

2018

## The Legendary Topography of the Viking Settlement of Iceland

Verena Höfig  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, verena@illinois.edu*

---

### Recommended Citation

Höfig, V. (2018). The Legendary Topography of the Viking Settlement of Iceland. *Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language*, 8(1).  
Retrieved from <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol8/iss1/23>

This Article (refereed) is posted at Research Online.  
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol8/iss1/23>

## The Legendary Topography of the Viking Settlement of Iceland

Verna Hofig (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Nations connect with their pasts as a means of confirming and legitimizing their present. As a country devoid of many visible remains of the past, such as intact buildings predating the eighteenth century or ruins comparable to monumental markers found elsewhere in Europe, such as castles, fortresses and cathedrals, Icelanders have chosen instead to focus on literature and literary descriptions of their landscape when attempting to relate their present to the past.

The description of landscape is omnipresent in the medieval Sagas of Icelanders, and with that, the mapping of nature and landscape into culture.<sup>1</sup> This is done by negotiating and utilizing space through descriptions of landownership, or the origins of place-names, and by attaching story telling traditions to certain natural and man-made markers such as mountains, rivers or grave-mounds. Using landscape in this manner, filling it with significance, and endowing it with signs, is what Jürg Glauser has called the semioticization of landscape in an article dedicated to the Sagas of Icelanders and the *þættir*, shorter pieces of narrative, arguing that they are literary representations of a new social space (Glauser 209).

The aim of this article will be to provide a case study of such a semioticization of landscape and creation of social space, using the origin myth of Icelanders, the story of the Norwegian Viking Ingólfr Arnarson, said to have settled on the island around the year 874, as an example. Focusing on Ingólfr's settlement in Icelanders' *Landnámabók*, or "Book of Settlement," the article will analyze the processes through which this text inscribes landscape with memory and uses external markers of authenticity in the context of such a semioticization, while simultaneously following more general storytelling traditions about

---

<sup>1</sup> The Sagas of Icelanders are medieval prose narratives based on oral traditions, most of them preserved in vellum manuscripts from the late thirteenth to the fifteenth century. Of the around 40 preserved works, a majority centers on the lives of a small group of Icelandic families during the time period of ca. 930-1030. Cf. Vésteinn Ólason 102.

**A quick note on spelling and endnotes: Icelanders are listed by their full names following the Icelandic patronymic naming system; listings in the bibliography are alphabetized by first name, not the patronymic.**

the foundation of new communities. By bringing in selected modern and early modern examples which respond to and perpetuate medieval literary traditions about Ingólfr Arnarson in the second half, the article reveals how medieval texts can assert ownership and control over territory, and ultimately contribute to the creation of a legendary, even sacred topography. This legendary topography preserves the cultural memory of the settlement and first formative years of Icelanders' community, and serves as a mnemonic tool to establish a cult of ancestry for selected figures from the sagas and their descendants. In commemorating these chosen people and their deeds, a poetic landscape is created - an *ethnoscape* to follow the terminology of nationalism scholar Anthony Smith, which he defines as an area "in which landscape and people are merged subjectively over time, and in which each belongs to the other" (Smith 136). As Smith emphasizes, such landscapes naturalize memories, so they become extensions of a community's terrain and its natural features - an outsider seeing and perceiving the landscape may be told that it is impossible to understand "the people" or their culture without understanding their landscape and vice versa (136). In the course of this process, landscape is endowed with poetic meaning, ultimately conveying a community's values and beliefs about the past. In the case of Icelanders' myth of origin, this includes an emphasis of the peaceful creation of a new culture from the bottom up, ruling out violence or assimilation with a former population as a means of land-taking, while celebrating a founding father whose divinely sanctioned settlement was to become the later capital of Icelanders, and whose descendants were integral to the creation of the country's political structure.

Along with New Zealand and other islands in the North Atlantic, Iceland belongs to one of the last substantial land masses on the planet to be colonized around the end of the first millennium (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 139). While New Zealand was settled by Eastern Polynesian seafarers, Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands were colonized by Norse and Gaelic settlers and their slaves (Agnar Helgason et al. 735; Gísli Sigurðsson 31). The *landnám*, Icelanders' "land-taking" and settlement, is elaborated in great detail in the "Book of Settlement" or *Landnámabók*, a text presumably first authored in the twelfth century which covers the colonization of the island with a clockwise

description of how and by whom Iceland was settled in the late ninth and tenth centuries. *Landnámabók* mentions more than 430 individual settlers who are said to have arrived in the time span between 874 and 930, provides the location of their farms, and adds personal names of later descendants of these first settlers. *Landnámabók* is an unstable text in that it has changed continually during its transmission as a result of numerous re-workings. While the first written versions may go back to plain lists of settlers and their properties, dating to the twelfth century and the earliest period of writing in Iceland, extant today are five redactions, three of which - *Melabók*, *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* - are medieval and preserved either in whole or in part, while the other two are copies from now lost texts made in the seventeenth century. It would exceed the scope of this article to discuss alternating models of *Landnámabók's* transmission history or speculate on the interrelatedness of the five redactions here.<sup>2</sup> What is essential for a study of Iceland's earliest settlers is that *Melabók*, of which only two leaves are preserved, shows a different ordering than the two other medieval redactions, *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*, and is therefore thought to preserve an older version.<sup>3</sup> *Melabók* covers the settlement of Iceland following a strict geographical order, starting in the southern quarter and then moving clockwise around the island. The two best preserved medieval versions, *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* in its lead, break up this structure of *Melabók's* brief settlement accounts and interpolate long narrative portions about some of the settlers, demarcating large areas as their *landnám*, in some cases so large that they were probably vastly exaggerated (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 148). As Sveinbjörn Rafnsson has pointed out, this may have occurred because of the interests of thirteenth century families who wanted to secure their present land-holding rights by resorting to historical precedent, but there must have also been other

