



Taming the Wild: Paradise Gained, Maintained, and Lost in medieval Icelandic literature

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The differences between Iceland at the time of settlement and Iceland at the time of saga-writing are manifold. One was a democratic, heathen, frontier Free State, and the other was a heavily-farmed Christian nation that was being increasingly drawn into an allegiance with Norway. Fully covering this vast stretch of history – anywhere between 400 and 500 years – is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, I will attempt to examine the sagas’ conceptualisation of Iceland and the reasons behind its settlement, and then go on to consider how Icelandic society, and its people’s relationship to nature and the supernatural, developed from the process of *landnám* up until the end of the period the sagas cover. I will be paying particular attention to *Egils saga* and *Laxdæla saga*,^{1 2} and as such the period of time I am primarily interested in is the years immediately preceding settlement – AD c.860 – up to around AD 1030.³

Before I begin the essay proper, I would also like to add that for the most part, I will be examining the information presented in the sagas and other primary sources on its own merits. I am aware that there is dispute as to the factuality of some aspects, especially concerning the names of settlers and the original size of their *landnám*;⁴ however, I am primarily interested in how the development of the relationship between Icelandic society and nature during the age of settlement is represented, and so while worth considering, the relevance of that evidence to this essay is less than it otherwise would be.

When people returned from Iceland and told stories of it before the time of settlement, or when Norwegians speculated about it, the language associated with it is often incredibly positive. Some of the first explorers of this new country describe ‘butter... dripping from every blade of grass,’⁵ Ingolf Arnarson had recounted to Kveldulf and Skallagrim that there was vast swathes of land there for the taking,⁶ and Ketil’s sons have heard about free, bountiful land, plentiful fishing, and the large number of beached whales.⁷ The concept of unspoilt bounty and its use as an escape from societal persecution is very much in keeping with the idea of the pastoral; the dichotomy between the corrupt society embodied by Harald

¹ Any references to *Egils saga* are taken from Bernard Scudder’s translation in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. By Jane Smiley (London: Penguin, 2001), pp.3-184.

² Any references to *Laxdæla saga* are taken from Keneva Kunz’s translation in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. By Jane Smiley (London: Penguin, 2001), pp.270-421.

³ The year in which the events of *Laxdæla saga* are assumed to end, according to its introduction in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, p. 270.

⁴ Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson, ‘Creating a Past: A Historiography of the Settlement of Iceland’, in *Contact, Continuity and Collapse: The Norse Colonisation of the North Atlantic*, ed. by James. M. Barrett (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), pp.139-161, p.146.

⁵ *Landnámabók*, translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1972), p.18.

⁶ *Egils saga*, p.43.

⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 277.

Fairhair's unification of Norway, and the simplified return to nature in its abundance as represented in common perceptions of Iceland.⁸ It is worth noting that this pastoral ideal is often falsely represented; even before settlement begins, Raven-Floki⁹ and Ketil¹⁰ voice their cynicism. However for the most part, Iceland represents a much-needed – and therefore heavily embellished – escape from the increasingly turbulent social upheavals propagated in Norway at the time.

Iceland as refuge is the primary justification for its settlement at the end of the 9th Century; however as Clunies Ross writes, there is a less explicit reason as well. Given the feminine personification of the land and the fact that Iceland has not been previously claimed by any major party, it was viewed as the settler's duty as males to lay claim to it, much in the same way that the vast majority of women in Scandinavian society were 'owned' by family members or by social leaders.¹¹ This right and duty was also supported by the use of high-seat pillars. These pillars, often imbued with a degree of religious importance, were used to lay claim to areas of land as chosen by the gods. However their phallic shape, alongside the phallic nature of other claiming devices such as Kveldulf's coffin,¹² imbues the process of *landnám* with an element of sexual conquest; Iceland is being 'deflowered', as the settlers felt obliged to do. In this way, the settlers' fate was to colonise the island, much in the same way European colonists felt they had a Manifest Destiny to expand the American border westwards. This sexualised process is ironically reversed in the second half of *Laxdæla saga* when Thorkel's ship is sunk in Breiðafjörð, and all of the timber he was going to use to build a church to rival the Norwegian King Olaf's is washed up along the banks of the river.¹³ Thorkel's failure to challenge the phallic mastery represented by the tall spire of Olaf's church, as well as the wanton and directionless spread of the logs, suggests impotence and insecurity when at the time of settlement there was virility and assurance. The gradual decline of the Icelandic frontier society is something I will cover further in the final part of this essay.

