what he has let himself in for by employing him.

But what is also strange about this episode is the correspondence in name of the character with the farm from which Grettir has just come. Is it mere coincidence that they meet Glaumr when they leave Glaumbær? It seems as if the saga author is attempting to make sense of some sketchy details of his narrative and cannot work out why the incident is significant. Is it also a coincidence that the farm Glaumbær is connected to the famous Þorfinnr Karlsefni, one of the explorers of Vínland? In *Grænlandinga saga* it states that Karlsefni's ship came into Skagafjörður. He stays in the area in the winter and then in the spring he buys the farm Glaumbær. When he dies, Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir takes over the running of the farm, and it is there that their son Snorri who was born in Vínland, lives afterwards. After a pilgrimage south Guðríður returns to Glaumbær and built a church there. She becomes a nun and then stays there for the remainder of her life.⁵⁵ The saga finishes with a genealogy which makes clear how important Snorri Þorfinnson's descendants are. His son is the ancestor of Brandr byskup and his daughter was the ancestor of Þorlákr byskup, two of the most important men in Iceland's history.⁵⁶ *Eiríks saga rauða* does not agree that Karlsefni lived at Glaumbær; it states that he returns to his home at Reynines (now Reynisstaður, which is not far from Glaumbær in the Skagafjörður district).⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Grænlandinga saga*, pp. 268-9.

⁵⁶ *Grænlandinga saga*, p. 269. *Eiríks saga rauða* concludes similarly: see *Eiríks saga rauða*, pp. 236-7.

⁵⁷ *Eiríks saga rauða*, pp. 236-7.

There is much to doubt about the veracity of both accounts, but whether or not Karlsefni did return to Iceland and live in Glaumbær is not as important as the fact that at around the time *Grænlendinga saga* was being written and/or copied in the manuscript version extant today, some people did think that Glaumbær had been his home, or at least had a reason why they should assert that this was the case. One might note with interest that it is still a common belief among Icelanders that Karlsefni did live there, and apparently Snorri is buried at the farm. Does this connection with the Vínland explorers and two great bishops of the Sturlung age explain why Glaumbær features in this strange episode? It is difficult to approach a satisfactory conclusion other than the fact that Glaumbær has been a farm of great significance at certain points in Iceland's history.

This episode is made curiouser still by the recounting at this point of Grettir's habits with his hood, and the young men of Glaumbær. It is not made clear why Grettir goes to Glaumbær, who exactly inhabits it, and what the point of the little narrative about the hood means. The episode does not hang together: one can perceive dimly that behind these fragments of a story lies a narrative to which the saga author could not quite journey in his imagination.

Skagafjörður is the scene for another hiring of a talkative vagrant. In *Víga-Glúms saga*, when Bárður Hallason is outlawed and has to leave the country, Halli enn hvíti Þorbjarnarson employs a vagrant to misinform the entire district of Skagafjörður:

Síðan kaupir Halli at einum einhleypingi at fara í Skagafjörð, eða vestr þaðan, ok segja, at Bárðr færi af því útan, ok treystisk eigi öðru fyrir þeim feðgum, en fara útan fyrir eitt orð: ‘ok engi þorir þeim í mót at gera í heraðinu.’ Hann gerði, sem Halli bað.⁵⁸

Afterwards Halli paid a certain vagrant to go around Skagafjörðr and further west from there and spread it around that Bárðr had gone abroad and that he would not have dared to do otherwise because of the father and son, and that he had gone abroad because of that one word: ‘and no one in the district would dare go against them.’ He did what Halli asked him to do.

In fact Bárðr does leave the country, but he only goes east for one winter, and then comes back to his farm in Iceland. The false rumour buys Bárðr some time and gives him the opportunity to go undetected for a while. The anonymity of a ‘certain vagrant’ ensures that Halli and Bárðr are not connected to this rumour. If they had employed anyone else to do this work, and especially someone from their retinue, suspicion would have been easily aroused. Because he is unattached, the vagrant is the ideal gossip, and everybody believes the rumour that has circulated. There is no mention of payment or employment or allegiance: only the expression of simple and uncomplicated compliance - “Hann gerði, sem Halli bað”. Such an expression conveys the idea that this was the sort of task which vagrants were ‘supposed’ to do, without questions, without payment, without being supplied with the reasoning behind it: they straight-forwardly could be relied upon to do what one wanted, this representation suggests.

⁵⁸ *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 30.

In *Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar saga* a wandering beggar called Grímkell comes to stay.⁵⁹ This vagrant, a man with a foul mouth, talks with Þorhaddr skal Hafljótsson a great deal, who persuades him to go round the west country and slander Þorsteinn Hallsson, saying that he is a woman every ninth night and that he has sex with men in that form (“at Þorsteinn væri kona ína níundu hverja nótt ok ætti þá viðskipti við karlmenn.”).⁶⁰ Grímkell complies, and soon the rumour reaches every household in the district. This is done for payment: the saga author says that Þorhaddr “kaupir at honum” - enters into a deal, or pays him for his services. Once more, the usefulness of a vagrant to the saga author is apparent. No landed man would dare to have on his lips the serious sexual slander of *níð*, for if one were found guilty of spreading such slander then one would face severe consequences either inside or outside of the law.⁶¹ A vagrant, though, could pass around this information without fear for his own life, because no one would care or think that a wandering beggar would have reason to slander a far more important man. Vagrants are the only safe and uncomplicated way for the saga author to have *níð* spread around the community: if anyone else did, lawsuits and/or murder attempts would have to ensue. Again it is to be noted that the vagrant has a foul mouth to begin with, and needs little encouragement to gossip and slander: it is ‘in their nature’, this representation implies.