---

<sup>2</sup> The chronology of and relationship between the various redactions of *Landnámabók* has been extensively studied by Jón Jóhannesson in *Gerðir Landnámabókar* (Reykjavík: Félagsprentsmiðjan, 1941), and by Sveinbjörn Rafnsson in *Studier i Landnámabók. Kritiska bidrag till den isländska fristatstidens historia*, Bibliotheca Historica Lundensis 31 (Lund: Carl Bloms Boktryckeri, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> The epilogue of Haukr Erlendsson's *Hauksbók* mentions three (now lost) predecessors or sources, and clarifies that Haukr used a now lost version of *Landnámabók* by Styrmir Kárason, and Sturla Þórðarson's *Sturlubók* as sources. This paper will focus on *Sturlubók* as the oldest surviving complete version, written before 1280. *Melabók* is extant only on two vellum leaves from the fifteenth century, and was originally composed no later than 1310 and with that after *Sturlubók*, yet it is most likely closer to Styrmir's now lost text from around 1220 (see Jón Jóhannesson 221-226; for an altogether different transmission model cf. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 81).

factors at play, since not everyone mentioned in the text was the ancestor of a later powerful family (166-181). That *Landnámabók* in many ways is “a piece of historical fiction rather than history proper” as Anders Gade Jensen puts it in his study of the construction of space in *Landnámabók*, is also signaled by the text's invention or reconstruction of some of the names of settlers which have been shown to be based on false place-name etymologies (232).

*Sturlubók* establishes the Viking and chieftain-son Ingólfr Arnarson and his blood- or foster brother<sup>4</sup> Hjörleifr as the first to permanently inhabit the island in the summer of 874. Both are said to have left Norway because they were accused of murder and had their property confiscated. According to chapters 6-9 in *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*, Ingólfr and Hjörleifr leave Norway after killing the sons of an earl, and decide to search for an island they have heard about from a previous explorer, Hrafna-Flóki. They spend one winter there and return to Norway in the spring to prepare for a permanent relocation the following year, which is to include families, farm animals, and slaves. Before departure, Ingólfr holds a great sacrifice, asking the gods for advice, with the outcome that he is advised to go to Iceland; Hjörleifr in turn does not sacrifice, and the text informs its readers that he never did so (*Landnámabók* 42). The two travel in separate ships, and upon catching sight of the land, Ingólfr throws his high-seat pillars overboard:<sup>5</sup>

Þá er Ingólfr sá Ísland, skaut hann fyrir borð ǫndugissúlum sínum til heilla; hann mælti svá fyrir, at hann skyldi þar byggja, er súlurnar kæmi á land. Ingólfr tók þar land, er nú heitir Ingólfrshöfði, en Hjörleif rak vestr fyrir land. (*Landnámabók* 42)

---

<sup>4</sup> The term *fóstbróðir* can refer both to a relationship between blood- or oath-brothers, or actual foster-brothers, who acquired this connection by having been raised together. This is common practice in the sagas, and circumstantial evidence from *Gísla saga* suggests that men who were already related to each other at times undertook an additional ceremony to become blood-brothers. The result of such a fictive kinship included the duty to avenge the other, and with that established the closest possible bond existing between two men in the Old Norse world (see Miller 173-174).

<sup>5</sup> The casting out of their “high-seat pillars” while approaching the coast of Iceland is a custom reported for several of the early settlers. Most likely, the pillars were part of the high-seats upon which the male heads of a household sat, and may have structurally supported the roofs of their halls. The pillars could have been therefore understood as part of a microcosmic analogy of the Old Norse universe, the hall representing the cosmos and the high-seat representing the world tree, world pillar, or *axis mundi* therein. See Böldl 171-174, and Wellendorf 1-21. Allowing numinous objects such as the pillars to guide and direct settlers to their final place of habitation ensured that settlers could claim that their *landnám* was legitimated by a divine, supernatural authority.

