

A Layered Landscape: How the Family Sagas Mapped Medieval Iceland

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The Icelandic Family Sagas – Old-Norse prose narratives written during the 1200s – inscribe in retrospect a process by which the unknown terrain of late ninth-century settlement Iceland is ‘mapped’ through association with human story. Space begs history: family sagas locate past deeds in a present landscape. At the most evident level, sagas explain how places received their names by reference to the people who had lived there. Another layer of meaning is created by the movement of stories and journeys over this named geography. Furthermore, the saga landscape thus constructed is shown to have continuing relevance: the sagas link past and present, with physical evidence of saga action still evident in thirteenth- or even twentieth-century Iceland. Yet family sagas do not claim that all responsibility for this construction of landscape lay with the early settlers. The land too is shown to have had agency, so choosing its people and history.

Iceland at the time of Norse settlement (c.870) was territory unmarked by human culture.¹ It was a space with no history, no myths, no stories attached to it – a land with no human meaning. The ‘family sagas’ written in thirteenth-century Iceland (the *Íslendingasögur*) describe the past in a way that fills an empty terrain with significance – or as Jürg Glauser puts it, they perform a ‘semiotization of the landscape’.² These Old-Norse prose narratives relate the process by which landscape was culturally constructed – and, in the process of telling, the *Íslendingasögur* are agents in this construction of Iceland. This essay takes as its starting point a notion that humans cannot understand their environment until it is cast in human terms. Space needs to be ‘mapped’, named, understood through (past) human interaction with it. Medieval Icelanders felt the need to place their mark, be it physical or conceptual, on the land.

In this paper I discuss three ways in which the family sagas inscribed cognitive maps over Iceland: firstly, sagas explain how places received their names through the people who lived and acted there; secondly, saga narratives traversing the named landscape act to imprint it further with human meaning; and finally, *Íslendingasögur* refer us to physical evidence of saga action in the landscape, asserting it can ‘still be seen today’. So convincing has this process been that people still look to find a medieval saga-landscape in modern Iceland, despite evidence in the *Íslendingasögur* themselves of change since the tenth century. However, family sagas do not claim that all responsibility for the construction of landscape lies with people and their actions. The land too is shown to have had agency, dictating choice of settlement and so effectively choosing its people and history.

¹ While *Íslendingabók* asserts that Irish hermits were discovered in Iceland by the first settlers, these are said to have soon left. Ari Thorgilsson, *The Book of the Icelanders (Íslendingabók)*, trans. Halldór Hermannsson; Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1930, p.60. Were Irish hermits really Iceland’s first occupants, or is this Thorgilsson’s invention? Even if these *papar* had ‘peopled’ Iceland first, there was no (acknowledged) continuity between any existing Irish traditions and those by which the Norse settlers defined Iceland.

² Glauser proposes this concept in an introductory paragraph to his article, but does not expand upon the idea. Glauser, ‘Sagas of the Icelanders (*Íslendinga Sögur*) and *Paettir* as the Literary Representation of a New Social Space’, in Margaret Clunies Ross (ed.), *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.209.

It has become widely accepted amongst social scientists that what humans perceive of as 'nature', 'environment', or 'landscape' is cultural construction rather than objective reality.³ Perhaps this is unsurprising, given that social sciences take culture as their primary focus. By contrast, environment-as-cultural-construct rather than objective physicality is by no means dogma amongst scientists and environmentalists.⁴ In this light, such contested terms require clarification.

Following Barry Cunliffe, I use 'landscape' to refer to cultural constructions of space.⁵ When first introduced into the English language in the seventeenth century, 'landscape' simply described a genre of painting.⁶ It continues to carry this connotation of consciously and artistically arranged scenery. More than either 'nature' or 'environment', landscape implies interpretation and cultural construction and I will use it as such.

I concur with David Lowenthal in understanding 'environment' to mean 'surroundings', hence clearly separating it from the usage which equates environment with 'nature'.⁷ The latter term I will avoid, due to its complex and contested associations. Much of the difficulty in referring to 'nature' relates to the binary oppositions it tends to invoke.⁸ The opposite of nature is seen to be 'culture' – that which is produced by humans. That may hold true for modern, Western societies, but from an anthropological point of view, division and opposition between nature and culture is not a universal of human perception.⁹

In addition to these terms, I adopt Cunliffe's distinction between 'space' and 'place'. 'Space' refers to the (possibly inaccessible) physical and objective reality of a location, while 'place', like landscape, is formed through human connection with particular terrain.¹⁰ As Georges Benko surmises, 'In its relationship with space, by the work of present and past generations, humankind creates places.'¹¹ As this essay concerns *perceptions* of environment, I do not look to find an objective reflection of 'space' in the *Íslendingasögur*, but to see how they reflected and/ or created a sense of 'place'. This analysis focuses on the cultural construction of Icelandic space.

