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## Constructing a Landscape in *Eyrbyggja saga*: the Case of *Dritsker*

Already in the 1960s, Michel Foucault heralded what later was to become the Spatial Turn of the Humanities and Social Sciences by arguing that a focus specifically on history was a characteristic obsession of the nineteenth century and that the present day of his time, rather than being an epoch of history, should be seen as an ‘epoch of space’ (Foucault 2006 [1967]: 317). In the following decades, the increased interest in the topic of spatiality that had become manifest in this much-quoted dictum led to intensified research into questions of space, including specifically also questions of our understanding of landscapes (e.g., DeLue and Elkins 2008; Mitchell 2002; Schama 1996; Tilley 1994; Cosgrove 1984). Much of this research came to focus on issues of ‘meaning’: ‘landscape’ was not so much taken into the focus of research as a physical, topographical entity but rather as a product of cultural forces which use the physical landscape as a kind of canvas that carries and conveys certain semantics. Thus, ‘landscape’ primarily came to be seen as a “work of the mind” (Schama

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the account of the settlement of Þórsnes by Þórólfr Mostrarskegg as it is presented in *Eyrbyggja saga*, relating it to the question of the applicability of current thinking on landscape to the interpretation of Old Norse literature. While current approaches both to landscape in general and to the construction of the landscape of Þórsnes in *Eyrbyggja saga* in particular tend to emphasise the function of ‘landscape’ as a medium conveying existential ‘meanings’, a close reading of the literary landscape of Þórsnes in *Eyrbyggja saga* rather suggests that much of the literary construction of this landscape should be seen as consciously grotesque and intended to be understood as such by the saga’s contemporary audience. Central for this reading is an interpretation of the place-name *Dritsker* as meaning “Guano Skerry”. This translation is suggested by the lexical evidence but has been avoided by previous critics, who chose to adapt their interpretations of the place-name to the story told about it in the saga and thus missed an arguably central clue for the interpretation of the saga episode. Some thoughts are also offered on the reasons for why a thirteenth-century author, perhaps working in the monastery at Helgafell, might have chosen to present the past of this area in a purposefully grotesque fashion.

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1996: 6–7; cf. Macfarlane 2008), a cultural construct which should best be understood from the perspective of what people *thought* about it, rather than asking what it (‘really’) *was*.<sup>1</sup> Within this discourse, one of the terms most frequently used to describe the mechanism of this construction of ‘landscape’ is the term ‘memory’: commonly, the ‘meaning’ that is ‘inscribed’ into landscape, and which is indeed thought to be fundamentally constitutive of ‘landscape’, is conceptualised as an accretion of memories. To pick just two examples representative of this outlook, one could name the works of Simon Schama and Robert Macfarlane. The former describes ‘landscape’ as a “scenery [...] built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock” (Schama 1996: 7), while the latter conceptualises our perception of landscapes as a process of ‘reading’, in which we “interpret their forms in the light of our own experience and memory, and that of our shared cultural memory” (Macfarlane 2008: 18; on the term ‘cultural memory’ cf. Assmann 1999; Assmann 1992).

While not originally a development that had any particular roots in the study of Old Norse history and culture, this interest in the semantisation of landscape, not least through ‘meanings’ and ‘memories’, has, during the last two decades, also increasingly been taken up in research on the medieval North.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, approaches focusing on the construction of ‘landscape’ as a unit of cultural ‘meaning’ have also been applied to Icelandic saga literature, including the narrative construction of the Þórsnes peninsula in *Eyrbyggja saga* that will stand at the centre of this article.<sup>3</sup> The most recent example is provided by an analysis by Carl Phelpstead, who suggests that “*Eyrbyggja saga* is, among other things, concerned with the relationship between natural environment and human civilisation [...] and specifically with the transition from a physical environment unaffected by humans to a state of ‘natureculture’ in which human cultivation and culture both bring about changes in the physical environment and also endow it with culturally contingent meanings” (Phelpstead 2014: 4).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Macfarlane 2008: 18: “when we look at a landscape, we do not see what is there, but largely what we think is there.”

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Mayburd 2014; Brink and Nordeide 2013; Brink 2001. On ‘cultural memory’ cf. from a Norse perspective Hermann 2009, 2010; on landscape and cultural memory cf. Barraclough 2012.

<sup>3</sup> References to the saga are based on the edition by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935; all translations are mine unless specified otherwise.