(As soon as Ingólfr saw Iceland, he threw his high-seat pillars overboard for good fortune, and he announced he would settle where the pillars washed ashore. Ingólfr took land where it is now called Ingólfshöfði, but Hjörleifr drifted westwards along the coast).<sup>6</sup>

While Ingólfr lands at the place later called *Ingólfshöfði*, “Ingólfr's Headland,” Hjörleifr's ship drifts off and lands at a place named in a likewise fashion *Hjörleifshöfði*, “Hjörleifr's Headland” where he is soon ambushed and killed by his accompanying slaves. Ingólfr later moves further west and spends the winter at *Ingólfsfell*, “Ingólfr's Mountain” near Ölfus River, until his slaves locate his high-seat pillars at *Arnarhóll*, “Eagle Hill,” a hillock in the center of present day Reykjavík:

Hann tók sér bústað þar sem öndvegissúlur hans höfðu á land komit; hann bjó í Reykjavík; þar eru enn öndugissúlur þær í eldhúsi. En Ingólfr nam land milli Ölfusár ok Hvalfjarðar fyrir útan Brynjudalsá, milli Öxarár, ok öll nes út. (*Landnámabók* 45)

(He took his residence where his high-seat pillars had been washed ashore; he lived at Reykjavík; there the high-seat pillars can still be seen in the hall. But Ingólfr claimed possession of the entire area between the Ölfus River and Hvalfjord, south of the Brynjudals and Öxar Rivers, with all the Nesses.)

Both the place of his first arrival, and the temporary location before establishing his final place of settlement are named after the first settler. The text inscribes the past event of the settlement into the landscape, which is first presented as an empty area but then converted into a social space. Readers of the text are also assured that at the time of writing, most likely the thirteenth century when *Sturlubók* was composed by Sturla Þórðarson, the pillars of Ingólfr's high-seat were still visible in the building. The presence of these artifacts, as signaled by the text, serve to verify the authenticity of the story, and that the farm building in Reykjavík at the time indeed was the one inhabited by the first settler. At the same time, the pillars indicate that the Icelandic landscape of the thirteenth century was comprised of markers of the past that inspired passers-by to connect them to local storytelling traditions,

---

<sup>6</sup> All translations into English, unless otherwise noted, were made by the author.

creating the cornerstones of a first, cognitive map and imprinting the landscape with meaning.<sup>7</sup> A comparable argument can be made about Hjörleifr's settlement, which is specified in location and size in chapter 8 of *Sturlubók*:

Hjörleifr tók land við Hjörleifshöfða, ok var þar þá fjörðr, ok horfði botninn inn at höfðanum. Hjörleifr lét þar gera skála tvá, ok er önnur tóptin átján faðma, en önnur nítján. (Landnámabók 43)

(Hjörleifr took land at Hjörleifshöfði, where back then was a fjord, and it reached all the way up to the headland. Hjörleifr had two halls built there, and one of the lots measures eighteen fathoms across, and the other nineteen.)

Because of Hjörleifr's violent death and much in contrast to the area settled by Ingólfr which is understood to have formed the *nucleus* of the later capital of the country, Reykjavík, *Hjörleifshöfði* becomes an area off limits for human habitation, an area where, according to *Sturlubók* “þar hafði engi maðr þorat at nema fyrir landvættum, síðan Hjörleifr var drepinn” (no one had dared to settle there, because of the land-spirits, since Hjörleifr was killed) (*Landnámabók* 333). In light of this clear contrast between the two first settlers and their fates, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has analyzed the tale of Ingólfr and Hjörleifr as an *exemplum* of the foundation of a new society. In so doing, it juxtaposes the pious heathen Ingólfr, who sacrificed and used divine guidance to find his place of settlement, to his blood-brother who refused to sacrifice, was a man of ill fortune killed by his slaves, and whose land claim became uninhabitable (25). Ingólfr's descendants prosper and are actively involved in establishing the first cornerstones of the fledgling society: his son Þorsteinn establishes the first Þing assembly at Kjalarnes near Reykjavík, and his grandson, Þorkell máni serves as law speaker at the newly founded Alþingi, the national assembly; his great-grandson Þormóðr Þorkelsson finally becomes *allsherjargoði*, the chieftain in charge of hallowing the assembly site at the Alþingi, an office passed on among several of Ingólfr's descendants after him (Helgi Þorláksson 52). Ingólfr's and Hjörleifr's settlement account in

---

<sup>7</sup> Carol Hoggart lists and discusses several such instances of “physical traces of tenth-century saga action” that could “still be seen” in the landscape of thirteenth century Iceland. Cf. Hoggart. See also Barraclough 92.

*Sturlubók* is furthermore reminiscent of foundational narratives from Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages featuring mythical or divine brother pairs associated with migration and settlement, for instance the founders of Denmark, Dan and Angel, or Hengist and Horsa, the Saxon leaders who settled in Kent (Helgi Þorláksson 54). As a myth of origin featuring the early death of one of the (blood-)brothers (Hjörleifr), the company of a sister and spouse (Ingólfr's sister Helga is married to Hjörleifr), and hints of a semi-divine origin of one of the two brothers, the tale of the two founders echoes several elements of dioscuric traditions connected to the foundation of new societies (Hoefig 78). Unlike Ingólfr, who is briefly introduced in chapter 1, Hjörleifr is not mentioned in Icelanders' earliest extant historical work, Ari fróði Þorgilsson's "Book of Icelanders" or *Íslendingabók*, and is also absent in most of the sagas of Icelanders that mention Ingólfr Arnarson, which suggests that he could have been a fictional character needed as a foil or accompanying (blood)brother for Ingólfr.