Landscape is constructed in the *Íslendingasögur*, but I further assert that it is constructed in specifically human terms. The land was not felt to be understood until it was 'mapped'. Yi-fu Tuan suggests that a 'deeply ingrained habit of anthropomorphising nature follows from our prior and necessarily far deeper involvement with human beings.'¹² This is because '[w]e are dependent on other human beings for 'a concept of reality'.¹³ Tuan claims that, 'People the world over ... anthropomorphise the forces of nature. We cannot, in fact, feel strongly about any object, animate or inanimate, without endowing it with human attributes.'¹⁴ Whether or not this generalisation holds true for all societies, it does help to explain certain Icelandic perceptions evident in family sagas. While not always strictly anthropomorphised, space is given name and identity in the *Íslendingasögur* that link it firmly to past human action. These names are not merely tags though which to identify topography – they endow that which they name with human significance and history.

This translation of space in human place can be seen as a kind of 'mapping'. What we commonly understand as maps are *representations* of space. They do not reproduce space objectively,

³ This is asserted by Roy Ellen, 'Introduction', in Roy Ellen and Katsuyoshi Fukui (ed's), *Redefining Nature: Ecology, Culture and Domestication*, Oxford and Washington D.C., Berg, 1996, p.3; and Andreas Roepstorff and Nils Bubandt, 'General Introduction: The Critique of Culture and the Plurality of Nature', in Andreas Roepstorff, Nils Bubandt and Kalevi Kull (ed's), *Imagining Nature: Practices of Cosmology and Identity*, Aarhus, Denmark, Aarhus University Press, 2003, p.10.

⁴ Kate Flint and Howard Morphy, 'Introduction', in Kate Flint and Howard Morphy (ed's), *Culture, Landscape and the Environment: The Linacre Lectures 1997*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.13.

⁵ Barry Cunliffe, 'Landscapes with People', in Kate Flint and Howard Morphy (ed's), *Culture, Landscape and the Environment: The Linacre Lectures 1997*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.111.

⁶ Eric Hirsch, 'Landscape: Between Space and Place', in Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon (ed's), *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Time and Space*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, p.2.

⁷ Lowenthal, 'Environment as Heritage', in Kate Flint and Howard Morphy (ed's), *Culture, Landscape and the Environment: The Linacre Lectures 1997*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.197.

⁸ On this topic, see: Lowenthal, pp.203-205.

⁹ Flint and Morphy, 'Introduction', p.2.

¹⁰ Cunliffe, p.111.

¹¹ Georges Benko, 'Introduction', in Georges Benko and Ulf Strohmayer (ed's), *Space and Social Theory: Interpreting Modernity and Postmodernity*, Oxford and Malden, Blackwell, 1997, p.23.

¹² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1979, p.7.

¹³ Tuan, p.8.

¹⁴ Tuan, p.105.

for they cannot possibly represent everything on the ground but only signify that which is deemed important. Maps classify and generalise. They selectively translate physical landmarks into symbols. Further, it has been argued that, in order to mediate between map and encountered space, humans need to position their bodies (left, right, back, front, up and down) in order to connect space to what they see on paper.¹⁵ In a similar way, sagas represent space, selecting for 'translation' only that which authors discerned to be important, and they do so by locating past human bodies in the landscape.

From the nameless topography encountered during the initial settlement of Iceland (*landnám*),¹⁶ family sagas portray a gradual filling up of landscape with human meaning. Land that is initially anonymous and meaningless is named, either by association with the first land takers, or later by assuming the name of one who settled upon it. Human events are also memorialised in this developing 'landscape'. Space is mapped into humanised place in saga accounts through the medium of names.