<sup>4</sup> With a comparable general thrust – i.e., interpreting the text as fundamentally concerned with the establishment of society and the ‘body politic’ – cf. in recent years also Wanner 2009. He puts the same episode in the centre of his discussion that also the follow-

Considering how the first settlement of Þórsnes by Þórólfr Mostrarskegg is presented by *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 4),<sup>5</sup> it may indeed seem immediately plausible that this settlement account describes how an empty natural space, devoid of any cultural significance, is turned into a landscape full of cultural – and especially religious – meaning. According to the saga, Þórólfr was a devout sacrificer and owner of a temple in Norway. At some point, however, he fell out of grace with the Norwegian king. Being faced with the choice of either handing himself over to the mercy of the king or emigrating to Iceland, Þórólfr performed a great sacrifice to Thor and consulted the god about what to do; the answer of the god indicated that Þórólfr should choose emigration. Thus, he took the timber of his temple and some of the earth from under it and brought everything on board his ship, together with his other possessions. After his arrival in Iceland, Þórólfr then took his high-seat pillars, which had stood in his temple and one of which was carved with an image of the god Thor, and threw them over board, vowing to settle where the pillars washed ashore. This happened on Þórsnes, and so Þórólfr settled down there and gave the peninsula its name of “Thor’s Peninsula”. He carried fire around his land-claim, named its bays and rivers (including one Hofsvágr, “Temple Bay”, and one Þórsá, “Thor’s River”), and built a temple at Hofstaðir (“Temple-Steads”); the description of this temple is one of the most detailed temple descriptions in Old Norse literature, even though it is clear that it contains little historical truth about the Viking Age and is primarily based on contemporary Christian and more generally biblical motifs (e.g., Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2007: 499; cf. Bödl 2005: 218–225; Wanner 2009: 238–239). The saga then concludes its description of how Þórólfr took land on Þórsnes with the following passage:

Þórólfr kallaði Þórsnes milli Vígrafjarðar ok Hofsvágs. Í því nesi stendr eitt fjall; á því fjalli hafði Þórólfr svá mikinn átrúnað, at þangat skyldi enginn maðr óþveginn líta ok engu skyldi tortíma í fjallinu, hvárki fé né mönnum, nema sjálft gengi í brott. Þat fjall kallaði hann Helgafell ok

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ing pages will focus on, but reads it by employing the anthropological theories of purity, pollution, and the formation of the socio-political order that were developed by the anthropologist Mary Douglas in the 1960s. *Mutatis mutandis*, I hold the same reservations against this approach as I will on the following pages develop on the more recent example of Phelpsstead 2014, even though it should be stressed that both contributions also open up fascinating perspectives on the saga.

<sup>5</sup> The parallel account in *Landnámabók* (S85, H73; ed. Jakob Benediktsson 1968) is now thought to be directly dependent on *Eyrbyggja saga* (Wellendorf 2010: 8 *pace* Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999: 151) and will therefore be left aside here.

trúði, at hann myndi þangat fara, þá er hann dœi, ok allir á nesinu hans frændr. Þar sem Þórr hafði á land komit, á tanganum nessins, lét hann hafa dóma alla ok setti þar heraðsþing; þar var ok svá mikill helgistaðr, at hann vildi með engu móti láta saurga völlinn, hvárki í heiptarblóði, ok eigi skyldi þar álfrek ganga, ok var haft til þess sker eitt, er Dritsker var kallat.

Þórólfr called the peninsula between the fjord Vigrafjörðr and the bay Hofsvágr (“Temple Bay”) Þórsnes (“Thor’s Peninsula”). On this peninsula, there is a mountain; Þórólfr had such a great faith in this mountain that no man should look there unwashed and one should kill nothing and nobody on the mountain, neither animals nor men, unless they went away by themselves. He called that mountain Helgafell (“Holy Mountain”) and believed that he, and all his relatives on the peninsula, would go there when they died. Where Thor had come on land, on the tip of the peninsula, he let all courts of law be held and instituted a district assembly there. There was such a great holy place that he wanted in no way to let the field be polluted, neither by spilled blood, nor should one relieve oneself there, and for that one had a skerry which was called Dritsker (“Skerry of Droppings”).

In sum, according to this account, Þórólfr arrives in Iceland led by divine guidance; he builds a temple there; he performs a fire-ritual to sanctify his land; he names many of the features of his land with toponyms referring to his favourite god Thor (Þórsnes; Þórsá) or to the temple (Hofstaðir; Hofsvágr); he defines a mountain on the peninsula as a place of particular sanctity and indeed the place in which he and his relatives are to live on after their deaths, giving it a name reflecting this holiness (Helgafell); and he establishes rules of ritual purity which protect the holiness of the assembly site by banishing impurity to a skerry which receives an aptly dirty name (Dritsker). Given that the geographical space here under discussion is a triangular headland barely measuring ten kilometres by seven at the points of its greatest extent, this account presents a picture of an extremely densely semanticised landscape.