Upon landing and finding their high-seat posts, the first settlers immediately begin to make land-claims. Because they are among the first to arrive, the size of their claims are very large; both Skallagrim's and Unn's claims cover massive stretches of land. Despite this seemingly autocratic beginning, the nature of Icelandic frontier society is demonstrated in its egalitarianism. Both Skallagrim and Unn give large swathes of land to their followers and set them up with farmsteads, and Unn even frees Norwegian and Scottish slaves and provides them with land.¹⁴ Unn deserves special mention as one of the first settlers; while she is a woman, she is in a unique position where she is under the jurisdiction of no man, and as such is enabled to take part in what was essentially a male activity. This is in keeping with the idea of the pastoral providing 'a borderland space where... gender can be tested.'¹⁵ Indeed, it appears as though the pastoral myth truly has been realised; food is indeed plentiful, as is land, and animals are so innocent that they do not even run from hunters.¹⁶ However, the realisation of the pastoral idyll, with its freedoms and luxuries, is seemingly short-lived.

Freedom from the societal norms found back in Norway is fleeting. Despite the concept of unspoiled land and the creation of a new society, many Icelanders seem to maintain strong links to their ancestral home. The fact that they bring their high-seat pillars – and even their ancestors' corpses – with them, and use them to divine where they will settle,

⁸ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 35.

⁹ *Landnámabók*, p.18.

¹⁰ *Laxdæla saga*, p.277.

¹¹ Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes vol. 2* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), p.125-126.

¹² *Egils saga*, p.46.

¹³ *Laxdæla saga*, p.417.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.280.

¹⁵ Terry Gifford, *The Pastoral* (Routledge: London, 1999), p.86.

¹⁶ *Egils saga*, p.48.

suggests an unwillingness to rely on their own intellectual resources, instead surrendering their free will to tradition and ancestry. This reliance is a common theme of both sagas; even prior to the deforestation of Iceland (a topic I will discuss in due course), Hoskuld returns to Norway to obtain timber for his farm buildings.¹⁷ While there, he is also invited into the company of King Hakon; a common theme of the sagas seems to be Icelanders returning to Norway and attaining the admiration of the royal family. This is perhaps suggestive of the time at which *Egils saga* and *Laxdæla* saga were written (approximately 1220-40¹⁸ and 1250-70¹⁹ respectively), when the importance of Icelandic national identity was on the rise due to the country's imminent annexation by Norway.

Ties to Norway are also evident in land claims. This is perhaps best exemplified in Egil, who undergoes a lengthy legal process to claim lands he has inherited in Norway, despite at one point becoming an outlaw in the country. Egil holds no great love for the Norwegian royal family and yet he pursues his claim with vigour, appearing before the Norwegian court a number of times in pursuit of his property. It is worth noting as well that Egil becomes 'restless and... increasingly melancholy' after travel to Norway is embargoed,²⁰ suggesting that Egil's reliance on Norway extends beyond the collection of rent to his very emotional wellbeing. That being said however, he has no qualms placing a curse on the earth there, denying 'nature spirits' any rest until they have driven Eirik and Gunnhild from the land.²¹

