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Nested Narrative:
Pórðar Saga Hreðu and Material Engagement

By Elisabeth Ida Ward

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for
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Doctor of Philosophy
in Scandinavian Languages and Literature
in the Graduate Division
of the University of California, Berkeley

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ABSTRACT

Nested Narrative: *Þórðar saga hreðu* and Material Engagement

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University of California, Berkeley

Professor John Lindow, Chair

Þórðar saga hreðu is an Icelandic saga, of the type usually referred to as Sagas of Icelanders or Family Sagas, that lacks much of the drama of other sagas of a similar type. The dissertation utilizes this genre outlier to test a new method for analyzing the sagas, which combines literary analysis with recent anthropological theory. This method foregrounds the interaction of the material world with the saga narrative as an essential way that meaning is manifested. Chapter 1 looks at the saga's physical attestation in manuscripts, which offers a new emphasis on the saga as the product of a local community. Chapter 2 turns to the human-made objects referenced within the text, suggesting that the depiction of the material world in this saga is in keeping with the non-modern milieu from which it originated. Chapter 3 focuses on scenes in the saga where characters are described as moving through the landscape, and analyzes these as a way to demonstrate how co-constitutive the real landscape was for the saga narrative. Chapter 4 employs Cultural Memory theory to explain why certain placenames are included in the saga instead of others, noting that placename references are a clear invitation to include the real material world into the meaning-making of the saga. Chapter 5 looks at how the dynamic between the narrative of the saga and the local landscape of Skagafjörður as place has been disrupted in the modern period. The Conclusion offers a broad assessment of why repositioning the material world back into the interpretation of saga narratives is important.

IN MEMORY OF MY BROTHER, WILLIAM LANGE JR.

FOR MY FAMILY

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The seeds for this project began to germinate during the summer of 2002, when I was invited to participate on an archaeological dig in Skagafjörður, Iceland. So I want to start by thanking the people who made that experience possible. William W. Fitzhugh gave me permission to participate as part of my duties at the Smithsonian Institution's Arctic Studies Center, one of many courtesies he has shown to me over the years. John Steinberg, lead investigator on the Skagafjörður Area Settlement Survey, requested I participate and was an enthusiastic and patient teacher with this literary scholar on her first dig, as were the other members of the team. Stephen Loring gave me the trowel that I used on that dig, and also inspired me to believe that archaeology can be a compassionate and insightful means to investigate the past.

The project sprung roots in Skagafjörður not only because of the beauty of that landscape, but also because of the people there. They made me feel comfortable and welcome to the valley both during the dig in 2002 and during my solo return trip in 2010. During the latter trip, Gunnar Oddsson of Flatatunga was kind enough to give coffee and conversation to an uninvited guest who had come to take pictures of his farm. The purveyors of Gistiheimili Bakkaföt were accommodating to my need for extra space to work on my computer at night, and displayed just the right mix of curiosity about my work and respect for my need for quiet. Guðny Zoëga offered support, which I appreciated, as she had also done during the team's stay in the valley in 2002.

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Thank you all.

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INTRODUCTION: EXHIBITING THE TEXT

When one walks into most museum exhibitions, one is confronted by an artifact or object of some sort, and a label or text panel explaining what it is. The interaction of these three nodes—object, text, and the perceiving human being—is much more complex than those of us familiar with the *habitus* of museum exhibitions may initially recognize. In one of the most influential works on modern museum criticism, *Exhibiting Cultures* (Karp and Lavine 1991), museum professionals and academics dissected the seeming innocence of putting an object in a space with a sign saying what it was. Although that seminal volume explored many social and theoretical issues ranging from nationalism to authenticity, it is the article by Michael Baxandall that is central to the discussion that will be undertaken here. He argues that meaning is not controlled by a single one of these nodes, but rather that it is in the interaction between these three that ideas are created, shared, and shaped. Baxandall argues for:

a notion of exhibition as a field in which at least three distinct terms are independently at play—makers of objects, exhibitors of made objects, and viewers of exhibited made objects. Two things are essential to this model. First, all three terms are active in the exhibition. Second, the activity of each of the three is differently directed and discretely if not incompatibly structured. Each of the three is playing, so to speak, a different game in the field. (1991, p. 36)

Each of the three players in Baxandall's formulation is responsible for specific aspects of the exhibition: the original maker of the object is responsible for its physical manifestation, having chosen its material, construction and decoration. The exhibitor is responsible for the label that accompanies the object, as well as other exhibition techniques such as lighting and organization that give the object whatever context the exhibitor finds important. It is however the third party, the "viewer, moving about in the space between the object and the label" that is "highly active. . . He is not a passive subject for instruction. He moves with great vitality between visually pleasurable (or at least intriguing) objects and equally pleasurable. . . information" (p.38). Baxandall's emphasis on "the viewer's disposition to be active in the space between label and object" (p. 40) is in a sense a museological iteration of reception theory, a recognition that meaning is never fixed by the author or stable on the page but always in the process of becoming by the reader.

The addition of physical objects into this meaning-making matrix however, adds more complexity to the process than Baxandall acknowledges. For it is not simply the craftsman who made the object, or the exhibitor, or the viewer, that controls meaning: recent studies suggest that objects themselves have agentive powers. In 2008, an edited volume entitled *Material Agency* (Knappett and Malafouris, eds.) was published, inspired

by the debate within computer science of the possibility of artificial intelligence, coupled with neuroscientific investigations which have postulated “distributed cognition.” The multidisciplinary authors of this work approach the issue of materiality and cognition as a theoretical question from a variety of perspectives, their overall concern being how thinking works in the world. Specifically, they offer that thinking can be done not only through objects and with objects, but that the material world has agency in defining itself. Such a perspective on agentive objects comes not only out of modern scientific studies of cognition, but is a productive idea for some branches of archaeology (Sutton, Yarrow, and van der Leeuw in *Material Agency*; see also Meskell 2005). The growing consensus that objects themselves can be constitutive of meaning does not undermine Baxandall’s essential formulation; rather, it reinforces the idea that “each player may be, so to speak, playing a different game” (Baxandall 1991, p. 36). By applying Actor Network Theory (ANT) to exhibitions (p. 145-6), Knappett places agency not with the viewer, as Baxandall had done, but on the intersection of the “material, visual, and textual culture” (p. 146) constitutive of an exhibition as a whole.

More importantly for the discussion that is to follow in this dissertation, Knappett argues that the interplay between these three things is not unique to the museum exhibition setting. Certainly museums, by formalizing and compressing the process of exhibiting, have heightened awareness of the implications of the pairing of object and text. But museums are only concentrating and distilling phenomena more general in human experience into an intense space, where it can be scrutinized and understood, rather than inventing an entirely new experience (Sandberg 2003). Material culture, visual culture, and literary culture, interacting with interpreting human beings, have participated in an elaborate dance that negotiates and contributes to meaning long before museums were invented.

Museum without Walls

This dissertation traces just such a dance, taking place not inside the walls of an exhibition gallery, but rather in the countryside of medieval Iceland. This change in venue necessitates a redefining of Baxandall’s “object”, “label”, “visitor”, in a way more aligned with Knappett’s “material”, “text” and “network”. To do so, I would like to borrow from the methodology of the ecological museum (Davis 1999), which understands discrete regions or landscapes like a wall-less museum, and all the objects, buildings, cultural heritages places, roads and other man-made structures as that museum’s “collection.” Whatever stories, folktales, or history told about in the area and about the area become the text of the museum. The active, human interpreters are the community members who live there, who constantly negotiate their understanding of the region as a place. The curators are the government employees in charge of cataloguing this array and working to preserve it.

This then brings us closer to Knappett’s understanding of material, visual, and textual culture, because it is not a single object, or a single label, or a single observing visitor, but rather much larger umbrella categories. A single object becomes the material culture, encompassing all physical things that are shaped by culture, including places that

have been enculturated in the process of naming, even if their physical appearance is not modified. As long as they have spatial dimensions, in Knappett's understanding of Material Agency, an object has not just physical weight but intellectual weight as well. It is a thing in the world, participating in that world. Similarly, the textual culture encompasses much more than a single label—it encompasses literacy and history and narrative. Finally, the perceiving human is not a lone actor concerned with a specific museum visit, but one of many members of a community continuously involved in its development.

In the broadening of these categories, a crucial problem arises. At the level of a single object paired with a single label, the idea that there might be dissonance or disjuncture between these things was seen as a productive “active space.” However, when these categories are expanded, suddenly this disjuncture becomes more threatening. Take for example the ecological museum model: there is no assumption in that model that the material culture of an area would in any way run counter to the textual or social culture of that same area. To do so would in fact undermine the entire logic behind the ecological museum's preservation efforts, because what is being defined and catalogued is a “culture.” All of its constituent parts are seen to be working together to produce the whole of a community's experience of itself as unique.

I want to be clear therefore that in borrowing the idea of the ecological museum, I am not borrowing the idea of a seamlessly integrated whole existing within that regionally defined space. Indeed I am aware that the change from “object” to “material culture” is much more than the replacement of a single example with its umbrella term. The semantic implication of “culture” is transformative: it automatically takes away some of the material's agency. Whereas we acknowledge single, visually-stunning objects can speak directly for themselves (Alpers 1991), entire assemblages of material goods are normally understood to be but the echoes of the culture which produced them. There have however been cracks developing in the edifice of “culture”, precipitated by the critique levied by James Clifford (1988); he considers it a fabrication implemented by anthropologists for ease of analysis, having no on-the-ground reality. The more recent archaeological move towards recognizing material agency is a further blow to the concept of culture. Although similar material assemblages demonstrate that a group of inhabitants were working within a shared set of practices concerning ways to manipulate the physical world, this does not necessitate social cohesion among those inhabitants.

So although I will be using the term material culture in this study, I hope to do so without losing the sense of the material world signifying and communicating in a way that is not fully harnessed or defined by the human inhabitants surrounding it. I want to retain Baxandall's sense of an object conveying on its own terms.

Another way in which my study differs from the ecological museum model is that the boundaries of the space I will be studying is not defined by a socio-political entity, like a parish, country, region, or state. Instead, I have chosen to analyze a place defined by virtue of the fact that it is the setting for a medieval story, known as *Þórðar saga hreðu*, which is usually translated as *The Saga of Thord the Menace*. This saga is one of a class of

stories written down in medieval Iceland between 1200 and 1400 grouped by modern scholars under the heading “Sagas of Icelanders” or “Family Sagas”, because they tell stories of early settlers to Iceland. This particular story is set in the landscape of northern Iceland, specifically the valleys of Miðfjörður and Skagafjörður, and so that is my region of interest throughout this dissertation.

In addition to defining the parameters, this saga also serves as the main “text” to my wall-less museum, although other stories and events that intersect with this region will also be mentioned. The analogy of a saga to a museum text is appropriate for Sagas of Icelanders generally, because like exhibition texts written by curators and then put up on the wall as an objective statement of “fact”, sagas are anonymous texts that have an air of authority about them. Both are however constructed, purposeful documents that are context dependent and can be biased.

The “objects” of this study will be the objects, things, burial mounds, farms, and culturally important places (even if they are unmodified by humans) that fall within this space. The active visitor, the seeing agent, varies between the group of people living in this area and interacting with one another and the scholars who have studied this saga and this genre of literature. Befitting the metaphor of a museum exhibition, throughout this study I will not be assuming cohesion or an underlying “culture” responsible for everything that goes on in this region. Rather, I leave open the possibility for an “active space” of disjuncture between the material worlds and textual worlds that overlap here.

Perhaps this unusual approach was brought to mind by Kirsten Hastrup’s declaration of Iceland as “The Island of Anthropology” (1990), or the example of museums in Iceland that seemed to consider entire valleys part of their interpretive schema (Ward and Bollason 2001). Or it could have been my own reaction to first coming to Iceland as a child, approaching it with the wonder and asking my guides—my grandfather, my aunt, and my uncle—for the words that would give what I was seeing meaning. This wonder was inspired by the physical confrontation with the landscape. Iceland has a compressed geology: there are many small mountains and mountain ranges crisscrossing the entire terrain, and rivers flowing north, south, east and west, emerging from the center of the island. This naturally divides the landscape into many small valleys, most of which are visually apprehended as such from the ridges separating one from the other. Unlike California, where huge valleys and towering mountains dwarf a person, most landscapes in Iceland are human-scaled; they are thus experienced as what Bender et al. (2007) refer to as “nested landscapes.” To me, traveling around Iceland as a child was very much like going from room to room inside a museum.

Between Artifact and Texts

To demonstrate that this approach is not merely an extended exercise in metaphor, I want to offer why approaching a region of Iceland like an exhibition composed of object, text, and observer, with the potential for disjuncture and unexpected meanings, is not only valuable, but necessary. In analyzing the Icelandic sagas—stories written down by both lay and churchmen of the medieval period—text has understandably been

privileged as the primary nexus of meaning making. After all, it is the allure of the text, written in a colloquial and accessible manner, which first drew the attention of scholars to medieval Icelandic culture. Unlike continental Europe, with its impressive medieval cathedrals—or countless other cultures whose rich material legacy inspire us today to wonder—the only tangible, enticing witness to Iceland’s medieval past as anything other than a poor rural outpost lies in the pages of now-darkening vellum manuscripts. There are no impressive tombs of great kings, no architectural marvels, just books.

And yet the Sagas of Icelanders present an enigma to modern scholars; they are neither fiction nor history nor folklore, but a literary form encompassing all three, told in a sparse, journalistic prose. At first read, they present with a strong air of verisimilitude, one that is not diminished by the consistencies with known facts from other more historical sources and the consistencies in character and plot between separate sagas. It is only as the sagas received more sophisticated literary treatment in the 20th century that the constructed nature of the narratives they convey came to light. And as more precise dating of their vellum manuscripts emerged, it became more and more clear that although the Sagas of Icelanders tell of events that took place between 900 and 1050 A.D., the oldest manuscripts do not predate 1200. Thus if the sagas contain genuine information from the earliest settlement period in Iceland (c. 875 A.D.-930 A.D.) that information had to be remembered orally for at least five generations before being set to paper.

Modern saga scholarship has therefore vacillated between understanding the sagas as oral cultural heritage to understanding the sagas as high literature. In attempting to come to intellectual grips with this ill-defined genre, other metaphors have been offered along the way by various scholars: that they ought to be thought of as a historical novel (Harris 1986), or a immanent potentiality (Clover 1986), or as a theatrical event (Lönnroth 2009). But in all of these approaches, the role of the material world around which the sagas are set has been conspicuously absent.

The literary approaches to saga scholarship developed as a corrective to the over-zealous optimism of 19th century scholars, who took the seeming verisimilitude of the sagas at face value and used the sagas as a kind of guidebook, as they went out exploring the Icelandic countryside. Ruins and artifacts were identified according to the personages described in the sagas, and there was understood to be a factual overlap between the textual world the sagas described and the physical realities of the Icelandic material culture (Ward 2009). Modern historians and anthropologists interested in studying Iceland’s past have instead emphasized the wonderful characters and plots, and the sophisticated use of irony, tension, and humor, when analyzing the sagas, as a corrective to the earlier over-enthusiasm of the sagas as historic, and in recognition of their clear artistic merit.

The questionable usefulness of the sagas in understanding Iceland’s past echoes a much larger debate in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, and history as to how to pair archaeological information with textual information about the past. Whereas one of the leading archaeologists in Iceland today, the head of the archaeology department at the

national university, advocates not using the sagas at all (Orri Vésteinsson 1998), scholars elsewhere in Europe are seeking other means with which to approach the variety of information we have about the past. Anders Andrén, in *Mellem Ting och text* (translated as *Between Artifacts and Text*, 1997) pulls from examples across the globe to demonstrate how, with care and judicial skepticism towards both sources of information, resonant information about the past can be gleaned. John Moreland (2001) offers an even more cautionary approach, guided by the principle that the written word is a tool of the elite classes and echoing the sentiment of most historical archaeologists that the goal of archaeologists working in the historic period ought to be to uncover the voices of the underprivileged silenced from the annals of history. In 2010, Moreland published an expanded exploration of how to use text and archaeology productively in a volume entitled *Archaeology, Theory, and the Middle Ages*. His primary focus is to critique modern scholars thinking about the past in a way that suits their modern intellectual concerns; instead he offers that a concern with specific, local and concrete examples is the only way to give the past its own voice. One emerging trend that he identifies as a hopeful development in the difficulty of navigating between artifact and text is that of material agency (p. 68, 200), although he adds that the degree of agency afforded objects was probably historically and culturally variable, and must therefore not be uncritically applied.

Of course it is impossible to know for certain the extent to which past peoples allowed for object agency in their daily practice, just as it is impossible to know for certain most anything about the past. But in saga studies the assumption has been of late that objects had no agency, or at least that the textual narratives were the dominant mode of everything from maintaining social hierarchies and religious beliefs to expressing gender dynamics and memory. This is problematic because—as will be discussed in depth in chapters 1 and 2—early Icelandic culture was an amalgamation of two very “object-centric” (if I might coin a phrase) cultures, the Viking Age and the Medieval Period. Colin Renfrew (1998) suggests in fact that in this intermediate phase, one should expect a society “where the role of artefacts as symbols is increasingly significant . . . it is the phase of symbolic artefacts or material symbols, of Symbolic Material Culture” (p. 3). He believes material culture in this phase of society would have served a variety of purposes, and would have had rich communicative potential.

The method I will be employing in this study is therefore intended to allow for the possibility of the objects in and around the sagas to be actively participating in meaning-making. In each of the chapters, a different object-text pairing will be explored. Because I will be focusing on only one saga, *Þórðar saga hreðu*, and in only a limited region of Iceland, primarily Skagafjörður, I cannot claim to be “proving” what level of object agency was operative in medieval Iceland. I do however plan to demonstrate that this method offers very fruitful new lines of inquiry, and that the potential for the sagas to differ from modern literature specifically in regard to how the material world is conceived must be considered.

The Vinland Sagas

The approaches offered by historical archaeologists like Andrén and Moreland struck me as insufficient in the case of the Sagas of Icelanders after I spent considerable time working with two sagas—the *Saga of Eirík the Red* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*—that are collectively known as the Vinland Sagas. They both tell of the discovery and exploration of a land to the west of Greenland, which the sagas name Vinland, and which we today call North America. In 1997, just as I was finishing my Master’s degree in Anthropology (with a concentration in Museum Studies), the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History was beginning plans for an exhibition about the discovery of Vinland by Norseman 500 years before Columbus. I was hired on as the assistant curator, and thanks to the help of many scholars (who contributed to the exhibition catalogue, Fitzhugh and Ward 2000), I came to know a great deal about the material culture of Viking Age¹ Scandinavia, and struggled, along with several other scholars (Gísli Sigurðsson and Örnólfur Thorsson in particular) as to how to integrate the Vinland saga texts with the archaeological objects.

Thus began my interest broadly in the topic explored throughout this dissertation: the relationship between material culture and literary culture. In the case of the Vinland sagas, the material culture is the archaeological finds dating to the Viking Age in Greenland and North America (specifically, Newfoundland, Canada) and the literary culture is the Vinland sagas, which do not follow the classic feud pattern of the core of the genre, and may well have been understood by the original contemporary audience as historiographic. Yet, they are not what we today would consider historic documents, especially because they are written at least 200 years after the events they describe. Early scholarship of the Vinland sagas (Rafn 1838) had assumed the Vinland sagas to be extremely accurate and important historical documents. But when the theories kept multiplying in the 19th century and early 20th as to the physical location of the place referred to as Vinland in the saga (Gísli Sigurðsson 2000), but no physical evidence was forthcoming, a new theory developed that the Vinland sagas were rather a literary invention. The story itself finds some parallel in the Irish “Life of Saint Brendan”, and the fact that Vinland is depicted as overflowing with grapes and self-sown wheat hinted too closely at the wine and unleavened bread needed for the holy communion: the milk and honey of the promised land had been replaced with grapes and wheat (Sayers 1993).

So when Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad located a site on the northern tip of Newfoundland Island in the late 1960s that corresponded rather well to the Vinland saga

¹ So different is this expansion across the Atlantic in terms of artifacts from what is seen in the continental expansion of Scandinavians during the Viking Age that these settlers are often referred to as Norse, rather than Viking. The term Norse is also used for a chronologically longer period of time: whereas the Viking Age stretches from 750 to 1050 A.D., sites can be identified as Norse that date from anywhere from 600 to 1400 A.D. I however prefer the term West Vikings to describe the peoples who settled Iceland around 870 A.D., rather than Norse or Norsemen; this term captures the idea that the settlement of the North Atlantic was another expansionary effort of people originating primarily from Scandinavia, speaking generally the same language and using the same sorts of ships, but whose methods and adaptive strategies diverged.

account (Ingstad 1977), saga scholars who had dismissed the saga as largely fictional were forced to reconsider. Instead the interest turned towards establishing the base-line truthfulness of the Vinland sagas. The head curator on the project, William Fitzhugh, is a prehistoric archaeologist, and like many archaeologists over the last one hundred and fifty years, he was keen to be able to say that the archeology had “proven” the saga accounts correct. Indeed, a series of archaeological discoveries since the 1960s have shown remarkable correspondence between the saga account and the details of the L’anse aux Meadows site on the northern tip of Newfoundland, including such details as the composition of the crews and activities like whale butchering and boat building (Fitzhugh and Ward 2000: see especially Wallace and Smith in that volume).

It was into this one hundred and fifty year-old controversy that I found myself thrown, a junior colleague fresh out of a Master’s program. But my gut feeling at the time was that it was incorrect to think of archaeology as proving the sagas, just as it had been incorrect in the late 19th century to use the sagas to prove archaeology. Instead I wanted to develop a method that would allow both the text and the objects to speak separately, and to place the human interpreter in a dynamic relationship to each.

Þórðar saga hreðu

Clearly, were I specifically concerned with the issue of the historicity of the sagas, or the ontological status of “truth” in researching the past, I would have chosen to have focused directly on the Vinland sagas, in as much as they are one of the few sagas to have specific archaeological remains associated with them—the digs at Hrísbú in Mosfellsbær and their association with *Egilssaga* would be another.² Instead this study will focus on a much less well-known saga, one that has received almost no scholarly attention: *Þórðar saga hreðu*. I came to this saga as an outgrowth of the Smithsonian narrative outlined above: a year after the Viking exhibit opened, I was invited to participate in an archaeological dig in Skagafjörður, primarily because the survey included the farmsite associated with Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, a main character in the Vinland sagas. It was an exciting opportunity to see if archaeology in Iceland might also be able to shed light on the Vinland saga narrative. I however quickly became enchanted with the valley of Skagafjörður itself. Laying at the base of a fjord in northern Iceland formed by melting glaciers thousands of years ago, it is still traversed by two branches of a glacial river that runs from the interior northward into the arctic ocean. Between these branches lies a flat marshy plain, and to the east and west of them, ridges of mountains. The south is marked by the heath of the sandy, glacial interior.

Spending the summer of 2002 in this valley, as part of the Skagafjörður Archaeological Settlement Survey led by John Steinberg, now with University of Massachusetts, was an important experience for me. Many days were surprisingly warm and bright; of course there were plenty of days that were rainy, cold and cloudy. Although

² Jesse Byock’s ongoing excavations at Hrísbú have been documented in a series of site reports, many of which he was kind enough to share with me. See Byock et al 2005 for a summary.

it has been several years, my legs still remember the rise and fall of the farms where I dug. Each farm became unique to me, being down in the soil brought one's attention to each one as a place. And then one bright day at the end of the summer, we hired a small plane and flew over the valley, taking photographs of the sites. As I watched a local farmer drive his herd of horses along the valley floor, Skagafjörður as a single valley became more comprehensible to me: the two forks of the river streamed from the south, emptying into the fjord at the north, the mountains on either side cradled the landscape. That technology allowed me to have a perspective long term residents probably already had of the connection between it all.

So when I was thinking about what saga I wanted to study for my dissertation, I realized I wanted to dwell on a text that dwelled in Skagafjörður. I am familiar with other landscapes of Iceland, especially around Suðurnesja, but there are no sagas set there. And I needed to find a saga where I would be as in tune to the material setting as to the narrative flow, if I was to have any hope of conceptualizing how those two interacted with one another. *Þórðar saga hreðu* is not only set primarily in this valley, but even more interestingly in terms of what it suggests about engagement with the material world, the main character, Þórður, is a carpenter, a master craftsman. Craftsmen have a special relationship to objects, and to object agency (Malafouris 2008).

This study seeks to demonstrate that however materially poor medieval Icelandic society may seem to us today, there is no reason to believe that the material world did not, for the contemporary audience, retain a robust meaning-making role in medieval Icelandic society. In the pages that follow, I will argue that a particular Icelandic saga, *Þórðar saga hreðu*, retains much evidence of people thinking in the world through the aegis of the material culture in their midst.

Chapter Overview

Þórðar saga hreðu is a Saga of Icelanders that violates the most central tenant of the Sagas of Icelanders genre: it has a happy ending. Unlike Hollywood films, saga narratives are not supposed to end with everyone reconciling, and the main character getting married to live out his life peacefully and productively. In Chapter 1, I review the scholarship of this saga, its manuscript history, popular reception in *rímur* form, and summarize its general plot, character development, and structure. I bring in the material world however in the form of the manuscript objects that contain versions of this saga. The interpreting humans in this case are the modern day scholars who have drawn certain conclusions about the saga by comparing the text and the manuscripts.

In Chapter 2, archaeologists and anthropologists become the interpreting humans, and objects in the text are set in comparison to the known archaeological finds of similar objects in Iceland. I then offer my own reading of the references of objects within the narrative, and utilize this as a means to gauge attitudes about object agency. Chapter 3 puts the hypothetical “sagateller” of *Þórðar saga hreðu* into the role of the interpreting human that negotiates between the material world—primarily the landscape—and the saga text. I suggest that the landscape had a vital role in the composition, transmission,

and theme of the saga. Chapter 4 keeps the medieval audience in focus, but I turn specifically to named places in the saga, looking at the kinds of associations those would have brought into the interpretive matrix of the saga. I suggest three layers of cultural memory apparent in the saga, including memories worked through a process I term communal forgetting.

Chapter 5 returns to the modern period, looking at the interaction between landscape, objects, and text in Skagafjörður today. I describe the efforts of the government and local agencies in Northern Iceland to create a wall-less museum in Skagafjörður, and I suggest that memory and identity are still vital forces in how *Bórðar saga hreðu* is interpreted in Iceland today.

This dissertation does not seek to rescue the literary reputation of *Bórðar saga hreðu*, but rather to use the saga as a way to explore a much more interesting problem: the relationship between saga narratives and the material world.

CHAPTER 1:

MANUSCRIPT NARRATIVES

Hann kom at máli við Skeggja ok mælti: “Svá er með vexti, at ek vilda, at þú bæðir Sigríðar frá Ósi til handa mér.” Skeggi svarar: “Þat mun ek eigi gera við þessa konu; . . . Hví munda ek biðja festarkonu Ásbjarnar, bróður þíns? (ÍF XIV, p. 185)

[He went to discuss the matter with Skeggi and said, “It is with growing urgency that I need you to bid Sigríð from Ós to marry me.” Skeggi replies, “I will not do that with this woman . . . Why would I bid the fiancée of your brother, Ásbjörn?”]

In common parlance, the terms “text”, “book”, and “work” are considered synonymous. But in medieval studies, the physical object which contains words is not a mass-produced, perfectly replicated copy of an author’s creative output, but a singularity, a unique material manifestation, hand-made using hand-made materials. That is why the Latin word for hand, *manus*, is embedded in the name of this object: manuscripts. Manuscripts are sometimes referred to as textual objects, but this terminology elides the distinction I wish to draw in this chapter, between the object—stretched vellum folded together, held together by leather straps, and marked with ink—and the text—the narrative that tells of people, places, and events.

Befitting the metaphor of a museum outlined in the Introduction, this chapter puts the scholars who have examined the manuscripts as the human agent in the dynamic relation between object and narrative. In museum terms, these scholars are both the audience and the curators, in that they are the only people allowed to directly inspect the manuscripts and the textual narrative that lies within the pages of these manuscripts. Through the editorial efforts of these scholars with specialized training and permission, an official text has been created, under the title *Þórðar saga hreðu*. This chapter will discuss their efforts, and then turn to how a greater emphasis on *Þórðar saga hreðu*’s manuscript attestations may allow for reassessment of earlier interpretations.

Theoretical considerations and historical background

The possibility for disjuncture between a manuscript and the text it contains is particularly foregrounded in saga studies; unlike other modern literary production, the text here is not fixed by a known author and publisher.¹ Icelandic manuscripts are of

¹ Translations of works, and the myriad subtle differences that can thereby be introduced into the text, are an exception to this, of course.

unknown origin—only a handful of the over 700 vellum manuscripts at the Árni Magnússon Institute contain a statement of when or where or by whom they were made—and there is enormous variation and flexibility in terms of which sagas are presented together in the same manuscript. In this sense, entering into the collection where the manuscripts are held is more like entering into a folklore archive—where transcriptions of various informants telling variant folktales are stored—rather than entering into a library, where books have been neatly arranged by topic and author.

The physical likeness of the manuscript collection as a whole to a folklore archive is not accidental: one of the operating principles of saga studies is that all sagas circulated in some sort of oral form before they were ever set down as written words on pages. But to what extent that oral form differed from the written form modern scholars are now confined to work with has been hotly debated. The enthusiastic period described in the Introduction—when the sagas were assumed to have much historical facts and therefore a clear overlap with the material world—was also the time period when scholars assumed that the written form was quite similar to a long-lasting, traditional oral form of the sagas. But beginning with the Icelandic school in the 1920s, a turn was made away from emphasizing the orality of the sagas in favor of the literary merits of the sagas. Manuscripts were compared with one another, with the assumption that the two manuscripts were created by two medieval clerics making scribal errors or revisions as they copied a written original text (O.E. Haugen 2004). Elaborate trees were created using this method, proposing—as in evolutionary science—several “lost” ancestor manuscripts, which would have served as a link between existing texts. Today, manuscripts are compared more for information about linguistic changes in the language over time than to establish relationships between manuscripts, but some efforts are still made in that regard as well (ibid.).

In both of these scenarios, there is a sense in which the “text” exists outside of the physical manuscripts held in the collections. In seeking an older form of the text—be that oral or written—the physical manifestation of the text in existence now is taken as but a shadow of the original. Indeed, when a scholar refers to *Njáls saga* or *Laxdæla saga* or any other saga, it is that proposed supra saga that is meant. This is based on the consensus of scholars working from either the assumption of an oral precursor or a written precursor, who have undertaken the editorial task of combing through all variants of a saga to produce one master text, which is thought to be as close as possible to the theoretical original. What is important to note here is that the text produced by the editors need not have a close relationship with any one physical manuscript. Thus saga studies have been a practice in de-materialized texts.

For many years, a schism existed between those scholars who felt the sagas were largely shaped by oral tradition, and those that felt the sagas should be thought of as primarily literary products. But in the last few years there has been a desire to reconcile the approaches of the literary school with the oral-tradition proponents, marked most notably by the publication of an edited volume entitled *Along the Oral-Written Continuum* (Rankovik 2010). This fascinating volume proposes to define the literary-ness

or orality of a work not by the medium in which it is contained, but rather by stylistic elements of its presentation. Thus skaldic poetry, which was composed and performed orally, can be considered literary in the sense that they have a fixed form and an emphasis on the authorial voice (p. 54), as opposed to works which may be preserved in the medium of the written page, but have little emphasis on the author and tolerate a fluidity in content.

There is, of course, still a long way to go in refining our stance on the degree of the prominence of the oral tradition in the development of the sagas in general and each saga in particular, but the consensus on principal seems to be in place, and this is enough for a relative positioning of the sagas around the middle of the x-axis [of the continuum]. (p. 47)

Positioning the sagas in the middle of the continuum—i.e. having an equal mixture of oral and literary elements—is primarily interesting for our purposes here in terms of how that affects the material agency of the manuscript. In this fluid model, the manuscript becomes not the end product of a single creative act, but one stage in an ongoing dialogue about a text. In the grey zone between orality and textuality, two scribes recopying a text can be metaphorically understood as conversing with one another, as they offer meta-commentary on the work of the other (Bryan 1999, Copeland 1991). In this model, manuscripts become snap shots of the discourse about a particular text, at a particular time, and not the definitive expression of the text. So although the Oral-Written continuum is an extremely useful concept that frees saga scholars from a nearly 75-year debate about the origin of the sagas, it does so with the same precondition of disjuncture between manuscript and text as the previous methods employed.

It is worthwhile noting how recent this practice is: when Árni Magnússon was first collecting the manuscripts, and when they were first catalogued, this was not the case. Rather, he and his assistant divided the manuscripts according to whether they were folios (pages formed by one sheet folded only once), quarto (pages formed by one sheet folded twice) or octavio (pages formed by one sheet folded three times). Thus the physicality of the manuscript object was paramount. After that, the manuscripts were grouped by content as much as possible; all the manuscripts and looseleaves containing a given saga were grouped together in a series if they were of the same page size, regardless of whether or not they were paper or vellum volumes. For instance, folio-sized manuscripts, whether paper or vellum, whether from the 14th century or the 18th century, containing Kings Sagas in Icelandic are numbered AM 35 to AM 97, with subgroupings of particular sagas (ie: *Hákonar saga Hákonarson*) within that series; after that, all of the folio-sized manuscripts containing *Landnámabók* are listed (Kålund 1888). Of course grouping by content was imperfect, in as much as many manuscripts contain more than one saga and not always the exact same array of content. But clearly antiquarians of the 17th, 18th, and early 19th century saw a greater amount of overlap between manuscripts as objects and sagas as texts. They could point to a section of the manuscript collection that they felt contained a particular saga.

But late 19th and 20th century interest in finding the “original” saga so transformed the scholarly relationship to the manuscript object that, today, Árni Magnússon’s cataloguing system is frustrating to modern scholars. This is because later scholars felt that a far more useful way to materially categorize manuscripts was not by the page trim size or content, but rather by the medium upon which the text is written: vellum manuscripts are written on animal skin (usually calf or sheep skin) whereas paper manuscripts are written on dried, flattened wood pulp. This seemingly innocuous material distinction is the bedrock upon which fundamental decisions have been made in the scholarly construction of the authoritative text not only of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, but of every other saga as well. In this distinction, the vellum manuscripts become privileged based on the observation that vellum is a much older medium for book construction in Europe than is paper; paper was unavailable in Iceland until the late 16th century. Thus vellum manuscripts are preferred not because of their legibility or quality or completeness, but because of the deep-seated interest in finding the oldest, and thereby “original”, version of a saga. Some of the oldest paper copies are consulted when the vellum manuscripts are illegible or missing pages,² but otherwise the vellum manuscripts are used. By discounting the paper manuscripts, the editors of the saga text have found a shortcut to their goal³. But because of the poor state of preservation of the worm-eaten and darkened vellum pages, legible only with special training and sometimes with special equipment, this preference for vellum manuscripts has left the process of producing a modern edition of a saga narrative at the hands of trained specialists.

Modern scholars today do not, except in rare circumstances, interact with the manuscripts themselves; we rely upon the edited volumes published by the professionals employed at the Árni Magnússon Institute (in Reykjavík and Copenhagen). Their ambitious project, begun in the 1920s, was to make an authoritative standardized, annotated modern printed version of all the sagas in the Árni Magnússon collection, including not just the Sagas of Icelanders, but also the Kings sagas, Bishop sagas, Contemporary sagas, and Förnaldar sagas. Published by Híð íslenska fornritafélag, this massive, ongoing project has not been carried out under the supervision of any one person, but by a body of top saga scholars who are selected based on their expertise for the sagas under consideration, referred to as the Fornrit editors. The Sagas of Icelanders were the first batch of sagas to be so published; that fourteen-volume process ended in 1959 with the publication of the volume that includes *Þórðar saga hreðu*.

The text of *Þórðar saga hreðu*

In order to discuss then why scholars have approached *Þórðar saga hreðu* the way they have, it is necessary to begin not with the manuscripts, as one might hope to, but

² Some of the vellum manuscripts that were collected by Árni Magnússon and copied by his staff onto paper manuscripts burned in the great Copenhagen fire of 1728.

³ However, a recent ambitious digitization process, publically accessible from the www.handrit.is database, now allows scholars unprecedented access to both the paper and vellum manuscripts, including in some cases photographs of the pages. This may eventually change how scholars think of and construct the texts they are working with. I am therefore here describing the process as it has historically been.

with an outline of the text. Here is a basic outline of the story of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, divided up into chapters as per the Íslensk Fornrit edition of 1959.

Chapter 1: Þórður is born just after his father, also named Þórður, dies. The youngest of four brothers, he spends time serving King Gamli, where he receives a fine short sword. Upon returning home, he and his brothers seek revenge on another member of the royal family for seducing the wife of the oldest brother; he and the Norwegian prince are killed during the assault.

Chapter 2: The remaining brothers decide to flee Norway and head for Iceland. They set in at Miðfjörður, but receive a cool reception from the chieftain of the area, Skeggi. Þórður rescues Skeggi's son Eiður from drowning, and Eiður moves in with Þórður and his brothers.