The skerry Dritsker is presented as the last place to be named by Þórólfr, and as such it already receives a certain prominence in the narrative. Moreover, in the further development of the saga’s storyline, this skerry soon comes to play a prominent role; its narrative centrality in fact almost seems to stand in an inverse relationship to its marginal geographical position within the ‘sacred landscape’ of Þórsnes. During Þórólfr’s lifetime, his rules of ritual purity are respected: nobody relieves themselves on the holy assembly site, rather using the skerry for this

purpose. After Þórólfr's death, however, some members of the Kjallekling family are no longer prepared to accept the laws of purity that had been set down by Þórólfr (ch. 9). They argue that the prohibition against relieving oneself on the assembly site is utterly unheard-of elsewhere and merely reflects the haughtiness of the people of Þórsnes, who think themselves above all others and who think that their land is more holy than other lands. In the following, the disagreement between the heirs of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg and the Kjalleklings leads to a violent confrontation that ends with several men dead on both sides and many more wounded; the slaughter is such that the holy soil is drenched in blood. Thus, the assembly site is polluted after all, if with human blood rather than human excrement. The argument is settled later on, and as part of the settlement it is decided that, having been drenched in blood, the old assembly site is no longer suitable to serve its elevated purpose and the assembly is moved to where it is "today"; in this new location, the offending rules concerning defecation are abolished (ch. 10). Only now, the final cultural topography of Þórsnes is established, and in this way it happens that the marginal skerry Dritsker has been the pivot around which the final creation of the socio-cultural order of this landscape has turned.

Much has been made of all this. Carl Phelpstead considers the ascription of sacrality to the area, which leads to the fateful establishment and naming of Dritsker, as an example of Yi-Fu Tuan's concept of 'geopiety' (Phelpstead 2014: 8–9; cf. Tuan 1976). Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson argues that it constitutes an authentic Viking Age tradition which illustrates how painstakingly the holiness of the thing assembly was respected in ancient times (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2007: 499–500; similarly: Ranke in Hinz *et al.* 1973: 17–18). Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards see the bloodshed about the use of Dritsker as the first of a number of points indicative of "undercurrents of unreasoning pride and smouldering neurotic violence" running through core parts of *Eyrbyggja saga* (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 5). Yet the very strangeness of the tale – Hermann Pálsson and Edwards rightly call the argument about the use of Dritsker something which "might appear at first sight a trivial and rather comical matter" (1989: 5) – advises caution.

This is particularly so considering a lexical point which so far appears to have escaped the attention of all commentators: it is anything but clear that *Dritsker* is simply a "Dirt Skerry" as the term was translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (1989: 30 [note 7]; 1972: 46), and even less does its meaning appear to be captured by the translation "Shit Skerry", which in recent years was proposed by Phelpstead (2014: 9),

Wanner (2009: 215), Quinn and Regal (2003: 77), and Quinn (1997: 134).<sup>6</sup> Such translations of the toponym follow the narrative framework established by the saga. The saga claims a direct connection between the prohibition of human defecation on the assembly site and the skerry: because of the holiness of the assembly, the skerry serves as the only local toilet. The wide-spread usage of Old Norse storytelling suggests that the name of the skerry is derived from its function,<sup>7</sup> and this is also insinuated by the structure of the saga narrative, where the toponym appears at the end of a passage in which Þórólfr names the various parts of his land and in doing so derives most names from their sacral functions or characteristics (“Temple-Steads”, “Temple-Bay”, “Holy Mountain”, etc.). This observation forms the basis for the common renderings of the toponym *Dritsker*, which translate the place-name as a functional part of the narrative: the name of the skerry where one has to go to take a shit is translated as “Shit Skerry”.

The saga insinuates this translation, and therefore such a translation definitely is not ‘wrong’. Yet it may obscure one important aspect of the toponym: its first component part *drit* seems to have strong connotations specifically of bird droppings. Already Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson defined the word as meaning “*dirt*, esp. of birds” (1874: s.v. ‘drit’), and more recent lexicography has not changed this picture. The Copenhagen *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* defines the word in general as meaning “lort, mæg / shit, excrement”, but it is worth highlighting that in the specific attestations collected there it is (letting aside only semantically unclear uses in nicknames) applied exclusively to animal and bird excrement, not to human excrement: of the two attestations of the simplex in Old Norse literature that the *Dictionary* is able to draw on, its

<sup>6</sup> Similarly cf. the equivalent translations “Skideskær” by Stavnem (2014: 166), “Kack-schäre” by Bödl (2011: 262), and “Scheiß-Schäre” by von See (1972: 25). Wanner also translates the name as “Waste-Skerry” (2009: 213), a translation which again suggests an association between the skerry and human bodily waste.

<sup>7</sup> As a text with a particular density of examples cf. *Landnámabók*. A particularly close and explicit parallel is provided by the bizarre aetiology of the toponym *Dritvík* in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991, ch. 4, where Bárðr and his companions defecate in an inlet and the faeces, being driven ashore in the bay *Dritvík*, is claimed to be the origin of this toponym. This parallel is particularly interesting as it may reflect a reading of *Eyrbyggja saga*: the late date of *Bárðar saga* and the prominent role of intertextuality in its makeup (cf. Jón Skaptason and Pulsiano 1984: xiii, xv, xxi–xxiii) suggest that the *Dritvík*-narrative probably constitutes a literary cross-reference that directly reworks the *Dritsker*-episode of *Eyrbyggja saga*, and this possibility is further underlined by the use of *ganga álfrek/á borð at álfreka* in both texts, which seems like a deliberate verbal echo.