These 'nature spirits' are roughly analogous to the *landvættir* ('land-wights') – indigenous spirits of Iceland that settlers believed protected it from harm. These supernatural beings play a major part in human affairs on the island, as will be shown. The most detailed account of the *landvættir* occurs in *Heimskringla*, when huge spirits in the shapes of a dragon, eagle, bull and giant, surrounded by hosts of smaller spirits, fend off the attentions of Harald Gormsson, who had plans to invade Iceland.²² Their role as Iceland's protectors is also seen in the settlers' laws, which forbade ships travelling towards the island bearing carved animal heads for fear of frightening or angering the spirits.²³ The support of the *landvættir*, then, is seen as essential for the *landnám* process; or at least it is initially. While the first settlers may rely on spiritual permission to settle in the untouched land – not that this is referenced fully in either saga – those that follow them appeal directly to the humans already present. Even in the first year after Skallagrim makes landfall, he has supplanted the *landvættir*'s duties in granting land when he offers it as his own to Oleif Hjalti.²⁴ As Clunies Ross notes, the settlers' engagement with nature and the environment was primarily for the purposes of *landnám*,²⁵ which may stem from the notion of the Icelandic wild existing as Other, entirely outside of the jurisdiction and comprehension of a law-based society.²⁶

The portrayal of the Icelanders' relationship with nature, sometimes personified in the *landvættir*, remains as multi-faceted throughout the course of the sagas. In some instances, the interaction is a positive one; an example being the partnership between Hafr-Björn – literally, 'he-goat Björn' – and a *landvættir* who causes his livestock to breed much faster

¹⁷ *Laxdæla* saga, p.286-288.

¹⁸ *Egils* saga, p.3.

¹⁹ *Laxdæla* saga, p.270.

²⁰ *Egils* saga, p.109.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.106.

²² Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, translated by Lee M. Hollander (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999), p.173-174.

²³ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, p.135.

²⁴ *Egils* saga, p.49.

²⁵ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, p.130-131.

²⁶ Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p.136-137.

than before in exchange for favour, which would probably have taken the form of sacrifices.²⁷ This cooperation is presented positively, unlike the interactions with nature exemplified in dealings with sorcerers Grima, Stigandi, Hallbjorn and Kotkel. Their apparent mastery over nature, which leads to the deaths of Thord Ingunnarson²⁸ and Kari Hrutsson,²⁹ as well as Hallbjorn's haunting of the coast where his body washes up,³⁰ all suggest either a close partnership with the *landvættir* or that the family are in fact *landvættir* themselves. They could be interpreted as representing nature's uncontrollability despite the best efforts of the settlers, or perhaps a reminder that despite their removal from the land-claiming process, their influence is still to be felt.

This influence is extant in the land surrounding the murder-site of Hjorleif, and Killer-Hrapp's farm. These have both been sites of death in which greed has been a strong force – either the greed of Hjorleif's slaves in wanting to kill him and escape or Hrapp's jealous wish to guard his land from beyond the grave. As a result of these unsavoury deaths, people are described as being wary of settling near Hjorleif's death-site due to retribution from *landvættir*,³¹ and those that do try to settle at Hrappsstaðir are first dissuaded by a seal with 'eyes... like those of a human',³² and after failing to take heed are drowned in a storm.³³ These acts appear to be the *landvættir* reasserting themselves in the land-claiming process, reminding the non-indigenous Icelanders who is really in control of the conceptual space outside of lawful society.

This control, however, is still open to challenge. Egil further assumes the role of land-granter when he warns Berg-Onund that refusing to give up Egil's land in Norway will result in 'break[ing] the laws of the land, incur[ring] the wrath of the gods and violat[ing] the peace.'³⁴ It is also worth noting that Egil does not want the land for himself, instead forbidding its use entirely in much the same way as the *landvættir* implicitly forbade the use of the land around Hjorleif's death-site.³⁵ In this way, Egil attempts to appropriate the nature-spirits' authority, and by extension their claim of original land-ownership.

Olaf Peacock also asserts his mastery over nature when he exorcises Hrapp's ghost from the plot of land he has bought near Hrappsstaðir,³⁶ and further cements his claim on the land with the construction of a fire-hall that literally has the human discourse of history written into its walls in the form of ornamental tales.³⁷ However, as much as Olaf might take refuge in his exorcised farmlands with their self-conscious self-narration, he is still not entirely free from the influence of nature. His slaughter of Harri the ox is an example of this; Harri was presumably a *landvættir*, suggested by his providing grass for the other oxen in the herd during winter months.³⁸ Olaf does not seem to realise that Harri is a nature spirit which leads to his slaughter, but the killing still brings about the death of his own son. Once more, nature acts outside of the settler-established law – and by extension society – in favour of pursuing redress through its own level of discourse.