Chapter 3: Skeggi's nephew Ásbjorn catches sight of Þórður's sister, Sigríður and is smitten. Þórður and Ásbjorn trade insults at a wrestling match. Before departing Iceland on a trading expedition, Ásbjorn asks Skeggi to make a marriage proposal to Sigríður on his behalf.

Chapter 4: Þórður and a farmer named Jón get in a dispute over a fine cloth both want to buy, as requested by their women folk (Þórður's sister and Jón's wife). Þórður kills both Jón and his companion. Skeggi arranges compensation for their deaths. In return for his assistance, Þórður agrees to Ásbjorn's proposal for Sigríður's hand. Skeggi gives Þórður the nickname "hreða"⁴

Chapter 5. While Ásbjorn is away, his brother, Ormur, arrives in Iceland. He too falls in love with Sigríður and is aggressive and dishonorable in his behavior towards her when his marriage proposal is put on hold for two years. Þórður catches him trying to seduce his sister, and kills him. Skeggi, obliged to seek vengeance for his nephew's death, attacks Þórður. Eiður intervenes and Skeggi returns home.

Chapter 6: Residents of Skagafjörður are named—two who have cause to seek compensation from Þórður for Ormur's murder (Indriði and Özurr) and two that will prove to be Þórður's allies (Kálfur and Þórhallur). Þórhallur's wife, Ólof, is also described.

Chapter 7: Þórður departs Miðfjörður, intending to board a ship in Skagafjörður and go abroad. However, he is attacked enroute by Indriði, a business partner of Ormur's. Wounded, Þórður seeks refuge at the home of Þórhallur and his wife Ólof. He stays there until he is healed. Indriði and Þórður reconcile.

⁴ This nickname is written "hræðu" in some manuscripts, meaning one who strikes fear into others. The more common spelling, "hreðu", may derive from the Anglo Saxon term "hreðr" (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1957, p. 283), meaning scrotum, implying, as in modern English usage, that Þórður is a "bally" guy. In the fragmentary version of the saga, Þórður's father has the nickname hreða, and he simply inherits it from his father at birth.

Chapter 8: Þórður attends a winter feast (yule) hosted by Kálfur at Kálfsstaðir in northeastern Skagafjörður. On his return, he is attacked by Özurr. Neither Özurr nor Þórður die in the skirmish, but 14 other men do. Þórður spares Özurr's life, and then Þórður returns to Þórhallur and Ólof, who again heals his wounds.

Chapter 9: Þórður is invited to build a hall at Flatatunga in southern Skagafjörður. Þórður sets off towards the east (Eyjafjörður) to get supplies for the building, but he is attacked by Özurr on his return. Again Þórður is victorious and again he spares Özurr's life. A sometime later, Þórður is out looking for his horse near Þórhallur and Ólof's farm, and Özurr attacks. This time Þórður kills Özurr and his men.

Chapter 10: Skeggi hears of the death of Özurr, his brother-in-law, and rides to Skagafjörður, planning to attack Þórður. Eiður intervenes, and Skeggi decides instead to kill Þórhallur before returning to Miðfjörður. Þórður also returns to his farm in Miðfjörður, where he is reunited with his brothers.

Chapter 11: Ásbjörn returns from his trading voyage. Skeggi tells him of his brother and uncle's deaths at the hands of Þórður. They plot to attack Þórður as he returns from a trip to Borgarfjörður in the south. The skirmish is underway when Eiður manages to separate the two sides.

Chapter 12: Þórður and his companions ambush Ásbjörn at Skeggi's farm, seriously wounding Ásbjörn and killing three others, before Eiður breaks up the skirmish and demands that both sides stop attacking one another. They agree to terms, and the marriage between Ásbjörn and Sigríður takes place.

Chapter 13: Þórður asks for Ólof's hand in marriage, and she accepts. He moves into her farm in Skagafjörður. He is then invited to build a hall at Hrafnagill in Eyjafjörður. At the same time, a ship arrives in Eyjafjörður carrying another uncle of Ormur named Sörli. Sörli challenges Þórður to a duel, but Þórður is victorious.

Chapter 14: Þórður goes to Miðfjörður to offer a settlement to Ásbjörn and Skeggi for the killing of their kinsman Sörli. Eiður moves to Borgarfjörður, and Ásbjörn and Sigríður depart Iceland for Norway. Skeggi dies of old age with his son in Borgarfjörður, and Þórður lives out the rest of his days in Skagafjörður with his wife Ólof.

What sort of story is this, anyway?

A "classical" family saga ought to have a central conflict around which the drama of the saga builds (Andersson 1967). For *Þórðar saga hreðu*, one can argue that such a conflict exists, and the quotation at the outset of this chapter above is the origins of it. Ormur makes good on his threat to try to seduce Þórður's sister, an action for which Þórður kills him. All of the conflicts thenceforth in the saga are between Þórður and characters seeking revenge for Þórður's killing of Ormur. However, the tension between Ormur and Þórður seems overwrought: tensions between characters in most sagas are usually something subtle, such as a poetic jab during a wrestling match that becomes more and more intolerable the longer the recipient thinks about it. But here the situation,

and the tension it will cause, is so grossly obvious, one wonders for a moment if they have picked up a modern soap-opera script instead of a medieval Saga of the Icelanders. Ásbjorn's brother, Ormur, arrives to Iceland shortly after Ásbjorn has betrothed Sigríður, and departed to acquire the necessary wealth abroad to start a family. Ormur immediately becomes obsessed with Ásbjorn's fiancé, and goes so far as to ask his uncle to press his suit. Even after hearing directly from his uncle that she is promised to his brother, Ormur continues, "villtu eigi biðja hennar fyrir mina hönd, þá mun verða róstumikit í heraði, því at þá skal ek fifla hana" (ÍF XIV, p. 185) [if you do not ask her to take my hand, then here will be a great uproar in the district, because I will make her my mistress]. Ormur is here depicted as not just somewhat dishonorable—even the major saga heroes have moments when they behave poorly—but the complete disrespect for a brotherly bond sets him so far outside of the norm of behavior as to stretch credulity.

Because the character of Ormur is hardly believable, the drama of the story, which in many sagas is based on a feeling of historical veracity, falls apart. Readers may have been willing to overlook the artificiality of the central conflict in the saga, were it not for several other improbable plot twist: Skeggi's son Eiður decides to make himself Þórður's foster-son against his father's wishes, and proceeds throughout the saga to disrupt his father's plans for revenge; Ormur's business partner Indriði takes such a sudden and complete liking to Þórður, after they try to kill each other in a mountain pass, that he personally offers to pay compensation to the family members of everyone whom Þórður has killed, and Þórður twice spares the life of Ormur's other uncle, Özurr, after he attacks Þórður, finally killing him in the third encounter. And as if the reader has not given up on the saga by this point, another relative of Ormur's arrives right at the end of the saga, only this time Þórður kills him and then immediately offers his family members compensation. At most every stage of the saga then, a potentially dramatic situation is deflated, and the confrontation ends in an unsatisfactory draw.

Looking therefore at the complete saga, we are faced with a saga that is narratively unsatisfying. It lacks the escalating feud conflict structure of many other Sagas of Icelanders, and indeed anyone reading the saga who has read *Njals saga* or *Hrafnkels saga* or a half dozen other family sagas will be struck by the fact that *Þórðar saga hreðu* lacks any real legal proceedings. No action takes place at the Althingi or any of the spring legal courts either. This is not to say it is a lawless saga: declaring killings is done, albeit in a rather quick and perfunctory manner and always in poetic verse, and binding arbitration is offered to Eiður near the end of the saga. But several killings take place with just the barest discussion of legal ramifications; Þórður's killing of Jón is smoothed over by Skeggi's immediate compensation to kin, and this death has no repercussions later in the saga, as it might in more legally minded sagas (Clover 2012).

But what likely gives most readers pause is the moment when the tone of the saga seems to drastically change, just when one would expect, in other Sagas of Icelanders, the moment of the ultimate show-down. Chapter 10 builds up the suspense, in as much as Skeggi is portrayed as so angry with his inability to take vengeance for his nephews killing that he lashes out at Þórhallur, Ólof's husband and friend of Þórður. With some

foreboding, Þórður asks Ólof to wait for him, “ef þú spyr mik á lífi” [if you hear that I am still alive]. Then in Chapter 11, Skeggi gets reinforcements in the form of Ormur’s brother Ásbjörn, and ends with the ominous warning that “hafði Eiður grun á tal þeira Skeggja ok Ásbjarnar at þeir sæti um líf Þórðar” (ÍF XIV, p. 218) [Eiður had found out that Skeggi and Ásbjörn were determined to take Þórður’s life]. Thus the confrontation is being drawn out, a normal narrative device to heighten tension and suspense. The start of Chapter 12 maintains the suspense, as Eiður, the keeper of peace, departs for another valley on an errand, and Þórður has a bad dream. That morning the battle ensues. Þórður is getting the better of Ásbjörn, when Skeggi arrives with his trusted sword, speaks a verse, and hews at Þórður. This is the moment when most sagas would deliver the narrative climax. But instead, Eiður suddenly returns, and breaks things up again. This has happened before in the saga, so the reader is not necessarily surprised. What is surprising however is what Ásbjörn says, still lying bleeding on the grass, “Þat var mitt erindi út hingat at sækja festarmey mína; en er ek fretta víg bróður míns, þá var víst með mér at hefna hans: en nú er svá orðinn fundr várr, at ek kýs heldr frið vid Þórð” (ÍF XIV, p. 220). [It was my purpose in coming here to retrieve my betrothed, but when I heard about my brother’s death, it was certain I had to avenge him, but now that our meeting has turned out this way, I choose rather peace with Þórður”.] After this, the saga tells us about two weddings and additional efforts at reconciliation, ending on a happy note.

Scholarly reception

Because of these plot disappointments, saga scholars have judged *Þórðar saga hreðu* harshly, starting already in the mid-nineteenth century. Guðbrandur Vigfússon put it in among a group of sagas he termed “spurious sagas” that were “partly extemporisations on ‘hints in Landnáma and other sagas’ and partly pure fabrications ‘when the very dregs of tradition have been used up’” (Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1878, summarized in Arnold 2003, p. 91). When the Íslensk Fornrit editions of the Saga of Icelanders were being organized, *Þórðar saga hreðu* was included in Volume 14, along with all of the other sagas that Guðbrandur had deemed spurious (except *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*). This is the only volume in the series whose contents were chosen on a basis other than a geographic one. Every other volume in the series contains all the sagas that took place in the same region of Iceland; moreover, all the volumes in the series were carefully planned to circumlocute the island. By that logic, *Þórðar saga hreðu* should have been included in Volume 7, which includes *Grettis saga* and other stories from northwestern Iceland. But instead *Þórðar saga hreðu* was relegated to the last volume of the Sagas of Icelanders along with several others that “eru taldar einna yngstar Íslendingasagna” [are considered amongst the youngest Icelandic sagas] (ÍF XIV, p. lxxv).⁵

To avoiding Guðbrandur’s derogatory term of “spurious”, the Fornrit editors used the more neutral term of “young” sagas. However, because of the disciplinary interest in the oldest and most “authentic” sagas, being called a young saga was a negative judgement on the importance of a saga, just as placing it in Volume 14 had been. It is

⁵ Volume 15 begins the scholarly editions of the Bishop sagas.

important to note that this determination is based on stylistic elements of the story, such as plot, characterization, and structure, and not on an “objective” criteria such as the provenience of the manuscripts in which the sagas are found. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1965), a scholar with the Árni Magnússon Institute, explained the standard method for evaluating the dating of a saga. First, linguistic markers are identified that, based on the methods of historical linguistics, can be used to argue for a saga to be early or late.⁶ Linguistically, he was only able to identify four words in *Þórðar saga hreðu* that linguists do not believe were spoken in Iceland before the 13th century, but notes that a greater concentration of young words would be needed to make a determination of the age of the saga (p. 126). In the second half of his book, he outlines a series of styles that can also be used to date the sagas, beginning with the parse stoic style that defines the most popular sagas in the genre and is called the “classical style” (p. 135). It was followed by a period he calls the “clerical style”, which was more heavily influenced by the Continental romances that began to be translated into Icelandic in the 13th century. He groups *Þórðar saga hreðu*, based on stylistic considerations and not on linguistic features, as one of these younger sagas (p. 126). Whether referred to as Guðbrandur’s “spurious” saga or the Fornrit editors “younger” sagas or the “clerical” saga, all of these dating schemes were self-perpetuating, because the dating of a saga was based on its stylistic elements, which are *ipso facto* defined as being either younger or older. The Fornrit editors then reinforced their own scholarly opinion about the “youngness” of the sagas in Volume 14 by using a different orthography than in the other scholarly editions: for instance, the antiquated letter φ is not used, and instead its modern equivalent, ö, appears. Their editorial efforts to shunt these sagas aside from the core of the corpus seems to have effectively convinced most scholars they are not worth studying.

In 1988, Jón Torfason’s Master’s thesis attempted somewhat to revive the reputation of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. In a subsequent article (Jón Torfason 1990) entitled “Góðar sögur eða vondar: athugun á nokkrum frásagnaeinkennum í Íslendingasögum, einkum með hliðsjón af *Þórðar sögu hreðu*.” [Good sagas or bad: Comments on certain narrative classifications, with special attention to *Þórðar saga hreðu*], Jón summarizes his thesis. Although Jón acknowledged that “Það er því í rauninni ekkert ris í sögunni” [there is no climax to the saga], his aim was to demonstrate that the saga showed sufficient complexity to “til að draga Þórðar sögu í flokk hinna ‘bókmenntalegu’ sagna” (p. 118) [put it in the category of literary sagas]. He then identifies a number of tropes in *Þórðar saga hreðu*, some of which are unique to the saga, others of which show up in many sagas. Although agreeing with some of the criticism of *Þórðar saga hreðu* by previous saga scholars, Jón points out that especially in terms of sentence structure, dialogue, and style, there is an economy to *Þórðar saga hreðu* which warrants that “frásanartæknilega eigi Þórðar saga heima með þeim klassísku” (p. 128) [in terms of narrative technique it ought to be considered amongst the classic sagas]. He suggests that the negative appraisal of this

⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson says that the clerical style was “miklu sterkari á Íslandi í lok 13. aldar en í byrjun hennar” (p. 129) [much stronger in Iceland by the end of the 13th century than at the beginning of it]. Scholars today (Andersson 2006) consider the 13th century the height of the time period of classical saga writing, and would therefore dispute Einar’s chronology, but not his developmental outline.

saga has had very little to do with the actual style, and instead is a judgment about the plot. “Líklega er það einna helst að sagan er skemmtisaga með “góðum” endi og að persónur er í daufara lagi. Aðalpersónan leysir hverja þrautina á fætur annarri áreynslulítið en ekki fer fram mögnuð glíma við stríð örlög.” (ibid.) [Most likely this is primarily because it is a happy saga with a good ending and because the main characters are somewhat shallow. The main character solves one problem on top of another with little effort and never has an epic struggle with fate.] Thus, the main reason this saga has been dismissed as spurious and young is because Þórður ends up living to a ripe old age without anything really terrible happening to him, and not because the prose style or dialogues are dissimilar from the lauded “classical” sagas. It is also not based on the linguistics of the saga, or, as we shall see below, on the manuscript provenance.

To me, the assumption that the first saga tellers in Iceland only told tragic tales seems counter-intuitive; one might more rightly assume a variety of stories in the early phase of saga telling, and that later on the genre become more and more rigidly confined to one particular type of plot. However, a more typical chronological development scheme is offered by the former director of the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík, Iceland, Vésteinn Ólason. He primarily follows the judgment of the Fornrit editors in his 1998 work *Dialogues with the Viking Age* and declares:

In fourteenth-century sagas and tales the conflict between these elements [honor, chieftains and power] is a thing of the past. In these works, incredible and admirable feats are performed by super-heroes such as Búi in *Kjalnesinga* saga, Finnbogi the Mighty, Hávarður Ísfirðingr, Þórður the Warrior, Bárður Snæfellsás, Ormr Stórolfsson and others....More clearly than ever before, sagas are now works of entertainment. In the fourteenth century life followed more predictable paths than before and the fates of men lay in the hands of God...” (p. 217)

Though perhaps calling a saga “entertaining” is less derogatory than “spurious” or “young”, the scholarly consensus remains that *Þórðar saga hreðu* is not of equal literary merit as other Sagas of Icelanders.

However, Jón Torfason’s more positive assessment of *Þórðar saga hreðu* as having much stylistically in common with the core of the genre, except the obvious happy ending, seems to have made some impression on the scholarly community. Thus Martin Arnold’s work *The Post-Classical Icelandic Family Saga* (2003) leaves off *Þórðar saga hreðu* from consideration, even though the other sagas addressed are all ones found in the Fornrit Volume 14, a group of sagas that Arnold prefers to call “post-classical.” By employing the term post-classical, Arnold is both agreeing with the Fornrit editors that certain sagas were written later than others, but also suggesting a more theoretically sophisticated reason for this. In his view, these sagas are intentionally reversing the expectations set up by the classical sagas, and are in fact a parody of them. In this sense they undermine the seriousness and reverence with which the classical sagas were treated by taking an ironic stance towards that past. Intertextual references to other sagas are an essential means by which this playfulness is accomplished. Thus post-classical sagas are

like post-modern novels, undermining and critiquing that which came before. Arnold never specifically addressed *Þórðar saga hreðu*, even though his bibliography includes Jón Torfason's thesis and article on the saga. This suggests he agrees with Jón's assessment of the saga as classical; he may have also chosen to leave off *Þórðar saga hreðu* from consideration because doing so suited his conclusion better:

These post-classical texts offer hyperbole, parody, unresolved tensions and the divided worlds of the human and the non-human, the inner community and the outer community. The post-classical hero is extraordinary and other-worldly, and there is no sense in which he either could or even should be imitated as an ideal: he is, like Refr Steinsson, Grettir, Hörðr, and Bárðr, for the main part beyond reach. (p. 230)

Had Arnold included *Þórðar saga hreðu* amongst the post-classical sagas, his thesis would have been grossly undermined, for Þórður is indeed the kind of hero a person does look up to and seeks to emulate. Instead, he left this problematic saga out of consideration.

Most other recent general works on the Family Sagas have also been silent in regard to *Þórðar saga hreðu*, including Jonas Kristjansson's *Eddas and Sagas* (1988) Andersson's *Growth of the Medieval Saga* (2006) and Daisy Neijmann's *History of Icelandic Literature* (2006). This reflects not only an overall uncertainty as to how to deal with this enigmatic saga, but also the sense that it is an unimportant saga.

Manuscripts

With such universal scholarly dismissal of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, there may seem little hope for reviving its reputation. However, manuscript scholars have made several important points about its manuscript attestations, which, although not re-assessing the literary merits of it as text, are important to note to understand *Þórðar saga hreðu* as manuscript object.

Manuscripts have been studied primarily in terms of trying to make educated guesses about the provenance of a particular manuscript; even in 18th-century paper copies, there is rarely complete information about when or where or by whom a manuscript was created.⁷ Saga scholars, starting already with Árni Magnússon, identified several prominent transcribers of the sagas, and in some cases it has been possible to identify those "hands" with known historic persons, thereby gleaning a dating of the manuscript to within that person's lifetime. This kind of handwriting analysis is probably not full-proof, but given the years of careful study of the manuscripts conducted by certain scholars at the Árni Magnússon Institute, there is no reason to question their findings. The bigger problem however is that a lifetime of a scribe can cover a large time

⁷I conducted nine months of research about the provenance of manuscripts at the Árni Magnússon Institute pre-dating 1500 as part of a project entitled *Orient North: Mapping Nordic Literary Culture*, sponsored by the Nordic Council of Ministers. Most of the following general comments on the method of determining provenance are based on that research experience.

span and many places. Scribes of this sort moved around from assignment to assignment, so it is not always possible to know where a saga was written, even if we know by whom. On the other hand, certain manuscripts have come to be associated with certain farms by virtue of being handed down in a family line by inhabitants of that farm, or associated farms, over generations. Often family members would write in the marginalia a note documenting when they received the manuscript, and sometimes from whom. Although this practice does not usually take a manuscript back to its point of origin, it can often give a good sense of what family line or what part of the country the manuscript circulated within, if the names in the marginalia can be definitely identified with a specific historic person.

The manuscripts as object have also been studied to determine whether or not the various loose leafs or late bindings of manuscript pages might actually have originally belonged to one larger, original volume. Unlike the comparisons of the content of various manuscript attestations of the same saga, which seek to create a master text of that saga, the comparisons of the physical pages are used to reconstruct a probable master manuscript that could have contained a variety of sagas. Often, the handwriting analysis from above is helpful in this endeavor, but because even a single page can have more than one hand, other criteria such as trim size, ink and page material, as well as decoration and layout, are also used to argue that manuscripts which today might bear separate catalogue numbers originally belonged to a single larger volume. The scholarly efforts at examining the manuscripts as objects are therefore also concerned with origins, as are the textual comparisons. But even in the case of the proponents of the Icelandic school, who emphasize the sagas as written narratives, the overlap between the manuscript findings and the arguments about a saga's origin are not complete; none of the manuscripts existing today are understood to be the first, original written production of a saga. So manuscript analysis takes place beside the literary analysis as a parallel but largely unrelated field of inquiry.

Vatnshyrna

In a few cases, the efforts of manuscript experts have been brought to bear on the case of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. One of the manuscripts containing *Þórðar saga hreðu* has been rather extensively studied: AM 564a 4to. Árni Magnússon, during his 20 year effort in the late 17th century and early 18th century of collecting and copying as many Icelandic manuscripts as he could, referred to a book called *Vatnshyrna*. When the Fornrit editors were working in the 1950s, the common opinion was that AM 564a 4to, which contains *Þórðar saga hreðu*, was one of the few extant pages remaining from *Vatnshyrna*. Many pages of that book were believed to have been lost, and even *Þórðar saga hreðu* is not complete in this manuscript: only the pages containing the beginning and ending of the saga are still extant in this manuscript, and thus it is referred to as a *brot* (fragment) of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. Saga scholars were eager to reconstruct *Vatnshyrna* not only because it is understood to have contained a large number of Sagas of Icelanders, but it is also one of the few vellum manuscripts whose provenance was believed to be known. For a number of reasons, it was believed that *Vatnshyrna* was commissioned by Jón Hákonarson, a late

14th century magistrate in Eyjafjörður, northern Iceland (near present day Akureyri). Jón Hákonarson (b. 1350, date of death uncertain, likely 1416) is one of the few saga commissioners known by name: he hired two clerics to create a beautiful presentation copy of some of the sagas related to the kings of Norway, a collection now called *Flateyjarbók* (See Ashman Rowe 2005). In his collection notes, Árni said that the handwriting on 564a 4to was the same as one of the scribes that wrote *Flateyjarbók*. Árni also noted that the genealogical information included at the end of two sagas in AM 564a—*Þorðar saga hreðu* and *Floamannasaga*—trace certain saga heroes down to Jón Hákonarson’s family (Stéfán Karlsson 1970). In fact the genealogy of *Þorðar saga hreðu* is the only one to trace the descendants not only to Jón Hákonarson but also to his wife, giving rather conclusive proof that this manuscript of the saga was amended by Jón in commissioning *Vatnshyrna*. Finally, Arngrímur the Learned describes seeing this book, which he consulted in compiling his Latin work *Crymogæa*, published in 1609⁸; he includes a summary of *Þorðar saga hreðu* in his compilation. Thus *Þorðar saga hreðu* is key to establishing the provenance of not only AM 564 4to, but also to all the other 10 Sagas of Icelanders known to have existed in the volume Árni called *Vatnshyrna*. Ironically, the other sagas in *Vatnshyrna* are considered “classical” sagas, whereas *Þorðar saga hreðu* is not, even though they come from the same manuscript dated to the late 14th century.

In 1970, an issue of *Opuscula Arnamagnæ* included two articles by Stéfán Karlsson and one by John McKinnel questioning the idea that 564a 4to was the actual *Vatnshyrna*. Instead it was concluded that AM 564a 4to dated to 1420, when one of the *Flateyjarbók* scribes was working for the bishopric at Hólar. But because it—along with the pages now identified as AM 445b 4to but originally belonging to this same book—contained the same sagas as *Vatnshyrna* was believed to contain, John McKinnel (1970) dubbed that 1420 book “pseudo-*Vatnshyrna*.” Whether this is the book Árni Magnússon was referring to, or whether another manuscript, written earlier by the same hand, once existed, is unclear.

Two Version

However, AM 564a 4to is not just important for what it tells us about *Vatnshyrna*, but also because it, and the copies made directly from it, attests to the fact that two considerably divergent versions of *Þorðar saga hreðu* were circulating by the late 14th century. This has caught the attention of Gísli Sigurðsson, who uses it as one of his examples in his 2002 book (translated in 2004) entitled *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*. This work outlines features by which saga manuscripts can be judged as containing more or less traces of their origin in what Gísli calls the “sea of orality.” His work first takes aim at the practices of saga scholars of the Icelandic school who assumed that sagas manifest in multiple manuscripts must have been copies from some now-lost original manuscript. Gísli does not dispute that this may have sometimes been the case, but he rejects the practice that assumes this was always the

⁸ See Árni Daniél Júlíusson 2002 for a discussion of Arngrímur’s production.

case. Rather, he establishes a strict criteria for such an assumption: “if such accounts employ the same words in their descriptions (over and above the commonest words and words that are inherent in the material itself) the probability of literary relations increases, especially when the correspondences start to multiply” (p. 128). But he rejects that general similarities in wording between manuscript attestations requires that a copyist was looking at a written original, rather than writing down something they heard or knew orally.

The saga that includes Jón Hákonarson’s genealogical information, and which only survives in the fragmentary version, differs considerably from the one attested to in almost every other manuscript version of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. The two versions differ in a myriad of details throughout all the pages surviving in 564a 4to, which unfortunately only contains the beginning and the end of the saga. This is why the plot summary above is based only on the complete version of the saga. However, if the description of the saga given by Arngrímur the Learned’s 1609 Latin work *Crymogæa* represents the missing portions of the fragmentary version of the saga,⁹ then the plot in the middle of the saga was also divergent from what today is considered the authoritative text. Arngrímur’s account talks about battles at different places and with different number of combatants than the main version does, but shares an emphasizes on Þórður’s skill as a warrior—able to single-handedly fend off up to 20 men on his own—and his wood-working abilities. Even with the limited text available for comparison, it is clear that the two versions are not just different copies of the same original, but rather two versions of a story about the character Þórður hreða, from Miðfjörður. The few scholars who have commented on the fragmentary version of *Þórðar saga hreðu* have focused on two aspects of it: its tale of Úlfjótr bringing the Gulathing law to Iceland (Olaf Olsen 1966; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997); and Jón Hákonarsson’s interest in linking his family line, including his wife Ingileif, to that of Þórður (ÍF XIV p. xl, Gísli Sigurðsson 2004). Neither of these elements is present in the full version of the saga, which lacks any discussion of legal proceedings and both begins and ends with almost no genealogical information. For this reason, no one has ever suggested a literary relationship between the two versions; rather the assumption of the Fornrit editors is that both are independent literary productions of the mid 14th century.

This assumption that two authors independently wrote divergent stories about Þórður hreða faces a challenge in that Þórður is not mentioned in *Landnámabók*, a book written around 1185 A.D. by Sæmundur Froði.¹⁰ It was a common practice of older saga scholars to assume a saga was written in the thirteenth or fourteenth century about a character because that character is mentioned in *Landnámabók*. Because that book gives only very brief summaries of most characters and conflicts of settlement period Iceland

⁹ The excerpt from *Crymogæa* relating Þórður’s life is published in Íslenzk Fornrit Vol. XIV, pp. 248-250, in Latin with Icelandic translation.

¹⁰ Of course, the preserved manuscripts of *Landnámabók* do not date to this period. Rather, two versions, one written around 1280 (by Sturla Þórðarson) and another around 1320 (by Haukr Erlendsson), are attested, both in later copies.

(870 to 1050 A.D.), scholars hypothesized that there was room for narrative improvisation in the form of extended sagas, as the traditional “bookprose” argument goes. However, that Þórður does not appear in *Landnámabók*¹¹ did not free it from the bookprose tradition; rather, this was used to argue that *Þórður saga hreðu* was an even younger saga. This was based on the speculation that by the 14th century saga authors had run through the lauded material from *Landnámabók* in the older, classic sagas, and were having to invent stories about minor local celebrities, in this case making up a heroic saga based on a very talented woodcarver (ÍF XIV, pg. li-lii).¹²

Gísli Sigurðsson’s theory on the other hand sees the fact that Þórður is not mentioned in *Landnámabók* as clear evidence for a strong oral tradition about this person. He discusses in particular the extended genealogical information provided in the fragmentary version of the saga:

It is possible that the genealogies appended to the end of *Þórðar saga hreðu* . . . which is not found in other sources [and which] ties in well with what is said elsewhere about people we do know about . . . could thus be an indication that knowledge of genealogies reaching all the way back to the 10th century was still alive in the 14th century—in the sense that genealogical lore that went so far back might still be considered reliable even though it was only preserved orally and not recorded in written form. (2004, p. 165)

Although Gísli focuses only on the fitness of its genealogical information with what is known from other classic sagas and *Landnámabók*,¹³ the two different version of *Þórðar saga hreðu* vary in precisely the way Gísli argues they should if the saga had been in robust oral circulation for some time before being written down. This includes not just the obvious fact that there are two rather different versions—Gísli’s discussion of the *Vinland sagas* suggests this occurs when a story is remember for a long time before getting written down—but also in the details of how they vary. For instance, in the full version of the saga, Þórður’s sister Sigríður is described as “allra kvenna högust, þeira er þar óxu upp henni samtíða” (ÍF XIV, p. 164) [the most lovely of women, amongst those who were her contemporaries], and much of the conflict in the saga is caused by her loveliness. In the fragmentary version of the saga, Sigríður is already married off when the action ensues, and it is instead Þórður’s niece Guðrún (who is not mentioned in the full

¹¹ Miðfjörður Skeggi is mentioned in *Landnámabók*; the story is told about him going Viking in Denmark, breaking into the haug of Hrólf kraki and stealing the sword Sköfnung.

¹² All versions of the saga, even the summary in *Crymogæa*, mention the fact that Þórður’s handiwork was still to be seen at the time the saga was written down, and there is evidence of a unique woodcarving tradition in the Skagafjörður region (Schjeide 2011).

¹³ Jón prófastur Jónsson from Stafafell wrote a long article in *Tímarit hins ízlensk bókmentafélags* (19:92-109) about the genealogy at the end of the fragmentary version of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, but his concern is in demonstrating how the information there fits with other sources in an effort to demonstrate that Þórður’s niece, Guðrún Klyppsdóttir, was a real person.

version) that is described as “kvenna vænst og vitrust ok skörungr inn mesti” (ÍF XIV, p. 233) [a most kind and clever and lively woman].

“Genealogical confusion of this kind can hardly be explained other than by assuming that the people who put the texts into book form acquired their historical and genealogical information from oral sources rather than written books—unless they made the whole thing up, which seems highly improbable in view of the number of points of agreement there are between various sources” (Gísli Sigurðsson 2004, p. 194).

Indeed, the method Gísli outlines for identifying a traditional oral tale works perfectly in the case of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. The extent pages of the two versions agree that Þórður started off his life in Norway, that he had four siblings, that his father died just before he was born (although the cause of death is different between the two versions). The summary of the fragmentary version from 1609 further corroborates that both versions said Þórður settled in Miðfjörður, moved to Skagafjörður, had various skirmishes which were broken up by a friend, and that his handiwork was still standing. In other words, they agree in generalities but not in particulars.

Popular reception

The online database “Handrit.is” lists 43 manuscripts—both paper and vellum—in the collections of the Árni Magnússon Institute and the National Library of Iceland containing *Þórðar saga hreðu*. In addition, there are three manuscripts with a “ætartölur” (family trees) of Þórður hreða, bound with sagas of the Norwegian kings. Four manuscripts contain *rímur*—a rhyming ballad form that was popular in Iceland from the 16th through to the 19th century—about Þórður hreða. These *rímur* collections caught the attention of Hans Kuhn (2006), one of the few scholars to have taken an interest in *Þórðar saga hreðu*. In his study of the *rímur* manuscripts by Hallgrímur Jónsson and Sígurður Breiðfjörð, Kuhn states:

Þórðar saga hreðu must have been a popular saga, judging by the number of preserved manuscripts. We know of two *rímur* treatments in the seventeenth century, one by Þorvaldur Magnússon, preserved in Landbókasafn in MS. form, and one by Sigmundur Helgason, of which only one *mansöngur* but no narrative verse has survived. (2006, p. 525)

It is interesting to note that unlike the recent professional dismissal of the saga, the full body of manuscripts attests to the popularity of the saga all the way through the 19th century.

Kuhn’s detailed analysis of these two 18th and 19th century variant *rímur* concludes that both adhere closely to the details of the saga as preserved in manuscript AM 471 but were composed independently. The independent composition of these *rímur* emphasizes how much demand there was for retellings of the exploits of Þórður. Hahn Kuhn also notes that “Hallgrímur was from the area where *Þórðar saga* takes place, and

some passages in his *rímur* suggest that there may still have been an oral tradition about Þórður's fame as a builder" (p. 526).

AM 471 4to is interesting not only because it is the one closest to the *rímur* tradition; it is also the version used by the less academically-minded popular Icelandic publication of *Þórðar saga hreðu* (referred to as Svart og hvít, which contains no scholarly apparatus or notes) because it is by far the best preserved vellum copy of the saga. I had an opportunity to examine this manuscript at the Árni Magnússon Institute. It includes a wonderful illustration of Þórður on the fronticeplate, which I was not allowed to photograph for obvious preservation issues, and unfortunately this manuscript has not yet (2012) been photographed for inclusion on the online Handrit.is database. But it was exciting to come face to face with a manuscript. Although the collection is housed one floor below the offices where scholars from all over the world come to work on medieval Icelandic sagas and other materials, it is a rare moment when the manuscripts themselves leave the climate-controlled vault in the basement. Everyone in the room at the time gathered around me and the manuscript, eager to see the "real thing;" but they wandered away in some disappointment when they found out it was a 17th century vellum manuscript, and not a 13th or 14th century vellum manuscript. The volume was in very good condition, with legible pages and red letters marking the beginning of each chapter. The most remarkable thing about it, beyond the amazing illustration, was the original wooden cover, which was heavy and worn. After a few hours of examining the manuscript, I returned it back to the storage room. In the 17th and 18th century, this manuscript would have been liberally read from and borrowed throughout northern Iceland. It was at one point in time a very popular book, and despite being now locked in a vault, it still retains a sense of a book with wide popular appeal.

A Local Saga

Kuhn's observation about the local background of one of the *rímur* composers seems to hold true for the composers of almost all of the manuscripts containing the saga. Although the exact provenance of all of the manuscripts containing *Þórðar saga hreðu* is not known, for those we do know, only two late copies¹⁴ are not localized to the section of Iceland spanning Miðfjörður, Vatnsfjörður, Skagafjörður, and Eyjafjörður. These adjacent fjords along the north coast all contained important manuscript production centers, and therefore it may not have seemed noteworthy to manuscript scholars that so many of the *Þórðar saga hreðu* manuscripts come from this area. But I believe it is noteworthy.

Of course *Vatnshyrna*, composed by Jón Hákonarson, is from this region of Iceland: his farm Viðidalstungu lies midway between Miðfjörður and Skagafjörður. The volume McKinnel calls pseudo-Vatnshyrna is even more local in provenance: the bishopric of Hólar is located on the northeastern side of the Skagafjörður. AM 486 4to is a 125 page, 17th century paper manuscript which quotes the fragmentary version of the saga

¹⁴ Leaving aside the copies commissioned by Árni Magnússon.

at the beginning and end but the main saga for the missing sections, was, according to Áрни Magnússon, written by Einar Eyjólfsson of Eyjafjörður. Except for Áрни mentioning borrowing a copy from a farmer associated with Hof in Vopnafjörður, eastern Iceland, all other manuscript evidence for the fragmentary version indicates that it was written in the local area where the saga took place.

The situation is similar for the complete version. AM 551d 4to, the oldest extant vellum manuscript of the complete version, was written in Lögmanshlíð in Eyjafjörður around 1420.¹⁵ AM 586 was written before 1487 and was collected from Arnarbæli, up the coast from Miðfjörður.¹⁶ AM 152 fol. dates to the 15th century, and was collected by Áрни from Elen Hákonardóttir of Vatnsfjörð; the manuscript came down the family line from Magnus Björnsson who was the lögmaður for the northwest area in the early 1600s (b. 1595 or thereabouts) who lived at Munkaþverá (Eyjafjörður). AM 471 4to, discussed above, was clearly known to the composer of the rímur, so although its provenience is unknown, it is likely to have been either written locally or available in the local area. Although the above includes only the vellum manuscripts (unless only represented by paper versions), it supports the contention that *Þórðar saga hreðu* was a saga well known in the local area along the north coast of Iceland—Miðfjörður, Skagafjörður, and Eyjafjörður—where it was copied down for generations. This then corresponds with its likely oral origins, which are, by definition, thought to be local in nature, and what is known of its 17th and 18th century popular reception.