occurrence in *Piðriks saga af Bern* refers to the excrement of chicken, while a second attestation in *Mortu saga ok Maríu Magðalenu* refers to the excrement of the fantastical animal *Bonachum*.<sup>8</sup> That the word does not seem to refer to human excrement is also reinforced by the compounds formed with *drit*: in compounds, *drit* is attested exclusively in composition with *dúfa* (“dove, pigeon”) or *fugl* (“bird”) in the forms *dúfnadrit* “dove/pigeon droppings” and *fugladrit* “bird droppings”; this suggests an association of the term not only generally with animals but specifically with bird excrement.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, and confirming this impression conveyed by the medieval material, in modern Icelandic *drit* means “bird droppings”.<sup>10</sup> Thus, while the limited number of early attestations does not allow absolute certainty, the lexicographic evidence suggests that *Dritsker* does not mean “Shit Skerry”, but “Guano Skerry”. Such an interpretation also makes considerable sense from an environmental perspective: if rocks on the shores of the North Atlantic are spattered with so much excrement that it provides a fitting basis for naming them, this excrement is most likely to be bird excrement. A (purely typological) parallel is provided by the Irish toponym *Fó na gCacannaí*, “creek of the droppings”, a cliff-sided inlet serving as the harbour of the small island Oileán Imill off the Irish west coast, which takes its name from the guano left there by cormorants (Robinson 2009: 346). An explanation why it was nevertheless possible to tie the toponym *Dritsker* into a story about human excrement might be provided by the verb *dríta*, which has a broader meaning than the noun and is used also of human defecation.<sup>11</sup> While it would seem questionable to simply transfer this wider meaning of the verb to the noun, the verb’s wider semantic field might have provided the possibility for the associative bridge between the place-name *Dritsker* and human defecation that was necessary to make the story work.

The semantic distinction between bird droppings and human excrement may at first glance seem like a comparatively minor one, and that the verb *dríta* is actually attested for human defecation underlines that there was no unbridgeable conceptual gap between the two. Yet even so,

<sup>8</sup> Københavns universitet, *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, <[http://onpweb.nfi.sc.ku.dk/wordlist\\_e\\_adv.html](http://onpweb.nfi.sc.ku.dk/wordlist_e_adv.html)>, s.v. ‘drit’ (06/03/2016).

<sup>9</sup> Københavns universitet, *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, <[http://onpweb.nfi.sc.ku.dk/wordlist\\_e\\_adv.html](http://onpweb.nfi.sc.ku.dk/wordlist_e_adv.html)>, s.v. ‘drit’, ‘dúfnadrit’, ‘fugladrit’ (06/03/2016).

<sup>10</sup> ISLEX orðabókin Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, <<http://islex.hi.is/>>, s.v. ‘drit’ (07/03/2016), giving the range of meanings as “fugleklat, fugleekskremitter, fuglelort”.

<sup>11</sup> Københavns universitet, *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, <[http://onpweb.nfi.sc.ku.dk/wordlist\\_e\\_adv.html](http://onpweb.nfi.sc.ku.dk/wordlist_e_adv.html)>, s.v. ‘dríta’ (12/03/2017).



the meaning of the noun *drit* seems to be restricted to animal and especially bird excrement, and if its extant attestations are representative for its medieval usage, then this has far-reaching implications for our understanding of the plotline of this section of *Eyrbyggja saga*. In the saga, the whole sub-plot of the first violent confrontation between the Kjalleklings and the descendants of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg hinges on the laws of ritual purity which are tied to the use of Dritsker and from which Dritsker is insinuated to derive its name. If, however, *Dritsker* does not mean “Shit Skerry” but “Guano Skerry”, then it follows that its name is not derived from a sacred obligation to use this skerry to relief oneself, but rather from the habit of the local birds to do so. Yet if this is so and the skerry really is named from the bird droppings spattering it, it follows in turn that the whole tale of the sacred obligation to use the skerry to relief oneself is purely fictitious. This actually seems to be hinted at in the saga itself: when the Kjalleklings refuse to go out to Dritsker, they do so on the grounds that relieving oneself on the assembly site itself is entirely normal at all other assemblies (ch. 9). Here, there may be a hint aimed at the text’s audience, emphasising that the tale of Dritsker is not a record of ancient assembly lore but a novel tale whose witty invention the audience may be expected to appreciate. Indeed, it seems likely that the tale’s audience did appreciate the story of Dritsker as a witty invention. The extant attestations of *drit* associate the term primarily with bird droppings, and if we can assume that the extant attestations are representative of the term’s use during the Middle Ages, then the saga’s audience would likewise have associated *drit* with bird excrement and would intuitively have understood *Dritsker* to mean, in the first instance, “Guano Skerry”. The discrepancy between the place-name and the tale told to explain it would have been glaring; and thus, to take the place-name “Guano Skerry” and to make it the nucleus of a fantastic and grotesque tale about human excrement – a tale which is structurally central to the further development of the saga plot – must have been, first and foremost, good fun. This might have been the more so if one considers the image that the place-name “Guano Skerry” and the saga narrative seem to conjure up between themselves: the local dignitaries taking a shit not only, being on a skerry, probably quite exposed, but also squatting amid the similarly occupied birds to do so.