A number of sagas begin with the emigration from Norway of settlers, illuminating thirteenth century perceptions of initial encounters with the Icelandic terrain. A saga-author typically enumerates nameless topographical features – headlands, mountains, rivers. The exploring Norse are then either made to name these features or leave their trace upon the land in such a way that it is christened by default. Topography might be named for its appearance:

Skallagrim explored the uplands of the district ... following the western bank of the river which he named Hvita [White river], because he ... had never seen water from a glacier before and thought it has a peculiar colour. They went up Hvita until they reached the river that flows from the mountains from the north. They named it Nordura [North river]¹⁷

Alternatively, landmarks receive evocative names. Onund bitterly dubs the Icelandic mountain overlooking his new home 'Coldback', contrasting it to the 'sunny meads' of Norway.¹⁸ Or Thorolf Moster-beard christens the mountain he settles near as 'Helgafell' – Holy Mountain. Whether it is inferred he saw holiness immanent in it, or he was thus instating it as a sacred space, Helgafell was considered holy from that point on.¹⁹ Finally, it seems that any explanation, however trivial, is better than unknowable topography: Kambness (comb peninsula) is explained as the headland upon which Unn the Deep-Minded lost her comb, and Dogurdarness (breakfast peninsula) is where her party had their morning meal.²⁰ Such homely events tame a hostile terrain, rendering it on a human scale. Additionally, saga linkage to semi-legendary ancestral figures like Unn connected present with past with concrete immediacy. Ancestral settlers seem very close in the landscape, their names and memory imprinted on physicality. Margaret Clunies Ross suggests that saga-compilers were influenced by the wishes of wealthy and influential Icelanders, who desired 'that the textual record of life in early Iceland promoted their personal importance, through their connections to famous ancestors, and, through that, authorized their traditionally sanctioned status in specific regions of the country.'²¹ Saga authors, sponsored in all likelihood by those who traced their lineage from such ancestors and land-claims, could thus act to increase their sponsor's prestige or political claims by highlighting (or even inventing) certain *landnám* events.

From the naming of landmarks, family sagas go on to portion land into humanly-defined units. Sagas habitually explain the names of existing farm-steads through those who are said to have

¹⁵ This mediation of the body in understanding maps first appears to have been articulated by Kant in 1770. Sabine Brauckmann, 'The Horizontal Architecture, or How We Locate Ourselves inside Nature', in Andreas Roepstorff, Nils Bubandt and Kalevi Kull (ed.'s), *Imagining Nature: Practices of Cosmology and Identity*, Aarhus, Denmark, Aarhus University Press, 2003, p.293.

¹⁶ The Icelandic term literally means 'land-taking'. Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, London, Penguin, 2001, p.9.

¹⁷ 'Egil's Saga', R. Kelllogg (ed.), *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2001, p.48.

¹⁸ *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, trans. Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris, London, George Prior Publishers, 1980, p.17.

¹⁹ 'The Saga of the People of Eyri', in Vidar Hreinsson (ed.), *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales*, Reykjavik, Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, vol.5, 1997, p.134.

²⁰ *Laxdaela Saga*, trans. Magnus Magnússon and Hermann Pálsson, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969, p.53.

²¹ Clunies Ross, 'Textual Territory: The Regional and Genealogical Dynamic of Medieval Icelandic Literary Production', *New Medieval Literatures*, vol.1, 1997, pp.28-29.