Before the arrival of Ingólfr, Hjörleifr and their families, Iceland was, according to *Íslendingabók*, *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*, not an entirely empty space:

En áðr Ísland byggðisk af Nóregi váru þar þeir menn, er Norðmenn kalla *papa*; þeir váru menn kristnir, ok hyggja menn, at þeir hafi verit vestan um haf, því at fundusk eptir þeim bækr írskar, bjöllur ok baglar ok enn fleiri hlutir, þeir er þat mátti skilja, at þeir váru Vestmenn. (*Landnámabók* 31-32)

(But before Iceland was settled from Norway other men were there, which the Norwegians call *papar*. They were Christian men and were thought to have moved westwards across the ocean, because they left behind Irish books, bells and croziers and additional objects that indicated that they were Irish.)

As John Lindow and Margaret Clunies Ross have suggested, the presence of the Irish monks can be read to indicate that the new land is a *terra Christiana*, and with that already consecrated ground, thanks to the religious objects that the *papar* have left behind:

These religious objects were probably thought of as imbued with spiritual force, so that, although Iceland did not become Christian again for over one hundred years,

the land remained subject to their powers, and there was a sense in which the territory of Iceland itself remained Christian, even though its human inhabitants for the most part did not. (Clunies Ross 21)

As such, it serves as a precondition for the prospering of the pagan settlers, following a general trajectory of Christian and salvational history which culminates in Icelanders' conversion some 130 years later (Lindow 21; Wamhoff 88).

On a much more basic level however, the text's assurance that the Irish did leave, based on the proof of artifacts found in the landscape, can be understood as support or even confirmation for the fact that the new land could be regarded as unpopulated, and that the foundation of Iceland happened thus as the creation of a new social space, and new culture from the bottom up. This creation of a new space is defined by who and what was no longer there. It is affirmed by the act of inscribing new memories via place-names into the environment, and functions according to a paradigm that rules out violence or assimilation with a former population as a means of land-taking. This stands in an interesting parallel to the manner in which the discovery and subsequent settlement of Greenland is described in *Íslendingabók*:

Land þat, es kallat es Grœnland, fannsk ok byggðisk af Íslandi. Eiríkr enn rauði hét maðr breiðfirzkr, es fór út heðan þangat ok nam þar land, es síðan es kallaðr Eiríksfjorðr. Hann gaf nafn landinu ok kallaði Grœnland ok kvað menn þat myndu fýsa þangat farar, at landit ætti nafn gótt. Þeir fundu þar manna vistir bæði austr ok vestr á landi ok keiþlabrot ok steinsmíði þat es af því má skilja, at þar hafði þess konar þjóð farit, es Vínland hefir byggt ok Grœnlendingar kalla Skrælinga. (*Íslendingabók* 13-14)

(The country which is called Greenland was discovered and settled from Iceland. Eiríkr the Red was the name of a man from Breiðafjorðr who went from here over there, and took land there where it has since been called Eiríksfjorðr. He gave a name to the land and called it Greenland, and said that men would desire to go there if the land had a good name. They found there signs of human habitation,

both in the east and west of the land, along with fragments of skin-boats and stoneworks, that indicate that this kind of people had passed through there that had also settled *Vínland*, and whom the Greenlanders call *Skrælingar*.)

Here, the description of the naming of the land - a first step in its incorporation into the habitable world (which in this case even involves a deliberate marketing strategy) - is immediately followed by the assurance that the land is uninhabited, yet bears signs of prior human habitation. Violent encounters or forceful displacements are thus ruled out, as the newly founded community is defined as being located on evidentially inhabitable *and* available land. The reference to the *skrælingar*, a derogatory term ascribed to the inhabitants of the eastern Canadian Arctic in the two *Vínland sagas*, signals that the Norse in Greenland and Iceland conceived of the diverse indigenous people in both areas as one coherent group.

While archaeological research into the relationship between Norse and Thule and Dorset people in Greenland indicates some trading activity (Sutherland 613-617), the presence of *papar* in Iceland has been a long contested issue. There are archaeological finds which, some argue, can confirm the presence of Irish Christians in Iceland: small bells, bronze pins possibly used as writing utensils, and several man made caves decorated with cross engravings that have parallel features with early Christian crosses in western Scotland have been discovered, but there is no univocal agreement that these indeed stem from the *papar* and not from later settlers of Gaelic origin (Kristján Ahronson 129 and Adolf Friðriksson "Sagas" 27-29). It has recently been suggested that the *papar* may have even lived as missionaries alongside the settlers for long periods of time - an interesting claim that is nearly impossible to verify (Morris 181-184). While archaeologists have thus far neither proven nor refuted the existence of *papar* on the island, interestingly, attempts to locate any of the farmsteads of a first generation settler mentioned in *Landnámabók* have not been successful, either. An excavated Viking longhouse or *skáli* in downtown Reykjavík, discovered in 2001 and at first dubbed "Ingólfr's Farm" by the Icelandic media, was later dated to the mid tenth century and declared an unsuitable location for the first farm (Helgi Þorláksson and Orri Vésteinsson 81). Nonetheless, the find sparked an intense interest in