Manuscript versus Text

What the above has demonstrated is how divergent the treatment of the manuscript object of *Þórðar saga hreðu* is from the treatment of its narrative. In terms of the dating and scholarly reception of the saga, it is the narrative text that has been privileged in saga scholarship, such that it would seem that whenever the textual evidence and manuscript evidence conflict, the saga scholars have chosen to side with the narrative text. Take for instance the issue of genre. Whereas the Fornrit editors chose to include *Þórðar saga hreðu* in a volume full of sagas of questionable merit, the manuscripts evidence is much more varied in terms of what other sagas seemed appropriate to include in a volume with *Þórðar saga hreðu*. As noted above, *Þórðar saga hreðu* shows up in the same manuscripts as the oldest extant versions of some of the “classical” sagas. In many of the later paper manuscripts, it is grouped in manuscripts with förnaldar sögur, and some of the “spurious” saga or shorter þættir. Occasionally it is grouped with contemporary sagas (*Guðmundur saga biskups*), and even kings sagas; the æturtölur (AM 904 a 4to) suggests that in the 17th century, *Þórðar saga hreðu* was considered a legitimate historical

¹⁵ The hand that wrote 551d4to also wrote Hrokkinskinna and appears in legal documents signed at Lögmanshlíð in Eyjafjörður (Loius-Jensen 1977).

¹⁶ Agnete Loth (1977, p. 19) has suggested that both 586 and AM 589, which are written in the same hands, were composed in Borgarfjörður based on an amendment to *Þórðar saga hreðu* in 586 that the farm Hreðuvatn in Borgarfjörð is linked to Þórður. No other manuscripts include this detail. I, however, consider the location from whence Áрни Magnússon collected the manuscript a better indicator of the provenance of the manuscript.

source of information. Of course, this inconsistent presentation of a saga in its manuscript history is not unique to *Þórðar saga hreðu*, and it is hard to draw conclusions one way another.¹⁷ Little work has been done to understand manuscript groupings, inasmuch as traditional literary genre saga studies have tended to consider original manuscript groupings irrelevant.

In terms of dating, the manuscript evidence has clearly been cast aside. Though none of the manuscript versions for *Þórðar saga hreðu* extant today predate the early fifteenth century, the fact is that such is the case for many other sagas as well. That is precisely why the manuscript provenance has not been used as a factor in dating the sagas. That *Þórðar saga hreðu* existed in written form by the late-fourteenth century, when Jón Hákonarson amended one received tradition by changing the introductory and concluding chapters to reflect on his own family lineage (ÍF XIV, p. v-vii), should have given it the status of an older classical saga. Having already made up their mind of the saga as being late, based only on the plot of the saga, however, scholars have never undertaken the sort of manuscript branching analysis that would posit several iterations of lost manuscripts linking the oldest extant manuscripts (AM 564a 4to of the fragmentary version and AM 551db 4to of the complete version). But given that the saga already existed in two very divergent forms when these manuscripts were written, both around 1420, I would not be surprised if such an analysis would conclude that a written version of the saga must have been in existence by the late thirteenth century. This possibility has however never been seriously entertained, because it would throw a wrench in the entire understanding of the development of the genre, as outlined by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1965) and recently updated by Ted Andersson (2006).

Wholistic evaluation

In the chapters that follow, I will not be trying to rescue the reputation of *Þórðar saga hreðu* as a literary masterpiece. I will however be working with an understanding of the saga that is based on a more balanced consideration of it as both a narrative text and manuscript object. Thus important interpretative frames will be drawn from what is known about the very enthusiastic popular reception of the saga and its wide and enduring attestation in the local area. Because there is nothing in *Þórður saga hreðu* that immediately defines it as either classical or post-classical, I will consider it an outlier, falling outside of the norms of genre conventions established by modern scholars. I will therefore entertain the idea that it would have been in oral and written circulation by at the late 13th century based not only on the manuscript evidence offered above, but also on textual evidence forthcoming in later chapters. But most importantly, because all we know for certain about this saga was that it was a local saga, throughout the remainder of this study, *Þórðar saga hreðu* will be understood as closely tied to its immediate surroundings and material world.

¹⁷ Ralph O'Connor has researched the post reformation reception of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, and concurs that the saga appears to group with a wide variety of other saga genres, though clustering increasingly with Family Sagas over time (email communication, 2012).

CHAPTER 2:

THINGS IN *ÞÓRÐAR SAGA HREÐU* AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Konungur mælti: “Goða fylgd hefir þú oss veitta, ok mikils háttar maðr muntu verða.” Konungr spretti af sér saxi, en hann var vanr at bera dagliga, ok mælti til Þórðar: “Hér er eitt sax, er ek vil gefa þér ok eg hygg, at gipta muni fylgja; þar með skal fylgja vinátta mín.” Þórðr þakkaði honum þenna soma ok allan annan, er hann gerði til hans. Konungr mælti: “Þess bið ek, at þú gefir engum manni eða lógir, nema þú eigir höfuð þitt at leysa; er ok eigi ólíkligt, at þess munir þú ok við þurfa.” (ÍF XIV, p. 165)

[The king spoke, “You have provided us with good assistance, and you are going to be a much celebrated man.” The king removed from about himself a short sword, which he was accustomed to wearing daily, and spoke to Þórður: “Here is a short sword, which I would like to give to you and I believe good luck (gipta) will follow. With it also comes my friendship.” Þórður thanked him for this honor and all the others which he had bestowed upon him. The king spoke, “I bid you not to give it to any man, or loan it, unless your life depends upon it, and it is not unlikely, that you might do this in need.”]

In the course of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, the main character Þórður interacts with many objects either himself or someone else has made: trade items, inherited items, weapons, burial mounds, etc.. Moreover, Þórður is also master of an art form that relies heavily on objects for its meaning, skaldic poetry. None of this is particularly unusual within the corpus of Sagas of Icelanders, but because Þórður is also defined specifically as a carpenter, this saga does offer an interesting opportunity to examine how human-made material things are represented in the saga, and what function they seem to serve. To explore this dynamic, this chapter pairs objects referenced in *Þórðar saga hreðu* with anthropological and archaeological discussions of those same sorts of objects. According to the triad discussed in the Introduction, this would place anthropologists and archaeologists into the role of the interpreting humans. However, unlike the scholars discussed in Chapter 1, who do at times engage with the material object of the manuscript, since the 1950s there have been very few archaeologists or anthropologists willing to engage in a direct comparison between archaeological objects and descriptions of objects in the sagas. This chapter charts that progression, and also suggests reasons to reconsidering that scholarly reticence.

Anthropological use of the Sagas

Because of the content of the Sagas of Icelanders—presenting detailed descriptions of a newly formed society emerging from the cusp of chieftaincies into statehood—the

sagas have been of interest to anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and archaeologists since the 18th century. For these scholars, the saga as narrative is secondary to information about the society of Commonwealth period¹ Iceland that can be mined from the pages of the sagas. Newly established on a previously uninhabited island during the bombastic Viking Age, the desire to see the sagas as a kind of first hand-description of that process was considerable. The oral-tradition perspective on the origin of sagas, discussed in Chapter 1, made it plausible to consider the sagas as a sort of ethnographic record, and to use them for concrete, real information about not just the historical outline of the settlement process, but also to understand the how of it from an anthropological perspective. A sagas-as-ethnography approach rests on a certain understanding of the sagas as products of Icelandic culture (rather than authors or scribes), which makes them a legitimate way to study that culture.² Recent scholars are of course much more careful than previous scholars to state the caveat that there is a disparity between the date of composition and the time period being described. But the saga texts continue to be used as a means to reconstruct a society theoretically existing separately and outside of the text, since that society is also, conversely, understood to be the very culture from which the sagas emerge. So whereas making a direct link between a certain saga event or character and a certain material object is not done, it is common practice to make a link at a general level between the sagas and the society understood to be behind it.

Using this technique, many observations have been made from such positivist schools as economic anthropology (e.g., Durrenberger 1990) and legal anthropology (e.g. Miller 1990), as well as from cognitive anthropologists (Wolf 2009). This scholarly use of the sagas is best captured in the 1992 volume *From Sagas to Society* (Gísli Pálsson, ed.), and in the work of Kirsten Hastrup. She published three books and numerous articles on the anthropology of Iceland between 1985 and 1998; her conclusions have continued to inspire anthropologically informed readings of the sagas. One of Hastrup's key concepts (1985), recently reiterated by Pernille Hermann (2005) and Jens Peter Schjødt (2008), among others, suggest that one of the most widespread generative deep cognitive structures in Iceland at the time of settlement was an understanding of the world as operating simultaneously on a vertical and horizontal plane. Meaning can either exist along the horizontal axis—that is in relationships between contemporary human beings—or along the vertical axis—that is the relationship between humans and the unseen, ancestral, or spiritual realm. I will be using this concept in discussing the saga's approach towards objects, and their agency, in this chapter.

¹ 900 to 1264 A.D., the time period during which Iceland was not a part of the Norwegian kingdom and therefore retained elements of Viking Age government and dispute resolution.

² A conception of "culture" as an integrated system, where the ideologies, the society, all creative products, and the material world would be seen functioning together, means that each is a product of the same base culture. In that conception, certain cognitive structures are understood to be deep structures, operating somewhat below conscious awareness, which make them innately conservative and slow to change. Thus the chronological gap between time of writing and time of action is somewhat ameliorated. That is why it is often unclear if the society so described belongs properly to the Viking Age, Commonwealth, or Medieval Icelanders.

History of Archaeology in Iceland

In addition to the sagas, archaeologists also have at their disposal remains of the material world from the Viking Age and later to build up a picture of the “real world” that existed outside the pages of the saga narratives. These material remains include: house foundations, roads, burials, other features of the built environment and all the artifacts collected through archaeological excavations or loose finds brought into museum holdings. There have been many developments in the field of archaeology over the last 150 years, especially as Icelandic archaeologists have variably attempted to articulate the relationship between material remains and the sagas, ranging from completely embracing of the sagas to completely dismissing them.

When archaeology first began in Iceland, its agenda was not to undercut the existing saga narratives. In fact, even *Þórðar saga hreðu* was considered a saga worthy of archaeological investigation. For instance, in 1894, Brynjólfur Jónsson went to Miðfjörður and Vantsdalur and wrote a report for the 10th issue of Iceland’s archaeological journal *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags* entitled, “Rannsókn sögustaða í vesturhluta Húnavatnssýslu sumarið 1894. Eptir Brynjólf Jónsson (Landnáma s. 1. Vatnsdæla s. 3. Hallfreðarsaga s. 7. Finnbogasaga s. 9. Þórðarsaga hreðu s. 10. Kormakssaga s. 12. Grettissaga s. 14. Heiðarvigasaga s. 17. Bandamannasaga s. 19).” [Research at sagaplace in western Húnavatn county, summer 1894]. The numeric list in parenthesis after the title of the article gives the name each saga Brynjólfur investigated, followed by a page number, meaning that his report was not organized by any objective criteria, but simply by the sagas themselves.³ His report of *Þórðar saga hreðu* focuses primarily on the remains of some *naust* (winter storage sheds for boats made out of turf) near the river estuary that the locals referred to as *Þórðar naust*. Brynjólfur reported that he believed the one furthest up on the land is the original one Þórður built, and that others were added later as the water level changed.

Like all the archaeological work during this period, no excavating proper was done, nor were measurements or photographs taken, or maps made. Although lacking in methodological vigor, what causes most modern-day archaeologists to dismiss this early archaeological work is the uncritical use of the sagas. The material world was put along side the saga text, and the anthropologist/archaeologist found a way to make the two harmonize. In other words, the archaeological standard of proof through objects had not yet been established.⁴ Objects for these early anthropologists did not exist as equal signifiers to landscape and narrative, but rather as subservient to it.

³ The first entry, Landnáma refers to *Landnámabók*, a 12th century history of the settlement of the island, but all the rest are Sagas of Icelanders.

⁴ It is also interesting to note that an archaeological investigation was conceived of as a travels through the landscape, systematically stopping at all the significant places mentioned in any of the sagas, to make observations. This early archaeological work confirms the naturalness for Icelanders of directly associating narrative to place, a point that will be brought up in Chapters 3 and 5 below.

As methods developed to allow more and more vigor in the discipline (Trigger 1989), Icelandic archaeologists became more and more confident of the ability of material culture to convey a vast array of information about past human societies. Certainly, objects are associated with a wide array of human activities: the initial creation of objects intersects with a culture's religious, gender, and environmental structural ideas, whereas the exchange of objects can have economic, political, and social repercussions. The use of objects can serve identity functions ranging from gender, to ethnicity to class and age, as well as environmental and health uses. So whereas the sagas had traditionally been understood to be the primary means to access the past for generations of Icelanders, archaeology introduced a more objective—in both meanings of the word—process starting especially in the 1950s.

That is when Kristján Eldjárn, head of the National Museum of Iceland (and later president of Iceland) published his tome arguing for an archaeology that operated along side, but separate from, saga studies. His seminal work, *Kuml og haugfé*, (1956) utilized all the artifacts recovered from burials reasonably dated to *heiðinn tími* (pagan period, approx. 900 A.D. to 1100 A.D.) to create an object-centric, archaeological understanding of that society. By focusing on some 300 odd burials, very few of which are even folkloristically associated with saga characters, he was able to avoid reference to the sagas except in a few instances. These burials provide some of the only non-literary information we have about Viking Age beliefs in Iceland. The first half of the book though does make a nod towards the literary, in that his description of all known pagan burials (*kuml*) in Iceland starts, as did *Landnámabók*, with the region around Reykjavík and then proceeds to discuss each region going clockwise around the island. This endemic Icelandic organizing principle was also noted in Chapter 1 above as the organizing principle of the Íslenzk Fornrit editions of the Sagas of Icelanders volume 1 to 13, as well as works ranging from bishop's sagas to contemporary tourist brochures in Iceland. The second half of Eldjárn's work takes the finds from those graves, along with other loose finds also dated to the Viking Age, and organizes it by types: all straight pins are discussed, then are trifold broaches, etc. Thus in contrast to the first half of the book, the second half follows an archaeological organizing principle, which strives to separate artifacts from their place and to instead impose upon them an "objective" organizing principle. Eldjárn's work then was not only professionalization of the archaeology in Iceland in terms of much less reliance on saga accounts, but also by virtue of the fact that he diverged from the traditional Icelandic regional approach in favor of a holistic "Icelandic" material culture approach. By comparing swords from all over Iceland with sword finds from Norway and other parts of Scandinavia, Eldjárn was establishing a national material culture lexicon, effectively superseding the local and regional.

By the 1980s, as objects came to be seen in archaeology as having an independent, direct ability to witness for the past, saga narratives were not simply being treated cautiously, as Eldjárn had advocated, but dismissed. Since then, there has been an explosion of archaeological work in Iceland, initially carried out by the National Museum before privatization in the 1990s saw the emergence of many independent archaeological firms in Iceland, as well as foreign archaeologists working on the island. The work of

these diligent archaeologists has uncovered sites from all over Iceland, and the majority of the projects have specifically focused on “prehistoric” Iceland, ie: 850-1250 A.D. Although some of these excavations include burials, more common has been the investigations of house sites or even entire valleys, such as the Skagafjörður Area Settlement Survey project, lead by John Steinberg. I had the pleasure to participate on this project during the summer of 2001, and have followed its progress since then. Steinberg is part of a research group working at the University of Massachusetts, Amhurst, specifically interested in the transition to state societies. Iceland is extremely interesting in this regard, because its transition away from a chieftain society (which it was during the Free State/Commonwealth period) is very late in a comparative European context. In order to examine this issue, Steinberg’s project seeks to identify, date, and partially excavate all house sites in Skagafjörður that can be dated with tephra chronology to between 900 and 1300 A.D. to note changes in size, orientation, placement, or construction.

This kind of hypothesis-driven, objective analysis of farmsteads also categorized the work of the North Atlantic Biocultural Organization’s (NABO) long-term project at Hofstaðir. Their project however focused on environmental science and resource exploitation by the early settlers. The lead investigator of NABO, Tom McGovern, has led projects all over the North Atlantic with a similar goal, which has led to rich comparative material that helps document the precise way in which the Norse adapted to a more maritime environment from their roots in agrarian Scandinavia (McGovern 2000 a, b). The NABO methodology requires very careful recovery of all floral and faunal remains, including the identifying and sorting of even the smallest fish-bones. One could say their work has introduced a whole new category of material culture to the analysis of Iceland’s past.

The professionalism of archaeology in Iceland was completed in 2002, when a department of archaeology was established at the University of Iceland, whose director has the stated aim of establishing an understanding of Icelandic history pre-1300 without reference to the sagas (Orri Vésteinsson 2004). Instead the ability of objects, especially artifacts but also built structures, to independently convey information about the past, had been fully embraced by the Icelandic archaeological community.

Of course the pendulum does continue to swing, and it is not inconceivable that in the next decade, Icelandic archaeologists will find a way to reincorporate non-artifact-based evidence in reconstructing Iceland’s past. This shift may be pushed along by the example of NABO’s work at Hofstaðir. There the archaeological team was forced to reconsider the value of placename evidence, which had been dismissed in the positivist turn of the late 20th century archaeology in Iceland. One of the key justifications for the dismissal of the placenames came from Adolf Fridriksson 1994 work, which despite being optimistic that some careful methodological overlap with the sagas could be found, was more influential for demonstrating that in some cases, 19th-century saga enthusiasts had renamed sites after famous saga farmsteads (p. 147-156). That coupled with the lack of reliable land-hold records prior to 1600 has allowed archaeologists to ignore not only the elaborate saga narratives, but also placename evidence. Thus, although the name

Hofstaðir means “place of sacrifice,” NABO chose this site for a very careful, scientific analysis of a typical early large farmsite. During the nearly 20 years of excavation, there was nothing to indicate anything other than that it was a normal farmsite, despite its dramatic name. That is, until the final season of excavation, when they decided to excavate two pits at the corner of the field, and discovered they were filled with the skulls of bulls (Lucas and McGovern 2007, Lucas 2009). Careful analysis of these faunal remains indicated that they had been ritually slaughtered (punctured simultaneously from the rear and front, resulting in a fountain of blood ushering forth from the bull’s mouth) and differentially weathered. This strongly indicates a seasonal sacrifice feast held at the farm of Hofstaðir. It is possible that this example may spur archaeologists in Iceland to reconsider the weight they give placename evidence in the future.

The case of Hofstaðir may also reverse a trend in Icelandic archaeology, wherein objects whose functionality at the time of deposition may well have been primarily along the vertical axis are interpreted solely along the horizontal axis. As discussed above and further elaborated below, since the early 20th century, Icelandic archaeologists have given objects agency to witness to the past, but their understanding of the role those objects had in the past has been extremely limited.⁵ This makes comparison with the saga’s use of objects difficult, because objects in the sagas present as extremely agentive, especially along the vertical axis but also horizontally.

Agentive Objects in Skaldic Poetry

The skaldic verses quoted in *Þórðar saga hreðu*⁶ are illustrative of the saga’s approach towards material objects. Unlike the prose of the saga, which refers to objects only when they are central to the action, the 12 verses of skaldic poetry are dense in references to objects. This may be because of a natural affinity between skaldic verse and objects; like intricately decorated objects which require careful, precise looking, skaldic verses are oral art forms which require very careful and attentive listening. The verbal artistry of skaldic poetry depends upon the use of kennings (elliptical ways of referring to people and places) which are typically made up of a base—a noun of some sort in either the nominative or accusative case—paired with another object in either the genitive or dative case. Objects very often stand in for people in this system. For instance, in the first verse of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, there is a kenning for warrior as a tree of the sword. But

⁵ For a contrasting approach towards interpreting the archaeological record, one more concerned with ideology and ideas, see Hodder 1991.

⁶ Because these stanzas do not exist as *lausavisar*, versus which circulated outside of a particular saga text and are therefore independently attested, the common opinion amongst saga scholars is that the verses in this saga were composed by an anonymous 14th century author, although the saga attributes the first 11 verses to Þórður and the final one to his brother-in-law. Kate Heslop, who is working on the skaldic verses embedded in the sagas as part of an ambitious international project, informed me that her initial impression of the verses in *Þórðar saga hreðu* gave no strong impression as to dating, either early or late. But she had not (as of August 2012) conducted detailed study of those verses (Oral Communication, Aarhus, Denmark).

because it is a compound kenning, the noun sword is not used, but rather another kenning, in this case sharp-edged salmon. The half-stanza reads:

Þar vá ek þolla fjóra

Þremja lax með saxi.

Þórður is boasting that he killed four “trees of sharpened salmon” with his sax. Another kenning in this verse uses helmet a base for a kenning of a warrior (here called a helmet of Gautr, i.e. the god of war); kennings for warriors using weapons as the base are very common in skaldic poetry. Although well motivated within the text of the saga—Þórður utters a skaldic verses each time he kills someone, as a dramatic way of declaring the killings—the utterance of skaldic verse would have reminded the audience of an intimate, dynamic relationship between objects and their human users through the kenning system.

Kennings are not exclusively used in a warrior context; the skaldic verses are also replete with kennings for women. The saga sets it up so that Þórður is often relaying his killings in skaldic verse to a woman, but she, as addressee of the verse, is not referred to by name. Rather, a base is paired with a kenning for gold, or for something shinny, golden, and in some cases, round. For example, the second verse, spoken after Þórður killed a man at Borgarnes (ÍF XIV, p. 184), has two kennings referring to women as those adorned with gold (*Leifnis lautar fagrviða lind* “the tree of the fire of the sea king’s lair” and *öldu brands brúðr* “bride of the wave of fire”) and another kenning referring to a man as adorned with gold (*ýta Fáfnis kindar fitjar* “Pushers of the land of Fafnir’s inheritance”). Notice that in none of these cases is the word gold used: rather it is referenced by its qualities, especially its golden glow which is likened to fire, and to its object biography, as being the object guarded by the dragon Fafnir. This required the listener to think deeply about an object as a thing in the world, and to remember its back-story; for instance, that Fafnir the dragon slept on a bed of gold. Otherwise, the kenning would make no sense at all.

This contemplative approach is not only because of the elliptical way in which people are referred, but also because of the complex word order, only comprehensible once a listener has unpacked the grammatical relationship between words. Snorri Sturluson (1200-1262 A.D.), author of a treatise on skaldic verse called the *Poetic Edda*, is a good proxy indicator of how a medieval audience might have thought about skaldic poetry. As a nescient historian, Snorri was concerned with establishing what specifically happened, though not the critical extent of modern historians or archaeologists. By enumerating all the metric and rhyming rules required of skaldic poetry, he demonstrates why a skaldic verse, once composed, would be virtually impossible to change. He also notes that skaldic verses composed for a king would not dare lie about the events they recount; otherwise the king would be insulted. He therefore quotes liberally from skaldic verse in his history of the Norwegian kings. It is likely that when other medieval Icelanders encountered skaldic verse in a saga, they thought of it as a voice directly from the past. This authenticating function of skaldic verse may have been enhanced by the

references to material objects, in as much as the saga also shows an interest in the ability of objects to witness about the past.⁷

It is important to note here however that this is done without specific reliance on visuality. While one verse in some manuscripts reference the color grey⁸, the objects in these skaldic verses are not so much described as indexically referenced. Just as human actors are elliptically named in kennings by references to what they are doing (riders of a ship = sailor), so too are many objects, especially swords and gold, only eluded to elliptically. The kennings thus depend on an understanding of objects in use and in motion—clanging on the battlefield, upon the body of a woman, or being swung through the air—which suggests a very contemporary, embodied sense of objects. However, the fact that many of the kennings refer to Norse gods (see for instance above the reference to the god of the sea) clearly inculcates the vertical axis as well. Weapons, gold and other precious goods, may have been understood as having an important function on the vertical axis, even as they were tied to immediate action and embodied movement.

The same can be said for almost all the objects mentioned in the saga. They are not described in detail, but merely named. An exception to this occurs, however, in regard to the clothing worn by Sigríður when she is first spotted by Ásbjörn. The text specifies she is wearing a red dress with a blue apron, the only such description of color, or someone's clothing, found in the saga. In the context of the text, these color descriptions seem to fit with the skaldic poetic tradition of associating women with gold; like gold, the bright clothing Sigríður is wearing attracts the eye and thereby captures Ásbjörn's attention. Generally, however, objects seem to be less of a surface to be read, as a voice to be heard, in this literature. There is an association between spoken words and objects, not only in terms of skaldic verse's liberal naming of objects, but also through the use of dialogue. Important objects are always introduced through dialogue. As was noted, the first object mentioned appears in the dialogue of the king, and several other important objects are the subjects of specific dialogue.

Skaldic verse, a heightened form of oral communication, further highlights the relationship between objects and spoken words. Although a broad comparison with all skaldic verse would be necessary to make a comprehensive statement about Old Norse culture and object agency, at least in this saga, the use of objects in the skaldic verses indicates they were granted an ontological status that differs from our modern, materialistic and bounded sense of objects. They are an extension of a person in some sense, and part of a person's ability to communicate with the world.

Kristján Eldjárn's approach to objects

It is interesting to compare the treatment of objects like weapons and jewelry in skaldic verse to the analysis their material manifestations received by the father of

⁷ This has also been argued in regard to other saga texts, and on a general understanding of object agency in the medieval period. See for instance Layher 2009.

⁸ AM 139 quarto lists the first word of the third stanza as grátt instead of fátt (footnote p. 193 in ÍF XIV).

Icelandic archaeology, Kristján Eldjárn. Although he was looking specifically at burial goods, which often included rare and precious objects, which were likely of special value at the time of internment, his interest was not on religious beliefs or practices. In his archaeological methodology, the main importance of objects interred with the dead is that it provides diagnostic evidence that the deceased was pagan, and thus serves to date the burial and the artifacts in it. Thus Eldjárn focused on these sorts of burials because he wanted to ensure that he was not finding objects from the post-conversion Commonwealth or early medieval period, which can look materially similar. As Þóra Petursdóttir has noted (2007), he took objects that clearly had a performative and ritualized function on the vertical axis, but interpreted them only on the horizontal axis. Let me take the example of beaded necklaces that appear in many burials. Though less than 20 have been found, they are comparable with the quality of beaded necklaces found in mainland Scandinavia: a variety of different types of beads were in a single necklace, including beads made from exotic trade goods such as Baltic amber and Italian glass. Eldjárn used this evidence to indicate the high-status of individuals among the early settlers.

Later scholars have continued in Eldjárn's footsteps. Jewelry and other decorative objects are taken to speak to a homogeneous "Icelandic" identity, or even in the case of Halstad-McGuire (2010), for a shared North Atlantic identity. She refers to this as a frontier identity, and notes that jewelry types and burial practices were relatively homogeneous between Iceland, the Færoes, Shetland, and Orkney Islands. Michele Hayeur Smith, looking at specifically Icelandic jewelry did note gender differences: male graves had mostly long, straight pins and necklaces with few beads, as opposed to female graves that had tortoise shell-shaped brooches and more numerous beads (2004). In all of these cases, burial goods, which by definition should be seen as operating on a vertical axis, are interpreted only as having functionality on the immediate, horizontal axis, and at a group, rather than individual, level. Þóra Petursdóttir is particularly critical of this approach in her MA thesis (2007, University of Tromsø).

Object comparison

A similar pattern can be seen in the other objects mentioned in the saga: whereas the saga depicts the objects as very agentic, the archaeological analysis of that same object category is wholly mundane.

Weapons in the saga

The passage quoted at the outset of this paper, where the king of Norway is conversing with Þórður, contains the first mention of an object in the saga, a short sword (sax).⁹ The motif of a king giving a promising young man a weapon is widespread in the sagas, and indeed much of what King Gamli is purported to have said to Þórður can be found almost verbatim in a number of other sagas, especially the final statement about

⁹ The first property mentioned in the saga is actually that of a wife, "Hann hafði fengi göfugt kvánfang" but for the purposes of this chapter, which focuses on materiality, women will not be considered objects.

not giving it or loaning it unless his life was in danger.¹⁰ But that the mention of the first object coincides with the first use of dialogue in the saga, and dialogue spoken no less from the mouth of the king, brings the audiences' attention onto this object. The object itself is not described in detail; we are not asked to meditate upon its physical beauty in wonder. Rather, this is a symbolic use of an object standing in for something else—in this case a signifier of the relationship between the king and Þórður—a point which is made explicit when the king mentions the non-material aspects of the object that are said to go along with it, including friendship and good luck.

Two chapters later, this exchange takes place:

Eiður var Þórði jafnan fylgjusamr, enda var Þórður alltilátssamr við hann. Þórður var löngum at ferju smíðinn miðri við ósinn ok Eiður hjá honum. Þat var einn dag, er Þórður var at skipssmíðinni ok sveinninn Eiður hjá honum. Þórður hafði jafnana hjá sér saxit Gamlanaut, ok svá var enn. Eiður tók upp saxit ok lék sér at. Þetta sér Þórður ok mælti: “Lízt þér vel á saxit, fóstri minn?” Hann svarar: “Allvel,” segir hann. Þórður mælti: “Þá vil ek gefa þér saxit.” Eiður mælti: “Aldri mun ek geta launat jafngóðan grip, en vináttu mín vil ek gefa þér, fóstri minn, ok mun hon pykkja lítils verð.” Þórður svarar: “Haf þú þökk fyrir, fóstri minn, ok muntu bæði launa opt ok stórum.” (ÍF XIV, p. 175)

[Eiður was always eager to go along with Þórður, since Þórður was very attentive towards him. Þórður was working on hard on his building his ferry in the middle of the river, and Eiður was with him. It happened one day, that Þórður was working on his boat and the boy Eiður was with him. Þórður always had with him his short sword, Gamli's Joy, including this day. Eiður picked up the sword and played with it. Þórður saw this and said, “Do you like the sword, my foster son?” He answered, “Absolutely,” he said. Þórður spoke, “Then I would like to give you the sword.” Eiður replied, “I would never be able to repay you for such a gift, but I will swear to you my friendship, my foster father, even though it seems of little worth.” Þórður answered, “You have my thanks, my foster son, because you will repay me both often and generously.”]

The giving of the sax establishes the friendship between Eiður and Þórður, a key plot element that links the episodes of *Þórðar saga hreðu* together. Exactly as Þórður predicts—in good saga fashion—Eiður does repay the gift of the sax (short sword) many times over, notably by continually stopping his father from exacting vengeance on Þórður for various affronts. Their fostering relationship is an informal one; in fact Eiður's father had arranged for him to be fostered with another man in Miðfjörður, but Eiður prefers the company of Þórður after Þórður rescues Eiður from drowning, an episode brought on

¹⁰ When Þórður gives the sword away to his young charge Eiður at his earliest opportunity, one is reminded of Kormák the skald, who also scoffed at instructions given to him regarding the proper use of powerful weapons. However, in Þórður's case, his gamble seems to pay off, as Eiður indeed saves his life on a number of occasions.

by his foster father's incompetence. The gift of the sax solidifies the relationship between these two: Þórður a young ambitious newcomer from Norway, presumably little more than a teenager (he is unmarried and has no children of his own), and Eiður, the only son of the most powerful man in the Miðfjörður area. This unusual fostering arrangement is a subject of ill-feeling for Eiður's father, who views the gift of the sax with suspicion:

‘En sja vil ek þann grip, er þú lætr svá mikilliga yfir, hvárt mér þykkir svá mikils um vert.’ Eiður sýndi honum þá saxit. Skeggi brá saxinu ok leizt allvel á ok mælti: ‘Auðsét er þat, at þenna grip hafa átt tignir menn, ok er þetta allmikil gersemi, ok eigi trúi ek, at hann hafi þvílíkan grip, svá fágætan, þér gefit.’ Þá svarara Eiður: ‘Eigi þykki mér þá líkligt, at þú munir styrkja mik til launanna, ef þú villt eigi trúa, at hann hafir gefit mér.’ Skeggi mælti: ‘Gjarna vilda ek, at þú hefðir þenna grip eigi þegit’ (ÍF XIV, p. 175).

[“I'd like to see this thing that you are making such a big fuss over, and whether I think it is worth so much.” Eiður showed him the sax. Skeggi drew the sax and studied it well and spoke “It is clear that this object has been owned by noble men, and is a great treasure, but I do not believe that he gave such an object, so rare, to you.” Eiður answered, “It seems to me unlikely that you would support me in my recompense, if you choose not to believe that he has given me this.” Skeggi spoke, “I would have been happy if you had not accepted this object.”]

The dialogue here turns very specifically on the nature of this object as gift. Skeggi, Eiður's father, looks at the object but comments not on its appearance or on how it is made: rather his concern is with the status of the previous owners. This is a material object that carries with it status and prestige, because of its object biography. Perhaps it is the lack of use, or the quality of the material in the sax, that elicits this response in Skeggi; whatever the case, he seems capable of reading the semiotics of this sax perfectly. He and Eiður both understand that this object operates on a horizontal axis, uniting and marking all men who own and carry it as members of an elite nobility. It is neither named, nor are we to understand it is particularly old. Rather this object functions as a class marker in contemporary society. Furthermore, this sax carries with it an obligation towards the gift giver, as do all gifts (Mauss 1990). Eiður refers to this explicitly, when he laments that his father will not help him fulfill the due recompense if he does not believe the sax to be a gift.

Skeggi himself has a sword with a similar noble pedigree: his sword was however not a gift, but rather something he robbed from the burial of a Danish king, and as such has clear import on the vertical axis. Skeggi has literally traveled on the vertical axis, going down into the earth, in order to receive his sword. Þórður on the other hand travels on the horizontal plane, going from his family farm in Norway to the king's hall, and then traveling to Iceland, where Eiður eventually receives the sword. Thus the two objects, both carrying with them impressive object biographies, communicate very different meanings.

The story of how Skeggi got his sword is summarized when Skeggi is first introduced into the saga:

Skeggi var garpr mikill ok einvígismaðr. Han var lengi í víkingu. Ok eitt hvert sinn kom hann við Danmörk ok fór til Hleiðrar, þangat sem haugr Hrólfs konungs kraka var, ok braut hauginn ok tók á braut sverðit Hrólfs konungs, Sköfnung, er bezt sverð hefir komit til Íslands, ok öxina, er Hjalti hafði átt inn hugpruði; en hann náði eigi Laufa af Böðvari bjarka, því at hann fekk hvergi sveigt hans armleggi. Siðan bar Skeggi Sköfnung. (ÍF XIV, p. 169)

[Skeggi was a great champion and brave warrior. He had harried widely. And onetime, he arrived at Denmark and went to Hleiðrar (modern day Leire), where the burial mound of King Hrólfr Kraki was, and broke into the mound and took away the sword of King Hrólfr, Sköfnung, which is the best sword that has ever come to Iceland, and the axe which Hjalti the Pure of Mind owned. He did not manage to get Laufa (a spear) from Böðvar Bjarki, because no matter what he could not lift his arm. Afterwards, Skeggi always bore Sköfnung.]

Skeggi's sword Sköfnung comes from a king, just as Þórður's short sword does, but its association with the vertical axis is paramount—this sword was recovered from the land of the dead, literally stolen out of the hands of the deceased king. The mention of Skeggi's failed attempt to recover the spear Laufa emphasizes the danger inherent in breaking into a burial chamber. *Grettis saga* has a detailed description of Grettir pilaging the grave of a family patriarch and stealing the weapons therein. The “mound dweller” he encounters is not simply a dead body; rather, as Grettir attempts to remove the treasure lying next to the deceased, it awakens and Grettir has a vigorous fight with him. The reference above to Skeggi being unable to lift Böðvar's¹¹ arm may similarly indicate that the mound dweller though dead was not inanimate. That the dead are somewhat operative, even though buried in a tomb, seems to resonate with their swords as well: they carry within them the agency of their previous owners.

Sköfnung is indeed one of the most famous of saga swords. In *Þórðar saga hreðu*, it is described as the best sword ever to come to Iceland and Skeggi's effort to recover Sköfnung is relayed not only *Þórðar saga hreðu*, but also in *Landnámabók* and in *Laxdæla saga*. It seems to be a very widely known tale associated with Skeggi of Miðfjörður, a character who shows up in other sagas. But Sköfnung is not exclusively associated with Skeggi: it is also mentioned in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, a legendary saga which tells of the exploits of King Hrólfr Kraki, the king whose tomb Skeggi raided; and it is also featured in *Kormáks saga*, where failure to carefully treat the sword according to regulations contributes to Kormákur's ill-luck (Hollander 1943). In the 78th chapter of *Laxdæla saga*, it is reported that the sword went with Gellir Þorkelsson on his crusade to Rome, and

¹¹ Böðvar and Hjalti are two heroes who served in the retinue of King Hrólfr Kraki, according to *Hrólfs saga kraka*, a legendary saga.

ended up back in Denmark, where Gellir died. This long and complex object biography therefore goes beyond the fact that Sköfnung has re-emerged from the land of the dead, an object displaced in time and place; instead the sword seems to have a life-force of its own.