Seeing the story of Dritsker as forming a conscious counterpoint to the semantics of the place-name is an approach which would not be isolated within the Norse culture of storytelling about places. One among many parallels in medieval Icelandic literature is the tale explaining place-



names of the type *Hálfðanarhaugr* in *Hálfðanar saga svarta* (ch. 9; ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941). This tale tells that Hálfðan the Black was an eminent king under whose rule there had been exceptionally good seasons. When he died, the powerful men in the different parts of his kingdom all wanted his body to be buried in their lands, in order to ensure that they might profit from his beneficent power also in the future. Since, however, there was only one dead king, but many parts of his kingdom that hoped for the blessing of his body, the decision was made to cut the body into a number of pieces and to bury each in a mound in a different part of the country; and these mounds were called *Hálfðanarhaugar*, “Mounds of Hálfðan”.

At the basis of this tale lies the observation that there is a number of burial mounds that all bear the same name: *Hálfðanarhaugr* or “Hálfðan’s Mound”. The obvious explanation of the recurrence of this particular toponym is that ‘Hálfðan’ is a reasonably common personal name; therefore, since there were many men by the name of Hálfðan, in due course there also were many dead men by that name and thus there had to be equally many burial mounds called “Hálfðan’s Mound”. The story in *Hálfðanar saga svarta*, however, proposes a more interesting aetiology: perhaps inspired by and playing on medieval practices common in the cult of the saints, it explains the multitude of identically named mounds through a single individual whose beneficent power inspired a butchering of his body and its distribution across the land. What this story does is to take a (group of) semantically clear place-name(s) and to explain these names in a way which takes a conscious step away from the obvious semantics of the name, a step furthermore which, given its secular rather than hagiographical context, seems at least slightly grotesque. Thus, what happens here is exactly what also happens with the toponym *Dritsker* in *Eyrbyggja saga*. In both cases, the storyteller takes a place-name with a clear meaning and explains it through a story which consciously moves away from the semantics of the toponym. In this way, a tension is created between the name and the story told to ‘explain’ it, creating an effect of grotesqueness which in all likelihood should be seen as a strategy to provide witty entertainment, at least on one level of the narrative.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This way of developing stories around place-names is not restricted to Old Norse literature, but also extremely common in medieval Irish literature, where it even constitutes a genre of its own: the genre of *dinnsenchas* or “Lore of High Places”. There, the construction of grotesqueness found in Icelandic place-name stories like the ones about Dritsker and the *Hálfðanarhaugr* is even pushed one step further, as the *dinnsenchas* collections are

In the case of Þórsnes, also other elements of the story appear to tie in with such an interpretation. *Eyrbyggja saga* tells that after the original assembly site had been defiled by the blood spilled there, the place of the assembly was moved eastwards to where it was in the storyteller's present. The claim that there was an assembly site in an easterly part of Þórsnes tallies very nicely with the toponymy of the peninsula: some two kilometres (as the crow flies) to the south-east of Stykkishólmur there is to this day a farmstead that bears the name Þingvellir, "Assembly Fields"; this appears to be the site that *Eyrbyggja saga* has in mind as the place to which the assembly site was shifted. However, since Dritsker seems not to be "Shit Skerry" but "Guano Skerry", and therefore the whole narrative associated with its name most likely can be considered fictional, it seems probable that the assembly site was not shifted to Þingvellir, but always was at Þingvellir. Out of a consciously grotesque aetiology of the name *Dritsker*, *Eyrbyggja saga* seems to spin a predecessor to the assembly site of Þingvellir which, as likely as not, never existed.

The most interesting feature of Þingvellir, which perhaps further corroborates the interpretative approach taken here, is described in ch. 10 of the saga. There it is said that there was a circle in which the men doomed to die were sentenced to be sacrificed. These sacrifices were performed on a specific stone:

í þeim hring stendr Þórs steinn, er þeir menn váru brotnir um, er til blóta váru hafðir, ok sér enn blóðslitinn á steininum.

In that circle stands Thor's Stone, where the men were broken who were used as sacrifices, and one still sees the colour of the blood on the stone.

Here, the saga tells another tale of barbaric pagan bloodshed induced by religious delusions, and again, this tale is directly tied to the landscape in a puzzling way: pagan blood sacrifices provide the aetiology for the red colour of a stone by the new assembly field. In this context, already W.G. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson – and many others after them – have remarked that there really is a stone at Þingvellir farm which shows a striking red colour caused by inclusions of iron in the rock;<sup>13</sup> probably

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ordered by place-names and commonly present more than one explanation for each name under discussion, with each explanation generally being more bizarre than its predecessor. Cf. the *Bodleian Dinnsenchas*, ed. and transl. Stokes 1892; the *Rennes Dinnsenchas*, ed. and transl. Stokes 1894–1895; the *Edinburgh Dinnsenchas*, ed. and transl. Stokes 1893; and the *Metrical Dinnsenchas*, ed. and transl. Gwynn 1903–1935.