Reykjavík's earliest history and was later converted into a museum dedicated to the settlement, which displays the foundations of the exhumed early-tenth-century house *in situ* - a prestigious and expensive project, since the conservation of turf structures indoors was a complete novelty (82-83). Additional excavations in the wider neighborhood of the find suggest that the main farmhouse structure of the area has still not been located, and that the area in question was much more densely inhabited than expected of a single household farmstead. This is indicated by a wooden pathway, tools, oven and slag from the ninth century which were found near the present-day parliament building (Vala Björg Garðarsdóttir 43). In immediate proximity to the hall found in 2001, archaeologists also located a fragment of a wall predating the settlement period, dateable by its situation under the so-called *landnám* tephra or volcanic ash layer which resulted from an eruption dated to 871±2 (Grønvold et al). Several scholars have recently tried to challenge the dating of the *landnám* based on pre-871±2 finds from elsewhere in the country, for instance on the southwestern peninsula of Reykjanes, where archaeologist Bjarni Einarsson has excavated an eighth-century turf building and argued emphatically for a much earlier settlement of Iceland; his and other attempts have not been widely accepted as proof for an earlier systematic settlement, but the debate here is ongoing.<sup>8</sup>

Given the much more diffuse and complicated picture about the settlement of Iceland as suggested by the archaeological record, the place-names and artifacts mentioned in *Sturlubók* which are ascribed to the first two settlers can be read as attempts to inscribe a specific version and memory of the *landnám* into the landscape, which must have at first competed with other versions. It establishes a dominant version of Icelanders' ancestry, celebrating a Norwegian who fathered a long line of notables, as the first to start the Icelandic community. Focusing once more on the description of the location of Ingólfr's settlement in chapter 8 of *Sturlubók* and paying close attention to onomastics and the precise wording, the text emphasizes that "Ingólfr tók þar land, er nú heitir Ingólfshöfði"

---

<sup>8</sup> See also the following debate in the 2009, 2010 and 2011 issues of the journal *Skírnir*: Páll Theodórsson, "Upphaf landnáms á Íslandi 670 AD," *Skírnir*, 183 (2009): 261-280 and "Hvað hét fyrsti landnámsmaðurinn?" *Skírnir* 184 (2010): 511-522; Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson, "Hvenær varð landnám manna á Íslandi?" *Skírnir* 184 (2010): 5-22, and Gunnar Karlsson, "Upphaf mannaferða á Íslandi," *Skírnir* 185 (2011): 5-33.

(Nowadays the place where he landed is called Ingólfshöfði) (*Landnámabók* 42). The adverb *nú* (now, nowadays) may indicate an awareness of this place name as a later addition, ascribed to a location after the tradition about Ingólfr and Hjörleifr had overwritten different (and potentially older) versions and established itself as Icelanders' dominant founding myth.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that Ingólfr's temporary residence on his way to finding his final place of settlement, *Ingólfsfell*, also bears his name, while his final home, Reykjavík (spelled "Reykjarvík" in *Sturlubók*, *Hauksbók* and *Þórðarbók*) is not named after its supposedly first inhabitant. In fact, all the place-names in Reykjavík connected to the first settler are attested for the modern period only. In 1772, poet and explorer Eggert Ólafsson visited the area and noted that the first settler's name was commemorated in a local well, *Ingolvs Brönd* ("Ingólfr's well") and the ruins of a boatshed, *Ingólfsnaust* ("Ingólfr's boathouse") (*Ferðabók* vol. I 42, vol. II 154-156 and 258-259). Another tradition connected a large rock on Reykjavík's shoreline, demolished before 1820, with Ingólfr, and it was assumed by some that it was used by him as a dock for his ship (Þorkell Grímsson 62). Present day visitors to Iceland's capital will find a pier adjacent to the Harpa concert hall (opened in 2011) and a busy square downtown named after the first settler, along with a street in the same neighborhood that runs along Arnarhóll hill, in *Sturlubók* the location of his final settlement. Einar Jónsson's impressive Ingólfr statue from 1924 now towers over Arnarhóll. Originally conceived by Sigurður Guðmundsson, the first curator of Iceland's Antiquarian Collection and creator of the modern Icelandic national costume *skautbúningur*, the statue was meant to be unveiled on Arnarhóll in 1874 - at the celebration of the millennium of Ingólfr's settlement. However, the project could only be realized fifty years later, as the commissioning of an appropriate artist, the designing of an agreeable "Ingólfr" effigy, and, most importantly, crowd-funding a bronze cast of a more-than life-sized statue proved quite challenging for members of Reykjavík's small middle class (Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir 215).