In *Þórðar saga hreðu* a vagrant, having overheard a conversation at Miklabær about the movements of the eponymous character and his men, runs off to pass on the information to Özurr Arngrímsson, who thanks him for the useful information.⁶² He

⁵⁹ Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, Íslensk Fornrit XI (Reykjavík, 1950), p. 307.

⁶⁰ *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, p. 308.

⁶¹ *Grágás* (Staðarhólsbók), pp. 181-3.

⁶² *Þórðar saga hreðu*, pp. 208-9.

is not in the employ of Özurr: there is no payment mentioned or explanation offered for the vagrant's behaviour, except the assumption, as we have seen from other examples, that vagrants are loose-tongued and love to gossip. But that is not all: the vagrant stirs Özurr to action. When the latter asks sarcastically what the 'champion' Þórðr is up to, he replies „Víst máttu þat til segja, at hann sé kappi, svá sneypiliga sem þú hefir fyrir honum farit...” - “Well might you say that, that he's a champion, seeing the shame you've had to endure because of his actions...”. This whetting is reminiscent of the *griðkona*'s rousing speech to Hrafnkell when Eyvindr Bjarnason rides past on his return journey from abroad.⁶³ A member of Hrafnkell's household incites him to take vengeance on the brother of his enemy Sámr Bjarnason. In this case, it is perhaps not too much a stretch of the imagination that, as part of her master's company, she should share in the humiliation and the injury which Sámr caused to Hrafnkell's reputation. But in *Þórðar saga hreðu* this vagrant is not attached to Özurr's household. He is not represented as standing to gain anything from passing on the information which Özurr is pleased to hear and certainly is not portrayed as standing to gain anything from Þórðr's potential downfall. Without explicit motivations offered for his behaviour, the partial representation of the vagrant leads the reader to conclude that his actions spring from malicious *Schadenfreude*. By tapping in to the assumption that vagrants love to spread gossip of their own volition, the author of *Þórðar saga hreðu* finds that his go-between is even more useful to him: he does not need to give the wanderer any reason or prompter to go on his errand. As a roving, malicious free agent, he makes an invaluable fictional device because his actions do not require explanation.

⁶³ *Hrafnkels saga*, p. 81.

In *Grettis saga* there is curious mention of vagrants. When Grettir Ásmundarson, in his rebellious youth, is given the task of looking after some geese, he becomes annoyed with the goslings when trying to round them up. The saga author tells us that some vagrants who were passing through find the goslings dead outside: their wings have been broken (“Nökkuru síðar fundu förumenn kjúklinga dauða úti ok heimgæss vængbrotnar...”).⁶⁴ They are used here by the saga author as a convenient way to ensure that his father Ásmundr finds out about his son’s malicious act. Because they are wanderers ‘outside’, they discover the deed that Grettir has done ‘outside’ of the norms of societal obedience and humanity. But, interestingly, the saga author here seems to deem it a given that the vagrants would have informed Ásmundr of their discovery: the author does not need to tell the audience explicitly that the vagrants passed on the information, because they already understand that that is what vagrants ‘do’ - stir trouble unnecessarily.

In *Finnboga saga* the whereabouts of Þorkell Sigurðarson and his wife Þóra are made known by vagrants (“af hlaupandi mönnum”) to their enemies.⁶⁵ This intelligence prompts Jökull Ingimundarson gamla to make an attack, but fortunately for Þorkell, the attempt on his life is unsuccessful, and Jökull comes away from the encounter very badly wounded. As in the previous two examples, there is no motivation given for the passing on of this information, and no mention of payment. These representations cast vagrants as inherently malicious: they require no prompting in order to do others a disservice. Because of this they are invaluable to the saga author as a means of propelling the plot.

⁶⁴ *Grettis saga*, p. 37.

⁶⁵ *Finnboga saga*, pp. 307-8.

4. The Beggarwomen of *Njáls saga*

So far all of the examples discussed have involved male vagrants. I cannot think of many, if any, episodes involving female vagrants except in *Njáls saga*, in which the beggarwomen replace male vagrants in their function as go-betweens. Why is it that the author of *Njáls saga* chooses to portray only female vagrants?