<sup>13</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899: 95–96 (with fig. 82); Bödl 2005: 213; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999: 40 with note 45; Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 18 (note 3).

this is the same stone already seen by whoever invented the story of Thor's gory sacrificial stone, and the direct basis for this tale. Here, a narrative seems to have been directly, and creatively, developed out of a physical feature of the landscape, just as in the case of Dritsker a story had been developed out of a place-name. In both cases, it seems, a storyteller took the raw material they found in the landscape about them and gave it a gory and grotesque twist to transform it into a good story.

As outlined at the beginning of this article, much landscape theoretical writing today primarily views 'landscape' as a canvas inscribed with 'meaning' through a (more or less creative) narrative reworking of ('cultural') 'memories'. Specifically in respect to *Eyrbyggja saga*, a recent example of such an approach is the work of Carl Phelpstead, in whose reading the story of Dritsker plays a core role in the semantisation of the landscape of Þórsnes (2014: 8–9). Yet having had a somewhat more detailed look at two core elements of the construction of the landscape of Þórsnes in this saga, one wonders whether such an approach is always appropriate for this text, and perhaps for Icelandic saga literature more generally. Both the sub-plot relating to Dritsker and the gory happenings at Thor's Stone appear to be entirely fictitious. What is more, the Dritsker sub-plot is based on twisting the semantics of a place-name whose real significance probably would have been obvious to a contemporary audience, just as nobody in this audience is likely to have seriously believed that bloodstains on a stone last for more than two centuries. What we are observing here, therefore, does not seem to be a construction of 'meaning', and even less a construction of 'memories', but a conscious literary play with places that weaves stories around places which gain their literary effect not from being believed, but from being recognised as consciously grotesque inventions that entertain through the very fact of their grotesqueness and because they move away from verisimilitude in a witty way.<sup>14</sup> Or in other words: what we are seeing in *Eyrbyggja saga* may to a large extent not be what the saga pretends on a superficial level, namely that an empty natural space, devoid of any cultural significance, is turned into a landscape full of cultural meaning. Rather, this space was

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<sup>14</sup> Pace Bödl, who prefers to emphasise the saga author's desire to create an authentic picture of the time he is writing about (2005: 226): "Man kann [...] davon ausgehen, daß nicht nur Snorri Sturluson, sondern auch die Autoren der *Eyrb.* und der *Kjalnesinga saga* bemüht waren, ein unter den ideologischen wie quellenmäßigen Rahmenbedingungen des Hochmittelalters verlässliches Bild der religiösen Vorstellungen und Praktiken der Sagazeit zu geben." In a similar vein cf. Schach 1972 (esp. pp. 114, 116, 119, 126), who likewise sees the work of the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* as an antiquarian endeavour aiming at an authentic reproduction of the past.

already fully charged with cultural meaning even before the storyteller first took up his pen, i.e., already before the stories of the saga began to be told it was a space whose individual places were all already named, down to the last small “Guano Skerry”. It seems that what the saga does is not to establish ‘meaning’, but to take previously semanticised places (“Guano Skerry”) and to twist their pre-existing meaning into a good story which takes its entertainment value from the discrepancy between the pre-existing character of the place and its grotesque new story. It should be emphasised that this narrative device – explaining a place by a story that forms a conscious counterpoint to the semantics of its name or, in the case of Thor’s Stone, its physicality – seems meant to be understood as such. The material under scrutiny here suggests that such stories are not meant to be believed as true or to be looked upon as ‘memories’, ‘cultural’ or otherwise. At least on some – and very prominent – level, they appear to be strategies of narrative entertainment.

This does not preclude that a text like *Eyrbyggja saga* also has its overarching agenda and that it is obsessed with ‘serious’ issues like the legitimisation of power structures. Good reasons have been brought forward to assume that this is the case; but this constitutes a different level of the narrative (cf. Bödl 2005: 255). Such serious matters are crucial for understanding the overall plot of the saga, which, as Klaus Bödl has rightly pointed out, most likely can be seen as focused on the historical legitimisation of the political power of the Sturlung family (2005: 255; cf. Torfi H. Tulinius 2007: 55–56). Similarly, one may think of Torfi H. Tulinius’ reading of the episode of the Fróðá Marvels (chs. 49–55) as a commentary on power struggles between clergy and lay chieftains in thirteenth-century Iceland (2007: 58–62). Yet still such ‘serious’ matters perhaps should not seduce us to take every element of the saga at face value, and possibly least of all the rich place lore woven into it.