The agentive strength of this sword is emphasized in the many references to its “nature”: “náttúra Sköfnungs var sú, at hann kvað við hátt, þá hann kenndi beinanna” [the nature of Sköfnung was such that it would exclaim loudly when it met the bone]. The verb “kvað,” which I have translated as “exclaim,” donates speech, especially formal speech such as giving a greeting or reciting a line of poetry. This underscores its agency; it interacts with the material world and the sounds it produces are understood as akin to speaking. In battle, the sword demanded that once it was unsheathed, it taste blood, as is recounted in *Þórðar saga hreðu*: “Þat er náttúra sverðsins, at nökkurt verðr at höggva með því, hvern tíma er brugðit er.” [It is the nature of the sword that someone has to deal a blow with it, each time that it is drawn]. The agentive nature of the sword is used to defer blame and causality: when Skeggi is frustrated in his final attempt to take Þórður’s life because of his son’s last minute intervention, Skeggi decides instead to kill Þorhallur, Ólof’s husband. He finds Þorhallur asleep in bed beside his wife, and he gives them a chance to get up. Þorhallur begs for his life, but Skeggi beheads him anyhow, and then says, “launaði eg nú Sköfnungi það að honum var brugðið” [I have now repaid Sköfnung for being drawn].

Both the short sword that Þórður gives Eiður, and the sword Sköfnung, actively participate in the narrative of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. The gift of the short sword creates the fostering relationship that then instigates the many instances when Eiður saves Þórður’s life. Sköfnung is also agentive in forming relationships, especially marriage relationships (Davidsson 1960). When Skeggi beheads Þorhallur, this opens up the opportunity for Þórður to ask Ólof for her hand in marriage; Sköfnung removes the obstacle to their union. This is not the only time Sköfnung is involved in marriage arrangements: Skeggi’s use of Sköfnung in Þórður’s defense spurs Þórður to agree to Ásbjorn’s proposal, and Sköfnung is actually drawn at the wedding of Ásbjörn, Skeggi’s nephew, and Sigríður, Þórður’s sister, by Þórður himself, a serious breach of Skeggi’s personal property. This seems to be an instance of Þórður goading Skeggi, as he had done to others in the saga, but for a more noble purpose; during the wedding, “Allir menn váru þar kátir nema Skeggi; hann var heldr ófrýnn . . . Illa líkaði Þórði, er Skeggi var ókátr um veizluna” [everyone was happy there except Skeggi, he was rather morose . . . It displeased Þórður that Skeggi was unhappy at the reception]. When Skeggi awakens, he finds out that Þórður has drawn Sköfnung, and stabbed a mare with it. Eiður then steps in and declares that Þórður owes Skeggi compensation, and Þórður offers Skeggi self-judgment (which is the highest honor; it means he sets his own terms of recompense). It is clear from the saga that Þórður shows him this slight dishonor in order to give Skeggi a ready means to increase his own honor. Considering how often both Eiður and Þórður bested Skeggi, Þórður is here trying to balance the equation, and Sköfnung is a ready symbol to this end. Sköfnung’s closer association with weddings pairs well with its object biography; it is the sort of sword that operates on the vertical axis, ensuring the links between generations.

Throughout the saga, Skeggi's animosity towards Þórður seems undermotivated. Indeed it is unclear why exactly Skeggi resents the giving of the short sword to Eiður, except in as much as he recognizes the heavy social obligations of mutual support which go along with accepting such a gift. There could also be a sense of jealousy: perhaps we are to imagine that Skeggi would have felt his role as father weakened, since it is likely Eiður would have been in line to inherit Sköfnung from his father.¹² But by focusing on the agency of the objects themselves, and noting the disparity in how they operate in the world—one through emphasizing the social gift-giving relationships formed in the now, and the other through the long-term communion with the otherworldly—perhaps Skeggi's reticence makes more sense. Skeggi is more of a Viking type than Þórður, more apt to steal what he desires than to be given it, and it is a sign of things to come that his son is not more like him. Eiður seems more concerned with operating on a horizontal level.

Weapons in archaeological analysis

The archaeological evidence for weapons being ritually charged is considerable, and has been explored in the Scandinavian context. In Viking Age Finland and Sweden, for instance, swords have been found were intentionally mangled pre-deposition (Fitzhugh and Ward 2000, p. 63). No such purposely-destroyed swords have been found in the Icelandic context, however. Grave robbing is another activity that points to the allure of weapons post-deposition. The spectacular burials at Borre in Norway show extensive evidence of post-depositional disturbance, although it is hard to tell how much of the original grave goods were removed (Myrhe 1994). And according to the physical biologists working for the National Museum of Iceland, there is hardly a pagan burial in Iceland that does not have skeletal remains disarticulated post- internment (Hildur Gestsdóttir personal communication November 2010; see also Þóra Þetursdóttir 2007, p. 67). But this activity has not been rigorously analyzed or discussed in the Icelandic context, and one wonders if this is not because it parallels too closely saga accounts.¹³

Instead, sword finds in Iceland have typically been utilized for dating purposes. In 1919, Norwegian archaeologist Jan Petersen published a detailed typology of Viking Age swords, based on a comparison of all swords found in Norway. The shape of the pommel, hilt, blade design, and material all were considered as he formulated his system. He came up with types A through H, and within each of those types, determined subcategories, usually ranging from I to V. Thus a Petersen B III became an internationally recognized short hand for a certain type of Viking Age sword. Moreover, his typology suggested a chronological development from one type to another, and although there was considerable overlap, the schematic was convincing enough that burials with one type of sword are considered early Viking Age whereas burials with another type of sword are

¹² H. R. Ellis Davidson in the article "The Sword at the Wedding" (1960) makes the interesting note however that very often, swords are passed down the maternal line in saga literature.

¹³ This lack of comment by the professional archaeological community on these disturbances was also noted by a student completing her bachelor's degree at the University of Iceland in 2008. Her thesis is available at http://skemman.is/is/stream/get/1946/3393/10565/1/Erna_Thorarinsdottir_fixed.pdf

considered late Viking Age. Especially in the Norwegian context, which lacks the tephra layer dating technique available in Iceland (due to the frequent and well researched history of volcanic eruptions), this weapon-based dating sequence was extremely important. Petersen went on to develop a similar typology for spears, arrows, and axes. To this day, the first step in analyzing Viking Age weapons is to determine which of Peterson's types they belong to. And in the case of the swords found in Iceland, this has traditionally been the end of the interest in swords. This despite the fact that a number of very fine swords in Icelandic burials may be interpreted as prestige gifts, since there is no way they could have been produced domestically. Or, as Þóra has noted, perhaps the act of interring the dead with their most valuable possessions should be thought of as a sort of gift-giving. Archaeological work in Iceland has however been silent on the activity of gift-giving, despite the fact that it is considered a major factor of Viking Age society (Hedeager 1994).¹⁴

Trade Goods in archaeology

Icelandic and non-Icelandic archaeologists have, however, been more interested in what artifacts and burial goods indicate about a different sort of economic activity: trade. The interest lies not in trade within Iceland, but in trade between Iceland and other lands.¹⁵ Recent excavations at the trade site of Gásir in Eyjafjörður have finally confirmed that Iceland had a dedicated trade site in the early medieval period (Orri Vésteinsson 2011), a subject that had previously been disputed. Before then, artifacts found in Iceland, but made of non-Icelandic material, were heavily studied not only by Eldjárn but also by many subsequent archaeologists simply as a means to confirm that trade did in fact take place. The articles in *Árbók hin Íslensk fornleifafélag* (Yearbook of the Icelandic Archaeological Association) reporting on these types of trade goods are detailed, accurate, and highly-informative, but lack a discussion of wider implications for the finds at a theoretical or historical level. For instance, Holt's survey of coins in Iceland (1998) emphasizes how few coins have been found, except for a few that are perforated and were worn as jewelry, although two hoards do contain a mixture of coinage. Holt ends his descriptive survey of all coins found in Iceland dating to the Viking and medieval period by suggesting that the record is so scarce because metal was simply so precious in Iceland that none of it made it into the archaeological record. This seems a very cautious approach, in as much as the lack of coinage may have had wider trade implications for Icelanders during this period; evidence of trade via a monetary economy is not evidenced in Iceland until well into the medieval period. But Holt's analysis of the coinage is typical of the conservative, descriptive nature of archaeological reports in Iceland.¹⁶

¹⁴ As William Miller (1990, p. 88-90) has described in the account of Auðun and the polar bear, in this society a gift was considered more honorable than a monetary transaction.

¹⁵ Building on Eldjárn's work, Iceland as a whole is usually thought of in Icelandic archaeology as the natural unit of analysis, rather than regional distinctions.

¹⁶ Sigríð Cecílie Juel Hansen's study of lead weights found in grave contexts and a large number of Norwegian whetstones found both at house sites and graves concludes that the sheer number and variety, as well as the heavy use they sustained, indicates a trade network for these items (2009).

Trade Goods in the Saga

Trade transactions in the *Þórðar saga hreðu* are also focused on international exchange, but the saga suggests a reason why such transactions were not more common: they were occurrences fraught with uncertainty and often the cause of strife. The first economic transaction described in the *Þórðar saga hreðu* occurs in chapter 2, just after Þórður has spoken his first verse. It reads: “Frændr þeira ok vinir fýstu þá at selja jarðir sínar til lausafjár ok lögðu þat til, at Þórður skyldi leita til islands” [Their relatives and friends urged them to sell their land for moveable goods and suggested that Þórður should seek out Iceland]. Þórður agrees to this suggestion, but not first without lamenting the need to sell “óðul mín”. The change in noun here from jarðir to óðul is interesting; óðul is inherited land, something that links a person to their ancestry and thus a material operating on the vertical axis. But the conversion to moveable goods happens to the “jarðir” (land/earth/plot). This monetary transaction facilitates Þórður’s move to Iceland, because it allows him to hire a ship, along with some tradesmen, and buy land when he arrives in Miðfjörður. Thus the value transfers from the vertical axis to the horizontal axis in a way that Þórður regrets.

The next trade transaction described in the saga is more negative. Upon the arrival of the brothers in Miðfjörður, we are told of the chieftain in the area, Skeggi. We also learn that Skeggi’s father was a merchant:

Skeggi bjó at Reyjum, er kallaðr var Miðfjarðar-Skeggi. Hann var son Skinna-Bjarna. Því var hann Skinna-Björn kallaðr, at hann var vanr at sigla í austr-veg kaupferð ok færa þaðan gráskinn, bjór ok safala. (ÍF XIV, p. 169)

[Skeggi lived at Reykja, and was called Miðfjörður-Skeggi. He was the son of Skinna-Björn. He was called Skinna-Björn because he was accustomed to under taking trade voyages on the eastern route, and got from there squirrel, bear, and sable skins.]

As a trader specializing in furs, Skeggi’s father Björn has earned the nickname Skinn-Björn.¹⁷ The saga makes explicate, by drawing attention to his journey “austr-veg”, that economic transactions operate on the horizontal plane, across geographic distance and uniting disparate lands.¹⁸ That Skeggi is the son of a trader makes his reaction to Þórður yet all the more enigmatic: Þórður expects to be greeted by the inhabitants, and that they will want to trade with them as well as “frétta tíðinda” [hear the news]. After some wait, finally a farmer named Eyjólfur from the farm at Ósi comes to him. He explains that it is customary in this fjord for Skeggi to greet all ships, to take what he likes,

¹⁷ The nicknaming conventions are interesting here, in as much as Skeggi’s nickname ties him to a place, whereas his father’s nickname ties him to material goods. Þórður’s nick name “hreðu” comes instead from a personal attribute he possesses. For more on nick-naming conventions, see Willson 2009.

¹⁸ There may also be a time element that differentiates horizontal from vertical relationships. Horizontal relationships are temporary and in need of constant iteration, whereas in the example of Sköfnung we see an object that only needs to operate occasionally to be powerful on the vertical axis.

and arrange to have the remaining goods sold. Þórður considers this “mikít um ríkilæti” [quite overbearing]. The situation does not improve after Eyjólfur goes to Skeggi, and tells him of the arrival of Þórður and a ship from Norway. Skeggi declares, “Engan vil ek til mín taka af þessum skipverjum” [I have no interest in taking any of these exchange goods]. According to the saga, Skeggi reacts in this way because he knows who Þórður is and what he has done in Norway (killed the king’s brother), although a reader is left wondering how Skeggi could have known of this recent development. This plot discrepancy suggests that it is actually engaging in trade as an act that is fraught with hostility; like Þórður’s reticence to sell his family land, Skeggi seems reticent to engage in a trade negotiation with Þórður. That Skeggi, who is a somewhat suspect character, is the son of a merchant begins to hint at the saga’s concern with trade as an activity.

The potentiality for the exchange of goods in a trade transaction to be dangerous is solidified in the third trade transaction described in the saga. Chapter 3 ends with Þórður and Eiður agreeing to go to Borgarnes, where some trade ships have docked. Þórður has an ominous dream about the trip, and then the readers are given another clue that something bad is about to happen:

Ok er þórður bjóst, mælti Sigríður, systir hans: “Þat vil ek, broðir minn, at þú kaupir mér skikkju mjök vandaða.” Þórður svarar: “Svá skal vera, systir. En svá segir mér hugr, at skikkjan verði fullkeypt, áðr lúki” (ÍF XIV, p. 179)

[And when Þórður was preparing for the trip, Sigríður his sister said, “I would like, my brother, for you to buy me a gown of very good quality.” Þórður answered, “It shall be done, sister. But my mind tells me that this gown will be very well paid for before the matter is closed.”]

Like the short sword Þórður received from King Gamli, this “well made gown” is introduced into the saga in a piece of dialogue, suggesting it has heightened importance. It is not visually described, but rather its quality, and the craftsmanship that went into making it, is emphasized. It also proves to be the subject of a great deal of strife. A merchant is there at Borgarnes from the East fjords, named Þórir. He has a fine gown among his wares. A farmer named Jón, from the northern quarter, goes into Þórir’s booth, and tries to buy the gown. Þórir is not inclined to sell it to him, and names a very high price. At this Jón leaves the booth. Then Þórður and Eiður enter the booth, and they see the gown. The merchant “kenna Þórður ok hans foreldra, ‘ok vil ek eigi meta við þik, heldr vil ek, at þú þiggir skikkjuna’” (ÍF XIV, p. 181) [knows Þórður and his parents, “and I do not want to bargain with you, rather I want you to accept the gown.”] Þórður agrees to this and takes the gown with him. He returns a short time later (to offer some compensation to the merchant presumably) but encounters Jón and his copatriot. They immediately fall to blows over the gown, without a word being spoken, and Þórður kills both Jón and his companion. Skeggi then has to come to their defense, as other friends of Jón descend upon Þórður and Eiður, as mentioned above.

The mere sight of this gown therefore seems to elicit a response in everyone involved. Þórir seemed unwilling to sell it to Jón because Jón was not of high enough

status to own a gown of this fine of quality. Þórður on the other hand, coming from the landed nobility of Norway, was a suitable recipient for the gown. This, coupled with the bravado of Sköfnung later in this scene as Skeggi comes to their rescue, makes the entire episode in Borgarnes an extended discussion of objects, and their rightful place in the world. In fact, the episode seems to have no other purpose in the narrative. None of the relatives of Jón ever emerge later in the saga to demand compensation. Instead, the matter is completely dropped after Skeggi negotiates a deal where Þórðar agrees to pay Jón's family 200 marks of silver. The others get no compensation. The gown also is never mentioned again in the saga.

This episode then serves only to underscore the dangerous nature of trade transactions, a theme repeated throughout the saga. Þórður has skirmishes with two other merchants who are seeking to avenge Ormur's death. The horizontal distribution of goods through monetary exchange is therefore painted in a negative light in the saga, and the social relationships which it engenders short lived. The gown has only temporary agency tied to its visual impact. It has no object biography, and no lasting legacy.¹⁹ This mirrors the treatment of the objects Þórður brought with him from Norway, which he readily sold away in exchange for the farm of Ósi in Miðfjörður. Objects involved in trade on the horizontal axis are therefore given only short term agency in the saga.

Healing objects

Finally, there is one category of objects that appears very often in the archaeological record, but is not mentioned in the saga at all: amulets. In about 20 of the 300 or so pagan burials identified by Kristján Eldjárn, objects he called "amulets" were found. Þóra Petursdóttir commented on these thusly:

In his doctoral thesis (Eldjárn 1956), as well as in its republication (Eldjárn 2000), these items are completely ignored. However, my own study of the corpus revealed that such items are actually among the most commonly found grave goods. They are documented in 21 graves, but are most likely underrepresented as they can easily be overlooked or ignored during excavations. (2007, p. 81)

Sharing Þóra's interest in these items that Eldjárn had ignored, I conducted a survey during the summer of 2008 of these and other items made of native Icelandic stone in Viking Age burials in Iceland. Small, mostly unworked, native Icelandic stones were found beside the bodies of the deceased, near their hips, and sometimes in the context of strike-a-lites. This suggests that they, along with strike-a-lites, were carried in small pouches on a belt, and that this belt and pouch were thought of as personal items of the deceased which were therefore buried with them.

¹⁹ This is not the gown Sigríður is wearing when Ásbjörn becomes enamored with her, since that episode takes place before this trade voyage to Borgarnes.

The function of these items is enigmatic; I believe that these stones were held in the palm of the hand as an aid in healing. If that idea is correct, their object agency must have been understood as very high, inasmuch as the stones allowed for powers to be harnessed that would not otherwise be accessible. Coming directly from the Icelandic landscape, presumably from mountain sides given the crystalline rocks involved (although precise sourcing was not possible), I would argue these stones operated along a vertical axis, tying the user to more vital forces. These sorts of objects, directly linked to non-Christian beliefs, are clearly personal items; it is therefore likely these small objects operated agentively in a private setting. It is also interesting to note that the majority of the burials, where sex could be identified, containing small native Icelandic stones were female graves. However, as Þóra notes, because these small native Icelandic stones can easily be overlooked, it could just be that earlier archaeologists working in Iceland were more apt to collect them from female graves than male. Eldjárn however ended his analysis after putting the label “amulet” on these objects, or even in the case of certain pieces of native stone, calling them strike-a-lites because they were found near other strike-a-lites, even though they clearly lack impact marks and are not of the same material as strike-a-lites.

The saga too is silent in regard to any amulets, but it does tell us that several people were skilled at healing people: Ólof, Þorvaldur from Engihlíð, and Þorgrímur from Ási. There is no description of the process of healing Þórður or the others, and no objects named as involved in that process. But here the archaeological evidence, if one is willing to interpret it aggressively, suggests a reason for this: healing was a private, personal act mediated through unmodified stones and pebbles.

Built Environment

However, the saga does show an interest in the natural landscape, especially as it is modified by humans. Two features of the built environment mentioned in the saga have also been the subject of rather intensive archaeological investigation. Let us turn then to these structures—burial mounds and halls—to see whether there is more overlap here between the archaeological analysis and saga depictions of these human-made things.

Burials in archaeological analysis

Burials, especially in the form of large burial mounds, are extremely important areas of research in Viking Age archaeology. Most of the spectacular finds come from that context, including the ship burials in Norway, the impressive cremation burials in Sweden, and the kingly burial mounds in Jelling, Denmark. Just as important as their content is the statement burial mounds make in the landscape. Indeed, the impressive mounds at Gamla Uppsala seem not to have ever contained any burials; rather, they stand as testament to the authority of a particular noble line in that central region of Sweden, who were believed to have controlled an important trade route. The mounds at Jelling, one of which contained a burial, also are part of a much larger complex of features that demonstrates the political, and perhaps ideological and social control, of Harald Bluetooth’s royal line.

In Iceland, although there are no mounds as large as those in mainland Scandinavia, Kristján Eldjárn and later archaeologists have identified several mounds that would have originally been several meters high, and therefore would presumably have been noticeable features in the landscape. However, given Iceland's geography, there are places where glacial deposits and frost heaves create features that look like they could be burial mounds. Early archaeological reports in Iceland include descriptions of digging into a mound believed to contain the remains of an important saga hero, only for the archaeologist to discover it was a natural feature. This presented a challenge to archaeologists in Iceland wishing to undertake analysis similar to what was done in mainland Scandinavia, coupled also with the greater conservatism of Icelandic archaeologists generally speaking. Recently, however, burial mounds have received a more serious treatment by one of the most important archaeologists working in Iceland today, Adolf Friðriksson (2004).²⁰ He finds that there are two models of distribution of burial mounds in Iceland: either they are near the main farmhouse, or they are located at the boundary of the homestead. In a presentation to the Viking Congress in 2009, he suggested that competition for land may have motivated the placement of burials at the edge of homesteads, as a way to symbolically claim the land, but that the preference was to have burials near the center of the homestead otherwise. As one of the few archaeologists in Iceland to have an optimistic outlook on the potentiality for saga studies and archaeological investigations to be mutually beneficial, if divergent, fields of inquiry (Adolf Friðriksson 1994), it is not surprising that he has chosen to study something many other archaeologists have chosen to ignore. This is because burial mounds are a prominent feature of the sagas.

Burials in the saga

In *Þórðar saga hreðu* a burial mound is often raised over the people Þórður kills, but interestingly enough, not over all of them. Þórður's first victim, Jón and his companion, whom he fights with over the gown, receive only monetary compensation. The contrast with Þórður's next victim could not be greater: Ormur is killed while trying to seduce Þórður's sister (or perhaps even rape her, since Þórður comes upon him laying on her knees), who is betrothed to his own brother. Despite the dishonorable nature of his action, Ormur receives a noteworthy burial. Perhaps this is because he is the nephew of the most powerful man in Miðfjörður, and the son of another powerful chieftain, but that there is no talk of monetary compensation in this case also makes the erection of a burial mound noteworthy. Perhaps it signifies that his death is not closed, that his descendants need to still remember it because they still need to avenge it. This makes the placement of his burial mound most interesting: "Ormur var heygðr í Miðfjarðarnesi" [Ormur was put into a burial mound on Miðfjörður peninsula]. This stretch of land is several kilometers away from where Ormur was killed, and not along the major roadways, although it is a promontory that was likely visible as one sailed into Miðfjörður. Such a placement

²⁰ Adolf is the head of a large contract archeology firm, Fornleifastofnun Íslands, which has also received numerous grants for research projects and collaborates closely with the University of Iceland, international archaeological projects, and publishes a journal and monograph series.

outside of the homestead is not explained in the text, but may be tied to the status of the deceased or the nature of his death, or both.²¹

The next two killings also contrast in terms of whether or not the victims have burial mounds raised above them. In both cases, Þórður is ambushed by a group of men seeking vengeance for his killing of Ormur, and in both cases, Þórður miraculously emerges victorious. However in one case—his skirmish with Ormur’s business partner, Captain Indriði—the crewmembers that Þórður kills are not “heygð” (a special verb in Icelandic meaning to put in a haug, ie: burial mound). Instead, Indriði himself offers to give compensation to their family members, after Þórður spares his life. Þórður also gives Indriði a gift of a golden ring, cementing their friendship. Þórður’s next encounter turns out completely differently: Özurr, Skeggi’s brother-in-law, ambushes Þórður and seven of his companions with eighteen men. In the ensuing skirmish, Þórður and his companions kills nine men, while Özurr side kills five. Immediately after the battle is over, the saga informs us that “Dysjar váru gervar at líkum þeira manna, er þar fellu” (ÍF XIV, p. 204) [Cairns were erected over the bodies of the men who died there]. As this sentence follows shortly after a statement describing how Þórður puts his shield over the injured Özurr to stop him from being eaten by ravens, perhaps the cairns are merely meant to stop their bodies from being desecrated rather than the deceased being formally heygð. The use of dysjar instead of haug may also indicate the difference in status between these rather anonymous followers and Ormur. This supposition finds support a few scenes later, when Özurr again tries to ambush Þórður, but this time gets himself killed: “Haugr var orpinn eptir Özur” [A burial mound was raised in memory of Özurr]. However, the placement of this haug seems to be at the physical location where Özurr died, which may be why in the next chapter it is said that Þórður and Skeggi go “þar til sem Özurr var dysjaðr; hurfu þeir nú um hauginn”. Apparently, Özurr’s burial is both a dysjar and a haug, suggesting that the one is raised at the place of death to protect the body from desecration, and the other is raised for high-status individuals as a remembrance to their kin, especially if their deaths are not avenged.

That the haug serves as an inducement towards vengeance is clear in a scene in chapter 10: Skeggi has captured Þórður and is about to kill him, but Þórður makes it a condition of his surrender that they go to Özurr’s haug, because it seems a more fitting place to take revenge for the killings, than inside Þórhallur’s home.²² Thus although a burial mound would seem to be primarily functioning on the vertical axis, in this saga at least, they also seem to also maintain social status and obligation that lie on the horizontal axis. The mention of Skeggi entering into Hrólf Kraki’s mound, discussed above, would

²¹ In Chapter 4 below, I offer an alternative reading of the placement of this burial mound, suggesting that it marks the northern boundary of Miðfjörður.

²² This tendency to make a bad situation worse, as it were, may be part of what earns him the nickname “hreðu”. Instead of trying to dissuade Skeggi from killing him, he seems to be egging him towards vengeance, by suggesting they go to the haug of Skeggi’s brother-in-law. Of course, this is also a delay tactic: it gives Þórður’s companions a chance to come to his rescue, which they do.

be an exception to this, of course, but because it is framed outside of the saga narrative, it still seems fair to say this saga is primarily interested in burials as socially operative.²³

Burial mounds, which almost by definition should be on the vertical axis, seem to function very extensively on the horizontal axis according both to the archaeological perspective and to the evidence in the sagas. The saga treatment however places greater emphasis on their agentive power as a means of witness to past events, and a call to future behavior.

Houses in archaeology

The excavation of house sites in Iceland has been especially prevalent since the 1970s, and in some instances, the excavations have been directly linked to saga characters, such as Guðmundur Ólafsson's excavations of Eiríksstaðir in Breiðafjörður (2001). In August of 1886, Sigurður Vigfússon examined a hall purportedly built by Þórður hreða himself, the hall at Flatatunga. He offers a rather detailed description of the oldest pieces of wood in the hall, noting that it is especially large and thick and of an unusual red color (Sigurður Vigfússon 1892, p. 80), and suggests that this wood came from a special royal Norwegian grove. Although Sigurður does not say so, the reason this is important is that it would agree with *Þórður saga hreðu*: Þórður goes to Eyjafjörður to select the best wood imported from Norway while building Flatatunga. It is interesting that Sigurður identifies Þórður as the likely builder of the hall, even though he acknowledges that some Danish scholars doubt the veracity of the saga; as if to partially acquiesce to those concerns, Sigurður embeds his description of Flatatunga within the introductory travel narrative, thereby demarcating of *Þórður saga hreðu* as less historically relevant, if not perhaps less reliable.²⁴

More typical of recent scholarship however is the work of Orri Vésteinsson, who has developed a chronological sequencing of the settlement of Iceland based on placement of farmsteads (1998), noting that farmsteads in less desirable locations are apparently subdivisions based off the earliest land-claims. House construction is also a major theme of research; comparison with house-sites in other parts of the North Atlantic has been especially important for identifying a Norse component in the British Isles. This research was aided by a fortuitous (from an archaeological perspective) event that gave

²³ Other family sagas however do emphasize the spiritual and ancestral power of burial mounds, especially when the deceased are described as still visible and speaking from the mounds, as Gunnar of Hliðarendi does in *Njáls saga*.

²⁴ A large section of the main body of Sigurður's report is taken up with descriptions of the artifacts he encountered at Hólar Cathedral. But he also has sections devoted to all the civil war battle fields—Örlygsstaðir, Flugumýri, and Haugsnes—and to the Landnám farm of Hjalti (after whom Hjaltadal is named). His methodology, like Brynjólfur above, is to confirm that the narrative as described in the saga fits well into the geography of the land. In his descriptions of the civil war sites, he notes several times how reliable the written reports are, and how consistent the placenames are. In cases where there is a discrepancy—such as a creek mentioned in *Íslendingasaga* but not visible today—Sigurður sides with the written accounts and suggests that the creek has since moved (p. 84). Thus although Sigurður's hedges *Þórður saga hreðu*, his general disposition towards textual evidence is very positive.

much insight into the nature of house construction in Iceland. Dubbed “Iceland’s Pompei” (cf. S.S. Hansen 2003), most of the valley of Þórsárdalur had been submerged in volcanic ash in 1104. The inhabitants seem to have had time to evacuate, but they left behind material goods, and the houses themselves were amazingly well preserved. Excavations of that area, as well as other house sites in Iceland, have revealed a society that can only be classified as materially-poor (Guðmundur Ólafsson 1987)²⁵. Even in the case of Þórsárdalur, the objects found number just over 700 for more than 30 house sites (Guðrún Alda Gísladóttir 2004). It was therefore primarily the houses themselves—their construction and layout—that captured the attention of the archaeological community. Thanks to those excavations, it is a well known fact that Icelandic homes in the Commonwealth period were made of thick sod walls surrounding wooden framed homes, typically with one long rectangular room centered around a long narrow fire pit and sometimes with other ancillary rooms off the central hall. Most of the scholarly attention has gone into examining the exact method of construction, including identifying different types of sod-brick laying techniques and roof supports.

Houses in the saga

In the case of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, it is especially important to closely consider houses, because Þórður is himself a builder of houses. In chapter 4 below, I will examine some of the literary symbolism of Þórður as a house builder, but here the anthropological approach maintained above will be employed to try to unpack what meaning houses can have had in a socio-cultural perspective and to discuss what sort of object agency they might have had.

Flatatunga is an especially interesting and important site, not just in archaeological terms but also in the saga. The first hall Þórður builds is at Flatatunga: “Um várit reið Þórður upp í herað, því at bóndi sá, er Þórgrímur hét, hafði sent honum orð at smíða skála einn. Því at Þórður var manna hagastur” (ÍF XIV, p. 205) [In the spring Þórður rode up the district, because a certain farmer, who was named Þórgrímur, had sent him word to build him a hall. This is because Þórður was a most skillful man.] Þórður is attacked during construction of this hall, but after he recovers, “Þórður var nú í Flatatunga, ok lauk við skálasmiðina; var þat furðursterkt hús. Stóð sá skáli allt til þess, er Egill biskup var at Hólum” (p. 207)[Þórður was now at Flatatunga, and completed building the hall. It was an amazingly strong building. That hall stood all the way until Egill was the bishop at Hólar.] A few chapters later, Þórður is again invited to build a hall, this time in another district. Again he is attacked before he can complete the job, but then the saga reports:

Nú er þar til at taka, at Þórði batnar sára sinna ok ríðr þaðan inn til Hrafnagils ok smíðaði þar skála um sumarit, þann sem enn stendur í dag. Hann hefir ok gert skálann út í Höfða í Höfðahverfi (ÍF XIV, p. 224)

²⁵ Prestige may have been carried more by the size and location of the house itself, as has been suggested by Jesse Byock for the Hrísrú site in Mosfellsbær (Byock et al. 2005).

Now the story takes up where Þórður recovers from his wounds, and rides from there to Hrafnagils. There he built a hall during the summer which is still standing today. He also made a hall out at Höfði in Höfðahverfi.

Notice that in both instances, emphasis is put first of all on the place of construction—the farm name—and secondly on the length of time the hall stood. The buildings Þórður built are here clearly operating on a vertical axis; they are reaching across many generations to tie the contemporary audience of the saga with the historical period of settlement. Rather than being a distant abstraction, the material agency of these halls re-invokes the past, and brings it into the present. This is particularly true for the statement referring to the hall that is “still standing today.”

A similar statement about the longevity of these halls appears in the summary of *Þórður saga hreðu* written by Arngrímur the Learned, which is based off of a more complete example of the fragmentary version of the saga. Arngrímur, writing in the 17th century, extended the witnessing power of the hall by some additional three hundred years. His account of Þórður ends with this statement “Huius sculpturæ vestigial, quibus domuum contignationes vel partietes ornaverant, etiamnum in Islandia visuntur, post annos plusquam sexcentos.” [Remains of his carvings, which decorated the parts of houses, are still visible in Iceland six hundred years later]. Whether this extension is owing to Arngrímur being unable to differentiate between the time of his reading the saga and the time that the saga was written, or whether carvings attributed to Þórður existed in the 17th century, the assumption that material objects have the agency to witness about the past is affirmed.

Conclusion

In modern archaeological practice, objects are taken as proof, so the danger of the exercise above is the implication that I am trying to “prove” the validity of the saga. In fact my concern is more to demonstrate the divergent ontological status of objects first of all within the field of anthropology, and second of all within the textual world of the saga. Putting object, text, and an interpreting human into dynamic interaction allows many questions to be asked of the past, but none of them in my mind include adjudicating which source is the best. My interest is to demonstrate that part of the disjuncture between the archaeological finds and the saga descriptions rests in disparate understandings of material agency, the modern transference of that agency away from the landscape, and limitations placed on that agency for moveable objects.

Immediately from the outset of this saga, the audience is invited to think of objects as something beyond their physical nature. The lack of detailed descriptions of what objects look like in the saga underscores that objects are not included as a mimetic representation trying to conjure a material world; rather, they are understood as participants in the action of the saga. The important qualities of an object are not at the surface level, but at the level of the relationships between people, and between generations, that objects engender. This sort of understanding of objects coincides well with anthropological approaches towards objects as socially, economically, religiously,

cognitively, and personally meaningful. Moreover, the interest in the durability of objects through time gives them potentiality to intersect with a broad cross section of human beings and human endeavors, a potentiality emphasized also in Kopytoff's (1986) discussion of object biographies in *The Social Life of Things* (A. Appadurai, ed.). This adds rich symbolic potentiality to objects, especially as a paradoxical representation of time as subjective, even as it suggests the fluidity of function and meaning of objects through time. *Þórðar saga hreðu* also expresses a willingness to consider objects as a witness or conduit to the past, which one might consider almost an archaeological perspective on objects as proof.

But in other regards, the saga defines objects with much greater agency than is found in the archaeological analysis of artifacts from the Commonwealth period. Icelandic archaeologists have, at least in the late 20th century, operated with an extremely narrow understanding of material agency; objects are allowed to speak to issues of dating or of interactions at the horizontal level between contemporaries, but not to anything else. My intention here is not to criticize this methodological vigor, but rather to underscore that it is the reason archaeologists and saga scholars are unable to discuss even the possibility of overlap between the two sources. Although both disciplines are using the word “sword” or “house”, their conception of that lexical item, and of the agency it has to speak to human experience, is so divergent as to render conversation meaningless. Of course this radical incarnation of object positivism in Iceland may be a result of an intentional reaction against the saga texts, but if that is the case, the lack of dialogue between the two disciplines should not be put solely on the unreliability of the sagas. The disjuncture lies not in the ahistoricity of the sagas—the material world depicted in the saga coincides rather well with what has been discovered through archaeological work—but in the divergent approach to object agency.

At the level of built structures and landscape features, there is however room for hope of interpretive overlap. *Þórðar saga hreðu* is a text clearly concerned with the built environment, in the sense I refer to as a nested-narrative. Early archaeological work in Iceland was also heavily focused on reading the landscape, and secondarily on artifacts. Although modern day archaeological practice in Iceland went through a phase of extreme reticence towards reading the landscape—even to the point of ignoring place-name evidence—there are signs of recent reconsideration. Archaeology is after all one of the most emplaced academic disciplines, so it has the potential to greatly contribute to a close, localized reading of a saga. This may help ameliorate the interpretive distance between these sources. The following chapter will discuss the significance of the landscape itself for the originators of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, to show it as a text is also interested in emplacement.

CHAPTER 3:

LANDSCAPES OF MOVEMENT AND MEMORY

‘En vel ferr þér, bóndi, ok haf þökk fyrir; mun ek þiggja þína vináttu, ef ek þarf til at taka.’ Síðan reið Þórður á burt ok Einarr með honum; skildu þeir Þorvaldr með vináttu. Þeir ríða upp eptir Langadal og norður Vatnsskarð. Ok er þeir kómu norður ór skarðinu, skildi þá á um leiðir; vildi Þórður ríða um Grindarhóla, ok hann réð. Þeir riðu til Arnastapa ok áðu þar. (ÍF XIV, p. 194-5)

[‘Farewell, sir, and you have my thanks. I will accept your offer of friendship, in my time of need.’ Then Þórður rode off with Einar, departing from Þorvaldur in friendship. They rode up along Langadal and north through Vatnsskarð. When they got through the pass, the road split. Þórður wanted to go towards the Grindarhóla, and the decision was his. They rode to Arnastapi and rested there.]