Some beggarwomen journeying from Njáll's farm to Gunnarr's farm form my first example: they are described as being "málgar ok heldr orðillar" - "talkative and sharp-tongued".⁶⁶ Hallgerðr asks them for news and information about the inhabitants of Bergþórshváll. In the course of this discussion Hallgerðr makes insults about Njáll and his sons, and Sigmundr Lambason makes up some slanderous verses on the theme. The beggarwomen then decide to return to Bergþórshváll to tell the mistress of the house about the insults, in anticipation of a reward ("Farandkonur töluð sín í meðal, at þær myndi hafa laun at Bergþóru, ef þær segði henni orð þessi...").⁶⁷ The author adds that they told Bergþóra in secret, without any prompting from her or anyone else. This obviously is a fictional device. It would be difficult to see how the verses and nicknames would have become known in Njáll's family, if, as the author tells us, Gunnar (who overhears the insulting chatter) threatens the room with expulsion and violence if the tales are repeated. The beggarwomen are perfect, invisible go-betweens who help propel the action of the plot. How else would the verses become known outside of Hallgerðr's party?⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *Njáls saga*, p. 112.

⁶⁷ *Njáls saga*, p. 114.

⁶⁸ The penalty for composing such verses was full outlawry; the penalty for reciting them, full outlawry; and the penalty for spreading the verses with intent to mock the subject of the poetry was also full outlawry. See *Grágás* (Staðarhólsbók), pp. 183-5.

More beggarwomen spread gossip later in the saga. Þráinn Sigfússon and his companions help some beggarwomen over the Marká, who then go on to Bergþórshváll.⁶⁹ There they tell Bergþóra that the party had been insulting her family (“en þat þótti oss at, er þeir váru svá fjölorðir ok illorðir hingat til bónda þíns ok sona hans.” - “but it seemed to us that they were so mouthy and foul-mouthed toward your husband and your sons.”).⁷⁰ Bergþóra gives them good gifts, and they supply her with the extra information which she needs: that Þráinn and his companions will be returning home in four or five days’ time. These vagrant women allow Bergþóra to keep track of her sons’ enemies’ movements. They stir up trouble in order to gain economic benefit: they are represented as capitalising ruthlessly on the maliciousness of others. It is only because they are on the road and the fact that they are women that they are in the company of Þráinn and his companions long enough to be party to their private conversations. Male vagrants would not have required assistance across the river and thus pick up on the important information that Bergþóra would like to hear. But, of course, female vagrants are necessary as go-betweens when the most notoriously quarrelsome and difficult women of saga narrative, Hallgerðr and Bergþóra, are responsible for much of the violence and death in the earlier part of the saga. Malicious female characters require malicious female assistance.

Beggarwomen also provide Helgi and Grímr Njálsson with news which prompts them to return home before the Burning begins. Some beggarwomen arrive at Hólar where their children are being fostered. When they hear that all of Njáll’s

⁶⁹ *Njáls saga*, pp. 230-1.

⁷⁰ *Njáls saga*, p. 231.

enemies fully-armed and riding in the direction of their farm have been spotted by the beggarwomen, they decide to return to Bergþórshváll.⁷¹

Female vagrants are employed in a different and inventive way when Mörðr Valgarðsson uses beggarwomen to catch Hallgerðr out. Gossip is not so much involved here, but trade. When he suspects that Hallgerðr is behind the theft of cheese and the burning of Otkell's storehouse, Mörðr sends beggarwomen round the district to peddle small household wares in exchange for goods and compare these goods from the different farmsteads. At Hlíðarendi they are given the most wares: in fact, the women are given a whole cheese.⁷² Hallgerðr manages to incriminate herself in her ill-motivated generosity. The beggarwomen are used to ferret out the thief in under-cover work. Again, beggarwomen are not only useful fictional devices for the saga author to employ to ensure that 'things get found out', but their representation adds to the picture the author builds up throughout the saga of women exerting a destabilizing force of the efforts of rational, good men.

All of these beggarwomen are free-roaming instruments of malice, who though the desire to earn reward and cause trouble, spread gossip and rumour to ruinous effect. The information which they pass on is wholly necessary in the propulsion of plot. Without their anonymous and timely interventions, Grímr and Helgi would not know to return home before the Burning, and the Njálssynir would have found an attack on Þráinn impossible. Their consistent use by the author highlights not only his great skill in interweaving and repeating motifs and narrative

⁷¹ *Njáls saga*, pp. 323-4.

⁷² *Njáls saga*, pp. 125-6.

devices, but, because he only employs female vagrants, which is direct contrast to other saga authors who only represent male vagrants, we cannot help but draw some conclusions about this choice.

The circulation of gossip and slander committed by beggarwomen fits the overall pattern of whetting and desire for violence demonstrated by the female characters of *Njáls saga*. Where their husbands and relatives advocate peace and reconciliation and legal intervention, Hallgerðr, Bergþóra, Hildigunnr and Kormlöð, for example, incite men to violence and destruction. As Heather O'Donoghue writes, "[s]avage determination that wrongs must be avenged, that insults should never be forgotten and that lethal violence is the only proper response to threats to one's pride and honour are shown in *Njáls saga* to be women's work... it is the men who negotiate arbitration and settlement, who try to do things properly in a civilized way according to the new due processes of the law."⁷³ Therefore *all* women, be they free or slave or vagrant, are represented as a destabilizing force in the saga. All the vagrants are female, because all females are trouble-makers.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated, vagrants seem only to appear when some underhand work requires an anonymous and dispensable agent. Everything else about the life of a vagrant is omitted. For example, the reasons for vagrancy are given no textual space, even in the lawcodes. As has been noted, the implications of perverse vagrancy point to personal faults as the root cause of one's homelessness. But what of the vagrants