Such scepticism as to the earnestness of the traditions presented in the saga, furthermore, might perhaps also be appropriate with respect to the historical value of its landscape account more generally. Looking at how the saga describes the construction of a pagan sacred landscape of Þórsnes, it is indeed striking how much of this narrative is either clearly unhistorical or remarkably unspecific. In its narrative construction of the Þórsnes landscape, the saga mentions the following religious elements:

1. The oracle of the high seat pillars, which are used to determine Þórólfr’s place of settlement, and the sanctification of his land-claim by means of a fire ritual;
2. the naming of the peninsula and its individual places;

3. the construction of a “temple” (*hof*);
4. the establishment of Helgafell as a holy site and an abode of the dead;
5. the establishment of the first assembly site with its strict rules of ritual purity and the compulsion to use Dritsker to relief oneself;
6. the move of the assembly site to Pingvellir and the establishment of the human sacrifices on Thor’s Stone.

Of these elements, the uses of a high-seat pillar oracle and of a fire ritual (no. 1) are recurring topoi of Icelandic literature which may or may not originally have been associated with Þórsnes; they may just as well have been borrowed from the founding legends of other places.<sup>15</sup> The description of the temple (no. 3) has long been recognised as being entirely based on contemporary Christianity and having no relationship to actual Viking Age religion beyond the connection to cult established by the place-name *Hofstaðir* (cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2007: 499; Bödl 2005: 218–225; Wanner 2009: 238–239). The whole sub-plot about the first assembly site and the conflict about the use of Dritsker (no. 5) seems to be merely a place story derived from a witty twisting of the name “Guano Skerry”, and the story of Thor’s Stone (no. 6) in the same way appears to be a place story drawing on and twisting the landscape in a witty way, though taking its starting point from a physical landscape feature rather than from a toponym. However, if this is so, then in terms of features that are both arguably ‘authentic’ and specific, all that remains of the long account of Þórsnes are the place-names and the tale of Helgafell.<sup>16</sup> Yet the tale of Helgafell is itself likewise woven around a place-name, raising the question of whether in this case as well, perhaps, the place-name is the only authentically old element of the tale, with all the details connected with it being a secondary, fanciful aetiology of the toponym, perhaps inspired by similar tales connected with places such as the hills Krosshólar in *Landnámabók* S97. Here, it is also important to recall some observations about Helgafell made recently by Kevin J. Wanner (2009). These observations are intrinsically tied to the probable place of composition of *Eyrbyggja saga*, which today’s *communis opinio* places in the Augustinian monastery of Helgafell; this monastery had originally been founded on Flatey but was moved to Helgafell in 1184 (Wanner

<sup>15</sup> In general on the topos of the high-seat pillars cf. Wellendorf 2010: 7–16 (with a concise collection of further literature); Bödl 2005: 163–176. For other examples of a performance of fire rituals in the context of the settlement of Iceland cf. *Landnámabók* S198=H166, S218/H184.

<sup>16</sup> In general on Helgafell cf. Heizmann 2007.

2009: 231–232, 234, 243, 245). If the saga was written in this monastery, then on some level it constitutes a monastic engagement with the historical background of a monastic site. This makes it extremely striking that Wanner is able to point to remarkably exact correspondences between the rules of ritual purity associated with the pagan Helgafell and with the first assembly site of *Eyrbyggja saga* and rules of ritual purity found in the Old Testament, especially in connection with Mount Sinai. Core passages are found in the Pentateuch. Exodus 19 describes Yahweh’s self-revelation on Mount Sinai. This self-revelation is preceded by Yahweh’s instructions for how the Israelites should prepare for his appearance on the mountain; a central point of these preparations is that the Israelites should wash their clothes (Exodus 19.10; 19.14) – recalling Þórólfr’s injunction that nobody should look at his holy mountain Helgafell unwashed. Furthermore, the Pentateuch regards all blood that is not spilled in an expressly ritual context as polluting, irrespective of whether it is the blood of humans or of animals (Numbers 35.33–34; Leviticus 17.3–4) – recalling Þórólfr’s injunctions against spilling the blood of either humans or animals on Helgafell or on the assembly site. (At the same time, Þórólfr’s temple contains a bowl of sacrificial blood that is sprinkled over the participants of the sacrifice, just as Moses, building an altar and sacrificing at the foot of Mount Sinai in Exodus 24.6 and 24.8, fills bowls with sacrificial blood and sprinkles it over the Israelites.) Even the banishment of excrement from the assembly site finds an Old Testament parallel in Deuteronomy 23.12–14, where the Israelites are forbidden to defecate inside their camp, as they would otherwise make it unclean and would make Yahweh turn away from them. Pointing to these and other parallels between the account of *Eyrbyggja saga* and the Pentateuch, Wanner is able to show that “all of the salient ingredients for the [...] account of Þórólfr’s institution of a sacred landscape and associated purity rules” were available in the Bible (2009: 38–40; quote: 39–40). Furthermore, he points out that thirteenth-century Scandinavian laws considered bloodshed in a sacred space to be polluting: according to the Frostathing Law, violence in a church would nullify its consecration, and a legal tract issued in Nidaros in 1273 stipulates that the spilling of blood in anger in a church or on a churchyard would necessitate its purification by a bishop (2009: 241–242) – again paralleling what is happening in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Even the perception of Helgafell as a gateway to a paradise of the dead finds a Christian parallel: after the conversion of Iceland, Snorri has a church built at Helgafell, taking up a clerical promise that a man would have the right to space in heaven for as many men