While his commemoration in form of a (national) monument and his representation in modern place names seems appropriate for his overall significance as the supposed

---

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this term, see Barraclough 92.

founder of the later capital, it is nonetheless surprising that Reykjavík itself is not named after Ingólfr. While *Sturlubók* does not comment on or explain the origins of the toponyms Reykjavík and Arnarhóll, the text uses the mentioned place-names in Southern Iceland (*Ingólfshöfði*, *Ingólfsfell*) along with the artifacts visible in the farmhouse in Reykjavík, to create an authoritative version of the first land-taking, highlighting the deeds of one specific settler, and establishing a cult of ancestry around him and his descendants. These place-names overwrite possible older or deviating versions of the settlement, which could have involved first settlers of different name and origin, and in the case of the *papar*, they even serve to indicate what or who is no longer there, and what or who can now be forgotten. With this, the story of Ingólfr and Hjörleifr fits well into Margret Clunies Ross's general evaluation of medieval Icelandic literature as "a complex way of asserting ownership and control over territory through texts," ultimately establishing a sense of identity through the literary form by enunciating Icelanders' myth of origin and legitimizing the *landnám* and the land "taken" in it (13). It is startling that Icelanders' rich medieval literary heritage has not preserved any text that provides a different version or deviating account of the *landnám* and earliest history of the country, or mentions a different first settler. Archaeologists Orri Vésteinsson and Adolf Friðriksson point out that aside from one Icelandic saga, *Svarfdæla saga*, which contains genealogical information on one settler that is significantly different from *Landnámabók*, all other preserved texts follow the information given by this text, and therefore do not contain any facts about the settlement that can be considered independent (144). This indicates that medieval authors and compilers either used a redaction of *Landnámabók* as a source, or were familiar with the same oral traditions which underlay its compilation, and which early on became part of a cognitive map of Icelanders' landscape. This cognitive map and *ethnoscape* was carried over to modern times by means of place names and external markers that served as mnemonic tools to represent the country's history. As the case of Ingólfr Arnarson's *landnám* and the following selected examples from the modern period demonstrate, such toponyms and mnemonic markers have both inspired folk traditions, and given rise to

tensions when local lore spun about them was recognized as deviating too far from the canonized medieval textual record.

In 1641, encouraged by an ongoing correspondence with Danish scholar and antiquary Ole Worm, Brynjólfur Sveinsson, then bishop of Skálholt, set out to lead an excursion to *Ingólfsfell* (alternatively spelled *Ingólfsfjall*) in search of Ingólfr Arnarson's grave. Tradition at the time had not only preserved the name *Ingólfsfjall* for a prominent mountain near today's Selfoss – specified in chapter 8 of *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* as the location where Ingólfr spent one winter – but also ascribed the name *Ing[ólfs]hóll*, “Ing[ólfrs]’s mound,” to a smaller mound on top of the mountain, where local tradition held that the body of the famous forefather was buried (Adolf Friðriksson “*Fornleifafræði*” 37n100). Excavating the mound in 1641, Brynjólfur could not find traces of human remains or artifacts, only stones and rubble. Watching his workers filling back these materials and erecting a cairn (“heath-marker”) on top of the mound, Brynjólfur urged his assistant, the poet and later priest Stefán Ólafsson, to compose a poem about the event. The resulting poem captures the uncanny experience of digging into an (empty) grave mound, and is called

“Á Ingólfshaugi” (On Ingólfr’s Mound):

Stóð af steindu smíði  
staður fornmanns hlaðinn,  
hlóðu að herrans boði  
heiðiteikn yfir leiði.

Haugur var hár og fagur  
hrundinn saman á grundu,  
en draugur dimmur og magur  
drundi björgum undir.

(Stefán Ólafsson 73)

(Monument of stone stood piled  
a place of a man from the old time,  
they filled again, on the master's order  
with a heath-marker over the grave.

The mound was tall and fair  
now it has collapsed on the ground,  
but a dark and thin ghost  
rumbled under the rocks.)

Despite Brynjólfur Sveinsson's failed excavation attempt, but maybe owed to by the poem that resulted from it, the idea that the first settler's grave was located on *Ingólfsfjall* inspired popular folk belief, evidenced by Jón Árnason and Magnús Grímsson, who were the first to record and collect folktales in Iceland in the second half of the nineteenth century. Volume 2 of *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (Icelandic Folktales and Legends) preserves tales about ancient Icelanders in a chapter entitled *Frá Fornmönnum* (Of the Forefathers), where two shorter stories specifically revolve around Ingólfr's grave on the mountain, explaining an important missing detail in *Landnámabók*: the location of the final resting place of the first settler. Both include the detail that a large treasure chest was located in his grave (possibly contained in his coffin), which in the first tale is discovered by locals from the area. In the story, no matter how hard the men tried, the chest could not be lifted up to ground level, and in the end, it fell back into the hole, taking the soil and earth that had been dug out along with it (Jón Árnason vol. II 75).

A second folk tale connects the pregnancy of an unmarried woman from the area along the Ölfusá River to several dreams in which Ingólfr approached her and asked her to share her bed. The woman agreed, and Ingólfr told her that the child resulting from the encounter was to be called Ingólfr, and when reaching the age of twelve, he should be sent up *Ingólfsfjall* to his grave mound to retrieve a treasure. When the boy turned twelve and went up the hill, he found a large chest, yet he was unable to open it. When he went back later to try again, the chest had disappeared (75-76).