Something that the *landvættir* do not plan for, however, is the eventual collapse of the Icelandic ecosystem. Iceland went from almost untouched to completely settled in the space

²⁷ Landnámabók, p.126.

²⁸ Laxdæla saga, p.336.

²⁹ Ibid, p.341.

³⁰ Ibid, p.343.

³¹ Landnámabók, p.126.

³² Laxdæla saga, p.299.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Egils saga, p.99.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Laxdæla saga, p.317.

³⁷ Ibid, p.323.

³⁸ Ibid, p.326-327.

of the years between AD 870 and AD 930, which placed an enormous strain on the ecosystem. Ari inn froði writes that when Iceland was first settled it was ‘covered with forests between mountain and seashore’;³⁹ indeed, before AD 850 it is estimated that approximately 65% of Iceland was vegetated and 25% was covered by trees, compared to modern figures of less than 25% and less than 1% respectively.⁴⁰ The majority of this deforestation took place during the *landnám* period, as demonstrated by Thorkel Eyjolfsson’s travel to Norway to find timber for his ill-fated church.⁴¹

Deforestation had a number of effects on Icelandic society. It ‘not only gradually changed the natural environment, resulting in a worsening of living conditions, but [also] precluded the alternatives which might have improved the critical situation.’⁴² This happened in the following ways: deforestation meant that fewer ships were built and manure was used for fuel instead of fertilising the fields. This in turn reduced agricultural yield, but because there was less timber available for the building of ships there was less travel to Norway and in turn less imported grain and timber for construction and fuel.⁴³

The reduced resources also meant that the people that owned the remaining patches of woodland increased in power, while those that did not dwindled;⁴⁴ the deserted farms at Hrappsstaðir and Melkorkustaðir in *Laxdæla saga* are not reclaimed, hinting at the possible extinction of smaller farms and their absorption into larger collectives which in turn may have become prototypical townships. In this manner, the class system that the first settlers had effectively abolished returns in full force.

What this shows is that the Arcadia the first settlers discovered and cultivated – their egalitarian, pastoral Free State – disappeared through its own success. The draw of Iceland’s perceived bounty caused people to flock to it in their droves, which in turn doomed its fragile ecosystem; Stigandi’s sudden and apparently effortless corruption of the previously fertile ‘Fire-Site’ upon his capture is a fitting analogy for the settlers’ fatal flaw of attempting to gain absolute control over nature with no consideration for the consequences.⁴⁵

One of the more poignant examples of the beginning of the end of the settlement age is when Thorkel and Thorstein pay a visit to Halldor and Hjardarholt in the final chapters of *Laxdæla saga*; before it had stood as a bold, if not brash, proclamation of the Icelandic will to prosper, teeming with animal and human life and acting as a nexus of the history of settlement. By the end of the saga, however, it is a shadow of its former self, nearly empty of livestock; the only people remaining are its owner and a retainer from a previous generation, while the household is elsewhere scavenging for food. When compared to Thorolf’s Eden-like description of butter dripping from grass, the full extent of the settlers’ fall is palpable.

³⁹ Ari inn froði, *Íslendingabók*, translated by Halldór Hermannsson, in *Islandica* 20 (1930), pp.60-89, p.60.

⁴⁰ Kevin P. Smith, ‘Landnám: the settlement of Iceland in archaeological and historical perspective’, in *World Archaeology* 26.3 (February 1995), pp.319-347, p.323.

⁴¹ *Laxdæla saga*, p.413.

⁴² Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, p.164.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Smith, ‘Landnám’, p.336.

⁴⁵ *Laxdæla saga*, p.342-343.

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