originally settled there centuries ago. So: ‘Thorhall, nicknamed Knapp lived at Knappsstadir’,²² Sökkolf was granted Sökkolfsdale, Hundi farmed Hundadale, and Vifil – Vifilsdale.²³ Odd the Hermit lived at Einbuabrekkur (Hermit’s slopes), and the tongue of land that Gris farmed is named ‘Grisartunga’.²⁴ The names of such minor characters often appear rather contrived. It has been suggested that *Landnámabók*, the twelfth century text which catalogues the settlement of Iceland by naming emigrants and their farms seemingly exhaustively, may well have invented many settlers, simply making up characters to match existing farmstead names and thus filling in the gaps.²⁵ The same process appears to have been applied by saga authors. In *Hen-Thorir*, we are told that the boy ‘Helgi went home with Thorir, and from that day on his [i.e. Thorir’s] farm has been known as Helgavatn.’²⁶ Yet Helgi was never to inherit or farm the land which is said to bear his name - Helgi dies while yet a boy, and his foster-father Hen-Thorir does not last much longer. The farm as it was known in the 1200s was almost certainly named after somebody called ‘Helgi’, but is it likely that it bore the name of one who was so briefly and inconsequentially upon it centuries ago? The saga character ‘Helgi’ may not have even existed, but was called into being to connect an existing farmstead with the saga. Anchored in a specific locality, the tale becomes more concrete, and the location itself becomes imprinted with meaning from the past. The saga asserts continuity between the farmsteads of centuries past and those of the thirteenth century. While there are a number of direct assertions of farmstead continuity in other sagas – for example, Unn’s farm in *Laxdaela Saga* has been ‘known as Hvamn ever since’²⁷ – more tellingly, the message implicit in most naming of farmsteads is that settlement era farm-names or sites are to be understood as identical with those of the thirteenth century unless otherwise specified. It seems integral to the saga-authors’ creation of enduring meaning in the landscape to assert that, once marked with human presence, this domestication of the land endures. Yet there are frequent hints that thirteenth century people knew that this was not necessarily so. Sagas refer to farmsteads changing names as they changed owners. Helgavatn itself is one such example – it is inferred that it had another name before it was named for Helgi, although what that identity was we are not told. Similarly Hrafinkel buys a farm named Lokhilla, ‘which has ever since been called Hrafinkelsstadir’.²⁸ Or the farm Hoskuld inherits becomes known henceforth as ‘Hoskuldstead’.²⁹ Against this nagging evidence of impermanence, sagas stubbornly assert stability of meaning in the landscape.

Beyond simply giving their names to the land they farmed, saga characters’ actions are also used to explain land-names. Associating story with landscape added another layer of human meaning onto the landscape for thirteenth century Icelanders. *Njal’s saga* shows how a saga could imprint terrain with an unforgettable human dimension. It vividly describes the climax of a battle starring Gunnar of Hlidarend:

Thorgeir Otkelsson was now almost on him with his sword raised; Gunnar whirled on him in fury and drove the halberd right through him, hoisted him high in the air, and hurled him out into the river. The body drifted down to the ford, where it caught against a boulder; this place has been known as Thorgeirs Ford ever since.³⁰

The river, its bank, the boulder, and the ford are no longer mere topography. The name, Thorgeirs Ford, provides a concrete link for contemporary saga-readers between story-action and physical

²² ‘The Tale of Thorhall Knapp’, in Vidar Hreinsson (ed.), *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales*, Reykjavik, Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, vol.2, 1997, p.462.

²³ *Laxdaela Saga*, p.54.

²⁴ ‘Egil’s Saga’, p.49.

²⁵ Preben Meulengracht Sorensen, ‘Social Institutions and Belief Systems of Medieval Iceland (c.870-1400) and Their Relations to Literary Production’, in Margaret Clunies Ross (ed.), *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.16.

²⁶ ‘Hen-Thorir’, in Gwyn Jones (ed. & trans.), *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980, p.5.

²⁷ *Laxdaela Saga*, p.53.

²⁸ ‘Hrafinkel the Priest of Frey’, in Gwyn Jones (ed. & trans.), *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980, p.113.

²⁹ *Laxdaela Saga*, p.58.

³⁰ *Njal’s Saga*, p.162.

geography. The wider story context casts the glamour of Gunnar's military prowess and tragic nobility over the location.

Similarly, a climactic moment in *The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi*, when Sam ambushes the outlawed Hrafnkel at his homestead, explains an otherwise unremarkable place-name. Sam leads his band of supporters to a location by 'the mountain beneath which stands the farmstead at Adalbol. Grassy clefts ran up on to the heath there, and there was a steep slope down to the valley, and there below stood the farmstead.'³¹ From there they spring the crucial surprise attack on the inhabitants of that farmstead, leaving their horses in these clefts - 'the place has been called Hrossageilar, Horselanes, ever since.'³² Even in the twentieth century, such saga-linkage of story to landscape draws people to 'experience' the past in the present, to find Hrafnkel and Sam, their presence enduringly embedded in the land. E.V. Gordon found of *Hrafnkel's Saga* that 'valleys, farms, roads and even minor natural features described can still be identified today, and most of them are just as the saga says they were'.³³ O.D. Macrae-Gibson follows in his footsteps, seeking out the pivotal sites of *Hrafnkel's Saga*. He uses a landmark that he identifies as the 'Horselanes' to pinpoint where Hrafnkel's house stood.³⁴ Tourist guides continue to point out where the famous Hrafnkel lived.³⁵ So saga and land act to magnify each other's impact. Why? Because names that mean something, that can be linked into a mental map that connects lineage, history and landmarks, give people the ability to make sense of their world, however illusory that sense may appear on reflection. Saga authors could arguably have harnessed this need to the requirements of their particular sponsors, or maybe this saga-trope of linking human to land filled a deeper, unarticulated need to comprehend their world that authors themselves were only vaguely aware of.