In this chapter, I will apply the triad discussed in the Introduction—object-text-interpreting human—to examine the interaction between *Þórðar saga hreðu* and the landscape of Northern Iceland. Such interaction is arguably more intense in this saga than elsewhere; unlike other Sagas of Icelanders, *Þórðar saga hreðu* does not have interludes where the hero voyages abroad, nor does some final dramatic showdown take place abroad, as in *Njáls Saga* and *Grettis saga*. Once the story moves to Iceland in Chapter 2, it stays very much in Iceland, and more specifically, in the northwestern area of Iceland. Moreover, scholars agree—despite considering the saga late and derivative—that the geographic and topographic details in *Þórðar saga hreðu* are extremely accurate with respect to the real geography of the two valleys of northern Iceland where the action is set (ÍF 14, p. lv).¹ Finally, the evidence available as to the place of writing of the attested manuscript versions of the saga points to the saga being written down in the same region of Iceland where the saga was set. This saga therefore is an appropriate test case to develop an understanding of how landscape can interact with the text of a saga.

But such an interaction cannot be understood without the third component of the meaning-making matrix: there has to be a human agent actively negotiating between the text and the material world, even if the agency of landscape is understood to be extremely active. But whereas Chapters 1 and 2 above put modern scholars in that role, in the remaining chapters attention will turn to the local recipient audience as the primary negotiators between the material world and text. This is partially because scholars of the last 50 years have taken little if any note of the actual landscape of Iceland in analyzing a saga text; below I summarize what comments scholars have made on this issue. But in general, saga scholars have assumed that the real landscape of Iceland adds little to the understanding of the text. Mirroring the modern archaeological reticence to carry the

¹ Not all sagas are similarly judged; some sagas seem to display a poor understanding of the geography, and this is usually taken as evidence that the saga was written somewhere other than the place where it is set.

sagas out into the landscape, modern literary scholars have become unwilling to carry the landscape into the text.² However, in the case of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, this reticence is unwarranted. Despite the uncertain dating of the saga, we do have strong evidence that this saga was a local story, such that the sagateller would have been situated in this landscape while conveying the story. The potentiality for the landscape to take on meaning for the narrator and audience is therefore considerable.

In this chapter, I will also focus on the “sagateller” as a primary interpreting human, one who was responsible for both the shaping and the transmitting of this saga. Of course, given the divergent versions of the saga, there is no one individual sagateller: *Þórðar saga hreðu* circulated in the region for a long time, probably sometimes in written form and sometimes in oral form. Thus one generation’s audience may be the next generation’s sagatellers. In the next chapter, I will turn to questions of when the attested complete saga might likely have been composed, but in this chapter I am exploring the evidence retained in the saga of a composition (likely oral) predating the versions we have today, one which was created in close concert with the physical landscape of the area. The saga is in my view a palimpsest, with various layers accruing over time; but throughout that process, the landscape was a fruitful collaborator in the evolution of the saga and could be returned to for new inspiration. No matter whether the sagateller had a quill in hand or not, the landscape of Northern Iceland is what he had in mind.

Definition of Landscape

The term landscape has a variety of meanings that vary by discipline. The word was first coined by the Dutch for a small administrative area, but came to be associated with a pictorial style developed in the Netherlands that depicted an idyllic built environment (Schama 1996, p. 10). In most academic uses of the term, this sense of human beings interacting with the environment remains, but in much popular usage, the word landscape has come to refer to an area believed to be untouched by humans, a wilderness. Given the low population density in Iceland, even today and especially so in the medieval period, it is tempting to think of an empty, uninhabited, “unspoiled” expanse of nature when one uses the term landscape. But that is not the sense intended here. What I mean by landscape is whatever physical expanse of land medieval Icelanders understood when the saga texts spoke of Miðfjörður, Skagafjörður, and other regional appellations.³ This is therefore not a landscape in an abstract sense of wilderness or uninhabited territory, nor in a metaphorical or pictorial sense, but rather akin to the original Dutch meaning of the word. It is an area marked by shared human habitation.

In the Commonwealth period, Miðfjörður and Skagafjörður were part of the same *landsfjórðungur*, and today they are part of the same county. But in the old *þing* system, they were separate political units; Miðfjörður is within Húnaþing, whereas the people of Skagafjörður answered to Hegraneþing. It seems that although they had some political

² See Chris Callow (2011) for a recent exception to this, though he is investigating *Landnámabók*.

³ As in modern day Swedish use of “landskap” to denote a province. See *Nordic Landscapes*, Jones and Olwig (2008), esp. articles by Ulf Sporrang and Gabriel Bladh.

efficacy, the names Miðfjörður and Skagafjörður are not strictly socio-political divisions; rather they are primarily geographic referents. In the Introduction, I described the geography of Iceland as being naturally divided, and mentioned that from the rises between fjords, it is possible to overlook an entire valley at once in Iceland's largely treeless expanses. This holds true of course for some regions more than others, but certainly both Skagafjörður and Miðfjörður are of that ilk. The geography of Iceland is such that regional appellations often correspond to visually apprehended landscapes.

The text of *Þórðar saga hreðu* draws attention to this fact. In the quotation above, and in another example discussed below, *Þórðar saga hreðu* sets events at the exact location from which one apprehends the entire region as single landscape. The view from Arnastapi, where Þórður and Einar stop to rest, is shown here in Figure #1. For anyone familiar with where it is located in the geography of Iceland, the fact that it is the place Þórður chooses to rest seems at once natural—there are picnic benches there today—and also powerful. This is an impressive view, one that presents suddenly at eye level an entire valley. It forces the viewer to confront the reality of Skagafjörður as more than a name.

This simultaneous, holistic apprehension of Skagafjörður is important for the relationship it creates between an individual and the landscape. One feels as if one has met Skagafjörður in that moment. But the bodily interaction between self and place continues even as one descends from the plateau down to the valley floor. Because when one is in Skagafjörður, all one sees is the rest of Skagafjörður. It is possible to see from the southern end to the northern end, but it is not possible to see further east or further west, beyond the borders, because of the mountain ridges on either side. Skagafjörður is then, in Christopher Tilley's (Bender, Hamilton, and Tilley 2007) definition, a "nested landscape." This term refers not just to the fact that a region is ringed by mountains around a central lowland, but that it is perceptible as such to a human standing in the valley (pp. 29-34). A human body in that landscape easily feels ensconced or nested in the landscape, giving a sense of "home" in a more phenomenological sense than simply a geo-political sense (Tilley 1994).



Figure 1: View from Arnastapi into Skagafjörður.

Moreover, this landscape, bodily experienced as home, takes on more complex inter-relationships with the humans living upon it through a process of enculturation. An enculturated landscape is different than an inhabited landscape: in a volume entitled "Northern Ethnographic Landscapes" (2004), the editors Krupnik, Mason, and Horton

explore the way the vast, unsettled reaches of the arctic and subarctic have become enculturated despite the fact that they are by and large uninhabited. This happens primarily through storytelling and the conventions of naming places; what may look like an “empty” landscape to a visitor is not empty at all in this ethnographic understanding of landscape (Callaway 2004, p. 177). For those in the know, an ethnographic landscape is filled with stories, and those stories are just as affective at transforming wilderness into a human place as roads or buildings. I believe it is logical to think of Miðfjörður and Skagafjörður as ethnographic landscapes.

But because they are also nested landscapes, they are also “places” in Edward Casey’s (2009) distinction between place and space. Place, he argues, is dependent upon the emplacement of a human body into a landscape:

Body and landscape present themselves as coeval epicenters around which particular places pivot and radiate. They are, at the very least, the bounds of places. In my embodied being I am *just at* a place as its inner boundary: a surrounding landscape, on the other hand, is *just beyond* that place as its outer boundary. . . . Thanks to the double horizon that body and landscape provide, a place is a locale bounded on both sides, near and far. . . . Thanks to the mutual enlivening of body and landscape, a place constantly overflows its own boundaries. Uncontainable on its near edge, it flows back into the body that subtends it; uncontainable on its far side, it flows outward into the circumambient world. (p. 29, emphasis in original)

Landscape for him is thus the maximum extent of horizontal ground that a perceiving human can sense bodily. At its edge, it bleeds into space, a demarcation of land abstractly comprehended through culturally-defined orienters rather than being bodily experienced.

The landscape of northern Iceland can therefore be understood to be set in relationship to its human occupants in three different, complementary ways: it is a geopolitical unit that has real world legal efficacy; it is a phenomenological place wherein the inhabitants experience a sense of belonging; and it is an area enculturated through the many stories told about its places. All of these worked together to make the inhabitants of Skagafjörður feel a part of their landscape, and their landscape a part of them.⁴ In this chapter, I will be exploring the potential this relationship opens up for the landscape to become integral in the formation of saga narrative not only in terms of symbolism and framing, but also in terms of memorization and transmission of the saga for the local population. The landscape would have been generative and regenerative of the story in a deeply symbiotic way, just as the saga would have helped transform empty space into meaningful place.

⁴ Oscar Aldred (2010 with Gavin Lucas) has studied various archaeological features, including pathways and cairn markers, in the Icelandic landscape utilizing the sort of phenomenological approach I employ here. Outside of Iceland, such phenomenological approaches to archaeological and historical landscapes represent an ongoing and productive field of research. See e.g. Joakim Goldhahn 2002 and the *Handbook of Landscape Archaeology* (David and Thomas, eds., 2008).

Landscape as regional identity

Perhaps the most obvious way in which *Þórðar saga hreðu* is connected to the landscape is through its function as a regional tale, a facet of the saga shared by both versions. As noted in chapter 1, although the character of Þórður is rather consistent in both the full and fragmentary versions of the saga—he is skilled at fighting and at woodcarving—the narrative itself varies significantly between them. There is however one plot element that is entirely consistent in both versions: Þórður moves from Miðfjörður to Skagafjörður. In both versions of the saga, this move is commented upon by Þórður himself, who rather negatively characterizes the people of Miðfjörður. The fragmentary version puts this speech in a particularly dramatic place in the landscape; Þórður pauses as he leaves Miðfjörður and looks out over the valley from the vantage point of Bessaborg rock, making a declaration. The text reads:

Nú búast þeir allir brott ór Miðfirði; reið Eyvindr með þeim. Ok er þeir kómu á þá borg, er Bessaborg heitir, þá sneri Þórðr aptr ok leit á fjörðinn ok mælti: “Fagr ertu þó Miðfjörðr, þó at ek verði nú við þik at skilja; mun þeim nú höfðingjunum þykja af einn inn ólmasti, er ek em á burtu. En þat læt ek um mælt, at þeir, sem mestir menn eru í Miðfirði, verði aldri samhuga, svó at árum skipti. Ok þat annat, at þat haldist, at hér er folk orðslaugarmeira ok ósannorðara en í flestum sveitum öðrum (ÍF XIV, p. 240).

[They prepared now all to leave Miðfjörður and Eyvindur went with them. And when they got to the rock which is called Bessaborg, Þórður turned around and looked back at the fjord and spoke: “Although you are lovely, Miðfjörður, I must separate myself from you now. I come away from one who must be considered the most horrible of chieftains. And I permit myself to say, that those who are most powerful in Miðfjörður will never be able to agree on anything, even as the years pass. And I say further, that it is considered that here people are more dishonest and deceitful than in most other districts.”]

Þórður’s speech act defines as negative the entire valley of Miðfjörður, and everyone who lives there. The quote continues to list other, more favorable attributes, such as productive farms in the fragmentary version, but the switch to using “hér” when listing these positive attributes in contrast to specifying Miðfjörður when listing the negative attributes leaves Þórður’s referent unclear. What is more clear is that the unmarked category, Skagafjörður, must have the positive attributes opposite to the negative ones ascribed to Miðfjörður, which would imply that it is peaceful.

The full version does not have Þórður utter this speech when traveling from Miðfjörður to Skagafjörður—either during the initial escape there quoted at the outset of this chapter or in chapter 13 when Þórður plans to ask Ólof to marry him. Instead, the complete version chooses to emphasize the distinction between these two regions as the final comment of the saga:

Mikil ætt er komin frá Þórði hreðu og margir göfgir menn, bæði í Nóregi ok Íslandi. Þat er mál manna, at þat hafi orðit at áhrinsorðum, er Þórðr mælti, at jafnan mundi vera nökkurar hreður í Miðfirði; hefir þar jafnan verið deilugjarnara en í öðrum heruðum. Þórðr hreðu varð sótt dauðr. Höfum vér ekki fleira heyrð með sannleik af honum sagt. Ok lýkr hér nú sögu Þórðar hreðu (ÍF XIV, p. 226).

[A large lineage is descendant from Þórður hreðu and many noble men, both in Norway and Iceland. Men say, that it had become a prophesy, the words which Þórður spoke, that there would always be something frightful in Miðfjörður. More divisiveness has always been there than in other districts. Þórður died of natural causes. We have not heard anything else truthful said about him. And here ends now the Saga of Þórður hreða.]

Because the conclusion alludes to Þórður's speech, which is nowhere to be found in this version of the saga itself, it seems that it was an especially well-known aspect of his story. Arngrímur's summary of the saga in *Crymogæa* also emphasizes Þórður's move from Miðfjörður to Skagafjörður as a concluding sentiment: "In prædio Micklabæ Borealis Islandiæ parochiæ Slettalyd postquam Midfjordesnes reliquisset, bonus et fortunatus senex obiit" (ÍF IVX, pg. 250). [He died late in life, happy and fortunate, at the farm of Miklabær in the northern Icelandic district of Sléttuhlíð after he had moved from Miðfjörður].

The distinction between these two valleys then is a fundamental frame upon which the entire narrative hangs. As the dominant feature shared between all versions of the saga—dramatically declared at a turning point in the fragmentary version and the concluding sentiment in the full version—certainly these two valleys are set in opposition to one another. In this opposition one valley seems to emerge as the "better place": Þórður's speech condemning people from Miðfjörður contrasts with his eventual happy life with a wonderful woman on a nice farm in Skagafjörður. Þórður's decision to settle in Skagafjörður reinforces that it is better than Miðfjörður; since he is a heroic ancestor, the recipient audience in Skagafjörður would have been gratified by his example. Through moving from one valley to another, Þórður's life serves as a means of comparing regions of Iceland to one another, and thereby could provide an important identity-making function for inhabitants of Skagafjörður; this is likely part of why the saga continued to be transmitted. And inasmuch as it is consistent between all versions of the saga, the regional distinction between these two areas also may well have originally helped inspire the saga narrative as a whole. It is reasonable to conjecture that such a narrative core would have formed when regional distinctions had their greatest efficacy, that is to say rather early on in the settlement process.⁵ At least some form of the saga would have therefore already existed by this time.

⁵ Sverrir Jakobsson argues that already by the 12th century, local identities were giving way to a shared "Icelandic" identity, though this would have been in the provincial sense of a part of a larger Scandinavian whole, and not nationalistic (2010, p. 70).

Þórðar saga hreðu is most likely not unique in fulfilling such a regional-identity function amongst Sagas of Icelanders. Regionalism is such an obvious aspect of Icelandic medieval literature that it hardly even gets noted by scholars in the field. It informs not only the title and topics of a great number of Icelandic family sagas, which are named for one specific region of Iceland—*Vatnsdæla saga*, *Laxdælasaga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, etc.—but also informs the entire organizational schema of the early history book *Landnámabók*, which begins in the southwest corner of Iceland, where the first Norwegian immigrant is said to have settled, and then the settlement of each valley is taken in order in a clockwise direction around the island. *Landnámabók* is further divided into four sections that represent the four administrative units of Iceland. So whereas the term “Saga of Icelanders” implies that a communal, supra-identity—one we might align with national identity—was paramount in the formation of this literature, the texts themselves bespeak a much greater concern with regional distinctions.

There is growing scholarly interest in the degree to which these regional divisions represent or became actual regional identities for Commonwealth period Icelanders. Ármann Jakobsson analysis of *Bárðarsaga Snæfellsáss* (2006) is a case in point. The saga title at once refers to a region of Iceland—Snæfellsnes—and the name of man, Bárður. The saga begins with a rather standard narrative: Bárður is born in Norway, fostered by a high-status man, and then moves to Iceland after King Harald Fairhair demands he, and other noblemen, start paying taxes, just as many other saga heroes do. But his genealogy sets him apart, inasmuch as he is descendant from trolls and giants, who prefer to live in caves rather than farms. His relationship with the landscape therefore goes beyond that of the normal landnámsmaður, who might get a valley or farm named after him. Bárður not only has a plethora of landscape features named after him, but rather early on in the saga, he decides to forgo the normal farming community to move up to a cave in the mountains. The saga then says that many people believe Bárður had become a mountain spirit, and they would ask him for protection at various times. Ármann notes that “the people of the region need someone who lives among them and is not yet totally of them, an intermediary such as Bárður” (p. 60). Although Ármann point is that the saga creates a negative category conjoining past, mountains, and the pagan religion, he takes it as a given that the saga also had an important local, regional identity-forming function.

Þórður does not become a mountain god the way Bárður does, but his actions do shape the built environment to such an extent that his works were still standing at the time the existing manuscripts were written. Þórður is in that sense closely aligned with the landscape. It is also interesting that Þórður’s relationship is, like Bárður’s, directly with the land in a physical sense, rather than with regional divisions in a political sense. Like *Bárðarsaga Snæfellsáss*, *Þórðar saga hreðu* never has any scenes set at any þing assembly. Instead, the pivotal, central development of the saga linked to regionalism is enacted through Þórður’s movement from one region to another.

Movement

Although regionalism is clearly a dominant theme in the saga, the precise way in which this movement is described warrants further examination: as the quote at the

outset demonstrates, Þórður's movements across the landscape are not solely categorized as movement between Miðfjörður and Skagafjörður. Rather, a catalogue of placenames encountered en route are relayed in the saga, with little description of the physical appearance of the landscape itself. Had they been visually described, one could argue they were being used to set tone or to provide a dramatic backdrop. But instead, the landscape is referenced without being objectified. Similar lists of landscape features pepper many Sagas of Icelanders, and therefore it is worth looking more closely at what else—besides a general interest in regionalism—these types of scenes might suggest about the relationship between the saga narrative, the physical landscape, and the interpreting human.

Unfortunately, despite their ubiquity, scenes cataloguing a character's movement across the landscape strike modern readers as unnecessary and uninteresting; perhaps this is why they have not been the subject of robust scholarly discussion to date. But scholars have touched on general issues of movement, place, space, setting, and landscape in the Old Norse corpus; I will summarize those efforts below before suggesting what I believe is motivating the specific textual manifestation of movement seen in *Þórður saga hreðu*.

Spatial approaches

Some saga scholars have noted that movement towards the cardinal directions of east, west, north and south do not seem to be neutral in Old Norse literature, but rather that such movement exists within a culturally-constructed spatial cosmology. For instance, Rudolf Simek's tome *Altnordische Kosmographie* (1990) argues that in several sagas—especially *förnaldasögur*—movement in certain directions is privileged. He applies scholarly understanding of Continental medieval cosmology and geographic imaginings from the middle ages (as evidenced in *mappæ mundi* and biblical and pilgrimage literature, combined with Icelandic and Norwegian learned “scientific” writings) to argue that the same macro-spatial understanding informs the narratives of a group of sagas comprised of several *förnaldasögur*, saint's lives, and translations from Latin.⁶ Together they demonstrate that the medieval mental map of the world with Rome at the center, in the classic T-O zonal form, was operating in Iceland and Scandinavia. Simek notes the importance of travel to the south and to the east in this conception of the world, although there were Scandinavian innovations upon it (p. 324)⁷. He concludes his analysis by offering that certain family sagas, including *Egil saga* and *Örvar-Odds saga* seem to display this same geographic sense (p. 365).

Lindow (1994) adds to Simek's observations evidence taken from the pagan mythological poems. In Snorri Sturluson's 13th century imaginings of 10th century cosmology, built upon the fragments of poetry that survived into Snorri's time, east was

⁶ He distinguishes between works primarily concerned with cosmology, such as saint's lives, and those reflecting a cosmographic understanding, such as Chivalric works and romances. None of the sagas he uses to illustrate Nordic cosmology are Sagas of Icelanders, although his analysis of *Hauksbók* includes a discussion of *Eiríks saga rauða*, which describes the voyages to Vinland.

⁷ Latin texts had described the North as the wild periphery, but for people living in the North, there was a need to modify this conception (see also S. Jakobsson, ed. 2009).

also privileged. But interestingly, in the mythological poetry and treatises, the east seems to be primarily associated with the “bothersome, but not maleficent, giants” (p. 219).⁸ These two competing world-views, one medieval and Christian, and the other pagan and Germanic, circulated around medieval Iceland during the period when the Sagas of Icelanders were being recorded in manuscripts. Together they suggest a cultural privileging of travel to the south and to the east, according to Simek and Lindow.

It is tempting to apply this finding to *Þórðar saga hreðu*, especially inasmuch as Skagafjörður lies almost perfectly on a north-south axis, the coast being due north and the inland area due south. As noted in chapter 1, during the course of the saga, Þórður transitions from building ferries at the coast to building halls inland, and indeed all the points of conflict in the saga are instigated by the arrival of ships at the coast. So in this particular saga, a negative depiction of the coast could be linked to a negative depiction of north, which would correspond to the findings of Lindow and Simek. One could also emphasize the sequence of travel further and further to the east as Þórður stays first in Skagafjörður and then makes short trips to Eyjafjörður, although Þórður’s return to Miðfjörður in between these journeys eastward would problematize any argument for a specific privileging of travel south-east.

More problematic, however, is that although we today conceive of the travel from Miðfjörður to Skagafjörður as a journey towards the east, as indeed it is by compass recognizing, a close look at the wording in the saga itself demonstrates that such was not their understanding of the situation. For instance, when Þórður is about to depart Miðfjörður a second time, to go ask for Ólof’s hand in marriage, the text describes it this way:

Þat vilda ek, fóstri minn, at þú riðir með mér norðr á Miklabær at biðja Ólofar Hrolleifsdóttur til handa mér.” Eiðr segir: “Skylt er þat, fóstri minn, at ek ríða hvert er þú villt.” Síðan ríða þeir heiman, Þórðr ok Eiðr, Ásbjörn, Eyjólf ok Steingrímur. Þeir ríða þar til er þeir koma á Miklabær (ÍF XIV, pg. 222).

[I would like it, my foster son, if you would come with me north to Miklabær to ask Ólof Hrolleifsdóttir to marry me. Eiðr replies, “It is understood, my foster father, that I shall ride with you wherever you choose.” Then they rode away from home, Þórður and Eiðr, Ásbjörn, Eyjólfand Steingrímur. They rode until they arrived at Miklabær]

⁸ Lotte Motz (1984) noted the correspondence between wilderness regions and giants in the poetic and mythological texts in the old Norse corpus (see also Schulz 2004), suggesting that such spaces were culturally othered in a significant way. However, any analysis of the interpretation of travel through “wilderness” depends on a binary opposition between wilderness and inhabited regions; I question the relevancy of that cultural category for any landscapes described in the Sagas of Icelanders, in as much as the saga is an enculturating force.

Note that this travel is conceived of as travel “north”, not east; similarly, the quotation at the outset of this chapter says Þórður is traveling north. Elsewhere, the voyage is said to be “ór” Miðfjörður, [out of], but never east. Þórður’s unexpected usage of “north” in this context perfectly corresponds to the findings of Stéfan Einarsson (1944), as expanded upon by Einar Haugen (1957). Stéfan had noted peculiar local usages of the terms going out and going in, going towards the north/south/west or away from it, both in modern Icelandic and in older texts, which seemed to change regionally in a way that was sometimes counter to the actual compass readings. Haugen extrapolated that these linguistic markers for directionals derived not from the actual compass, but from an orientation in the landscape that located “north” in a particular peninsula on the northeast coast of Iceland, “west” in a group of peninsulas in northwestern Iceland, “south” in the large southwestern peninsula, and “east” in a fjord on the east coast (See Hastrup 1985 p. 53 for a review and discussion).

So although there were likely cultural influences pushing Icelanders towards an appreciation of space marked by compass directionals, the evidence is that an indigenous Icelandic perspective was extremely persistent. Rather than having anything to do with actual compass readings, the native perspective was that any movement toward certain prominent features of the coastline were conceived of as travel in that direction. Kirsten Hastrup (1998) summarizes the situation thusly:

“South” covered a varied field of directions, largely towards the south-west, but due to the rocky terrain and crumbled nature of the land actually covering the entire compass; “east” likewise, if generally heading towards the north-east. The point is that due to the topography, and the ancient political geography of Iceland, most locations are *en route*—towards somewhere else. That route, invariably, consists in a line connecting two or more points on a circular path ... the Icelandic world having of necessity been built along the coastline” (Hastrup 1998, p. 119).

Between these two works of Hastrup’s dealing with Icelandic cultural history, one in 1985 and another in 1998, one notes a transition between wanting to abstract and categorize the phenomena she identifies in her historic and ethnographic research and wanting to personalize those phenomena. Thus in 1985 she talks about “an ego-centric model for the perception of immediate space” coupled with an “ego-centered temporal model.” But by 1998 her tone is much more personal:

“What gradually dawned upon me during my own meanderings through the landscape on foot is that nobody ever walks completely alone ... by way of words and implicit knowledge the landscape is always already populated—if sometimes by absent figures. The landscape is something seen, but it cannot be seen from ‘no where in particular.’ It is seen from the point of view of particular human agents, whose perspective is also historicized and directed by tradition” (Hastrup 1998, p. 121).

This echoes the sentiment of Casey, who notes: “As at once kinetic and kinesthetic (moving and feeling-itself-moving), my lived body is what offers the ultimate—and the first—resistance to determination in strictly spatial terms” (2009, p. 39).

Thus, although Icelanders may have been aware of the cosmological spatial categories Simek identifies, and were even able to use them to abstractly think about Europe and Rome, when it came to the landscape of Iceland, it is no longer a question of space, but rather a question of place. The Sagas of Icelanders in particular, which are by definition set in the local landscape, resist any strict application of spatial organization. Unlike Snorri Sturluson, who Lindow notes was “freed from the constraints of actual topography” (1994, p. 213) when writing about mythology, or the authors of the *förnaldasögur* Simek uses, the composers of the Sagas of Icelanders were in fact constrained. Their stories were set in the real landscape of Iceland, which would have been, in most cases, very familiar to both the sagateller and the contemporary recipient audience.

Landscape as Literary Motif

Simek and Lindow were both working with texts outside of the core Sagas of Icelanders genre; saga scholars specifically working on that genre have been less in agreement on how to approach the relationship between the fictional narrative of the sagas and the real landscape of Iceland. Most saga scholars have been solely concerned with the literary function of scenes in the sagas where characters are described as moving across the landscape. For instance, in his seminal work, *The Icelandic Family Sagas: an analytic reading* from 1967, Andersson defines them as “topographic detail (usually the route to be followed)” (1967, p.57). He considers these one of the possible rhetorical devices the narrator has for alerting the audience to a coming conflict or climax, a process he calls staging: “[I]t is inherent in the technique of staging that the narrative does not jump to the point of collision at once but prefaces it with particulars” (ibid., p.59-60). Thus, according to Andersson, the catalogue of landscape features mentioned in scenes like the one quoted at the outset of this chapter do not add content to the narrative. Andersson’s focus is on the plot—the action that will take place—and he assumes the audience’s attention is there as well. That these “particulars” might be of special interest, or even key, to the recipient audience’s interaction with the text is nowhere considered in Andersson’s work.

Andersson’s literary analysis opened the door for a trend in saga scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s to look closely at the structure and technique of sagas writers, and it seems his idea that descriptions of the landscape are simply links between moments of action satisfied most saga scholars, even if they disagreed with Andersson in other regards.⁹ For instance, Carol Clover takes a less strictly structuralist approach in “Scene in

⁹ Part of the genius of Andersson’s rules of saga structure is that they work so well even for sagas not included in his study. For instance, the concept of staging works perfectly for the scene quoted at the outset of this paper: the narrator has brought Þórður and Einar to a natural place, resting on a hillock after their journey, and the next sentence (typeset as the next paragraph in modern editions) shifts over to Indriði, a business partner of the man Þórður has just killed. Not coincidentally, Indriði decides to ride into the

Saga Composition” (1974), but still emphasizes that moments when the characters are engaged with one another in verbal exchange or physical duel should be considered the main element of sagas. These exchanges, which perhaps circulated orally as independent stories, are then brought together into one written narrative by logical narrative links, such as descriptions of characters traveling through the landscape. Others have defined these moments of journeying through the landscape, or across the ocean, as narrative interludes; Lars Lönnroth identified them as a “travel pattern...a digressive strand within or between feud episodes” (1976, p. 71). These digressions have been almost by definition extraneous in the minds of most saga scholars.¹⁰

Constance Hieatt (1989) argues against the “commonplace” assumption that travel is simply transitional divisions between climatic scenes (p. 276). Instead, she finds that important, major character developments occur especially during travel outside of Iceland, where characters, particularly young men, typically come into their own. Noting a relationship between characters and the settings associated with them has also been understood as a literary use of landscape by other scholars. Helen Damico’s 1986 analysis of *Grettis saga* utilized the allegorical potential of landscape, well-recognized in medieval studies, to argue that much emotional reaction or internal thought processes is conveyed by landscape as symbolic trope. She argues that particularly in *Grettis saga*, the different settings – “that is, the descriptions of the landscape, physical properties, time, and weather” (p. 4)—are a direct reflection of the psychological state of the protagonist, Grettir. The longer he lives as an outlaw, the more he becomes like an animal, and “Grettir’s habitat at Fagraskogafell also illustrates the effect of immediate environment on the transformation of personality” (p. 8). Although Damico’s article is too short to completely explicate her reasoning, she does note that the use of landscape in *Grettis saga* is especially intense and liberal, suggesting that the subject of the saga—the story of a man who lived for 19 years on the fringe of society in caves and hidden valleys—encouraged the saga author to explore the psychology of the character through the use of landscape imagery.

Similarly, Lars Lönnroth discussed the “use of pastoral and demonic imagery” (1976, p. 94) as one of the few ways the narrator, working within the saga convention of “impassibilité” (emotional restraint, see also Lönnroth 1989) can give emotional tenor and express attitude and opinion on events. In his detailed analysis of arguably the most celebrated Saga of Icelanders, *Njáls saga*, Lönnroth notes that “by choosing the right setting, and by focusing on the right moment, the narrator nevertheless may also manipulate sympathies and antipathies” (ibid., p. 73). Lönnroth points to the landscape description before the killing of Höskuldur as especially affective in this regard:

The weather was fine and the sun was up. At this time Höskuldr Hvítaness priest woke up. He dressed and put on the cloak that Flosi had given him. He took a basket full of grain and a sword in his other hand and went out on his field to sow

mountain pass using a route that goes past Arnastapi. A skirmish then takes place there, and Þórður kills all four of Indriði’s companions.

¹⁰ See however Clover 1989 and Damico 2000 for a discussion of travel outside of Iceland.

(*han tók kornkippu ok sverð í aðra hönd ok ferr til gerðis sins ok sár niðr korninu*). Skarpheðinn and his companions had agreed they should use all their weapons against him. Skarpheðinn rushed up from behind the fence, but when Höskuldr saw him he wanted to turn away. Then Skarpheðinn ran at him and said: ‘Don’t bother to take to your heels, Hvítaness priest’ (*Hirð eigi þú at hoga á hæl, Hvítanessgoðinn*)—and struck him with an axe. The blow hit his head, and Höskuldr sank down on his knees (as quoted in Lönnroth 1976, p. 96).

Because the sagas do not expound upon the emotional state of a character, or present the internal thoughts of characters, describing the landscape that a character is in at a particular time is, in Lönnroth’s view, the means by which the narrator persuades the audience to sympathize with a particular character.

Most recently, Eleanor Barraclough (2010)—who begins her essay with a declaration that “landscape as a narrative device in the sagas” remains a “largely neglected area of research” (p. 365)—expands upon Damico’s analysis by including another famous outlaw saga, *Gísli saga Súrssonar*. Like Damico and Lönnroth, Barraclough finds symbolic potential in the association between character and setting. Wild places seem particularly important to the understanding of the outlaw figure; both of the outlaws Gísli and Grettir have to fight for their lives in wild spaces:

“Börkr’s unsuccessful attempts to capture [Gísli] are played out on the water between the island and the mainland, a shifting unstable interface between worlds that emphasizes Gísli’s marginality. Gísli’s successful navigation of such peripheral spheres emphasizes his status as an outlaw.” (2010, p. 382)

Following Damico, it is the division of landscape into “idyllic and dystopic space” (Damico 1986, p. 10) that allows certain landscapes, as wilderness, to have a symbolic function in the character development of both sagas. Barraclough explores in particular the liminality of Grettir and Gísli, through their association with both socialized and unsocialized space.

These literary approaches—whether interested in the construction of the narrative or the process of character development—certainly add to an appreciation of the text of a saga. But they do so by privileging the narrative over the material world and over the personal intellect of the original interpreting human(s) in the meaning-making matrix. For instance, the final two pages of Damico’s essay on *Grettis saga* are taken up with an amazing summary of Grettir’s pursuit of his adversary Gísli across the landscape of Northwestern Iceland without fully commenting on its meaning. Damico notes how the difference in altitude between the pursuer—Grettir up on the mountain side—and pursued—Gísli along the river’s edge—conveys the image of Grettir as a bird of prey (1986, p. 8-10), especially in concert with verbiage of movement. After an evocative recap of the scene that she notes is marked by continual movement, Damico’s only analysis is to offer that the landscape here displays a “para-existence” in that it is being used not just as a literal place but also as one that offers dramatic potential. That that potential is tied

up with the movement of the character across the landscape she takes as an outcome of the bird analogy she sees at work. However, when Damico notes that the saga is not specific about the amount of territory traversed by Grettir, and implies this is because he is being described as a bird, she is forgetting that for anyone familiar with this part of Iceland, the distances covered would be known, and the idea of Grettir floating above the landscape lost. This is not to say that Grettir's movements are not exciting or narratively compelling, but that they exist apart from the landscape is incorrect; the specific characteristics of the landscape features, including the jetty where Gísli is finally caught, are absolutely integral to the conclusion of this chase.¹¹ Thus a more embodied, emplaced understanding of the use of landscape in the sagas is necessary.

Towards an Embodied Approach

The only work to expressly try to grapple with the landscape as a real physical materiality that would affect the interpretation of sagas was Gillian Overing and Marijane Osborn's 1994 work entitled *Landscape of Desire*, a short book that, unfortunately, seems to have made no impact on saga scholarship. This may be partially owing to Overing and Osborn's own admission that they came to no firm conclusion in their project, but also because they refused to take a literary approach to the use of landscape, as other scholars had done. Instead the book catalogues their own experiences retracing the steps through the landscape of the main characters from *Beowulf*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga*, which they felt was the only way to come to grips with how the medieval literature intended landscape as place to be understood. They advocate for a moving away from a symbolic or literary approach: "In a sense we have moved via fiction and history to a clearer understanding of our critical and personal practice. We began with a suspicion, and then a conviction, that 'real' things mattered, held their own and their own existence" (p. xv). Their primarily theoretical approach is a concern with the relationship of landscape to self, utilizing the term "biosocial" for this matrix. Overing and Osborn note that *Landnámabók* describes how plots of land were claimed by a person walking around them, thus giving the land a personal, bodily definition. They are concerned also with female bodies, how a pregnant woman walks more slowly around her land, and thus they engage with the ecofeminism debate of the 1990s.¹² They note that in that debate, land is often depicted as about isolation and freedom, qualities gendered male, in such a way that females are not able to define themselves in relationship to the land.

"To bring these arguments a little closer to medieval Iceland, we can ask how Grettir, a legal outlaw and social outcast who is continually displaced, might stand in relation to the land. To what extent does land serve as an agent for legal or

¹¹ By taking the higher ground, Grettir displays his superior knowledge of the specific local landscape, and it is that knowledge that makes him victorious. This may have provided a sense of reassurance, even pride, to the listeners of the saga similarly familiar with the exact features of the terrain: local know-how can overcome even powerful enemies.

¹² To apply this concept to *Þórðar saga hreðu*, Ólof is always located at her farm, Miklabær on Ósahlið, while Þórður travels throughout Skagafjörður and northern Iceland. At the end of the full version of the saga, he moves in with her; she is always at one with her place.

territorial directives, or serve as the space within which Grettir creates or imposes self? How can we approach the idea of the aesthetic that is implied by Gunnar's refusal to leave the land he loves and finds so beautiful? What are the ideologies of power Gudrun enacts, reinforces, or resists in her choices to move or stay put? Freedom to move, to change one's place and hence control one's relationship to space, are legal and physical freedoms, inevitably bound up with gendered social practices, and to ask what is the specific relation of the female self to place is to involve and question these practices." (p. 46).

What Overing and Osborn are talking about, then, is not the use of landscape as literary trope in the sagas, but rather that the landscape is a real phenomenon experienced by medieval Icelanders. Their approach is a phenomenological one, one based on the idea of Being in the World rather than being detached from it.