That the historical memory about Ingólfr's settlement as preserved in *Landnámabók* was considered superior to oral folk traditions connected to the *landnám*, and had established itself as authoritative for Iceland's earliest modern writers (and effectively been canonized) is best illustrated in collector Árni Magnússon's report in his *Chorographica Islandica* from 1712. According to his observations made while traveling around Iceland on commission of the Danish king between 1702-1712, the inhabitants of Seltjarnarnes (the peninsula bordering Reykjavík) believed the name *Reykjavík* (Smoke-Bay) stemmed from Ingólfr's high-seat pillars. Their tradition held that the pillars had not landed on the peninsula itself but on the outlying island Örfirisey, which seemed unfit for settlement. The pillars were then burnt by the first settler, and when the smoke drifted towards the mainland, he understood that this would be his final settlement place, so he named the area "Smoke Bay":

Reykjavík segja Seltjarnarnesingar heiti þar af, að þá Ingólfur skaut öndvegissúlum sínum fyrir borð, hafi þær rekið í Effersey. Það hafi Ingólfi þótt ólíklegt, að þær vísuðu sér að svo litlu landnámi, hafi því súlurnar þar brennt, er nú heitir Reykjanes á Effersey, og viljað láta sér vera landnáms tilvísan þar reykinn lagði á. Reykinn hafi lagt á Víkur stæði og síðan heiti það Reykjavík. Nugæ, qvæ non conveniunt cum Landnámu. (Árni Magnússon 60)

(The people of Seltjarnarnes believe that Reykjavík was named from when Ingólfr cast his high-seat pillars, and they landed on Effersey. It seemed unlikely to Ingólfr that they would indicate such a small area for his *landnám*, and he had the pillars burnt at what is now Reykjanes on Effersey, and resolved to accept the area the smoke drifted to as his *landnám*. The smoke drifted to a bay which since is called Reykjavík [smoke bay]. Nonsense, which does not agree with *Landnáma*[bók].)

To Árni Magnússon, who as collector and conservator was familiar with *Landnámabók* as a text, anything in contrast to this established version of the event of the settlement constituted *nugae*, nonsense, even if it remains curious that he deemed this alternative tradition worth recording. The passage demonstrates how effectively the textual record

preserved in *Landnámabók*, authenticated by the artifacts described in the text and the place-names/toponyms generated by them, instantly overwrite differing oral traditions present at the actual location. Resorting not to the landscape as found on the spot, but the landscape as found in the text, this episode confirms that the true land-taking of Icelanders happened in writing and on vellum, and not on the ground.

### Works Cited

- Adolf Friðriksson. *Sagas and Popular Antiquarianism in Icelandic Archaeology*. Worldwide Archaeology Series, 10. Aldershot: Avebury, 1994.
- Adolf Friðriksson. *Íslensk Fornleifafræði fyrir 1880*. I.-II. hluti. Reykjavík: Fornleifastofnun Íslands, 1998.
- Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson. "Creating a Past: A Historiography of the Settlement of Iceland." *Contact, Continuity, and Collapse: The Norse Colonization of the North Atlantic*. Ed. James H. Barrett. Turnhout: Brepols, 2003. 139-162.
- Agnar Helgason, Eileen Hickey et al. "mtDNA and the Islands of the North Atlantic: Estimating the Proportions of Norse and Gaelic Ancestry." *American Journal of Human Genetics* 68 (2001): 723-37.
- Árni Einarsson and Orri Vésteinsson. "Living in Reykjavík in the 10th Century." *Reykjavík 871±2. Landnámssýningin. The Settlement Exhibition*. Ed. Orri Vésteinsson, Helgi Þorláksson and Árni Einarsson. Reykjavík: Minjasafn Reykjavíkur, 2006. 88-107.
- Árni Magnússon. *Chorographica Islandica*. Safn til Sögu Íslands og Íslenzkra Bókmennta, Annar Flokkur, I.2. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1955.
- Barraclough, Eleanor Rosamund. "Naming the Landscape in the *Landnám* Narratives of the *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók*." *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 36 (2012): 79-101.
- Bödl, Klaus. *Eigi einhamr. Beiträge zum Weltbild der Eyrbyggja und anderer Isländersagas*. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde Vol. 48. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005.
- Clunies Ross, Margaret. "Textual Territory: The Regional and Genealogical Dynamic of

- Medieval Icelandic Literary Production.” *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997): 9-30.
- Ferðabók Eggerts Ólafssonar og Bjarna Pálssonar*. Jón Eiríksson og Gerhard Schöning gáfu út, Steindór Steindórsson þýddi. I-II. Reykjavík: Örn og Örlygur, 1981.
- Gísli Sigurðsson. *Gaelic Influence in Iceland: Historical and Literary Contacts- A Survey of Research*. *Studia Islandica* 46. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2000.
- Glauser, Jürg. “Sagas of Icelanders (Íslendinga sögur) and *þættir* as the Literary Representation of a New Social Space.” *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*. Ed. Margaret Clunies Ross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 203-220.
- Grønvold, Karl et al. “Ash Layers from Iceland in the Greenland GRIP Ice Core Correlated with Oceanic and Land Sediments.” *Earth and Planetary Science Letters* 135 (1995): 149-155.
- Guðmundur Hálfðanarson. “Þingvellir: An Icelandic ‘Lieu de Mémoire.’” *History and Memory* 12 (2000): 4-29.
- Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson “Þjóðsagnir og sagnfræði.” *Saga* 8 (1970): 268-296.
- Helgi Þorláksson. “Tradition.” *Reykjavík 871±2. Landnámssýningin. The Settlement Exhibition*. Ed. Orri Vésteinsson, Helgi Þorláksson and Árne Einarsson. Reykjavík: Minjasafn Reykjavíkur, 2006. 48-64.
- Helgi Þorláksson and Orri Vésteinsson. “Myth.” *Reykjavík 871±2. Landnámssýningin. The Settlement Exhibition*. Ed. Orri Vésteinsson, Helgi Þorláksson and Árne Einarsson. Reykjavík: Minjasafn Reykjavíkur, 2006. 68-85.
- Historia Norwegie*. Ed. Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, trans. Peter Fisher. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003.
- Hjörleifur Stefánsson and Þórunn Sigríður Þorgrímsdóttir. “Reykjavík 871±2.” *Reykjavík 871±2. Landnámssýningin. The Settlement Exhibition*. Ed. Orri Vésteinsson, Helgi Þorláksson and Árne Einarsson. Reykjavík: Minjasafn Reykjavíkur, 2006. 132-134.
- Hoefig, Verena. “Foundational Myth in Sturlubók.” *Sturla Þórðarson - Skald, Chieftain and Lawman*. Ed. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Sverrir Jakobsson. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2017. 70-82.
- Hoggart, Carol. “A Layered Landscape: How the Family Sagas Mapped Medieval Iceland.”