Sagas further embed meaning onto landscape already named and linked to humans: narrative events that chart movement over specified territory add dimension to the human 'mapping' of space. Such a landscape becomes further layered with story and meaning.

This process is illustrated by the chase after Vestein in *Gisli's Saga*. Gisli knows that if his brother-in-law, Vestein, visits him Vestein will almost certainly be murdered. Hearing of Vestein's return to Iceland, Gisli 'calls his housemen, Hallvard and Havard, and told them to go north to Onundarfjord and meet Vestein' in order to warn him:³⁶

They go then, and take a boat from Haukadal and row to Laekjaross and come ashore and call on the farmer who lived there at Bersi's steading; he was called Bersi. They give him a message from Gisli that he is to lend them two horses which he had ... the swiftest in the fjords. He lends them the horses, and they ride until they come to Mosvellir, and from there in towards Hest. Meanwhile Vestein sets out from home, and it happens that he rides below the sandhill at Mosvellir as the brothers are riding along the top, and so they pass by and miss each other

Hallvard and Havard come in to Hest and hear that in fact Vestein has already set out – they turn and ride after him at their hardest. And when they come to Mosvellir they see men riding in the middle of the valley, but there was a hill between them; they ride now into Bjarnadal and come to Arnkelsbrekka; there both horses founder. They run from the horses then, and shout. Vestein and his men hear them now; they had come as far as Gemlufall Moor, and they wait there until they come up and give their message³⁷

But by this time Vestein is almost at Gisli's house, and doesn't want to turn back. And so the frantic chase has been in vain. It is important to realise, as an Icelandic audience would have, that the saga plot hangs on Vestein's impending murder. His death has been foreshadowed, and readers know that what is fated in sagas comes about.³⁸ However, the fate of Gisli, the saga's hero, is also in the balance.

³¹ 'Hrafnkel the Priest of Frey', p.110.

³² 'Hrafnkel the Priest of Frey', pp.110-111.

³³ Gordon, 'On Hrafnkels Saga Freysgodar', *Medium Aevum*, vol.8, 1939, p.1.

³⁴ Macrae-Gibson, 'The Topography of *Hrafnkel's Saga*', *Saga-Book*, vol.19, 1977, pp.244-247.

³⁵ See for example: David Leffman & James Proctor, *The Rough Guide to Iceland*, (3rd ed.) London, Rough Guides, 2007, p.303.

³⁶ *The Saga of Gisli*, trans. George Johnston, London and Melbourne, Dent, 1963, p.14.

³⁷ *The Saga of Gisli*, pp.14-15.

³⁸ Aaron Gurevich in particular underlines the importance of fate in saga mentality. Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992, p.104.

Vestein's death will have to be avenged, and Gisli will be outlawed for performing this duty. The pursuit of Vestein is thus a critical, tension-loaded episode of the saga. Moreover, it is set in a concrete and detailed landscape. In part, the landscape acts as a plot-device, with hills necessary to conceal the route of one party from the other in two instances. But the role of landscape is not confined to literary device. The description of the break-neck journey imprints the land with story, with human meaning that deepens the associations of all who know both story and land. The sandhill at Mosvellir is no longer a simple hill – its shape invokes the fateful divergence of two paths, one above and one below. Saga authors do not expend words for no reason. Why did the author not simply state that the brothers made all speed to Vestein's farm at Hest and then, having missed Vestein, back-tracked in pursuit? There is purpose to what may seem to twenty-first century readers a tiresome litany of place-names.

This example from *Gisli's Saga* is only one of many in the *Íslendingasögur* in which saga-action involving movement and the listing of place-names imprints layers of human meaning onto a landscape already endowed with meaning.³⁹ It would be impossible for a medieval Icelander, knowing the story, to travel that terrain and not understand it in terms of Hallvard and Havard's chase. The past would be felt in the present, and that present experience in turn would affect the way in which that past was imagined. Perception of the landscape is influenced by saga-tales of prior human movement upon it. Perhaps also, in an era before cartography as we know it, such vivid descriptions of a route could serve more practically as directions from one destination to another.