Although their work was largely ignored by the scholarly community, it is somewhat surprisingly similar to an approach used by Hermann Pálsson (1971) in his analysis of *Hrafnkelssaga*. Even for someone dedicated to the idea of the sagas as works of literature, the idea of movement through landscape is so omnipresent in *Hrafnkelssaga* that Hermann must at least partially come to terms with it. His summary of the various scenes of journey across the landscape in *Hrafnkelssaga* includes discussion of the real-world difficulties of traversing the actual swamplands named in the saga, based on his own childhood memories of the area. His conclusion to this discussion, is, however, rather unsatisfactory: "Here, as elsewhere in the saga, it is from horseback that the thirteenth century author observes the land he seems to know so well. All these pictures of Icelandic scenery add to the visual quality of the narrative and they are meaningful elements in its total design" (p. 39). Nowhere in this short book does he expound upon what he means by "meaningful elements", but for the purposes here what is interesting is that even for a scholar convinced that the Sagas of Icelanders are a purely literary artifact, the landscape remains personal, lived, and experienced. Unfortunately, it seems many other scholars have felt that such an approach was too reminiscent of William Dasent or W.G. Collingwood, as they rode horseback through the "country of Njála" (Wawn 2000, pp. 166-167; Collingwood and Stefánsson 1899).

In reaction against this sort of Romantic Antiquarianism, the modern concept of "setting"—a backdrop against which action occurs—has been favored when analyzing the role of landscape in saga narratives. But such a concept must be anachronistic to the Icelandic sagas; Merleau-Ponty has argued that one of the consequences of the Enlightenment was an estrangement from the world, and the loss of a sense of Being in the World (Matthews 2002). The idea of "setting" is part of the modern habitus that has conditioned us to think of ourselves as separate from place. Certainly for a literature that well predates the Enlightenment, we should anticipate that the text would present a different understanding of the relationship between character and landscape. In order to develop an appreciation for how the saga narrative itself treats that relationship, I will turn to a close look at the text of *Þórður saga hreðu*.

Chapter 6 of Þórðar saga hreðu

Chapter 6 of the full version of *Þórðar saga hreðu* offers a tantalizing glimpse into how the saga creates synergy between landscape, character, and plot. It reads:

Þórvaldr hét maðr, góðr bóndi. Hann bjó í Langadal á þeim bæ, er heitir í Egnihlíð. Hann var læknir góðr. Hann átti tvá sonu, hét annarr Einar, en annarr Bjarni. Indriði hét maðr ok félagi Orms. Hann var mikill maðr ok vígr hverjum manni betr ok inn bezti drengur. Hann var kominn út í Kolbeinsárósi. Hann var þá búinn til siglingar, er þetta var tíðinda. Özurr hét maðr. Hann bjó í Skagafirði á þeim bæ, er á Grund heitir. Hann var Arngrímsson. Jórunn hét móðir hans ok var systir Miðfjarðar-Skeggja. Özurr var höfðingi mikill, því at hann hafði goðorð um inn efra hlut Skagafjarðar ok út til móts við Hjaltasonu. Hann var ódældarmaðr, ok ekki var hann vinsæll, meiri ok sterkari en flestir menn, ótrúur ok undirhyggjufullr. Þórhallr hét maðr. Hann bjó á Miklabæ í Óslandshlíð. Ólof hét kona hans. Hon var væn kona ok inn mesti skörungur. Þórhallr var vellauðigr at fé; engi var hann kempa kallaðr ok heldr hræddr ok at öllu it mesta lítilmenni. Hann var hælinn ok inn mesti skrumari ok þóttist flest ráð kunna. Ólof, húsfreyja hans, var Hrolleifsdóttir, þess er nam Hrolleifsdal upp af Slettahlíð. Hon var fyrir þeim um alla hluti. Hafði hon verit gefin honum til fjár. Hon var ung, en Þórhallr við aldr. Hon var læknir góðr. Kálfr hét bondi einn í Hjaltadal. Hann bjó á Kálfsstöðum. Hann var mikilhæfr bóndi.

[There was a man named Þórvaldur, a good farmer. He lived in Langadal at that farm which is called Engihlíð. He was a skilled healer. He had two sons, one named Einar and the other Bjarni. There was a man named Indriði, an associate of Ormur's. He was a large man who fought better than other men and the best of guys. He had arrived at Kolbeinsárós. He was ready to set sail, when this happened. There was a man named Özurr. He lived in Skagafjörður at that farm which is called Grund. He was Arngrímsson. His mother was called Jórunn and she was the sister of Skeggi of Miðfjörður. Özurr was a great chieftain, because he had authority over the outer part of Skagafjörður and all the way out until the claim of the sons of Hjalti began. He was an unkind man, and not popular, although he was stronger and more powerful than most other men, untrustworthy and careless. There was a man named Þórhallur. He lived at Miklabær in Óslandshlíð. His wife was named Ólof. She was a kind woman and the boldest. Þórhallur was financially well off, but far from being a champion, rather fearful and in everyway an unremarkable man. He was boastful and a great exaggerator and thought he knew what was best. Ólof, his wife, was the daughter of Hrolleif who had claimed Hrolleifsdal up to Slettahlíð. She was more remarkable than he in every way. She had been married to him for his money. She was young, but he was old. She was a good healer. There was a certain farmer in Hjaltadal named Kálfr. He lived at Kálfsstaðir. He was a well respected farmer.]

Coming just after Þórður's slaying of Ormur, this chapter interrupts the flow of the plot to introduce new characters. Each new character gives the audience a clue as to the narrative that will thereafter unfold, and each personality trait assigned to them, as well as each juicy bit of gossip we learn about them, will come to have import in the story. This is the saga style of foreshadowing: Özurr, a troublesome and haughty chieftain, who is related to Ormur, the man Þórður killed, has motivation and means to seek revenge, and the audience knows a showdown between the two of them is imminent. But what purpose do the farm and place names associated with each character serve?

To a modern reader, the details about farm names are easily skipped over. But for anyone somewhat familiar with the geography of northern Iceland, the farm locations associated with these characters signal that the action of the saga is about to turn from Miðfjörður, where Þórður had first settled in chapter 2, over to Skagafjörður, where he will eventually live for the rest of his life.¹³ Not only is Skagafjörður specifically named in regard to Özurr, but most Icelanders would likely know that Kolbeinsárósi, a major northern port, was also in Skagafjörður. In this sense, this chapter is another reinforcement of the regional theme discussed above.

What is key to note, however, is that although the order in which the narrator mentions each character might at first glance seem to be the order into which they come into the plot, it is not. For instance, we learn about Ólof towards the end of the chapter, even though Þórður meets her before he meets Özurr. On the other hand, the order in which the characters are mentioned perfectly corresponds to the relative position of their farms in the landscape. The chapter first mentions Langadal, a narrow valley in the highland that separates Miðfjörður from Skagafjörður; it lies directly east of Miðfjörður. By mentioning that location first, the reader's attention is guided across the landscape from Miðfjörður toward the east. Then the narrator brings Skagafjörður into relief by mentioning its major feature, Kolbeinsárós, located on the eastern shore of Skagafjörður at the base of the fjord, the major port of northern Iceland in the medieval period. Then the saga mentions Skeggi's farm and the extent of his goðorð, which is south along the eastern side of Skagafjörður just below Kolbeinsárós; Ósahlíð and Hjaltadalur are specific geographic features to the north and east of Kolbeinsárós respectively. Clearly, Skagafjörður is not being activated as an iconic regional whole, but as a series of discrete and orderly parts. Indeed, for someone familiar with the geography of Skagafjörður, the list of place names serves as a mental map, akin to a "google fly over": it goes from one valley across to the other from west to east, and from south to north as it zooms into the key section of the landscape of Skagafjörður, namely its northeastern corner. It is the strict maintenance of this south-west to north-east progression that requires the farm of Özurr to be mentioned before the farm of Ólof, even though Þórður will meet her first.

The geographic location of each farm thus provides the organizational structure for this chapter, not the plot. But the geographic location of each character, from west to east

¹³ David Herman (2002) notes that a similar phenomena can be seen in modern day journalism and news articles, where place is mentioned but not described, and yet forms an integral part of the story for the audience familiar with the locals mentioned (pg. 278).

across the landscape, almost perfectly correlates with the order in which Þórður is going to encounter them, since he himself is moving west to east. It is only in the case of Ólof and Özurr that the underlying logic via location is revealed; otherwise, it seems as if this chapter is purely foreshadowing the plot. Indeed, the characters and landscape seem co-constitutive: landscape is not being used as a thing apart from the characters, but rather the characters are understood as deeply embedded in their landscape. This is why the chronological expansion of the plot forward seems to depend on the geographic movement of characters outwards. By coalescing temporal and geographic movement, the saga makes all action emplaced.

That the logical, organized placement of characters within the landscape almost precisely corresponds to their role in the plot of the saga is more than coincidental. Rather, it reads as a careful study in mnemonics: by mapping out the landscape, the storyteller and the audience visualize and remember those characters. The landscape itself seems to be the primary means by which the characters and the narrative of *Þórðar saga hreðu* were remembered. It is therefore not a peripheral, but rather a central, component to the meaning-making matrix.

Landscape and Memory

I am not the first to suggest a relationship between landscape and memory; indeed, Simon Schama has an entire book entitled exactly that (1996). In the Old Norse field, Jürg Glauser (2007) has recently written on this possibility. While discussing “the concepts of memory and mediality” (p. 18), Glauser argues that in Norse society, memory was linked to spatiality; he uses the example in *Njál’s saga* where Njáll tells those who have permission to leave the burning building to remember what room he was in when he died. Glauser continues, “Snorri Sturluson also demonstrates how memory is pre-eminently associated with spatial modes of thought, pointing out in the prologue to *Heimskringla* that the poems *Ynglingatal* and *Hálegjatal* ... mention not only the circumstances and causes of the deaths of kings, but also their burial places . . . Graves and barrows (*legstaðir* and *haugstaðrir*) are the media from which memory is constituted” (p. 19). Glauser seems to take it as a given that landscape and memory are integral to one another: “In saga literature it is first and foremost the landscape and the events localized in it which play the decisive role as guarantors of memory” (p. 20).

The cataloguing of successive placenames as seen in Chapter 6 of *Þórður saga hreðu*, and in the quote at the outset of this chapter—indeed similar scenes are found in other Sagas of Icelanders as well—suggests that this is an active process tied to body movement. The landscape does not simply passively guarantee memory. Glauser clearly understands that there is an embodied aspect to memory; the article quoted above is entitled “The speaking bodies of Saga Texts” and it includes examples showing suspicion of the written word disassociated from a body, or from speaking person. But I would emphasize that it is not just in speaking but also in moving that the characters in the sagas are enacting the kind of emplaced, embodied, materially enmeshed, phenomenological world-view that

one should anticipate for a pre-Enlightenment culture like Commonwealth Iceland.¹⁴ Tim Ingold, a philosophical anthropologist who has expanded the implications of phenomenology, has argued that “lineal movements along paths of travel” (2011, p. 149) is fundamental to how human beings in many societies and at many times (even today) acquire knowledge. He calls that sort of movement wayfaring, and that seems to me precisely what Þórður is doing in Northern Iceland.

Medieval memory practice

An appreciation for a close relationship between landscape and memory is typically confined to pre-literate societies, whereas of course the sagas must be understood as medieval products because of their time of writing. There is, however, no need to think of a fundamental disjuncture in memory practice between literate and pre-literate societies, especially in the medieval period. Even in mainland Europe, and amongst the most learned scholastic monks, Mary Carruthers (1998) has argued that the written text was not in and of itself a repository for memory. Rather than putting information in a book and then looking through the book to find it later, her evidence suggests that medieval monks, clerics, and scholastics memorized how the pages of a manuscript looked, and when they wanted to know something, they accessed their memories of that image. The written page was understood as a visual clue to the information on the page, not as means of storing that information. Decorated capitals, marginalia, the division into columns were aids in distinguishing one page from another, so that medieval scholars could easily visualize a particular page. By recalling a memorized picture of that page, they would instantly remember the contents of that page, without reading the text word for word.

Carruther’s widely-accepted theory (an expansion of Frances Yates’ 1966 work) is based on a long European tradition of associating visual clues with specific memories. As early as classical texts such as Aristotle’s *De Anima*, the anonymous *Ad Herennium* and Quintilian’s practicum of rhetoric, memory was explained as operating exactly as a wax template, with images understood as quite literally impressed into the brain (Carruthers 1998, p. 49). Medieval scholastics, especially Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, in the 12th and 13th century elaborated upon this classical understanding, and by the 16th century, visually-aided memory had reached an extremely sophisticated level. For example, the late 16th century Italian missionary to China, Matteo Ricci, hoped to convert the Chinese by impressing them with his amazing powers of memory (Spence 1984). His method, explained in a treatise he wrote in Chinese, was not rote memorization of facts, but rather a practice whereby specific memories get organized spatially and visually in the brain, as a mnemonic. Ricci referred to it as a “memory palace,” wherein everything one wanted to remember was associated with an image and placed within specific architecture. When one needed to recall something, one visualized entering a room, turning to the left or right, and seeing the images within that room; by focusing on the desired one, all the necessary information would be instantly accessed.

¹⁴ Perhaps this is why the rare moments when the landscape is visually described typically comes out of the mouth of characters, as in Þórður’s speech act quoted above in reference to Miðfjörður.

It is likely that medieval Icelandic monks would have had some familiarity with mainland European ideas about memory, and perhaps even Catilian's suggestions for how to memorize rhetorical speeches through the use of visual memory clues, but there is no evidence that something as elaborate as the memory palace concept reached Iceland. In fact, there is unfortunately no Icelandic manuscript discussing memory or memorization techniques. The evidence in Carruthers and Yates, however, would suggest that it would be highly anachronistic to imagine that medieval Icelanders were relying on the written text to actually hold the contents of a saga. Though clearly innovative within the medium, in the process of learning the technology of writing it is likely that Icelanders would have also absorbed the uses to which it should be put. Whether oral transmission of a saga is considered commonplace or not, to imagine that the sagas were not memorized, referred to, and talked about without access or reliance upon the written medium seems unlikely, given both the known medieval practice and the well-established oral culture that directly and closely preceded the saga-writing period in Iceland. Scholars have been reticent however to apply Carruther's finding to the Icelandic situation because medieval Icelandic manuscripts lack the decorations and visual clues so central to Carruthers' argument.

Carolyne Larrington (2009) has however argued that there are other sorts of mnemonics apparent in the Old Norse corpus. She begins by reasoning that much of the medieval memory practice was based on what appear to be universal cognitive abilities of human beings. Turning primarily to the *Poetic Edda*, she then identifies several mnemonic devices that seem to be operating within the text. One is the well-known poetic device of rhythm, repetition and rhyme. The next is the "oldest and most widespread forms of mnemonic device . . . the classical *loci* system" (p. 273), which she sees operating for instance in *Grímnismál*, where the home of each of the gods is described in turn. She also identifies instances of somatic encoding (Oðinn writes the runes on his body in *Hávamál*) and of visual imagery embedded in Old Norse names. A name or place which has the potential to evoke visual imagery in the mind of the listener is especially memorable; she argues for instance that the names for Oðinn were better remembered because they reference imagery taken from events in Oðinn's life: "Narrative associations thus reinforce the mnemonic effectiveness of visual imagery" (p. 274).

To Larrington's list could be added another aspect of memory practice seen in the *Poetic Edda*. Although mainland Europe seems to have had the wax template as the dominant metaphor for understanding the workings of memory, *the Poetic Edda* offers a different, more uniquely northern, metaphor: the flight of a raven. The Old Norse god Oðinn, whose worship extended from at least Sweden to England from before the 5th century, was understood to be a god of war, a god of poetry, and a god of wisdom. Like most Norse gods, he had a specific, iconographic animal counterpart: his was the raven. Snorri Sturluson tells us that Oðinn had two ravens, one called Huginn and the other called Muninn; Viking Age depictions presumed to be of the god Oðinn often show two birds circling above his head. The names suggest something of how thought and memory were understood to work in an Old Norse context: huginn is a noun coming from the verb "huga" which means to think, and muninn is a noun coming from the verb "muna"

which means to remember. Although the exact sense of these two verbs is not perfectly captured by the English translation, clearly the ravens are understood to be part of the mental processies. These birds fly out over the world, and they come back to Oðinn with information, as stated in the *Poetic Edda*:

Huginn og Muninn
fljúga hverjan dag
Jörmungrund yfir.
óumk eg of Hugin
agð hann aftur né komit
þó sjámk meir um Munin.

(Sigurðsson 1999, p. 80)

[Huginn and Muninn fly every day over the wide earth.
I fear that Huginn might never return, but worry more about Muninn.]

That the failure of Muninn to return to Oðinn would represent a greater loss than the failure of Huginn to return suggests just how valuable memory was in this society.

In both instances—Ricci’s wandering inside the walls of a palace or Oðinn’s birds flying over the landscape—memory and thought is metaphorically associated with movement. Memory maybe stored in visual *loci*, but it is only retrieved through the mind actively going to each visualization. In Ricci’s well-explained system, his mind moved within a specific imagined space that was mentally decorated with relevant images. Like a person who fills his home with mementos from various trips, Ricci could wander through his mind and recall a plethora of ideas, facts, and events. Old Norse culture did not have that same architectural familiarity with large enclosed spaces; there were no castles or palaces, no Romanesque edifices. So here memory was described not as wandering through halls, but as a raven flying about the landscape, gathering up information unto itself. But movement was still key to the process of memory. I would therefore argue that the movement of characters through the landscape can be understood as a textual representation of a memory practice closely tied to landscape.¹⁵

Landscape-as-mnemonic should, however, not be seen as incompatible with a literary culture; the evidence from *Þórðar saga hreðu* rather suggests there was a symbiotic relationship between the two. Meditating upon the landscape of Miðfjörður and Skagafjörður, and recalling mental places in that area, must have continued to be part of the sagatelling tradition well into its literary manifestation. Otherwise, it would not have continued to influence the organization of Chapter 6 of the saga.

Further corroboration, in the form of negative evidence, of the relationship between landscape and the remembrance of narrative is offered in Chapter 1 of the full version of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, which is set in Norway. It has no description of landscape, place, or

¹⁵ The edited volume *Medieval Memory: Image and Text* (Willaert 2004) argues that many medieval texts display traces of memory practice. Although they focus on French examples, I am suggesting a similar approach ought to be adopted for the Icelandic sagas.

movement; the farms are not named, nor is there any mention of the route taken through the landscape to get somewhere. The lack of landscape descriptions and placenames in the Norwegian prelude to the full version of the saga is especially obvious as soon as Chapter 2 begins; immediately precise sailing landmarks are listed. Of course, the fragmentary version of the saga treats the events in Norway very differently; not only does the action remain in Norway for at least four chapters (the manuscript lacuna begins while still in Norway), but there are also a few farm names given, although no descriptions of travel through the landscape. Thus this section of the saga is considerably different in the two versions we have of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. Perhaps it is because the sagateller did not have the real landscape at hand to serve as a mnemonic of how the story ought to be told that the events in Norway could be framed so differently in the two versions. But clearly once the action turns to Iceland, the landscape becomes an integral part of the narrative.

But besides the particulars of this saga, the general landscape-as-mnemonic idea also better bridges what is known of memory practice in Europe with the evidence in Iceland of a very active narrative-producing culture. It is certainly worth considering whether the ubiquitous descriptions of characters moving through the landscape in other saga besides *Þórðar saga hreðu* might also have had a role in memorizing the narrative. If so, perhaps the genre of the Sagas of Icelanders, or some subgenre thereof, ought to be defined in terms of the memory practice it elicits.¹⁶

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reprioritized the landscape itself an integral material matrix into which the narrative of *Þórðar saga hreðu* fits. Moreover, both in terms of the theme of regionalism, and the potential for landscape to serve as mnemonic, the specific way in which the text engages with the landscape—namely through movement—has been emphasized. In this analysis, the scenes in the saga where a list of places are given as a description of the landscape—scenes which seem especially irrelevant to modern readers—have been cast as essential, even constitutional, of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. What is key is that the landscape described is not a static pictorial element apart from the action of the saga; rather, it is a thing bodily experienced through the movement of characters. Indeed the descriptions of landscape only as characters move across it, and of deeply emplaced characters and action, provide evidence to support that a non-modern world-view is operating vis-à-vis the landscape, one which would have made it as integral to the saga for the originators as it seems peripheral to us today. This understanding of the importance of the landscape in *Þórðar saga hreðu* has a number of consequences for our

¹⁶ See Nünning et al. (2006), p. 17-18 for a discussion of how some literary scholars consider genre as literary memory: “Particularly the strongly conventionalized genres are the result of fundamental processes of memory, namely continual repetition and actualization.” In this case, what is being remembered is the form and style a narrative ought to take as part of a genre. This is not the emphasis I wish to make here; rather I am concerned with how the content of specific sagas may have been remembered by reference to the landscape. But this does not in any way discount genre as literary memory for the overall form of the narrative.

understanding of the saga's role in its original social context, as well as consequences for our understanding of the composition of the saga.

In terms of the former, for audience members who were familiar with the location of at least one place listed in the saga, in the course of hearing the saga, they would have become familiar with the relative position of other places. Each reference to a placename therefore offered the recipient audience an opportunity to expand their mental map of the region, and to reinforce existing knowledge. In this process, *Þórðar saga hreðu* fulfilled an enculturating function for the inhabitants of this region that made it into an ethnographic landscape. Moreover, the movement of characters would have complemented an audience member's own experience of landscape, transforming it from something "out there" to something immediate. As a member of the audience mentally went through the landscape with Þórður the character, Þórður becomes, in Casey's terms, the apprehending body through which abstract space gets transformed into known place. I would like to suggest that such a process would complement the regional identity function *Þórðar saga hreðu* seems to have had at its origin, making regional identity personal and intimate. Once an audience member identifies with Þórður, and Þórður gets embedded all over the landscape, the saga narrative aids in the transformation of local identity to personal identity through the bodily medium of an identified character. But such an understanding rests on recognizing that the saga presents the landscape as an embodied, experienced thing, and not a backdrop or setting.

In terms of the latter, an emphasis on the movement of characters across the landscape also has consequences for the composition of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. This saga has been dated as young based on the assumption that it—like other sagas that are tightly focused and hang together well such as *Hrafnkels saga*—must, by definition, be a literary composition. This is because they lack what Carol Clover identified as "þátr" (1986), small parts of the sagas, (literally translated as "individual strand", þættir in plural) that would have circulated orally, independent of one another. Clover argues that medieval Icelanders may have understood þættir as relating to parts of a longer, "immanent saga", but no one ever did, nor was expected to, have the whole of that saga in mind at any one time. According to Clover, the development of a complete saga had to wait until the technology of writing came around. Once it did, the common scholarly understanding is that, as Pernille Hermann puts it, "Icelanders took advantage of the possibility to record the memories of the past in writing" (2009, p. 287).

A þættir-driven understanding of saga composition does not work well for *Þórðar saga hreðu*. First of all, this is not a saga full of asides and vignettes that could be removed from the saga without harm to its narrative core; ironically, however, it is this compactness that makes it seem literary. Because the saga hangs together so well, the assumption has been that it was composed with pen and paper in hand. But as discussed in Chapter 1, there are many reasons to believe this saga had a very lively oral existence apart from its textual attestations. This impasse can be rectified by recognizing the role of the landscape as a mnemonic in *Þórðar saga hreðu*, a mnemonic that would have allowed the entire saga to be remembered holistically, instead of verbatim. One might even go so

far as to use a landscape metaphor here: the specific places are the individual þáttr of the saga, and the regional landscape is the entire saga.

Of course I do not mean to be suggesting that the saga contains the account of what really happened, perfectly remembered. Rather, the structure of the saga plot and the characters in the saga were mentally hung about the landscape of northern Iceland in a way that made memorization possible and efficient. This could have been an accumulating process, with the narrative of Þórður's movements modified over time to more precisely map onto the landscape, until it became rather easy to visualize the entire saga by thinking about the landscape of Miðfjörður and Skagafjörður. The landscape-as-mnemonic idea is especially likely given the strong focus on regionality evidenced in both versions of the saga. The landscape itself seems to have had a role in formulating, transmitting, and remembering *Þórðar saga hreðu*.

In the next chapter, I will turn to how the saga's association with the landscape may have evolved as the socio-political situation in Iceland changed, and as regional identities, perhaps, became less central. Indeed, the material agency of landscape would continue to have efficacy throughout the lifespan of the saga: as long as the real landscape is in existence, its potentiality to provide a meaningful nexus of interpretation for any audience hearing the saga is inexhaustible, as will be demonstrated in Chapters 4 and 5 below. But it is worth considering that even at the oral composition stage, the sagateller could have utilized the landscape not only as an identity-making matrix for the audience, but also as a mnemonic device for themselves.

CHAPTER 4:

PLACES TO REMEMBER, PLACES TO FORGET

Síðan ríða þeir á Kálfsstaði, ok er þeim þar vel fagnat; var þar veizla góð um jólin. Nú er at segja frá Özuri at Þverá, at hann heldr njósnum til um ferð Þórðar, þá hann ferr frá jólaveizlunni. Safnar hann at sér mönnum ok ríðr heiman við inn nítjándan mann um nóttina fyrir affaradaga jólanna út til Hjaltadals ok nam staðar nær Viðvík, þar sem heitur Garðshvammr, skammt frá bænum Viðvík. (ÍF XIV, p. 201)

[Then they rode to Kálfsstaðir, and they were well received; a great feast was held there over jule. Now must be told about Özurr from Þverá, that he sent spies to check on Þórður's movements, and when he left the jule celebration. Özurr gathered together a force of men and rode from his house with the 19th man during the night after the second day of Jule towards Hjaltadalur and stopped near Viðvík, at a place called Garðshvammur, not far from Viðvík.]

In this chapter, I will expand on the relationship between landscape and narrative by paying particular attention to the placenames in the saga. Placenames are a discrete point of intersection between the narrative of the saga and the material world, and therefore merit particular attention in terms of the meaning-making matrix of the human-narrative-material triad employed throughout this study. Moreover, in many cases, named places also have other narratives, besides the ones mentioned in the saga, linked to them that come from historical, social, and cultural milieus. This opens up the potentiality for associations to be made in the minds' of the audience members between the events in the saga and events that happened in the "real world," and makes careful consideration of placenames essential. It is my contention in this chapter that the producers of *Þórðar saga hreðu* likely anticipated that the audience would bring those exterior associations into an understanding of the saga, and purposely crafted the saga with this affect in mind. So although named places are phenomenologically experienced just as all places are, in this chapter, I will be focused on the historic and cultural associations of particular places mentioned in the text to see how those associations change the potential meaning of the saga.

A Note about Placename Continuity

Before proceeding into a close analysis of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, it is necessary to address the ontological status of placenames in this saga, as I understand it. As I will discuss below, I do not discount the possibility that places mentioned in the text of *Þórðar saga hreðu* that are not recognized today may be fictional places made up by the sagateller. I do, however, believe that the intended audience of the saga would have been aware of the sagateller employing that sort of fictionalizing device, which would have activated a different dynamic than the one I am exploring throughout most of this chapter. But some have questioned whether even the places

identifiable in the landscape today ought to be considered fictional constructs. In some cases, the correspondence between modern placenames and saga placenames may be due to the efforts of romantic antiquarians and later nationalists who read the sagas and renaming their farms after the saga accounts (Adolf Friðriksson 1994, see also Jón Karl Helgason 1998).

However, in the case of Skagafjörður and Miðfjörður, the remarkable stability of habitation patterns makes this rather unlikely. In Skagafjörður, to an exceptional degree even by Icelandic standards, the geographic features we see today, except at the coastline, are the same as they were in the 13th century (email communication with Doug Bolender, May 2011). Not only has the geology changed little, but the occupation patterns have also remained steady (Hjalti Pálsson 1999). This is rather apparent to the naked eye: the flat valley of Skagafjörður is punctuated by human-made hillocks formed by the accumulation of trash and collapsed houses, piled one top of another. This is undeniable evidence of consecutive generations of people keeping the organization of their farmsteads almost entirely intact. Excavation of these middens has revealed continuous use from the 20th century back to the 13th century at least. Though some farm names have changed of course (between 5 percent and 20 percent by Bolender's estimation), this is primarily motivated by a secondary farmhouses being built on the farm. Main farmhouses have also been relocated within the farm boundaries, a phenomenon that was fairly widespread right around 1100 A.D. (Steinberg and Bolender 2004), but the boundaries of farmsteads and the names of farmsteads have otherwise remained constant, apparently for over 1000 years.

For my analysis below, however, the precise GPS coordinates of a particular farmstead are not essential. This is because I am not trying to generate a perfect map of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. Instead, I will be using contemporary sources to try to understand what external associations were attached to places mentioned in *Þórðar saga hreðu*, which would have formed part of the contemporary interpretive context for the saga.¹ Thus if both *Þórðar saga hreðu* and *Kristni saga* mentioned a farm by the same name in Skagafjörður, and a farm of that name still exists in Skagafjörður today, I will assume the modern day location is a reasonable estimation of where that farm existed in the Commonwealth period.

Method

Although the geographic position of farms is relevant to the analysis below, the primary objective is to understand how the audience of *Þórðar saga hreðu* might have responded to placenames in the text by uncovering their meta-textual associations. Because placenames appear both in a text and exist in the real world, they are natural points of interaction between text and the material. This opens up new possibilities for acknowledging the material agency of named places to engage with the meaning-making matrix of a text.

In taking specific note of the location of places, I am following the advice of Franco Moretti: “Think of maps . . . as a point of departure, then . . . which sketch a further array of interpretive paths: towards a text, a critical idea, a historical thesis” (Moretti 1998, p. 8). His efforts at mapping the European novel opened up new theoretical concerns: instead of thinking of setting as evocative of the mood or tone of the story, Moretti takes as meaningful the specific placenames

¹ See below for a discussion of what I mean by “contemporary.”

mentioned in a text, especially as a nexus with real-world political, historic, and cultural trends. By mapping the real locations of sites mentioned in a text, certain patterns emerge that can offer insight into a layer of meaning, often tied to the author's cultural or political biases, otherwise obscured. However, Moretti's literary-mapping analysis was designed for use with modern novels, where the exact date and location of publication is known. Because the context is certain, it is reasonable to compare maps generated from literary representations of place with those generated from other sources.

A literary mapping technique cannot therefore easily be applied to the Sagas of Icelanders, although attempts to do so have been made. Chris Callow and Theodore Andersson separately presented papers at the 15th International Saga Conference (2012 in Aarhus) comparing maps of saga phenomena with maps drawn from other sources. Unlike Moretti, however, they did so as litmus test for the sagas' reliability and dating. Callow mapped centers of power, and saw no correspondence, whereas Anderson, who mapped the location of harbors, saw strong correspondence.² Using maps as a way to determine the dating of the sagas has therefore yielded uncertain results to date.

In this chapter, I will be employed a literary mapping method in the hopes of revealing larger cultural concerns into which and through which a saga text is responding. I am however doing so judiciously; in addition to the problems of using Moretti's method with the sagas as described above, there is one additional consideration. Commonwealth and medieval Icelanders did not use cartographic representations of the world indigenously, which implies that their relationship to the landscape is not as objective as the modern perspective. Instead, as discussed in Chapter 3 above, they had an intimate awareness of their landscape as a lived place. With that came a certain type of geographic understanding that maps can only represent in a limited way.

However, I have also sought to somewhat recoup the lived experience of place my own exploration of the landscape of Miðfjörður and Skagafjörður. I spent two weeks during the summer of 2010 visiting all the named farms and many of the landmarks mentioned in the saga, photographing each one from multiple angles. This method, combined with the historic research presented below, brought to light nuances of the landscape that I was then able to pair with literary mapping to invigorate the role of placenames in *Þórðar saga hreðu*.

Theoretical concerns

A focus on external historic and cultural associations that a placename may have had outside the text opens up the possibility for the saga to be examined as a form of Cultural Memory. That theory assumes that a culture selects events from the past based on their continued relevancy to a group's identity and stability in the present (see Olick in 2008 for a historic overview). Cultural memory has become an important topic in the humanities (Erl, Nünning, and Young, eds., 2008) for its interdisciplinary potential.³ As Pernille Hermann has

² Unfortunately, the 15th International Saga Conference was not able to publish the preprint papers from this conference, as had been the tradition with other Saga Conferences.

³ Although first developed in the social sciences and anthropology with Haberswath's idea of "collective memory," which was heavily influenced by a Durkheimian sense of integrated cultural systems, it has recently been expanded

pointed out (2009, 2010), the Sagas of Icelanders can well be seen as examples of cultural memory. She has effectively argued that the sagas are tools for social memory-making: what is presented in the sagas is those parts of the past which the process of social memory has deemed valuable and important for the contemporary medieval recipient audience, and is not a simple repetition of genuine Viking Age memories.⁴ Hermann's understanding of the sagas is similar to those articulated by Vésteinn Ólason in his *Dialogues with the Viking Age* (1998), but she explicitly frames the sagas within the theory of social memory. By focusing on the Sagas of Icelanders as foundational narratives, she emphasizes their myth-like function. Indeed, according to the Egyptologist Jan Assman, who has been seminal in the recent expansion of Cultural Memory theory, literature participates in cultural memory only when it is of mythological character (1983). Thus Hermann's understanding of the sagas as foundational narratives is what allows her to define them as cultural memory.

This understanding of texts by proponents of Cultural Memory theory is somewhat problematic, in that it leaves other types of literature outside of the cultural memory-making dynamic. Rather, literature is more commonly associated with personal memory; the editors of *Memory and Literature* (Nünning, Gymnich, Sommer 2006) catalogue numerous examples of literature exploring understandings of personal memory, but they offer few examples of literature shaping particular social or cultural memories. According to the editors' Introduction, literature has not normally been seen as participating in this latter process; they call for further research into this topic.⁵ However, as a product of human creativity intended for communal consumption, it seems likely that literary texts do direct audience members and readers to focus on certain aspects of events rather than others.

On the other hand, the role of the material world in cultural memory making is readily acknowledged. The names of the object categories like "personal mementos" or "tourist memorabilia" bear witness to this acknowledged memorial function of certain objects. The material culture aspect of memory has been highlighted in several recent works, including the edited volume *Memory Work: Archaeologies of Material Practices* (Mills and Walker 2008, eds.), which focuses on a wide range of examples both chronological and geographical where material objects and architecture participate in memory making and forgetting. Another recent work, entitled *Memory, Mourning, and Landscape* (Anderson, Maddrell, McLoughlin and Vincent, eds. 2010) further develops the role of memorials, cemeteries, and museums in shaping memories. These works are largely inspired by Nora Pierre's (1989) discussion of places of memory. The unmodified natural environment is seldom included in these discussions, although Schama's monograph from 1995 attempts a personal exploration of this theme. Aleida Assmann also

and modified to have less to do with structure and cultural continuity and more to do with individual actors and change, a distinction now marked by the term "cultural memory." Discussions of cultural memory allow for diachronic perspectives to become synchronic, in that memory studies focus on singular moments when social actors produce a new perspective on some past event to make it socially meaningful in their contemporary world. It therefore contributes to our understanding of the complex process of culture change.

⁴ This is therefore distinct from the discussion found in Byock 2001 of "genuine social memories", which he finds generated many of the details in *Egils saga*.

⁵ Jan Assmann 1983 is included in a German edited volume entitled *Script und Gedächtnis* that focuses on epic and mythological texts, not on modern literature.

argues that in many non-modern cultures, a geographic approach to memory, mediated through place, rather than one defined chronologically, was likely operative (2011).⁶

By focusing on placenames in the text, which are in essence material intrusions into the textual world, this emplaced aspect of cultural memory theory is retained. In other words, I am not taking the whole of *Þórðar saga hreðu* as an example of cultural memory, but instead I am identifying the places named in the saga as the textual referent that allows cultural memory to be enacted. They are the nexus through which the sagateller and the audience construct cultural memories, and in each retelling of the saga, the memory would be reformulated.

I want to do so however without elevating the sagas to the level of foundational narratives or myths. Rather, I propose that the sagas exist in between the two categories of memory Jan Assmann (2008) identified: “communicative memory,” which captures recent memories informally discussed; and “cultural memory,” which circulates in highly institutionalized forms (p. 110). One of the distinctions Assmann draws between “communicative” memory and “cultural memory” is that the former stretches back at most only three generations (approximately 80 years), whereas the later goes back to deep, mythical history. Assmann specifically identifies a “gap” in historical knowledge in between those two discrete periods. I am suggesting that the sagas fall into this “gap”; just as the sagas exist somewhere in the middle of the oral-written continuum, I would argue so too do they exist somewhere in between Assmann’s two forms of memory. Another distinction that has been made (Nora 1989, Esposito 2011) is between social memory and collective memory. Social memory is formalized expressions that give large, complex societies a sense of cohesion, whereas collective memory is the purview of “peasant societies” (Esposito 2011, p. 187) because it stays local, enacted and fluid, and it is specifically not conceived of as written. I would therefore argue that the sagas should be understood as in between these two categories as well. This is because listening to the sagas was more of a communicative event—a conversation—and less of a formal ritualized act. The saga narrator expected the audience, who most likely lived in northern Iceland, to bring to the act of listening commonly-held, real-world, local knowledge about the places mentioned.