- Limina. A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*, 16 (2010)  
<[http://www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/2571067/HogartArticle.pdf](http://www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2571067/HogartArticle.pdf)> [accessed 1 November 2017].
- Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*. Jakob Benediktsson gaf út. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1968.
- Jensen, Anders Gade. "Landet i tekst. Stedet som samlingspunkt for historie, erindring og geografi i Landnámabók-traditionen i Island 1100-1300." Diss. Aarhus University, 2012.
- Jón Árnason. *Íslenskar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri*. I-II. Leipzig: AÐ Forlagi J.C. Hinrich's Bokaverzlunar, 1864.
- Jón Jóhannesson. *Gerðir Landnámabókar*. Reykjavík: Félagsprentsmiðjan, 1941.
- Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir. "Monuments to Settlers of the North: A Means to Strengthen National Identity." *Images of the North: Histories – Identities – Ideas*. Ed. Sverrir Jakobsson. Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2009. 205-227.
- Kristján Ahronson. *Into the Ocean: Vikings, Irish, and Environmental Change in Iceland and the North*. Toronto: University Press, 2015.
- Landnámabók: Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*. Jakob Benediktsson gaf út. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1968.
- Lerner, Marion. *Landnahme-Mythos, kulturelles Gedächtnis und nationale Identität. Isländische Reisevereine im frühen 20. Jahrhundert*. Berlin: Wissenschaftsverlag, 2010.
- Lindow, John. "Íslendingabók and Myth." *Scandinavian Studies* 69 (1997): 454-464.
- Lúðvík Kristjánsson. *Við fjörð og vík. Brot úr endurminningum Knud Zimsens fyrrverandi borgarstjóra*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1948.
- Miller, William I. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: Univ. Press, 1990.
- Morris, Christopher D. "From Birsay to Brattahlíð: Recent Perspectives on Norse Christianity in Orkney, Shetland and the North Atlantic Region." *Scandinavia and Europe 800–1350: Contact, Conflict and Coexistence*. Ed. Jonathan Adams and Katherine Holman.

- Turnhout: Brepols, 2004.
- Skarðsárbók: Landnámabók Björns Jónssonar á Skarðsá.* Jakob Benediktsson gaf út.  
Reykjavík: Prentsmiðjan Hólar, 1958.
- Smith, Anthony. *Chosen Peoples.* Oxford: Univ. Press, 2003.
- Stefán Ólafsson. *Kvæði.* Kaupmannahöfn: Bianco Luno, 1885.
- Sutherland, Patricia. "Norse and Natives in the Eastern Arctic." *The Viking World.* Ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price. London / New York: Routledge, 2008. 613-617.
- Sveinbjörn Rafnsson. *Studier i Landnámabók. Kritiska bidrag till den isländska fristatstidens historia.* Bibliotheca Historica Lundensis 31. Lund: Carl Bloms Boktryckeri, 1974.
- Sørensen, Preben Meulengracht. "Social Institutions and Belief Systems of Medieval Iceland (ca. 870–1400) and Their Relation to Literary Production." *Old Icelandic Literature and Society.* Ed. Margaret Clunies Ross. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 42. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000, 8-28.
- Vésteinn Ólason, "Family Sagas," *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture.* Ed. Rory Mc Turk. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 102-118.
- Vala Björg Garðarsdóttir. "Alþingisreiturinn: Upphaf landnáms í Reykjavík." *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags* 102 (2011): 5-43.
- Wamhoff, Laura Sonja. *Isländische Erinnerungskultur 1100-1300. Altnordische Historiographie und kulturelles Gedächtnis.* Beiträge zur Nordischen Philologie 57. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2016.
- Wellendorf, Jonas. "The Interplay of Pagan and Christian Traditions in Icelandic Settlement Myths." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 109 (2010): 1-21.
- Þorkell Grímsson. "Reykvískar Fornleifar." in: *Reykjavík í 1100 ár.* Ed. Helgi Þorláksson. Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1974. 53-74.