The *Íslendingasögur* tendency to connect current place-names with past characters and action would have subtly encouraged thirteenth century audiences to understand their environment in terms of human history. However, saga-authors went further still, actively asserting that physical traces of tenth-century saga action could 'still be seen' in a thirteenth century landscape. Such identification creates tangible links between what is related and what experienced, so imprinting a landscape ever more concretely with human meaning. Many of these remains would quite clearly have had human origins even without being identified as such by a saga. For example, the underground room in which the outlawed Gisli hid, of which it is noted that 'traces of it can still be seen',⁴⁰ would evidently have been part of a derelict building. Similarly with the boat shed built by Hoskuld in *Laxdaela Saga*, 'whose ruins are still to be seen'.⁴¹ Once these ruins have been identified by sagas, however, they are no longer just human marks on the land – they are physical links to a specified past, and their presence in the landscape encourages imaginative understanding of both storied past and the broader environmental context. Standing at a site, one might see why the underground room was ideally situated to conceal Gisli, or imagine the route Hoskuld's ship took before it was beached.

Other saga-artifacts are less obviously human traces on the land. Speaking of an abandoned assembly site, the *The Saga of the People of Eyri's* author tells us:

It is still possible to see the judgement circle in which men were sentenced to be sacrificed. Within the ring stands Thor's stone, across which men's backs were broken when they were sacrificed, and the stain of blood can still be seen on the stone.⁴²

This gruesome description of a pagan past prompts the onlooker to read meaning into what might otherwise have been seen as a random grouping of stones. Did such sacrifices really occur, or is this a Christian interpretation of a pagan past? Such considerations amount to little when someone who has read the saga physically beholds the stones. 'Thor's stone', with its ominous dark stain, would be searched out and probably 'located', whether or not that rock had actually ever had backs broken over it. The power of the story cannot help but colour the way in which the environment it is linked to is perceived.

These layers of human meaning on the landscape are so convincing that even today people see in Iceland a tenth-century saga topography.⁴³ Standing at the Skaftafell farmstead, Jack D. Ives

³⁹ Perhaps the most monumental such narrative traversing of the land is the evangelical journey by Thangbrand in *Njal's Saga*. The extensive naming of locations and people effectively re-maps Iceland as a Christian landscape. *Njal's Saga*, pp.217-224.

⁴⁰ *The Saga of Gisli*, p.35.

⁴¹ *Laxdaela Saga*, p.67.

⁴² 'The Saga of the People of Eyri', p.138.

perceived the characters and events of *Njal's Saga*, *Sturlungasaga*, and *Landnámabók* imprinted in landscape before him. Ives asserts that all these characters and their actions over the centuries

are associated in time and place; they have lived, stood, worked, hurt, rejoiced, and loved *and* survived in an almost incomparable spiritual descent of lineage and in an inestimable landscape of stark beauty, danger, and challenge.⁴⁴

The terrain is seen positively to glow with an identity sourced from medieval texts, an approach that Ives defends as both 'spiritually' and 'physically' valid.⁴⁵ Similarly Macrae-Gibson determinedly scours the landscape of Hrafnkeldalur to 'locate' key sites in which action from *Hrafnkel's Saga* took place.⁴⁶ For Gillian Overing and Marijane Osborn, who travelled to Iceland specifically in search of saga-sites, 'past landscapes of the sagas often seemed to correlate with the present geographical reality.'⁴⁷ They find that Icelanders even in the late twentieth-century can reliably link landscape formations with saga narratives.⁴⁸ Such instances confirm the continuing literal interpretation of saga landscape within Iceland identified by Ian Wyatt.⁴⁹

However, a process that endows space with human meaning in order that its inhabitants could 'understand' it is not necessarily synonymous with historical accuracy. The *Íslendingasögur* assert that what occurred in the tenth century may still be 'read' in thirteenth century topography, whether in place-names or extant landmarks. Modern readers look to find it still. But geography did not stand still even in the three centuries between Saga Age and saga writing – these texts also refer to place-name changes, farm desertions and amalgamations, and characters were probably invented to fit the place-names available to authors at the time. While I perceive that saga-authors *constructed* a view of the Icelandic landscape, scholars like Ives approach that construction in the light of enduring truth.