as could stand in a church erected by him; thus, as a pagan as well as as a Christian site, Helgafell appears as a portal to a blissful afterlife (*Eyrbyggja saga* 49; Wanner 2009: 244–245). All in all, this means that there are strikingly exact parallels between the literary pagan world of *Eyrbyggja saga* and that of contemporary Christianity. Wanner explicitly shies away from making any inferences from these correspondences about the value of *Eyrbyggja saga* as a source for pre-Christian beliefs (2009: 243); but one could at least consider the possibility that indeed the depiction of the sacred landscape of Þórsnes owes more to contemporary Christian and Old Testament motifs than to any authentic memories of Viking Age religion. Yet if this were so, then it might well be that the only element of historical Viking Age value contained in the saga account of the construction of the pagan sacred landscape of Þórsnes are the bare bones of the peninsula's toponymy.

This being said, I would like to emphasise that I do not necessarily wish to push my historical deconstruction of the pagan sacred landscape of Þórsnes quite that far; but it may perhaps be worthwhile pointing out that it would, in theory, be possible to do so, and that the body of evidence overall might indeed point in such a direction. In any case, my main point is a different one: *Eyrbyggja saga*, and Icelandic saga literature more generally, is deeply connected to the landscape – including both its toponymy and its physical features – in which it is set. This connection between text and landscape needs to be centrally considered in saga research, a principle rightly observed by researchers like Phelpstead and many others and recurrently applied with much gain.<sup>17</sup> Such a consideration, however, cannot in all cases take the form of a straightforward adoption of current theories of the construction of landscapes as bearers of 'meaning' in the form of 'memories', not even when such 'memories' are qualified as 'cultural memories'. Meaning of this type may be there, and often it is, but one also has to look out for conscious counterpoints to such a serious striving for meaning. If the interpretation proposed here comes close to the truth, then the sub-plot tied to Dritsker is not meant to be taken very seriously and to be believed verbatim. Rather, it seems to present us with a witty play with its material that appears to aim at a literary construction of grotesqueness – and the same is likely to be true about the stories of Thor's Stone and the Mounds of Hálfðan. Icelandic saga literature is deeply engaged with the Nordic landscape, but not necessarily so as a machinery geared to the creation of 'meaning' in

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. above, note 2.



any direct way. Rather, in the story of Dritsker, it seems that ‘meaning’ is consciously deconstructed by turning the pagan landscape into something deeply grotesque.

Yet on the other hand, of course even the deconstruction of ‘meaning’ can be deeply meaningful. As the current theorising outlined at the beginning of this article does not tire to emphasise, the normal case appears to be that landscape is a medium of cultural meaning. In the case of Dritsker, a corresponding analysis seems to fail, and this throws the question of what is going on here into sharp relief. The relationship between ‘meaning’ and the land in our text is a remarkably awkward one: the text engages with the ‘meaning’ of the land, but the result is something simply too grotesque to be considered ‘meaningful’. One, though certainly not the only, way of approaching the tension observable here might be by harking back to the place where *Eyrbyggja saga* is most likely to have been composed, the Augustinian monastery of Helgafell. If this localisation of the writing of the saga is correct, then this has two important implications: first, the saga is a monastic (and therefore deeply Christian and ecclesiastic) creation; and second, it was written at the centre of Þórsnes, whose landscape then as now was filled with place-names that carried deeply pagan semantics. Toponyms like Hofsvágr (“Temple Bay”), Þórsá (“Thor’s River”), Hofstaðir (“Temple-Steads”), and the name of the peninsula itself (Þórsnes, “Thor’s Peninsula”), would have been daily reminders of the land’s pagan past and would on a daily basis have given this pagan past a presence in the saga writer’s here and now. For an ecclesiastic writing in a monastery, this might have been an awkward situation indeed: while striving for Christian salvation, he was constantly surrounded by places whose names marked them as the holy sites of a very different belief system. This cannot, of course, be more than a speculative thought, but maybe what we are observing in *Eyrbyggja saga* is an attempt by a Christian *litteratus* to come to terms with living a Christian life in a land still toponymically semanticised as pagan: he cannot take away either the pagan place-names or the memory of pre-Christian paganism they stand for, but even if he cannot effect a *damnatio memoriae* of paganism on Þórsnes, he can take away its sting by turning it into something faintly ridiculous. It is almost as if the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* had tried to laugh off the meaning inscribed into the land by its toponyms. Thus, perhaps, what we are seeing in *Eyrbyggja saga* is not an account of pre-Christian paganism, but how a Christian writer is trying to handle living in a land full of pagan place-names; and if this interpretation does indeed come close to the truth, then *Eyrbyggja saga* may

well be a core source for the complex relationship between religion and the land in Iceland, except that its outlook is focused on the religious preoccupations of the thirteenth century rather than the Viking Age.

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