⁷³ H. O'Donoghue, "Women in *Njáls saga*" in *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. J. Hines and D. Slay (London, 1992), p. 89.

who must seek shelter and employment with others out of necessity? There are no narratives of starvation, of worsening land conditions and farm abandonment. When Hrafnkell Freysgoði is banished from his lands, he is not forced to beg for a living or sell wares from household to household. Instead, he buys a farm on credit and rapidly prospers. Saga narrative involves itself only in the fortunes of an *élite* group of farm owners, not the poorest and most marginalized of its nation's people.

The sad history of the landless population has no place in the grand narrative of the development of the Icelandic nation; vagrancy in the family sagas is an unexplained yet incontrovertible phenomenon. Unlike the exiles of Old English poetry whose voices are heard in elegiac laments, the position of the landless wanderer never finds expression in Old Icelandic literature. There is certainly a class distinction at work here: the voices in Old English elegy belong to a higher social rank than the Icelandic vagrants, but I am not convinced that this fact alone explains the silence. Although Old English poets often used the voice of the exile from human society to define more general human issues (such as the transitoriness of the present world compared to the lasting splendour of the next),⁷⁴ the outsider's misfortunes and luckless existence were depicted. The landless unfortunates of saga narrative are represented in harsher terms, and, unlike their landed counterparts, they share a homogeneous representation in the family sagas, albeit a critical one. If farmsteads and boundary enclosures represent an ordered, civilised society, then the landless people stand for a return to chaos and a world devoid of law and order. This perhaps explains in part the use of vagrants as false messengers who facilitate evil schemes, and also as circulators of gossip and social nuisance, such as Oddbjörg in *Víga-Glúms*

⁷⁴ Neville, *Representations of the Natural World*, p. 21.

saga, who in her travels round the district tells the fortunes of men, much to the dislike of Saldís when the old woman tells her what the future holds for the two foster-brothers in her care.⁷⁵ Vagrants are participants in atmospheres of lawlessness and deceit because of their dark, precarious existence outside the boundaries of other men's property. This representation offered in the family sagas tallies with the extreme prejudice and stigmatisation of landless people represented in the lawcodes. The saga authors could not have experienced many difficulties with imagining the plight of landless people, since they must have seen vagrants in their districts, travelling from door to door, therefore the lacuna in the representation must be a deliberate one. Perhaps, too, the Icelandic consciousness retained a dim memory of what it felt like to be landless on the voyage from Norway to Iceland in the days of Haraldr inn hárfagri. Does the representation of vagrancy in the sagas tap into the horror of that pre-settlement era, when men and women, separated from their ancestral lands in mainland Scandinavia, feared for their future and the possibility that they would never find another home? Did the necessity of finding land in a strange, new place cause this particular sensitivity to those poor people who were rootless? Did vagrants serve as a reminder of what they and their ancestors might have become? The Icelandic people could never take the settlement for granted.

⁷⁵ *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 21.

CONCLUSION

I have demonstrated that there is much to be gained from making a separate study of land and landownership. As I mentioned at the close of chapter one I believe that exploring this topic thoroughly in separate studies of individual sagas would be of enormous benefit to the field too. Although saga-style is remarkably uniform, there are possibilities afforded by the mode in which these texts are written for the saga author's own quirks and preoccupations to come across to the reader. By careful, concentrated study I believe the family sagas will yield more fascinating and intriguing problems in connection with Icelandic land and landownership.

Every chapter, except the last (which took a flip-side view of the rootless, landless people of saga narrative), has shown clearly that there is little homogeneity in the representation of land and landownership in the medieval Icelandic texts which I have studied. In the reconstruction of the Icelanders' relationship with the land there is scant consensus, from the variation in hallowing the boundaries and other, unique expressions of landownership witnessed in chapter three, to the contradictions between the fourth and fifth chapter which analysed continuity (and the close bonds developed with the land) and change (and the fluid land market) respectively.

I have explored the problem with the gap in time between the historical event and the textual event in saga narrative and in *Landnámabók* especially, and how the qualification and selection of the collective memory informs the production of medieval Icelandic texts. This was no more strongly highlighted than in chapter two, which focused on the stabilising effect on the later Icelandic imagination of founding

myths, and in particular those which legitimise land claims through divine sanctification. Chapter four also made obvious the familiarising and controlling consequence of the representation of the act of naming, and the power of place-names as symbolic markers of the continuity between the settler and the land, and the past and the present. And the omission of the histories of Iceland's less fortunate inhabitants revealed the qualification and selection of collective memory. This, as I discussed at the end of the final chapter, could be interpreted as a defence mechanism to keep at bay the unsettling thoughts and reminiscences of the unsettling migration from Norway.