The predominating view amongst social scientists that environment is 'culturally constructed' has been criticized for failing to allow for the agency of natural forces.⁵⁰ If humans are seen to be entirely responsible for how they perceive environment, this implies that nature is passive – something that is cognitively acted upon without it in turn having any effect on that cognition. The *Íslendingasögur*, however, do not portray Icelandic environment as passive. Some aspects of what we today would characterise as natural are anthropomorphised in sagas. Trolls, elves, giants, and *landvættir* (land-spirits), all emanations of the land, are recognisably human-like in form and behaviour. Giants and trolls are portrayed as 'guardians' of the land they inhabit.⁵¹ Similarly, Clunies Ross discusses Icelandic *landvættir* in terms of 'supernatural creatures who lived in the land and protected its well-being.'⁵² One of the few references to elves in sagas speaks of them living within a 'hillock' and having the ability to heal a magically injured human if they are provided a 'feast' of bull's blood.⁵³ The environment that such figures symbolise is shown to possess distinct agency, as these figures influence human activity in concrete ways. In order to articulate a felt agency in the land, medieval Icelanders imagined it in humanised terms.

The land was also perceived to have actively determined where its inhabitants settled. In *landnám* accounts, a new arrival often casts the 'high-seat pillars' over the side of their ship. Where

⁴³ This tendency is described convincingly by Ian Wyatt in his article on Wyatt, 'Narrative Functions of Landscape in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas', in John Hines, Alan Lane & Mark Redknapp (eds), *Land, Sea and Home: Proceedings of a Conference on Viking-Period Settlement, at Cardiff, July 2001*, Leeds, Maney, 2004, pp.273-274 & 280-282; and in Wyatt, *The Form and Function of Landscape in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas*, pp.53 & 69-71.

⁴⁴ Jack D. Ives, 'Landscape Change and Human Response During a Thousand Years of Climatic Fluctuations and Volcanism: Skaftafell, Southeast Iceland', *Pirineos*, vol.137, 1991, pp.10-11.

⁴⁵ Ives, p.10.

⁴⁶ Macrae-Gibson, pp.239-263.

⁴⁷ Overing and Osborn, *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p.xvi.

⁴⁸ Overing and Osborn, pp.39-40 & 55-56.

⁴⁹ A good example of this is provided in Wyatt, 'Narrative Functions of Landscape in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas', p.282.

⁵⁰ See: Flint and Morphy, 'Introduction', p.7; Roepstorff and Bubandt, pp.10-11; and Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, New York, Vintage Books, 1996, p.13.

⁵¹ Lotte Motz, 'Gods and Demons of the Wilderness', *Arkiv for nordisk filologi*, vol.99, 1984, p.183.

⁵² Clunies Ross Clunies Ross, pp.14-15.

⁵³ Kormak's Saga', in Vidar Hreinsson (ed.), *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales*, Reykjavik, Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, vol.1, 1997, p.217.

these are later found to have washed up decrees where he or she will settle. But who decrees it? The agency behind the placement of these pillars is, in one instance, attributed to Thor: Thorolf Moster-beard, a devotee of Thor, ‘declared that he would settle in Iceland in whatever place Thor directed the pillars to land.’⁵⁴ Clunies Ross extrapolates from this that the late ninth-century procedure would have habitually invoked Thor.⁵⁵ Whatever happened in the 800s, what concerns me is thirteenth-century understandings of *landnám*. The anonymity of the power directing the pillars in most accounts may reflect a Christian author’s dilemma, unwilling to attribute power to a pagan god and yet aware that heathen settlers would not have dedicated pillars to Christ. In default of gods, the *Íslendingasögur* imply that the land (or perhaps the sea) itself directed the pillars. Conversely, the environment can make it quite clear to settlers that they have got the location wrong. In *The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey’s Godi*, it takes the death of a slave in the first settlement, then a dream-messenger followed by a landslide in the second, before Hrafnkel’s father selects a location in which he is blessed by good fortune.⁵⁶ Saga authors showed history to have been influenced by a landscape with agency.

So the un-named spaces of *landnám* Iceland are transformed in *Íslendingasögur* into places with human meaning. Iceland in the thirteenth-century, and even in the twentieth, is imprinted with significance derived from names and actions of saga characters. The map has been drawn convincingly, and endures to shape the land in turn.

⁵⁴ 'The Saga of the People of Eyri', p.133.

⁵⁵ Clunies Ross, p.19.

⁵⁶ 'Hrafnkel the Priest of Frey', p.89.