To capture the unique character of the memory-making function of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, I will be utilizing the term “communal memory”. This term has the advantage of keeping a sense of fluid and enacted memory, which I do not believe was supplanted by the introduction of writing into Iceland. Moreover, this term brings analytical attention to the specific and local aspect of the text; though certain placenames might have meaning at an abstract level of Icelandic culture, attending to the local allows for the potential that memories stemming from regionally-specific events may be manifest in the text. Finally, as a form of cultural memory, communal memory is clearly about choosing those parts of the past that can serve contemporary needs, but considers those needs as operative at a regional, territorial, and local level.

Of course, which associations the audience would bring into the narrative depended not just on the where of the audience, but also the when of the audience. The placenames in *Þórðar saga hreðu* that I have found to have meaningful narratives outside the saga text can be divided

⁶ See *Memory and Literature* (Nünning, Gymnich, Sommer 2006) pp. 22-24 for a discussion of Aleida Assmann’s approach.

up into three historic moments: around 900 (when Iceland was settled by pagan Scandinavians), around 1100 (when Christianity was transforming the society), and around 1300 (when large scale political changes destabilized historic patterns). The text of *Þórðar saga hreðu* is, however, a palimpsest containing all of these moments simultaneously. So although I am calling this communal memory, and consider it possible that some placenames were altered as the saga was transmitted, it is important to recognize the specific agency of each of these places as carriers of a thick memory of place (Sanders 2009) independent of the text. This means that changing historical circumstances could have given new meaning to the placenames in the saga, even if the saga text itself remained exactly the same. Simply by including places in the text that also have real-world referents, the possibility arises for the narrative to take on new meaning. In this interplay between material world, narrative, and interpreting human, the saga would stay relevant and vibrant in the minds of the inhabitants of Skagafjörður. Thus this is not a means to date the saga, but rather a way to explore how the narrative continually participates in cultural memory making through the aegis of material places. Indeed, the saga itself seems much less concerned with chronology than with emplacement, and it is only for modern convenience that these chronological distinctions are given.

Places activating Regional Identity

In the previous chapter, I discussed the degree to which both the full version and the fragmentary version of the saga have major, pivotal moments that emphasize the regional distinctions between Miðfjörður and Skagafjörður. I argued that because this theme of regionalism is shared between both versions, it must have originated during some early oral formulation of the saga. This also fits with the understanding that Viking Age identities were more locally defined, a tradition which *landnámsmenn* might well have tried to implement in settlement period Iceland.

Certain placenames in the text appear to be specifically linked to the theme of regionalism. For instance, in the fragmentary version, Þórður's speech act describing Miðfjörður is said to take place at Bessaborg, which is a scenic overlook on the eastern side of Miðfjörður. But the regionalism theme also seems to play itself out in other named landscape features. Indeed, a close look at this type of placename in the full version reveals that most of these places are also boundary locations, a piece of knowledge the original recipient audience likely would have known. Given the strong geographic dimension of such an identity, these sorts of landscape boundary placenames are especially appropriate references to carry the theme of regionalism.

For instance, Miðfjarðará (Miðfjörður River) is reached after Skeggi and Þórður travel north from Borgarfjörður; this river marks the southern extent of Miðfjörður. Miðfjarðará stands out because no other named places are given in regard to this trip, even though Skeggi and Þórður are traversing a sizeable expanse when going from Miðfjörður to the trade site in Borgarfjörður. The text also highlights that they did not speak to each other at all, the whole ride up, until they came to this spot in the landscape, which makes the fact that they have arrived into Miðfjörður, via its southern boundary, especially apparent. Skeggi says, "Hér munu vér af baki stíga, því at eg á við þik, Þórðr, erindi." (ÍF XIV, pg. 182). [We should get off our horses here, because I have request to make of you, Þórður]. The request is indeed a weighty one: Skeggi is

asking for Þórður's sister's hand in marriage on behalf of his nephew. The fact that this proposal takes place within Miðfjörður, rather than outside of it, might have suggested to the audience that Skeggi, as the leader of that district, has chosen this location to make Þórður's acceptance more likely. It is, clearly, not simply a casual choice, but rather one enacting their mutual identity as people of Miðfjörður.

The text also mentions landscape features that would mark the northern, western, and eastern extent of Miðfjörður. For instance, the saga tells us that Ormur is buried at Miðfjarðarnes, even though it is not where he died. Because this feature marks the northern end of Miðfjörður, it is possible a geographic logic spurred the narrative location of this burial, which is otherwise undermotivated. When Þórður leaves Miðfjörður, heading towards the east, a series of landscape features are named, as was quoted at the outset of Chapter 3 above, beginning with Linkadalur, whose name means "the valley which connects." Implicate in this name therefore is the sense that one is leaving one place enroute to another place, which makes it an appropriate marker of the eastern boundary of Miðfjörður. In the fragmentary version of the saga, Bessaborg and Þórður's parting speech mark this eastern boundary even more explicitly. And to complete the compass directionals, I might note that the full version tells us, for no narratively important reason, that Þórður builds a ferry which goes along the western side of the fjord, up towards Strandir. Thus Þórður himself effectually permeates all of the boundaries that mark Miðfjörður.

This pattern is even clearer in regard to Skagafjörður. Unlike Miðfjörður,⁷ Skagafjörður was its own administrative unit from the Settlement period into the modern period, thus making its boundaries more clearly demarcated. These places also get special narrative attention by being the location of Þórður's battles, which makes them especially memorable. Þórður battles Indriði at Arnastapi, which marks the eastern entrance into Skagafjörður, and he battles Özurr at Egilsá, which is at the south eastern corner of Skagafjörður, on the route out to Eyjafjörður (and is close by Flatatunga, which the text mentions is "ofarlíga í Skagafirði" [at the far end of Skagafjörður]). These would be the two main exit and entrance points into the valley, for travelers within Iceland.

An understanding of the regionalism theme as underlying the choice of venue for Þórður's battles becomes even more intriguing when the specific outcomes of the battles are considered. Take for instance the killing of Sörli versus the sparing of Indriði. Although these occur at different times in the plot, in many ways, the scenes mirror one another. They are both instances where Þórður is attacked by merchants who have links to Ormur. They also stand out from all the other skirmishes in the saga because, unlike the strife with Skeggi and Özurr that play out over multiple encounters, these are single, decisive incidents. In both cases, when the merchants who have arrived by ship to Iceland hear of Þórður's killing of Ormur, they immediately set out across the landscape in search of Þórður. In both cases, Þórður is coincidentally heading himself across the landscape, in their direction, and they meet out in the heath. In both cases, they ask each other names, realize they are enemies, and then Þórður goads them into attacking him by saying they will not get a better chance to avenge their comrade Ormur. In both cases, Þórður makes a statement afterwards that they were incredibly valiant opponents. What is puzzling

⁷ Miðfjörður is part of Húnavatnssýslu vestra, which includes Hrutafjörður to the west of Miðfjörður and Blönduós to the east.

however is that in the case of Indriði, Þórður decides not to kill him, and instead takes him to get healed. In the case of Sörli, Þórður does not hesitate to kill him. In terms of overall plot, both incidents stand out as perplexing, and one is hard pressed to point out details of the encounters that might explain why they turn out differently. There is absolutely no good motivation for Þórður to spare Indriði in the first incident, since he had recently killed not only Ormur but also Jón, and conversely no good motivation for him to kill Sörli, especially since Þórður's encounter with Sörli occurs after everything has finally been satisfactorily settled and Ásbjorn has married his sister. If Þórður should have spared anyone, it should have been his brother-in-law's uncle.

Mapping these sites however uncovers the geographic logic underlying the distinctions (Fig. 2). All of the incidents where Þórður decides to spare the life of his opponents take place within the boundaries of Skagafjörður, which becomes abundantly clear by the contrastive, bookended killing of Sörli. The saga tells us specifically that this encounter took place at Lakkasteinn, a landscape feature that marks the entry into Eyjafjörður. It is, in other words, just outside of the boundary of Skagafjörður. Similarly, the killing of Özzur, after the sparing of his life on two other occasions within the boundaries of Skagafjörður, takes place at a landscape feature whose location is not precisely known, but which is, according to the text, north and inland from Þórður's farm. This would place it beyond the visual northern end of Skagafjörður, behind the mountains of Hjaltadalur.

The original recipient audience, aware not only of the location of these placenames but also of their geo-political value as boundary markers, would likely have understood

when Þórður entered and when he exited the regions in question. This would have made Þórður's actions far more comprehensible, as the audience augmented the saga with their own knowledge. At the same time, Þórður's movements effectively inscribed each region, reinforcing the identification of each for the audience. This kind of feedback loop would be a clear example

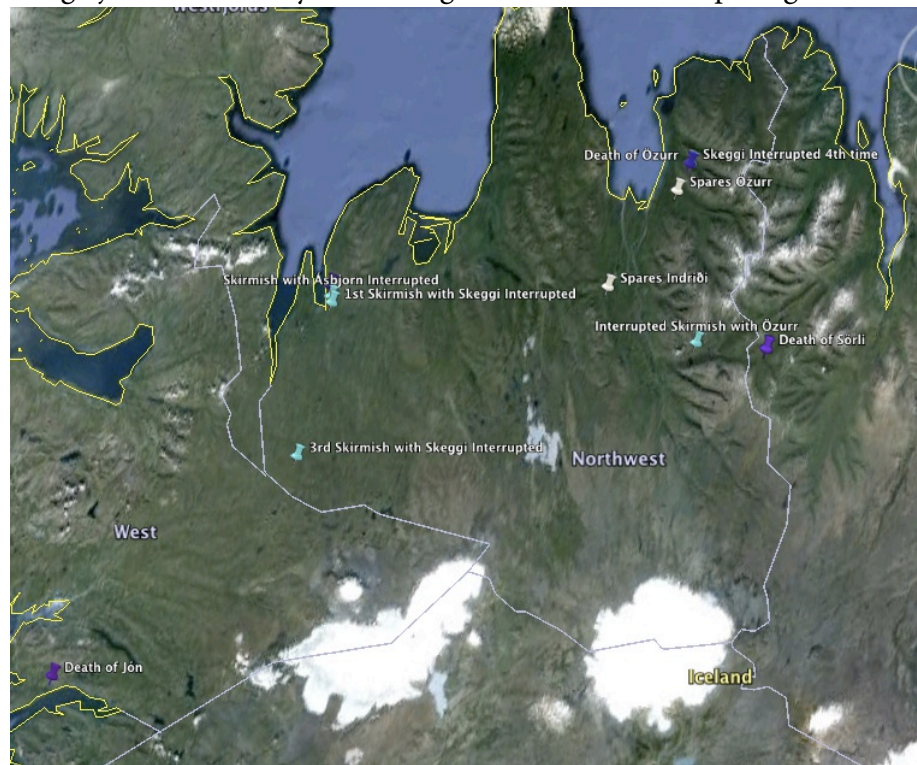


Fig. 2: Map of skirmishes in Þórðar saga hreðu. Purple indicates death of main opponent, white indicates sparing of main opponent, blue indicates skirmish interrupted by outsiders.

of literature participating in the construction and maintenance of cultural memory tied to a regional identity.

Places associated with a Christian identity

However, the pattern of Þórður sparing his opponents' lives inside of Skagafjörður and killing them outside of it seems to be more than just an enactment of regional identity. Rather it seems a nuanced rhetorical effort on the part of the narrative to mark Skagafjörður as specifically Christian, in that it is a place of mercy, forgiveness, and healing. Sverrir Jakobsson (2008) notes that in the 11th and 12th century, there was a specific ecclesiastical movement, called the Peace of God, later broadened to the Truce of God, which called for the adoption of a non-violent mindset, especially towards priest and church property, but also more generally away from weapons and toward mercy. Christian men were discouraged from spilling the blood of any other Christian man, no matter the cause, in this movement. Sverrir notes that in the late 12th century, this teaching was brought to the attention of the Icelandic clergy by the Archbishop of Niðaróss. Various instances of people seeking refuge inside churches in the contemporary Sturlungasögur demonstrate that the idea of sparing the lives of those who sought sanctuary in holy places was well known in Iceland in the 12th and 13th century. The pattern of sparing opponents within the boundaries of Skagafjörður as noted above seems to be an extension of this concept. If this is the case, we have a cultural memory not only of the adoption of Christianity, but also of this change in ecclesiastical practice. Like the theme of regionalism, the theme of Christianity seems to be very tied up with the communal identity of the inhabitants, in that the whole of Skagafjörður becomes understood as a peaceful, holy, Christian place. There are several placenames in the text of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, all associated with secondary characters, that specifically uphold this theme.

Let me first note that no other commentator on *Þórðar saga hreðu* has understood it to be a religiously-oriented text. Part of the reason for this is that this saga, unlike many other Sagas of Icelanders, does not make any direct reference to religion. We are never told about any character praying or sacrificing to any Norse gods, nor are any of the characters described as being followers of Christ or the new religion. No description is given of visiting a sorceress or someone conducting a religious rite; in fact, other than Þórður having a few prophetic dreams, there are no supernatural events in the story. It is indeed the lack of nostalgia for the pagan past that makes *Þórðar saga hreðu* difficult to classify as a post-classical saga. The saga also lacks the sort of Christian textual admonition that sometimes appear inserted into other sagas. The narrative is simply silent in regard to religion. The only direct reference to Christianity found in the text is the clause “er Egill biskup var at Hólum” [when Bishop Egill was in charge of Hólar, ie: 1332 to 1341], which is used as a time referent to explain how long one of Þórður's halls stood.

Although naming the bishop is what makes this a Christian reference for the casual reader, the placename Hólar would have also done so for a native Icelandic audience. It is the name of the cathedral that was the administrative head of the northern diocese, the See of one of the two bishoprics in Iceland. Hólar was established as the episcopal seat in 1106 A.D., and it is located in the valley of Hjaltadalur, which is part of Skagafjörður. Although Iceland officially adopted Christianity at a ruling of the Althing in 1000 A.D., the first churches were built by high-status

chieftains and *goðar* who built churches on their properties, both as a way to consolidate power and as a way to generate revenue from tithing (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, pp. 188-193). The two Episcopal sees were therefore distinct from other churches in Iceland, since their loyalty was directly to the Archbishop in Niðaróss, Norway. Because Iceland did not have a king, the bishops were an essential conduit to mainland European culture and thought. Skalhólt in the south of Iceland and Hólar in the north of Iceland were also bustling schooling and craftsmanship centers, as well as places of worship. They were, in affect, the capitals of their two respective domains. Hólar is also located in an impressive landscape: it is on the northern slope of Hjaltaadalur, rather deep in its interior, where steep, perpetually snow covered mountains crowd about, lending a simultaneously majestic and intimate air to the place.⁸ Thus the placename Hólar in the text would have had tremendous real world associations for the intended audience of this saga.

Except in the mention of Bishop Egill, Hólar as a site is never mentioned in *Þórðar saga hreðu*; this would indeed shatter the historical frame the narrator has created, in as much as the story is ostensibly set around 950 A.D., well before Hólar was established. This reference therefore cannot be considered as part of how the saga itself shows a concern with Christianity. However, careful attention to the places associated with many of the auxiliary characters reveals that they have a link to Hólar; even without Hólar being mentioned by name in the text, it would nevertheless be present in the audience's interpretation of the narrative.

The first character Þórður spares is Indriði, who is said to be preparing his ship at the harbor port of Kolbeinsárós when he is introduced into the saga. This placename would have been meaningful to the audience of the saga as a major northern port, as I discussed in chapter 3 above. Kolbeinsárós, whose name was later shortened to Kolkuós, was a vibrant harbor for many centuries. Locals in the area may likely also have known that this harbor was the embarking and disembarking station for goods and visitors coming to Hólar Cathedral; indeed, the proximity to this harbor is believed to be an important motivation for locating the Episcopal See at this site. Indriði's association with this harbor would not in itself qualify as part of a Christian theme in the saga. But combined with how he is characterized in the text—he is so generous, upstanding, and forgiving as to offer to personally pay compensation to the families of the men Þórður killed—being identified with this site might better explain why he is the first opponent Þórður spares. Certain audience members more interested in Christianity than regionalism may well have understood Indriði as a Christian.

Two other characters acquire a Christian glow through this combination of association with place, characterization, and involvement in skirmishes where someone is spared. In Chapter 8, Þórður is invited by Kálfur to a yule feast at Kálfsstaðir. Kálfur [Calf] is unusual as an Icelandic first name, in that Icelanders are usually named after wild animals, not domesticates (Willson 2009). To someone familiar with the Bible, the name Kálfur may have had certain Judeo-Christian overtones, in as much as the fatted calf was the favored sacrificial animal during

⁸ This impressive setting may even have inspired the choice of location for the Northern Bishopric, since sacred sites are often located in noteworthy topographies (Bradley 2000).

passover.⁹ Since yule feasts are both pagan and Christian holidays—in the pagan period they marked the winter solstice, whereas in the Christian period yule became the mass of Christ—the text therefore gives some reason for the audience to interpret Kálfur as a Christian. Kálfsstaðir as a place, however, makes this Christian association very clear. When first introducing Kálfur, the saga relays that his farm, Kálfstaðir is in Hjaltadalur, but it was not until I visited Kálfsstaðir that I realized the close relationship between Kálfstaðir and Hólar. It is not just a farm in the same valley as the cathedral; it is the farm that sits directly across from it on the valley’s southern slope. The view from Kálfstaðir is Hólar. I believe, Kálfstaðir was meant to be understood as a holy place, a kind of proxy for Hólar. In light of the association of Kálfsstaðir with Christianity, Þórður’s decision not to kill Özurr as he leaves Kálfstaðir—which seems undermotivated in the narrative, especially since Özurr had ambushed him—makes more sense. The text draws attention to this unusual decision:

Eptir fundinn gekk Þórður at Özuri ok kippti honum ór blóði ok skaut yfir hann skildi, svá at eigi rífi hann hrafnar, því at hann mátti sér enga hjálp veita. Allir flýðu undan menn Özurar. Eigi váru menn Þórðar færir til eptirferðar, því at engi komst ósárr af fundi þessum. Þórður bauð Özuri að láta græða hann. ‘Eigi þartu at bjóða mér lækning,’ segir Özurr, ‘því at janskjótt skal ek drepa þik sem ek komust í færi við þik.’ Þórður kveðst ekki at því fara ok sendi Þórhall yfir í Ás til Þórgríms, er þar bjó, at hann sækti Özur ok græddi hann (ÍF XIV pg. 204).

[After the encounter, Þórður went up to Özurr and pulled him out of the blood and set up a shield over him so that the ravens could not pick at him, since he was unable to defend himself. All of Özurr’s men had fled the scene. None of Þórður’s men were fit to pursue them, since no one had emerged unscathed from this encounter. Þórður offered Özurr to get his wounds patched up. “You do not need to offer me doctoring,” replies Özurr, “because I will kill you the very second I get another chance against you.” Þórður replies he is not worried about that and sends Þórhall over to Ás to Þórgrímur, who lived there, and he brought Özurr home and tended to his wounds.]

This rather touching scene of Þórður’s concern for the well-being of Özurr could be interpreted as relating to a Christian theme in the saga, especially because of the other placename mentioned here, Ás. The saga first names this place a few pages earlier, during the dinner at Kálfsstaðir when Kálfur introduces Þórður to a man named Eyvindur, whose patronymic is not given. However, the farm he is said to come from, Ás, is named. Like Kálfstaðir, it is said in the text to be “í Hjaltadal.” Eyvindur turns out to be a very loyal friend to Þórður, battling beside him on several occasions and staying with him at his house. Modern readers would probably find little reason to see a Christian overtone in this character, especially inasmuch as the text says he gives Þórður a gilded spear as a sign of loyalty, and thus seems perfectly Viking. But the farmstead from which he comes suggests that he too has Christian associations. Ás is the site where the first church in Iceland was erected, sixteen years before Iceland formally adopted

⁹ Knowledge of Judaic practice in pre-Reformation Iceland may have been fairly in depth, inasmuch as the only known vernacular translations from that period, now collectively referred to as *Stjórn*, were made of books from the Old Testament.

Christianity (*Kristni saga*, ÍF XV, chapter 3). Thus Ás as a place is symbolic of the deep roots Christianity has in Hjaltadalur and Skagafjörður. By appreciating the connotation of the place from which he is said to come, Eyvindur as a character becomes much more than just a convenient fictional companion. Instead, one could imagine the medieval audience taking comfort in Þórður having a loyal, brave figure from this deeply religious farmstead accompanying him everywhere he goes, as if he had acquired a guardian angel.

Although each of these examples does support the possibility of a Christian theme in the saga, I am also interested in the way in which each place also gestures towards Hólar. In fact, mapping all the farms named in Skagafjörður in the saga brings to light just how very much the



Figure 3: Map of farms associated with main characters.

text is favoring Hjaltadalur (Fig. 3). It is striking that although the saga takes pains to name the landscape features marking the eastern, western, northern, and southern boundaries of Skagafjörður, what comprises named farmsteads within Skagafjörður is surprisingly narrow. No placenames are listed in the main valley traversed by Héraðsvötn River, which is the productive farmland and geographic center of the valley.

The farmstead of Flatatunga, which the text specifically notes is at the southern edge of Skagafjörður, is the only farmstead from

within the boundaries of Skagafjörður listed in the saga that is not located in the northeastern corner of Skagafjörður. In fact, the only farmstead not leading directly into Hjaltadalur associated with a reoccurring character in Skagafjörður is the farm of Þórður's enemy, Özurr. All of Þórður's friends are from the part of Skagafjörður that leads into Hjaltadalur or is inside Hjaltadalur itself. We can say that by locating the regional hero Þórður in that part of the valley, the text is creating an authentic core of Skagafjörður that does not encompass the whole of the valley. As Moretti notes (1998, pg. 47), when texts create such a geographic focus, they are participating in identity politics: the features associated with that particular area are rhetorically offered to the audience as appropriate characteristics to define a larger region. It seems that only the farms very near Hólar can lay claim to being the authentic core of Skagafjörður. That is why there is a preponderance of farmsteads associated with characters in the full version of the saga located near Hólar cathedral. Even Ósland, the hillside upon which Olóf and Þórhall live, marks the entry to Hjaltadalur; it is the landmark visible from all over Skagafjörður leading the way to

Hólar. This is where Þórður's wife to be, Ólof, lives, who is said to be a good healer, and where Þórður will live out his old age in peace and prosperity.

I believe the saga means to suggest, and would have suggested to a medieval audience, that Hjaltadalur in particular, and Skagafjörður more generally, should be thought of a holy landscape, a sacred place. The unusual plot elements in the saga—ranging from the moments of extreme generosity, sudden sparing of life, and a cantankerous warrior quietly settling down—not only all take place in Skagafjörður, but they are spurred on by auxiliary characters who all come from places associated with Hólar.

Befitting the contrast set up between Skagafjörður and Miðfjörður, I would like to suggest one final Christian association through a placename, but this time the referent is in Miðfjörður and it is negative and biblical, instead of positive and historical. In chapter two of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, a character named Þórkell is introduced, and the saga tells us, “Hann bjó á þeim bæ, er á Söndum heitir, fyrir vestan fjörðinn, gegnt Ósi.” [He lived at that farm, which is called Sandur, on the western side of the fjord, across from Ósi]. When I was in Miðfjörður, I did my best to locate this farm, but there is no present day farm by that name in the area; it is also hard to visualize where a farm of that name could have been located on that side of the fjord, since it is a rather steep terrain without a sandy coast. If the medieval audience knew this geography, they may have understood this not as a reference to a real farm, but as a reference to the biblical passage that this farm name echoes. In Matthew 7:26, the parable is given of the foolish man who builds his house upon the sand: “et omnis qui audit verba mea haec et non facit ea similis erit viro stulto qui aedificavit domum suam supra harenam” (Vulgata Version).¹⁰ Indeed, Þórkell is a very foolish man. Eiður, the son of Skeggi who was fostered to Þórkell but then decides instead to live with Þórður after Þórður saves him from drowning, explains to his father his reasoning: “..því at Þórðr er mikils háttar maðr, ok má af honum gott hljóta, en Þórkell er lítilmenni ok heimskr; hann vildi bana mér fyrir sakir óvizku ok forsjáleysis, en Þórðr gaf mér lif, ok hann hefir gefit mér inn bezta grip” (ÍF XIV, pg. 175) [Because Þórður is a remarkable man, and I will receive good things from him, but Þórkell is a petty man and foolish; he almost killed me because of his stupidity and lack of foresight, but Þórður gave me life, and he has given me the most precious thing.] Not only does the farm name Sandur reference this parable but in this quotation of Eiður's, a direct contrast is being made between Þórður and Þórkell, just as the parable in Matthew sets up a contrast between the wise man who builds his house on stone, and the foolish man who builds his house on sand. Matthew 7:24 reads: “Omnis ergo qui audit verba mea haec et facit ea adsimilabitur viro sapienti qui aedificavit domum suam supra petram” (Vulgata Version) [Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock. (New King James Version)] In fact, if the medieval audience was intimately aware of the placenames in Miðfjörður, they may have known that there is a farm inland from the described location of Sandur called Bjarg,¹¹ which means rock. If so, Þórkell's farmname would have made for a humorous contrast.

¹⁰ The Latin word here “harena” refers to a geological feature filled with sand, like a desert or beach; an appropriate Icelandic translation for that would be sandur, a landscape term that refers to a sandy area cut by water.

¹¹ The farm of Bjarg is associated with Grettir the Strong.

That Þórður should be thought of as the wise builder is of course not just suggested in Eiður's description of him as wise: Þórður is himself a master builder. The saga says, "Váru þeir engir, at jafnbyði Þórði um allan fimleik ok afl. Þórðr var umsýslumaðr mikill ok inn mesti þjóðsmiðr" (ÍF XIV, p. 172). [There was no one that was equal to Þórður in all maneuvers and strength. Þórður was a leader in the district and the greatest master craftsman]. Throughout the saga, Þórður's skills as a warrior are paired with his skills as a builder, but the kinds of things he builds transition in the course of the saga. The first thing he builds is a ferry; in fact, it is because he is the process of building his ferry that he is in position to save the life of Eiður, who would otherwise have drowned in an icy river. Once he moves to Skagafjörður, Þórður begins building halls, each of which is named, bringing narrative attention not only to his profession but also to the places where he worked. This transition from moveable good to a fixed feature of the built environment highlights the agency of his profession as a carpenter. Perhaps not coincidentally, carpentry is a profession honored in the Christian worldview because of its association with Jesus of Nazareth. So although it would be overstating it to say he is a sort of proto-Christ, one could say, biblically speaking, that Þórður is the wise builder, who would have listened to Jesus' words had he heard them.

In terms of Cultural Memory theory, putting a Christian theme into the saga of a Viking Age settler like Þórður hreða could be said to make the conversion less of a shocking break with the past. By introducing the idea of Christian leanings even in those who had not heard the Christian teachings, this saga may make the transition less abrupt and more natural. Indeed, Lönnroth (1969) identified such a "noble heathen" theme in many sagas. However, what the discussion above has demonstrated is that the Christian theme is one tied to place, not to chronology. It is not that Þórður's life, which chronologically was before the conversion, demonstrated Christian proclivities, but that the landscape of Skagafjörður demonstrated Christian proclivities. Þórður's change of behavior when inside of Skagafjörður suggests that the authority of Christianity reigning there even before Hólar was established, as if it was always a holy landscape. Only in this context does it make sense that the saga makes this the place where characters are spared and healed, and where the most Christian of professions found its most profound expression. That the landscape itself was understood as Christian helps explain why Christianity continues to be a very important component in the local identity of the people of Skagafjörður even today, a point that will be expanded in Chapter 5 below. The Christian theme of the saga is therefore one that both produces and is a product of that Christian identity, in a feedback loop that intimately involves place.

Iceland's "Civil War"

It is therefore highly ironic that this same landscape is also the place where the bloodiest battles of Iceland's "civil war" took place, between 1238 and 1255 A.D.. Of course, most historians and saga scholars call this period by the much more innocuous term, "the end of the Commonwealth," in that it also marks the integration of Iceland formally into the Norwegian kingdom. Pernille Hermann believes this time period was processed through cultural memory because of the loss of national identity typically associated with the end of the Commonwealth. But as Ármann Jakobsson (2002) has pointed out, there is reason to believe 12th century Icelanders already saw themselves in some sort of liege-like relationship to the king of Norway,

and there were laws defining that relationship, even before the end of the Commonwealth. It is therefore not the loss of a unique identity that was traumatic for Icelanders of this period, or dislike of having to submit to the authority of Norwegians. Instead, I would argue it was the long-term domestic instability that marked the period that was traumatic, and probably would have been so regardless of the political outcome.

Since 930 A.D., the leading aristocrats in Iceland had utilized an open-air assembly system for airing grievances known from Norway and elsewhere in Northern Europe. This Thing system allowed for people of almost any rank in society to present cases of wrongdoing in their local districts twice a year and at a larger national forum once a year; those cases would be arbitrated by a group of popularly selected landholders called *goðar*. This system worked relatively well and is hailed as a unique example of a representative government in a medieval European world dominated by monarchies (Helgi Þorláksson 2000). But over time, cracks in this system began to appear: various kings of Norway sought influence over Iceland through chieftains who wished to align themselves with a king for prestige purposes; and the church, whose lands were held by powerful chieftains, sought favor and influence in the system as well. By the late 12th century, the local spring and fall assemblies were being disbanded as diffuse local chieftains' power gave way to ever more centralized power (Jón Jóhannesson 1974, p. 238). Although technically illegal, in this process single individuals came to hold multiple *goðorð*, usually within the same district but not always. Now it was no longer independent landowners feuding with one another, a problem which could be settled by arbitration at the Thing assemblies, but rather a few very powerful and wealthy individuals and family lines vying for control of all of Iceland.

The deterioration of what is called the Icelandic Commonwealth was a slow process that likely began in the early 12th century but “it was not until after the middle of the 12th century that civil unrest and warfare in Iceland reached sinister proportions, and from then on the hostilities continued with only brief periods of truce until the end of the Commonwealth period” (ibid., p. 229). Jón sets the stage for the climax of this process: “[S]hortly after 1220 the main share of political power in Iceland had been taken over by six families or clans.” It is the violent and prolonged clash of these six families between 1220 and 1262, involving people from every district of Iceland and ever-increasing numbers of combatants, that I am defining as Iceland's civil war, although Icelanders themselves are very reticent to use this terminology. Instead Icelanders today see it as the moment they lost their independence; indeed, this internecine conflict could only be settled by resorting to the arbitration of the only authority above the level of these few powerful landholders, the king of Norway. In 1264, all chieftains formally submitted to the king of Norway, finally bringing this period of extended and escalating violence to an end.

Most Icelandic history books are quick to gloss over this period, treating it as a necessary and natural alignment of the Icelandic government with the mainland European royal model. But some saga scholars, such as Torfi Tulinius (2007), have noted that this period of escalating violence and the process of submitting to the king of Norway exactly corresponds to the period when the sagas are being written down and that this may well have influenced certain details in the sagas as we know them today. It clearly behooves any analysis of the context of the sagas to

take into account the particulars of Iceland's civil war, and *Þórðar saga hreðu* is certainly no exception to this.

The families or clans Jón Johannesson identifies were to a great extent regionally defined: The Svínfellings had “control of the entire Eastern Quarter” (1974, p. 231); the south of Iceland was divided between the Oddaverjar, who were in secure control east of Thjorsá, while west of Thjorsá, the Haukdælir clan reigned; the Sturlunga family had control of two areas, Borgafjörður in the west and Eyjafjörður in the north; the remainder of the west, consisted of many small scattered settlements, was lead by one family, the Vatnsfirðings (from Vatnsfjörður). The final family in this hexagamic divison was the Ásbirnings; “from the early part of the 12th century to the end of the period in question they were in sole power in Skagafjörður” (ibid., p. 235). Jón Johannesson also notes that the consolidation of several goðorð—originally defined by the landclaims of the first settlers—into a single regional whole “probably began first in Skagafjörður” because it was so densely populated, and also because it housed the Episcopal see, thus giving local secular authorities a reason to consolidate their power to more forcefully oppose the ecclesiastical one. Although it is unclear exactly how the Ásbirning clan came into power, what is clear is that for almost 200 years Skagafjörður as a region had a strong and stable leadership structure. *Þórðar saga hreðu*'s rhetoric in support of a specific Skagafjörður identity seems therefore to be well in-line with the political situation of the area.

In the late 13th century, that regional political stability was destroyed in a very dramatic fashion. Kolbeinn the Young of the Ásbirning clan, who was in charge of Skagafjörður, as had been his father before him, married and then divorced the daughter of Snorri Sturluson, whose father Sturla was the chieftain of Hvamm in Dalir. Snorri, although best known today for his authorship, was the youngest of three brothers, each of whom set out to increase the family power.¹² The oldest brother, Þórður, married in succession two daughters of chieftains on the Snæfellsness peninsula, and took over the goðorð in the area; his son, Sturla, wrote the definitive account of this period in Icelandic history, called *Íslendingasaga* (See Úlfar Bragason 2010 for a comprehensive treatment of that work). The middle brother, Sighvatur, married the sister of Kolbeinn Tumason, the elder head of the Ásbirning clan. Sighvatur, and his son Sturla, were extremely ambitious men, leading assaults against Bishop Guðmundur of Hólar and against chieftains throughout Iceland. Each colorful and important in their own right, in terms of the politics in Skagafjörður, Sighvatur and his son Sturla are key.

Sighvatur had another son named Tumi, who was given a chieftaincy in Eyjafjörður; Sighvatur took this over and moved to Grund in Eyjafjörður. His son Sturla took over his grandfather's chieftaincy in Dalir. This left Kolbeinn the Younger surrounded; to the west was Sturla and to the east was Sighvatur. At first, relations were hospitable; Sighvatur was, after all, married to Kolbeinn's aunt, making him and Sturla first cousins. But Sturla's ambitions, and the support he received from the king of Norway, spurred him to try to consolidate all chieftaincies in Iceland to himself (Jón Johannesson 1974, p. 250; see also Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1940 p. 11-12.).

¹² I am drawing here primarily from *Íslands saga til okkar daga* by Björn Þórsteinsson and Bergsteinn Jónsson (1991), although the general chronology of events in this period is little disputed thanks to the contemporary eyewitness account preserved in *Íslendingasaga*.

First he attacked the Haukdælir clan in the south of Iceland; their chieftain, Gizzur survived and turned to Kolbeinn for support.

The six powerful families were now down to two camps, and the whole of the power struggle for Iceland focalized on Skagafjörður, Kolbeinn's base of power, and the last real holdout against the Sturlungs (Árni Daniél et al. 2005). Not only was it the political center of this struggle, Skagafjörður also became the physical center of this struggle. The first of two major battles in Skagafjörður took place in 1238: Sturla, Sighvatur's son, had amassed troops in the west of Iceland, and then marched across Vatnskerð to Skagafjörður. En route, chapter 133 of *Íslendingasaga* tells us he picked up support from the people of Miðfjörður (Sturlunga Saga vol. II, p. 324).¹³ Then his father arrived with troops from Eyjafjörður, in total over 1000 men (Fig. 4).

Kolbeinn had heard about these troop movements, and went to the south, to meet with Gizzur, while Sturla and his father Sighvatur entered Skagafjörður unopposed. They took over the rich farmlands on the southeastern side of the valley, near the farms of Viðimýri and Miklabær.

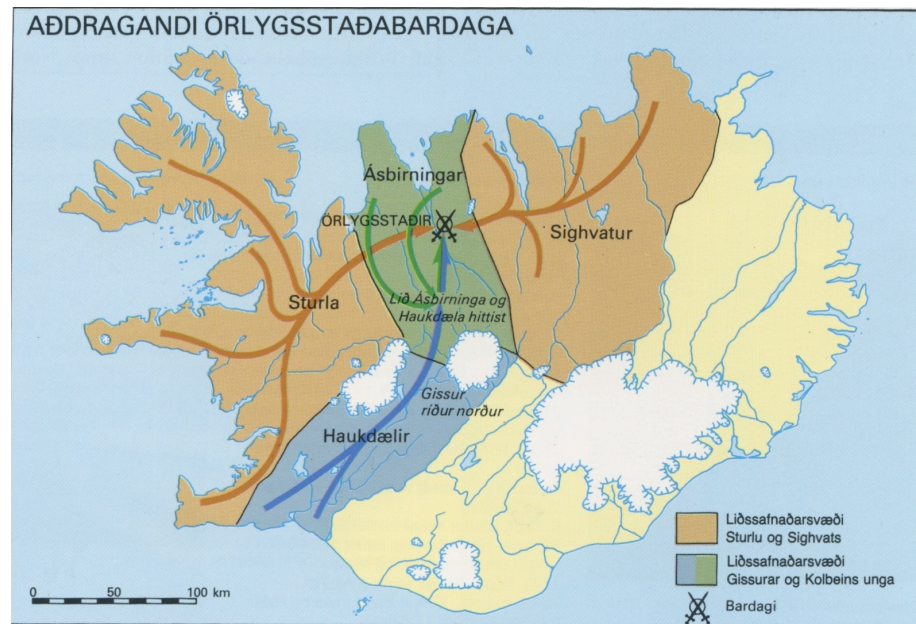


Fig. 4: Troop movements associated with Örylgsstaðir battle. Reproduced by permission of Árni Daniél Júlíuson.