But, most importantly, throughout the thesis I have sought continually to categorise the variability in the representation of land and landownership. In chapter one I noted that genuinely different experiences of the migration from Norway to Iceland were, of course, a possibility to take into consideration: not every fluctuation in the representation of landtaking and landownership is necessarily an indication of the lack of a secure tradition. Chapter five contained a number of instances in which saga authors had used land conveyance as a convenient narrative device. Some of the highly unusual and personal arrangements were clear indicators that the saga author was either struggling to make sense of the details of his narrative, or to contriving to propel his plot forward; distinguishing between the two was in some cases an impossibility. Vagrants, in the homogeneity of their one-dimensional representation, were seen to be used as narrative devices when landed characters required the work of an anonymous and dispensable agent. These are only a small number of the instances in which I have categorised the variability in the representation of land and landownership; many more permeate this thesis, as I trust I have shown throughout.

As well as making studies of individual sagas and their attitudes toward land and landownership, I believe that there is a great deal more work to be done in this area of research. This thesis has (of necessity, being the first of its kind) provided a survey and a starting point for others who may wish to investigate the topic further. This survey is by no means comprehensive. Archaeology will throw yet more light on the Icelandic settlement, and a true interdisciplinary study combining excavation results and saga narrative would contribute enormously to our understanding of land and landownership in Iceland. There are more sagas to be incorporated into this topic: comparisons between the *Íslendingasögur* and the *samtíðarsögur* would be an intriguing place to begin, and the inclusion of *fornaldarsögur*, which have been enjoying rather more critical attention of late, could enhance our perception of the medieval Icelandic spatial imagination. Furthermore, closer examination of the hints of tenancy needs to be undertaken in order to determine if a larger picture of Iceland's possible feudal past can be uncovered. But most crucially of all, there needs to be more written on *Landnámabók*. To me it seems incredible that this text, with its fascinating, terse little narratives, has not attracted more scholars to its captivating matrix of redactions. Jakob Benediktsson introduced the field to *Landnámabók* and more or less single-handedly sustained its research during his life, but I am certain that the great scholar who now lies in Víðimýri churchyard would have been the first to encourage more work to be done on this important text.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary texts

- M. J. Driscoll, ed., *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum: a Twelfth Century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1995.
- H. Magerøy, ed., *Bandamanna saga*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1981.
- Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds, *Bárðar saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1941.
- Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, eds, *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, Íslenzk Fornrit III. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1938.
- Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Bolla þáttir Bollasonar*, Íslendinga Sögur IV. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1946.
- Jón Jóhannesson, ed., *Brandkrossa þáttir*, Íslenzk Fornrit XI. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1950.
- Catullus, *The Complete Poems*, trans. G. Lee. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- R. Cleasby and Guðbrandr Vigfússon, eds, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, second edition W. Craigie. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957.
- Viðar Hreinsson, gen. ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, including 49 Tales*. Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997.
- Dicuili, *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*, ed. J. J. Tierney. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967.
- Jón Jóhannesson, ed., *Droplaugarsonar saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XI. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1950.
- Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Egils saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit II. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1933.
- Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds, *Eiríks saga rauða*, Íslenzk Fornrit IV. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1935.
- Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds, *Eyrbyggja saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit IV. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1935.
- L. Hollander and P. Schach, trans, *Eyrbyggja saga*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959.

Bjarni Einarsson, ed., *Fagrskinna – Nóregs Konunga Tal*, Íslenzk Fornrit XXIX. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1985.

Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., *Finnboga saga ramma*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIV. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1959.

E. Haugen, ed., *First Grammatical Treatise. The Earliest Germanic Phonology*, second edition. London: Longman, 1972.

Jón Jóhannesson, ed., *Fljótsdæla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XI. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1950.

Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds, *Flóamanna saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1941.

Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, eds, *Fóstbræðra saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit VI. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1943.

Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, eds, *Gísla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit VI. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1943.

V. Finsen, ed., *Grágás: Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*. Copenhagen: Brodrene Berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852-70.

V. Finsen, ed., *Grágás efter det Arnamagnænske Haandskrift nr. 334 fol. Staðarhólsbók*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1879.

A. Dennis, P. Foote and R. Perkins, trans, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás* (two volumes). Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980 and 2000.

Guðni Jónsson ed., *Grettis saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit VII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1936.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds, *Grænlandinga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit IV. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1935.

Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds, *Gull-Þóris saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1941.

Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIV. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1959.

Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning in Edda*, ed. A. Faulkes. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1988.

Snorri Sturluson, *Haralds saga hárfagra in Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit XXVI. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1961.

- Pórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds, *Harðar saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1941.
- Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, eds, *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, Íslenzk Fornrit VI. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1943.
- G. Storm, ed., *Historia Norwegiae*, from *Monumenta Historica Norvegiae*. Oslo: A. W. Brogger, 1880.
- E.V. Gordon, ed., *Hrafnkels saga, An Introduction to Old Norse*, revised edition A. R. Taylor. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.
- Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Hrafn's þáttur Guðrúnarsonar*, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1939.
- Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Hrómundar þáttur halta*, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1939.
- Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, eds, *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit III. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1938.
- G. Storm, ed., *Islandske Annaler indtil 1578*. Oslo: Grøndahl & Søn's Bogtrykkeri, 1888.
- Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, ed. Halldór Hermannsson, *Islandica* XX. Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 1930.
- Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók Ara Fróða A.M. 113a and 113b, fol.*, introduction Jón Jóhannesson. Reykjavík: University of Iceland, 1956.
- Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., *Kjalnesinga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIV. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1959.
- L. Holm-Olsen, ed., *Konungs Skuggsiá*. Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-Institutt, 1983.
- Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Kormáks saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1939.
- Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., *Króka-Refs saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIV. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1959.
- Jakob Benediktsson, ed., *Landnámabók*, Íslenzk Fornrit I (two volumes). Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1968.
- Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards, *The Book of Settlements. Landnámabók*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1972.
- Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdæla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit V. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1934.

Björn Sigfússon, ed., *Ljósvetninga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit X. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1940.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1954.

Pytheas of Massalia, *On the Ocean*, ed. C. H. Roseman. Chicago: Ares, 1994.

Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds, *Orms þátrr Stórólfssonar*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1941.

Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit XXVI. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1961.

Björn Sigfússon, ed., *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, Íslenzk Fornrit X. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1940.

Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., *Svarfdæla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit IX. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1956.

Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., *Valla-Ljóts saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit IX. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1956.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Vatnsdæla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1939.

Jón Jóhannesson, ed., *Vápnfirðinga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XI. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1950.

Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., *Víglundar saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIV. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1959.

G. Turville-Petre, ed., *Víga-Glúms saga*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960.

G. T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, reprint. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

Jón Jóhannesson, ed., *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, Íslenzk Fornrit XI. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1950.

Jón Jóhannesson, ed., *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, Íslenzk Fornrit XI. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1950.

Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds, *Þorsteins þátrr tjaldstæðings*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1941.

Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds, *Þorsteins þátrr uxafóts*, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1941.

Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Þorvalds þáttur viðförða*, Íslendinga Sögur VII. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1947.

Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., *Þórðar saga hreðu*, Íslensk Fornrit XIV. Reykjavík: Íslenska Fornritfélag, 1959.

Secondary

Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, "The Position of Freed Slaves in Medieval Iceland", *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research XXII* (London, 1986-9), 33-49.

P. Ainsworth and T. Scott, eds, *Regions and Landscapes: Reality and Imagination in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Oxford: P. Lang, 2000.

F. Amory, "The Medieval Icelandic Outlaw: Life-style, Saga, and Legend", in *From Saga to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock, 1992), pp. 189-203.

T. M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964.

T. Andersson and K. I. Sandred, eds, *The Vikings. Proceedings of the Symposium of the Faculty of Arts of Uppsala University, June 6-9, 1977*. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1978.

T. M. Andersson and W. I. Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989.

J. Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape*, revised edition. Chichester: Wiley Press, 1996.

M. M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Towards a Historical Poetics", from *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist; trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 84-258.

J. Barnes, *England, England*. London: Picador, 1999.

J. H. Barrett, ed., *Contact, Continuity and Collapse: The Norse Colonization of the North Atlantic*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2003.

Jakob Benediktsson, Review of *Studier I Landnámabók. Kritiska Bidrag till den Isländska Fristatens Historia*, Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research XIX* (London, 1974-77), 311-318.

Jakob Benediktsson, "Some Problems in the History of the Settlement of Iceland", in *The Vikings. Proceedings of the Symposium of the Faculty of Arts of Uppsala University, June 6-9, 1977*, ed. T. Andersson and K. I. Sandred (Uppsala, 1978), pp. 161-165.

Jakob Benediktsson, "Landnámabók: Some Remarks on its Value as a Historical Source", *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research XVII* (London, 1996), 275-292.

A. Berger, "Lawyers in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas: Heroes, Villains, and Authors", *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research XX* (1978-81), 70-9.

O. Bjarnason, V. Bjarnason, J. H. Edwards, S. Fridriksson, M. Magnusson, A. E. Mourant and D. Tills, "The Blood Group of Icelanders", *Annals of Human Genetics XXXVI* (London, 1973), 425-58.

B. Brogyanyi, ed., *Germanisches Altertum und Christliches Mittelalter*. Hamburg: Kovac, 2002.

J. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

J. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*. Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1993.

J. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001.

M. Clunies Ross, "The myth of Gefjon and Gylfi and its function in *Snorra Edda* and *Heimskringla*", *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi XCIII* (Lund, 1978), 149-65.

M. Clunies Ross, "Textual Territory: The Regional and Genealogical Dynamic of Medieval Icelandic Literary Production", in *New Medieval Literatures Vol. I*, ed. W. Scase, R. Copeland and D. Lawton (Oxford, 1997), pp. 9-30.

M. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. II: The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1998.

M. Clunies Ross, ed., *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

M. Clunies Ross, "'Saint' Ásólf", in *Germanisches Altertum und Christliches Mittelalter*, ed. B. Brogyanyi (Hamburg, 2002), pp. 29-49.

W. G. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson, *A Pilgrimage to the Saga Steads of Iceland*. Alveston: W. Holmes, 1899.

B. E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987.

- B. E. Crawford, ed., *Scandinavian Settlement in Northern Britain*. London: Leicester University Press, 1995.
- W. Davies and P. Fouracre, eds, *The Settlement of Dispute in Early Medieval Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- E. Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.
- E. P. Durrenberger, *The Dynamics of Medieval Iceland. Political Economy and Literature*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992.
- E. P. Durrenberger, "Production in Medieval Iceland", *Acta Archaeologica* LXI (Copenhagen, 1990), 14-21.
- I. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands*. Edinburgh: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Monograph Series I, 2001.
- W. W. Fitzhugh and E. I. Ward, eds, *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000.
- P. G. Foote and D. M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1970.
- J. Frenk, ed., *Spatial Change in English Literature*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2000.
- Adolf Friðriksson, *Sagas and Popular Antiquarianism in Icelandic Archaeology*. Aldershot: Avebury, 1994.
- Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson, "Creating a Past: A Historiography of the Settlement of Iceland", in *Contact, Continuity and Collapse: The Norse Colonization of the North Atlantic* ed. J. H. Barrett (Turnhout, 2003), 139-162.
- M. Gelling and A. Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names*. Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2003.
- B. E. Gelsinger, *Icelandic Enterprise: Commerce and Economy in the Middle Ages*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1981.
- R. Gray, "Travel", in *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*, ed. M. Kowalewski (Athens, 1992), pp. 33-50.
- D. Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.
- K. Grönvald, N. Oskarsson, S. J. Johnsen, H. B. Clausen, C. U. Hammer, G. Bond and E. Bard, "Ash Layers from Iceland in the Greenland GRIP Ice Core Correlated with Oceanic and Land Sediments", *Earth and Planetary Science Letters* CXXXV (Amsterdam, 1995), 149-155.

A. J. Gurevich, "Space and Time in the Weltmodell of the Old Scandinavian Peoples", *Mediæval Scandinavia* II (Odense, 1969), 42-53.

A. J. Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, trans. G. L. Campbell. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.

J. W. Harris, *Property and Justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

D. Harrison, "Invisible Boundaries and Places of Power: Notions of Liminality and Centrality in the Early Middle Ages", in *The Transformation of Frontiers from Late Antiquity to the Carolingians*, ed. W. Pohl, I. Wood and H. Reimitz (Leiden, 2001), pp. 83-93.

K. Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.

K. Hastrup, "Text and Context. Continuity and Change in Medieval Icelandic History as 'said' and 'laid down'", in *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages*, ed. E. Vestergaard (Odense, 1986), pp. 9-25.

K. Hastrup, "Tracing Tradition: An Anthropological Perspective on *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*", in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, ed. J. Lindow, L. Lonnröth and G. W. Weber (Odense, 1986), pp. 281-313.

K. Hastrup, *Island of Anthropology: Studies in Past and Present Iceland*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1990.

K. Hastrup, *A Place Apart: An Anthropological Study of the Icelandic World*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

A. Helgason, S. Sigurðardóttir, J. R. Gulcher, R. Ward, and K. Stefansson, "mtDNA and the Origin of the Icelanders: Deciphering Signals of Recent Population History", *American Journal of Human Genetics* LXVI (Baltimore, 2000), 999-1016.

Margrét Hermanns-Auðardóttir, "The Early Settlement of Iceland", *Norwegian Archaeological Review* XXIV, (Oslo, 1991), 1-33.

J. Hines and D. Slay, eds, *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992.

J. Hines, ed., *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: an Ethnographic Perspective*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997.

S. Hollis, "The Minster-in-Thamet Foundation Story", *Anglo-Saxon England* XXVII (Cambridge, 1998), 41-64.

D. Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England*. London: Leicester University Press, 1998.

- N. Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- T. N. Jackson and A. V. Podossinov, "Norway in Old Norse Literature: Some Considerations on the Specific Character of Scandinavian Spatial Orientation", *Skandinavistik* XXVII (Glückstadt, 1997), 85-97.
- G. Jones, "Some Characteristics of the Icelandic 'Hólmanga'", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* XXXII (Urbana, 1933), 204-24.
- G. Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- G. Jones, *A History of the Vikings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- R. M. Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.
- J. Kerrigan, "The Country of the Mind", *Times Literary Supplement* (London, 11 September 1998), 3-4.
- A. Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1975.
- A. Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*. Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1984.
- M. Kowalewski, *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992.
- R. Kroesen, "The Usurpation of Land in the Laxdœla Saga", *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* XXXIII (Amsterdam, 1991), 137-48.
- H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
- J. Lindow, L. Lonnröth and G. W. Weber, *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1986.
- J. Lindow, "Íslendingabók and Myth", *Scandinavian Studies* LXIX (Menasha, 1997), 454-464.
- D. Lowenthal and M. J. Bowden, eds, *Geographies of the Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- S. Mayer, "The Traveller as Topographer: Jonathan Raban's *Bad Land: An American Romance*", in *Spatial Change in English Literature*, ed. J. Frenk (Trier, 2000), pp. 173-83.
- D. W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

J. Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

H. O'Donoghue, "Women in *Njáls saga*", in *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. J. Hines and D. Slay (London, 1992).

H. O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age. Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, trans. A. Wawn. Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998.

M. Olsen, *Fanes and Farms of Ancient Norway*. Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1928.

G. R. Overing and M. Osborn, *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

E. Österberg, ed., *Mentalities and Other Realities: Essays in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian History*, trans. A. Crozier. Lund: Lund University Press, 1991.

R. I. Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings. Records, Memorials and Myths*. London: British Museum Press, 1995.

Gísli Pálsson, ed., *From Saga to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*. Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992.

Hermann Pálsson, "A Foundation Myth in *Landnámabók*", *Mediæval Scandinavia* XII, (Odense, 1988), 24-28.

N. F. Partner, "Making Up Lost Time: Writing on the Writing of History", *Speculum* LXI (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 9-117.

W. Pencak, *The Conflict of Law and Justice in the Icelandic Sagas*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995.

S. Pile and N. Thrift, *Mapping the Subject. Geographies of Cultural Transformation*. London: Routledge, 1995.

M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.

W. Pohl, I. Wood and H. Reimitz, eds, *The Transformation of Frontiers from Late Antiquity to the Carolingians*. Leiden: Brill, 2001.

P. Pulsiano, ed., *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*. London: Garland Publishing, 1993.

- Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, "Comments on 'The Settlement of Iceland'", *Norwegian Archaeological Review* X (Oslo, 1977), 65-68.
- E. Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, trans. S. M. Margeson and K. Williams. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992.
- R. Samson, ed., *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*. Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1991.
- L. F. Saugstad, "The Settlement of Iceland", *Norwegian Archaeological Review* X (Oslo, 1977), 60-5.
- B. Sawyer, *The Viking Age Rune-Stones: Custom and Commemoration in Early Medieval Scandinavia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- W. Sayers "Vínland, the Irish, 'Obvious Fictions and Apocrypha'", *Skandinavistik* XXIII (Glückstadt, 1993), 1-15.
- W. Sayers, "Management of the Celtic Fact in *Landnámabók*", *Scandinavian Studies* LXVI (Menasha, 1994), 129-53.
- K. Schier, "The rise of literature in *terra nova*", *Gripla* I (Reykjavík, 1975), 168-81.
- W. Scase, R. Copeland and D. Lawton, eds, *New Medieval Literatures Vol. I*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland. Historical and Literary Contacts. A Survey of Research*. Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands og Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 2000.
- Jón Víðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans. J. Lundskær-Nielsen. Odense: Odense University Press, 1999.
- R. Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973.
- J. Z. Smith, *To Take Place. Toward Theory in Ritual*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- K. P. Smith, "Landnám: the Settlement of Iceland in Archaeological and Historical Perspective", *World Archaeology* XXVI (London, 1995), 319-347.
- Stambovsky v Ackley 572 NYS 2d 672 (1991) (App Div)
- Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, *Farm Abandonment in Medieval and Post-Medieval Iceland: an Interdisciplinary Study*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1992.
- Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njáls saga*. Reykjavík: H. F. Leiftur, 1953.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, ed. and trans. P. Schach. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971.

P. M. Sørensen, *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature*, trans. J. Tucker. Odense: Odense University Press, 1993.

C. Y. Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994.

Y. Tuan "Geography, Phenomenology and the Study of Human Nature", *Canadian Geographer* XV (Toronto, 1971), 181-192.

Y. Tuan, "Geopietty: A Theme in Man's Attachment to Nature and Place" in *Geographies of the Mind*, ed. D. Lowenthal and M. J. Bowden (New York, 1976), pp. 11-31.

Y. Tuan "Thought and Landscape: The Eye and the Mind's Eye", in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D. W. Meinig (Oxford, 1979), pp. 81-102.

Y. Tuan "Geographical Theory: Questions from a Cultural Geographer" *Geographical Analysis* I (Columbus, 1983), 69-72.

T. Tulinus, "The Matter of the North: fiction and uncertain identities", in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. M. Clunies Ross (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 242-65.

D. E. Vasey, "Population Regulation, Ecology, and Political Economy in Pre-Industrial Iceland", *American Ethnologist* XXIII (Washington, D. C., 1996), 366-92.

Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power and Social Change 1000-1300*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Orri Vésteinsson "Patterns of Settlement in Iceland: A Study in Pre-history" *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* XXV (London, 1998), 1-29.

E. Vestergaard, ed., *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages: A Symposium*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1986.

F. T. Wainwright, *Archaeology and Place-Names and History. An Essay on Problems of Co-ordination*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.

A. Wawn and Þ. Sigurðardóttir, eds, *Approaches to Vinland*. Reykjavík: Oxbow Books, 2001.

P. Wormald, "Bede and the Conversion of England; the Charter Evidence", *Jarrow Lecture* XXVII (Jarrow, 1984), 1-32.

P. Wormald, "How do we know so much about Anglo-Saxon Deerhurst?", *Deerhurst Lecture* 1991 (Deerhurst, 1993), 1-28.