Meanwhile, down south, Kolbeinn and Gizzur gathered up a force of over 1600 men and began marching north. Sturla Þórðarson's account in *Íslendingasaga* sets the scene in Skagafjörður thusly:

Sturla vaknaði þá er skammt var sól farin. Hann settist upp ok var sveittr um andlitit. Hann strauk fast hendinni um kinnina ok mælti “Ekki er mark at draumum.” Síðan stoð hann upp ok gekk til salernis ok Illugi prestr með honum. En er hann kom aftr, lá hann litla hrið, áðr maðr kom í skálann ok kallaði, “Nú ríðr flokkurinn Sunnlendinga ok er herr manna” (SS vol. II, p. 341).

[Sturla awoke not long after the sun had gone down. He sat up and there was sweat on his face. He rubbed his hand across his chin and said, “Dreams mean nothing.” Then he stood up and went to the restroom; the priest Illugi accompanied him. When he got back to bed, he laid down only a little while,

¹³ Henceforth, the collection of contemporary sagas known as *Sturlunga Saga* will be referenced simply by SS.

before a man came into the hall and shouted, “Now the group from the south is on the move, and it is an army of men.”]

The resulting battle, in the early morning of August 21, 1238, could be described as a rout. Sturla and his father were caught totally off guard; they had stationed their troops throughout the valley and had to scramble to get everyone together to a defensible position before Kolbeinn and Gizzur arrived. The battle was joined at a farm just east of Miklabær, called Örlygsstaðir, where Sturla had raised some minimal bunkers. Their efforts were hardly sufficient; both Sturla and Sighvatur were killed that day, along with dozens of others, but Kolbeinn and Gizzur’s forces came out virtually unscathed (Jón Johannesson 1974, p. 252). After his victory, Kolbeinn claimed for himself not only Skagafjörður, but all the lands in the north that had once been under the control of Sturla and Sighvatur, even though he had no ancestral claim to these areas.

This illegal takeover, plus the desire to avenge the deaths of Sturla and Sighvatur, led another son of Sighvatur’s, Þórður kakali, to begin gathering followers for an eventual attack on Kolbeinn. Kolbeinn died of natural causes, however, in 1245, at which time Þórður claimed for himself all of Kolbeinn’s holdings, much of which had belonged to his father and brother. Kolbeinn however had already granted all of his authority to his cousin Brandur. Jón Johannesson (1974) summarizes the subsequent events thusly:

Þórður finally gathered his followers and advanced into Skagafjörður, where Brandur and his men stood ready to oppose him. The armies met at Haugnes on the southern bank of the river Djúpadalsá on April 19, 1246, and there they fought the fiercest battle ever to take place in Iceland. (p. 261)

This battle, usually referred to as the battle of Haugnes, was the single deadliest battle in Icelandic history. *Þórðar saga kakala*, a contemporary account of the events written by an unknown author, provides a rather touching description of the end of the battle:

“Þá hjó Sigurður um þvert höfuðit Brandi ok klauf höfuðit ofan at eyrum. Lét Brandr þar líf sitt. Við líflát Brands var á þriðja tigi manna. Þar var sett up róða, sem Brandr fell, oh heitir þar Róðugrund síðan.” (SS vol. III, p. 124-125)

[Then Sigurður hewed across the head of Brandur and sliced the head off above the ears. Brandur gave up his life there. Thirty men witnessed the death of Brandur. A pole was set up at the spot where Brandur fell, and it has been called Poleground ever since.]

The total fatalities of this battle, which involved over 1200 men, numbered 110, 70 of which were men from Skagafjörður.¹⁴

In addition to these two dramatic clashes, Skagafjörður remained the center of political intrigue all the way until 1264. Gizzur, who had been living in southern Iceland, bought land at

¹⁴ I would like to thank the audience member who pointed out for me, during an oral presentation of my preliminary findings at Linneaus University in Kalmar, Sweden in 2011 that 1200 combatants in a population of approximately 60,000 people is 5% of the males in the country, meaning that nearly everyone in Iceland at the time would have known someone in that battle.

the farm of Staðir in Skagafjörður after the death of Þórður kakali (who died in his sleep while visiting the king of Norway). This led to two other events taking place here, which are vividly described in Sturla Þórðarson's account: the burning at Flugumýri, where Gizurr almost lost his life, and a final skirmish at Geldingaholt just before authority was handed over to the king of Norway. Though burnings are not uncommon in the sagas, or in the historic records, Sturla's account of the burning at Flugumýri is especially detailed and descriptive, including relaying Gizurr's wife's efforts to save the children, and paints a very heartwrenching scene. Úlfar Bragason (2010) argues in fact that the entire narrative structure of *Íslendingasaga* is "intended to focus the attention of the listener/reader specifically on two events in the story . . . : the battle of Örlygsstaðir, and the burning of Flugumýri" (p. 296).

Although not a comprehensive overview of all the struggle, conflict, and violence involved in the so-called "end of the commonwealth", or what I would call Iceland's civil war, the above should be sufficient to demonstrate how central Skagafjörður was in that turmoil.

Places in *Þórðar saga hreðu* and the Sturlungaöld

In light of the momentous events that took place in Skagafjörður, the placenames mentioned in *Þórðar saga hreðu* take on yet another layer of meaning, this time tied to the cultural memory of the civil war. There is however only one placename mentioned in *Þórðar saga hreðu* that also hosted events around the civil war: Flatatunga. Sturla Þórðarson's account in *Íslendingasaga*, chapter 98, explains that Sighvatur had gathered up troops, 600 of them, and positioned himself at Flatatunga. Kolbeinn the Younger was preparing to move in on Sighvatur there, but "skriftaði Guðmundr byskup mönnum Kolbeins, en segir þó, at þeir myndi eigi berjast um daginn" (SS Vol. II, p. 243). [Bishop Guðmundur heard confession from Kolbein's men, and told them that they must not battle that day.] When the troops met at Flatatunga, "gengu stórbændr ór Eyjafirði ór liði Sighvats ok enn nökkurir af liði Kolbeins ok leituðu um sættir í milli þeira" (ibid., p. 244). [leading men from Eyjafjörður who were part of Sighvatur's troops and several leading men from Kolbein's troops met to arrange a truce between them.] Here we see an application of the Peace of God concept being used to stop bloodshed. But what is also interesting is that this event parallels what happens in *Þórðar saga hreðu* at Flatatunga; Þórður and Özurr are just about to battle, but men from the area intervene and break up the fight. It is the only skirmish not broken up by Þórður's foster son, Eiður, and thus it is narratively interesting.

In contrast to that impending showdown, which was staved off by the efforts of the bishop and the leading men in the area, the other battles in Skagafjörður during the Sturlungaöld civil war did not have the same outcome. It is those places of violence that are left out of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. The emptiness of the middle of the valley is especially noticeable during Þórður's journey to Flatatunga. To get there, Þórður would need to go south, and thereby potentially risk going past Özurr's farmstead, but instead the saga simply tells us, "Um várit reið Þórðr upp í herað, því at bóndi sá, er Þórgrímur hét, hafði sent honum orð at smíða skála sinn, því at Þórðr var manna hogastr. Þórgrímur bjó í Flatatungu; þat er ofarliga í Skagafirði" (ÍF XIV, p. 205). [That spring, Þórður rode through the district, because a certain farmer who was named Þórgrímur had sent word for him to build his hall, because Þórður was the most skillful of men. Þórgrímur lived at

Flatatunga, which is at the outer-edge of Skagafjörður.] This bit of text comes just after Þórður has spared Özurr's life the first time, and Özurr has warned him not to do so, because he will kill him the next time he comes near him, as quoted above. So the audience would be primed to expect another showdown, and, aware of the geography of Skagafjörður, would know that Þórður has to go past Özurr's farm to get to Flatatunga. But the narrative entirely skips relaying his travel details. This contrasts not only with the type of landscape descriptions discussed in Chapter 3, but also with the travel described on page 216 of ÍF XIV, where Ásbjörn and Skeggi are said to take a back route “fyrir framan byggð alla” [away from all the settlements] so that they specifically do not get spotted. Instead, the text here has Þórður suddenly arrive at Flatatunga. After Þórður has been in Flatatunga for a while, the text tells us he heard about a ship arriving at Gásir in Eyjafjörður, so he travels there. This time, the weapons Þórður carries with him and the exact route of this travels are given, and indeed Özurr and Þórður meet just as Þórður nears Flatatunga on his return. Servants from Flatatunga witness this, and arrange to break up the fight, as mentioned above. The similarities in these two stories, and the omission of the middle of the valley, make one suspects that the sagateller(s) responsible for certain late changes to the narrative—those reflecting the civil war—wished to specifically commemorate efforts at peaceful intervention.

Theories of Forgetting

The silence regarding Þórður's trip through the central valley of Skagafjörður is also of special theoretical interest. Above, I have suggested that the places named in *Þórðar saga hreðu* are included as a way to enact and maintain certain communal memories related to the inhabitants' regional identity and religious identity. The saga's proclivity for focusing on characters who live near Hólar was interpreted as part of the theme of Christianity in the saga. But what a text chooses not to include is also very telling (Moretti 1998, pp. 13-22). In this case, the area near Hjaltadalur is privileged in the text to such a degree that large chunks of Skagafjörður's landscape are entirely missing. Most of the action of the saga takes place in this northeastern corner of the valley, with other events taking place at the boundaries around Skagafjörður. But the central, productive and more densely populated farmlands that lie north to south along both forks of the Héraðsvötn river that flows into Skagafjörður—the area most Icelanders today would think of as “Skagafjörður”—are not part of the saga.

This sort of omission is interesting in that it suggests that the text is not just concerned with positively constructing a particular communal memory, but also is actively attempting communal forgetting. All processes of memory are closely tied in with forgetting; in fact, some have argued that memory practice is more about forgetting vast amounts of information rather than about retention of a few specific things (Esposito 2008). Walter Benjamin put it poetically, in his discussion of Proust's theory of memory, that “remembrance is the woof and forgetting is the warp” (1968, p. 202), or in less poetic terms, that these two cognitive acts are “inextricably bound up with one another” (Robinson 2010, p. 93). Indeed forgetting is essential in the cognitive, communal, cultural, and social functions of memory, and has been recognized as such by throughout Western philosophy (Weinrich 2004). It is not just about remembering that which we want to remember, but perhaps more importantly about forgetting that which no longer serves a person or a society. The point is that omissions in memory are not a simple oversight, or

something left to wither on the vine naturally, but can be purposeful, voluntary or even “executive” efforts at directed repression. The term “repression” is an exceedingly loaded one, inasmuch as it has been heavily used by psychologists and Freudianists, where it is understood as an unhealthy response to trauma. Memory studies of course do owe something to modern psychology, and one could say that the civil war battles in Skagafjörður were traumatic for the inhabitants of the area. But I am using repression not because I want to cast the events between 1230 and 1260 as “cultural trauma” (see Kansteiner and Weilnböck 2008 for a scathing critique of that intellectual concept). Rather, by using the term repression, I mean to capture that this is directed forgetting, purposely employed.

Certainly if one maps the saga along side the events of the civil war, the negative relationship between the two becomes obvious (Fig. 5). For a late 13th and 14th century audience, the saga’s focus on the northeastern corner of Skagafjörður would not only conjure up positive Christian qualities, but would also allow the audience to ignore the negative qualities associated with the middle of the valley, the area where the battles of the Icelandic civil war took place. What I am suggesting is that just as the places mentioned in the text can be thought of as the nexus of communal memory making, so too can the places not mentioned in the text be thought of as participating in communal forgetting. This is perhaps less about trauma, and more about addressing the conflicting identities brought up by the civil war battles. The battle sites as a material manifestation of memory marked the landscape of Skagafjörður as a place of violence, which is directly at odds with the identity of the valley nurtured not only through the text of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, but also by the establishment of the bishopric of Hólar. Thus the textual glossing over of central Skagafjörður is not a narrative quirk, but rather part of an overall pattern of the text.

However, I believe that faced with this ongoing challenge to an established identity—the civil war battle sites would have been a continuous witness to a potential violent identity for the area—the text of *Þórðar saga hreðu* continued to evolve to find other ways to encourage active forgetting. Of course, the sagas do not offer any evidence of individual forgetting or sudden amnesia after a traumatic event; rather, saga characters seem to have very clear memories of traumatic events, and remind others about it at strategic times. The Sagas of Icelanders are replete with example after example of traumatic events, and thus seems a very unlikely vehicle for a cultural mechanism that purposefully represses memories. But there were literary conventions in place to help create distance between a narrator and those events, both in the case of formalized poetics and narrative style. This is most tellingly demonstrated in the case of the author of the contemporary saga *Íslendingasaga*, Sturla Þórðarson (Bragg 1994; Á. Jakobsson 2003; see also Ulfar Bragason 2010). Himself an actor and witness to the events he then wrote about in his old age, Sturla contains his anger and his emotions to a remarkable degree as he writes about these events; it is only in the intimate, detailed descriptions and dialogue that some hint of the author’s moral and emotional stance to those events are apparent (Gúðrun Nordal 1998).

In a similarly subtle and nuanced way, a close look at the placenames that are mentioned in *Þórðar saga hreðu*, through the lens of the places associated with the civil war, suggests that a repressed memory of place may be occurring not only through this lacuna of the center of the valley, but also at a textual level through a play on names. This would represent an innovation within the genre, and may account for why *Þórðar saga hreðu* seems so unusual within the corpus. Conversely, that *Þórðar saga hreðu* was already unusual for its happy ending may have made it an ideal candidate to be a carrier of efforts at directed forgetting.



Fig. 5: Locations of the Sturlungaöld battles in Skagafjörður are marked in yellow, whereas red marks places listed in *Þórðar saga hreðu*.

Ghost places

To start with the most obvious example, in chapter 6 of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, we are introduced to a series of characters, including Ólof, who lives at the farm of Miklabær in Óslandshlíð. As the text proceeds, her farm is sometimes called Ósland and sometimes called Miklabær. Ósland is an interesting echo of the name of the farm where Þórðar had first lived when arriving in Iceland: Ós. Both farms are in fact similarly

situated at the mouth of the river just as it enters into the fjord, one in Miðfjörður and the other in Skagafjörður, and both are located on the eastern side of that river mouth. Thus Ós and Ósland parallel one another.¹⁵ But what of Miklabær? For those in the audience familiar with the events of the Sturlungöld, Miklabær in Skagafjörður would surely ring a bell. Miklabær is the farmstead where Sturla prepared himself for the battle at Örlygsstaðir, and where Sighvatur was killed after he sought refuge in the church at Miklabær. It is a farm about a kilometer north of the Örlyggstaðir battle field. But the Miklabær involved in the Sturlunga battles is in central Skagafjörður, about a dozen kilometers south of Miklabær á Óslandshlíð. The reason Ólof's farm

¹⁵ Mark Turner (1996), who has fruitfully combined reader response theory and cognitive psychology in a quest to understand why human beings need narrative, considers the playfulness of a narrative integral not only to its meaning, but also to the function of literature as a whole in human cognition.

has the descriptive appellation of “of Óslandshlíð” is therefore to distinguish it from this more southerly Miklabær. Both farms are in Skagafjörður, but Þórður’s farm is on the northern end of the valley, near Hjaltadalur, whereas the other one is in the more populated central valley. It is highly improbable to imagine that a medieval audience member, living within a generation or two of the events of the Sturlungaöld battle, would not notice the overlap between the two farm names.

Note the mental gymnastics the audience is being asked to perform by the text of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. First they are enjoying hearing about the escapades of Þórður and laughing at, or admiring, his foster-son, the pure-of-heart Eiður. Then they hear about a farm called Miklabær, and instantly the mind conjures the place where the events of the civil war raged. The saga narrator does not allow the audience to dwell there however. Immediately, the audience is informed, “no, not that Miklabær. The other one, north up the valley” a farm that has an identical name and is similarly situated on the eastern side of the valley along a river hillside. And as the narrative unfolds, what happens at this Miklabær? Þórður gets healed. Þórður meets his future bride. A silly and disloyal person, in the form of Þórhall, gets his comeuppance, finally. Here, at this northerly Miklabær, the great saga hero Þórður lives out his days, building great halls that stand for hundreds of years.

A skilled sagateller in the late 13th or 14th century could well have utilized the real-world existence of these two farms in Skagafjörður in the construction of the narrative, and through the medium of the literary text, inverted the real world relationship between them. Miklabær of the Sturlunga battles is prominent both geographically—it lies in the middle of the valley—and historically. But the audience is being asked to forget about that Miklabær; it does not so much as get a single mention in the saga. The only indication that the narrator knows this other farm exists is that the saga defines Ólof’s Miklabær as being on Óslandshlíð, and in fact sometimes refers to Ólof’s farm not as Miklabær, but rather just as Óslandshlíð, further erasing the cognitive hold the “other” Miklabær has on the audience. The southern Miklabær, where hundreds of combatants from all over Iceland met in a fierce and decisive battle, was the Miklabær everyone in the audience was probably grateful to forget. While they listened to *Þórðar saga hreðu*, that Miklabær sank into oblivion, while the other Miklabær rose to importance.

Though Miklabær is the clearest example of the narrative’s invitation to the audience to conjure up but then quickly forget places associated with the civil war, there are indications of at least four other cases where a similar dynamic is taking place, literally. The quote at the outset of this chapter describes the moment when Þórður leaves Kálfstaðir—a site with clearly Christian overtones—into an ambush set by Özurr. That ambush takes place, as the text says, after Þórður “nam staðar nær Viðvík, þar sem heitir Garðshvammr, skammt frá bænum í Viðvík.” In case anyone in the audience should miss it, the text repeats twice that this encounter is taking place near Viðvík. This placename echoes with another placename involved in the Örlygsstaðir battle: Víðivellir. While not identical names as in the case above, there is a poetic resonance between them, which the audience would likely have noticed given the native Icelandic skaldic poetic rules. That poetic form depended on the alliteration of beginning consonants, internal rhymes of syllables as both full-rhymes—where the vowel and end consonant were the same—and as half-rhymes—where the vowel was not the same but the end consonant was. It is however the physical

similarity between these two locations that brings this likeness more to the fore: Örlyggstaðir battlefield is right next to the farm of Víðivellir, just as Þórður's encounter with Özurr is right next to the farm of Viðvík, a fact that the text takes pains to point out. Also, both Viðvík and Víðivellir are at the edge of a river, whereas the battlefields near them are up the hillside. They are also near Miklabær; Viðvík is just south of Miklabær á Óslandshlíð, whereas Víðivellir is just south of central Miklabær. It is therefore possible that the similarity of these places would have been noted in the minds of the audience just long enough to be dismissed, serving to elevate the northern Viðvík over its southern counterpart, Víðivellir.

Keeping in this vein then, let me note a few other placenames which a late 13th and 14th century audience may have found just associative enough to be disassociative—in other words to act as an erasure—of the civil war battles. All editors of *Þórðar saga hreðu* have noted with some frustration that all the manuscripts repeat the same “mistake” regarding the name of the farm of Özurr, the chieftain in Skagafjörður who relentlessly pursues Þórður. In chapter 6 of the saga, he is introduced as Özurr from Grund, but starting in chapter 8, inexplicably his farm is now called “Þverá.” The editors of the Fornrít edition, and Kristian Kálund, conjecture that Grund must be the farm today named Ýtra-Grund which is adjacent to the farm Þverá, suggesting that originally they maybe been part of a single farm (see footnote p. 191 of ÍF XIV). This does not entirely explain why all versions of the saga maintain this “confusion” over Özurr's farm name, suddenly switching from one to the other. I suggest that this is another example of the text of *Þórðar saga hreðu* obliquely referencing the events of the Sturlungaöld.

As was noted above in reference to the deadly battle of Haugnes, the name of the field was changed to Róðugrund as a memorial to the fallen. Today, the farm near the battlefield is simply called Grund. It is unclear when the descriptive “róðu” was dropped from the name; the pole in the field was replaced by a hut used for praying in the medieval period.¹⁶ But certainly either naming the field Róðugrund or abbreviating it to Grund would have motivated the renaming of a farm that may have earlier been called Grund to Þverá or Ýtra-grund. Thus the change in name of Özurr's farm in the text reminds readers of the real-world change in the name of both the field on Haugnes and of the farm of Grund. It is no mere scribal error.

Þverá and Grund also resonate in another way with the civil war events. Sighvatur, after taking over the goðorð of his son in Eyjafjörður, lived on a farm named Grund in Eyjafjörður, which was a long-standing and important chieftain's residence. The Grund of Skagafjörður, associated with Özurr in *Þórðar saga hreðu*, is not historically known as a major power center, and in fact Özurr himself is not known from other sources. Thus the farm name Grund associated with a chieftain may have first elicited in the minds of the medieval audience thoughts of Grund in Eyjafjörður. Also, one of the skirmishes of the civil war takes place at a field nearby the farm of Grund in Eyjafjörður, called the battle of Þverá in 1255. Of course, Þverá is a particularly ubiquitous name for a river, in that it basically means tributary; any river lacking a formal name that is a tributary tends to get named Þverá. Grund, which is cognate with English “ground”, is also not an uncommon placename. But in the context of the late 13th and 14th

¹⁶ See Chapter 5 below for further discussion.

century, by switching Özurr's farmname from Grund to Þverá, the text may well be inviting an association of Özurr with Sighvatur and other invaders of Skagafjörður.

These sorts of linguistic play, clever tricks of association and disassociation focused on placenames, must be kept in context of the lived experience of place for the users (producers and consumers) of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. Were this not a culture where the landscape was omnipresent, and where stories were embedded into almost every farmstead, such an idea would not be tenable. Were this not a culture accustomed to linguistic play in poetry, and a culture used to emotional restraint in prose, such a suggestion of “games with names” would be inappropriate. But *Þórðar saga hreðu* did develop in just such a milieu, and it found a way to maximize the placenames in the saga as an outlet for subtly processing the memories of the civil war. If we postulate that a saga circulated around northern Iceland about a heroic carpenter named Þórður during the 12th century, the events of the late 13th century would have given that saga new efficacy. Perhaps the location of some of Þórður's skirmishes with Özurr were recast to occur at particular places in the landscape, or the outcome of the skirmishes adjusted. The resulting narrative is one that displaces the real violence of the civil war with the heroic deeds of Þórður hreða, in an effort at directed forgetting.

Fictional places

Finally, to return to something I briefly mentioned at the outset, I do not believe every placename mentioned in *Þórðar saga hreðu* is by necessity a real place with known physical correspondence. There is one scene of the saga that takes place at a location that seems in fact to have no physical correspondence in Skagafjörður, Þórður's final show down with Özurr at Sviðgrímshólar. Although there are some, as will be discussed in chapter 5 below, who feel that it is possible to identify the landscape feature to which this placename originally referred, it remains the only placename in the saga whose fitness with the real landscape of Skagafjörður has been questioned. Thus it can serve as basis upon which to discuss how fictional places might participate in memory formation. Given my interest throughout this study on the real-world knowledge of the recipient audience members, and what their knowledge would bring to the meaning and interpretation of the saga, it should be clear that I believe if this was a fictional place invented by the sageteller, the audience would have recognized it as such. Because the saga is deeply emplaced in its real world milieu, any deviance from that reality would have been apparent to the local community experiencing the saga. Thus allowing room for fictional places within the narrative does not divorce the text from its material matrix. Instead, it would entirely depend upon it.

As Ralph O'Connor has recently summarized (2005), fictionality was not readily accepted in the medieval period. There was a moral ambiguity inherent in it that concerned church leaders—since it was seen as a form of lying—and more generally, suggesting historical narratives were false could be radically destabilizing in a variety of contexts. I therefore do not want to casually mention the possibility of a fictional place in *Þórðar saga hreðu*, especially if I am claiming that the audience would have understood it as fictional. However, the mention of a

fictional place could have served as a signal to the audience¹⁷ that what was to follow was a creative enhancement offered by a storyteller. In other words, by mentioning first a fictional place, the sagateller may have opened up a rhetorical narrative space in which fictional embellishment was allowed. Within this fictional place, the audience may have registered the events described as truthlike but not truthful.

In the case of the nominee for a fictional place in *Þórðar saga hreðu*—Sviðgrímshólar—such a hypothesis works well. This placename provides the locale for one of the most dramatic and vivid scenes in *Þórðar saga hreðu*, where Þórður’s reputation as a warrior is solidified. The sagateller accentuates Þórður’s tendency to goad his opponents; inciting Özurr and his men to come after him, Þórður declares, “skulum vit ok báðir eigi af þessum fund með fjörvi burt komast” (ÍF XIV, p. 210) [The both of us shall not be leaving this encounter alive]. Then when he is surrounded by six men, heroically warding each one off, he calls out to Özurr, “Illa sækist yðr sex . . . hitt ráð at sækja at ok hefna Orms, frænda þíns, ok allra þeira svaðilferða, er þú hefir fyrir mér farit” (ibid.). [Your six men attack poorly. . . The other option is for you now to attack and avenge the death of Ormur, your nephew, and all those muddy failed attempts on my life which you have undertaken.] This witty dialogue, combined with several improbably feats in the scene including skiing down a cliff face on a spear shaft suggest a certain air of fictionality to the scene. If the battle scene was knowingly set in a fictional place, this may have signaled to the audience that what was to follow was something Þórður could have done, rather than something he necessarily did, which would be in keeping with medieval practice (Morse 1991).

Could this arguably fictional scene, however, be not only a chance for the sagateller to display his virtuosity, but also an opportunity for communal memory making? To answer this, I want to look closely at the way the place itself as a landscape feature is described, and how it is used in this scene.¹⁸ The audience’s attention is first brought to the specifics of the lay of the land by the conversations between Þórður and Eyvindur as they discuss where best to defend themselves, including such details as the hillside being covered in hard snow. Such descriptions of the lay of the land are very rare in the saga, and I would say are included here because the sagateller knows the audience is not familiar with the area since the area does not exist. It is a nod to the fictionality of the scene that these descriptions are included. But what is also interesting to me is the degree to which the description of the landscape corresponds to the description of the battle that takes place there. During the battle scene, the audience’s attention is brought onto particular body parts, from Þórður’s feet to the impact of the wounds. In fact there is a sense in which the bodies and the landscape are interchangeable, each one having an array of denominators for its constituting parts, and each one more than the sum of its parts. That the nomenclature for certain landscape features and body parts can overlay makes this correspondence even more apparent: Þórður and his companion “skulum leita hrossanna upp í hálsinn” (ÍF XIV, p. 209) [will go look for the horses in the neck of the valley] and then during the battle “högg kom á hálsinn” (ÍF XIV, p. 210) [a blow landed on the neck]. The movement of Þórður and his companion across the landscape is also reminiscent of the movement of the sword across Özurr’s body. Þórður and his companion travel from the neck of the valley, across

¹⁷ *Apologia* (Kalinke 2005, p. 316-318) is a more obvious case of signaling to the audience potential fictionality, but here I am suggesting a material-context dependent means to do so.

¹⁸ A long excerpt from this scene is quoted at the outset of Chapter 5 below.

the cliff face, down to the hólár at the bottom, just as Þórður “hjó ... til Ozurar, ok kom þat högg undir ina vinstri höndina ok renndi niðr með hryggnum, svá at hann leysti frá ok rifin; hljóp sverðit þar á hol; fell hann þegar dauðr niðr” (ibid.). [lunged at Özurr and that blow landed under his (uplifted) left arm and ran down to the spine so that it came loose and was torn off. Then the sword slipped into the cavity and Özurr fell down dead]. In light of the linguistic play discussed above, the similarity between hóla (hills) and hol (cavity), the places where Þórður’s spear and sword respectively ended their journey, may also be significant. Þórður’s sword in fact “hljóp” [ran] there.

It seems that this fictional place is not a place at all, but a body, and more precisely a body that gets dissected. In the context of the civil war battles discussed above, we might reverse this and say it is not a body that is being wounded, but rather a landscape that has been wounded that is represented in this scene. This supposition is supported by the fact that the text takes pains to point out that this is a landscape feature named after a horse, Sviðgrímur. This horse is first introduced into the saga as a gift to Þórður in chapter eight of the saga, just before the skirmish at Viðvík is described, but because this information bears no import for the immediate events of that chapter, it stands out as an odd detail. It is not until the middle of the next chapter, after another skirmish with Özurr takes place—the one at Flatatunga described above—that we finally discover why the saga has introduced the horse Sviðgrímur. Þórður gets ambushed when he decides he wants to go see this horse, who is at his favorite grazing spot, called Sviðgrímshólar in his honor.

Landscape features named after horses are not unknown in Iceland or in the sagas; Skagafjörður in fact has two well-known examples of such placenames, both of which were intimately involved in the violent collapse of the commonwealth. Flugumýri, the site of the attempted burning alive of Gizurr in 1253—which is described with much drama and pathos in *Íslendingasaga*—is, according to *Landnámabók*, named after a mare. Fluga came from Norway with the first landnámsman in the area, and she was a wonderful horse, smart and fast and brave. Unfortunately, one day her owner went to try to ride her, but she did not come when she called him. Instead he found her drowning in the marshlands where Heráðsvötn empties into Skagafjörður; he named that field Flugumýri in the mare’s memory. The scene of another skirmish shortly thereafter, at Geldingaholt in 1255, where Gizurr was also attacked, is similarly named after a horse; its name means “The hillocks of the gelding”.

That this fictionalized scene, with its evocative use of landscape descriptions, is similarly set at a place named after a horse could suggest it is another oblique reference to the events of the civil war. If so, it would be an interesting example of directed forgetting, inasmuch as it depends not just on redirecting the attention of the audience, but also encourages the audience to step into a fictional world. Whether or not fictionality and forgetting are compatible cognitive actions is outside of the scope of the present discussion, but it seems a possibility worth considering. I would however caution that I only mean to suggest the sagateller added a fictional place, and thereby a fictional scene, into the saga, which would not fictionalize the narrative as a whole precisely because the audience’s real world knowledge would allow them to understand the scene as an embellishment.

Conclusion

Throughout my analysis of the full version of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, I have employed a method that works on the assumption that places speak independently, apart from saga texts. Although the saga narrative attaches narrative to place, it does not generate the only narrative associated with a place. Many other cultural, historical, and political references can also come to be embedded in places. For a sagateller, this could present a challenge, in that it introduces free associations that may undermine his thematic and artistic endeavor. But the examples above suggest a strategy was in place to embrace this potential threat to the saga narrative, and instead turn it to an advantage. This is particularly clear in the case of the theme of regionalism and Christianity, where the placenames came to carry important themes in the saga that likely added depth and meaning to the narrative for the intended audience. The placename associations were therefore welcome.

In the example of the Sturlungaöld memories, the efforts of the text at directed forgetting of certain places associated with the civil war suggests a rather sophisticated, self-conscious, and perhaps radical re-imagining of this placename-association strategy. Instead of working with the associations placenames bring into the narrative, the cultural memory of the collapse of the Commonwealth was dealt with by disassociation. It requires a certain amount of scholarly empathy to imagine why a sagateller would be motivated to undertake such an effort. The civil war battles were an event (in the sense of Bolander 2010) that must have changed how this saga was presented and interpreted. So although the death of so many men from the local area could be dismissed as a personal sorrow, it is also of literary concern. *Þórðar saga hreðu*'s apparent role as a long-standing mediator of identity for the local community of Northern Iceland would have made it a fertile ground for such an endeavor. And if we envision a sagateller in the local area, concerned with the wellbeing of his fellow inhabitants, the text's efforts to process the trauma that came from having the Sturlungaöld battles right inside this local community become humane and natural. Those events were marked in the very landscape that the audience of this saga encountered on a daily basis, and they would have served as continual reminders, and a continual destabilizing factor to the existing identity of the area. The text of *Þórðar saga hreðu* preserved in the full version seems acutely aware of the direct, unmediated relationship between place and memory, but is trying to insert its literary narrative into that relationship, thereby creating disjuncture, and new opportunities for remembering and forgetting. The textual references to acts of healing by characters in the narrative could be seen as reflective of the text's effort outside the narrative: it is trying to heal the wounds of the landscape.

This kind of directed forgetting served a vital function in 13th and 14th century Iceland. Were the people of Skagafjörður not able to forget the horrific events of the Sturlungaöld battles, and instead embrace their identity as Christians, they may well have rallied for another uprising against the consolidated powers of the Norwegian king's appointed men. The cycle of revenge and retribution would have been unbroken and the people of Skagafjörður would not have been able to move forward. By ignoring the part of the landscape associated with those battles, and offering up an older, authentic core as the focal point, the saga allowed the listeners an opportunity to reconstitute their understanding of place. So although the disparity between the happy ending of *Þórðar saga hreðu* and the actual tragedy of the Sturlungaöld battles could

perhaps be called escapist, it is escapist with a very important and heartfelt agenda. *Þórðar saga hreðu* is not a happy, uplifting tale because its author was a late 14th century literary dilettante, but because the people of Skagafjörður in the late 13th century needed such a tale. The intervention of a fictional narrative into the real world of Skagafjörður seems to have facilitated the creation, or maintenance, of a more forgiving, Christian identity.

In the next chapter, I will examine some recent events in Skagafjörður that suggest a Christian identity has remained a strong component of local identity into the present. Although *Þórðar saga hreðu* was not the only mechanism by which this was achieved—Hólar Cathedral in and of itself makes a powerful statement in the landscape—it appears it was, and continues to be, part and parcel of it.

CHAPTER 5:

SIGNS BY THE WAYSIDE

“Þat var einn morgun fyrir jól, at Þórður vildi fara at sjá hest sinn, Sviðgrím. Hann stóð med fjórum hrossum. Þórhallr bað Þórð bíða ok fara þrimr nóttum síðar, “því at ek vilda áðr færa hey mín ór stakkgörðum.” Þórður bað hann að ráða, “en ekki kemr mér á óvart, at vér munum mönnum eiga at mæta.” Þórhallr kvað þá eiga uppgefna, þótt nökkurr liðsmunr sé. Þórður brosti at orðum hans ok mælti, “Svá mun vera, ef þú stendr á aðra hönd mér” . . . Þenna sama morgun ríða þeir Þórður heiman ok Eyvindr ok Þórhallr. Þórður bað Eyvind hafa vápnr sín, kvað því ekki ofaukit. Hann gerði svá. Þeir ríða út í Sviðgrímshóla. Þá mælti Þórður, “Þat vil ek, Þórhallr, at þú sér hér eptir, en vit Eyvindr skulum leita hrossanna upp í hálsinn.” Þórhallr bað hann ráða. Þeir gengu upp í hliðina. Snjór var í hliðinni ok harðfenni víða. Özurr kemr at garðinum ok þeir tólf saman ok slá hring um Þórhall ok brugðu vápnum sínum ok báðu mannfýluna segja til Þórðar. Þórhallr varð ógurliga hræddr ok heytist niðr undir garðinn ok kvað Þórð genginn upp í hliðina við annan mann. Özurr mælti, “Illt er at eiga þræl at einkavin,” ok laust hann öxarhamarshögg, svá at hann lá í svíma. Síðan runnu þeir upp í hliðina. Þá mælti Þórður við Eyvind, “Menn koma neðan í hliðina, ok kenni ek þá gerla; þar er Özurr kominn ok vill enn hafa minn fund. Nú skulu vit við leitast at komast á Skeggjahamar ok þaðan í Sviðgrímshóla, þar er vígi gott.” Eyvindr svara, “Vel megu vit komast á hamarinn.” Þeir hlaupa nú á hamarinn. Í því koma þeir Özurr at. Þórður gengr á framanverðan hamarinn. Skafl var lagðr af hamrinum niðr á jöfnu ok ákafliga brattr; var þar in mesta mannhætta ofan at fara. Síðan settu þeir spjótinn í milli fóta sér ok ríðu svá ofan af hamrinum allt á jöfnu; komust þeir nú á Sviðgrímshóla” (ÍF XIV, pp. 208-209).

[One morning, shortly before Christmas, Þórður wanted to go see his horse, Sviðgrím. He stood with four mares. Þórhall asked Þórður to wait and go three days later, “because I would like first to get my hay out of the hay enclosure.” Þórður said they would do as he wished, “although it would not surprise me if we would be expected by some men.” Þórhall declared that they would have to give up, even if the numbers favored them. Þórður smiled at his words and said, “That would surely be the case, if you were standing at my side.” . . . That same morning Þórður and Eyvindur and Þórhallur headed out. Þórður told Eyvindur to be armed, saying it would not be overdone. He did so. They road out to Sviðgrímshól. Then Þórður said, “I would like it, Þórhallur, that you remain here below, while Eyvindur and I go look for the horses up the neck of the valley.” Þórhallur agreed. They went up the hillside. Snow was on the hillside that was hardfrozen in many places. Özurr arrived at the hay enclosure with twelve men and formed a ring around Þórhallur and drew their weapons and told the fool to give up Þórður’s location. Þórhallur was terribly afraid and cowered against the

fence and told them that Þórður had headed up the hillside with one other man. Özurr spoke, “It is bad to have a slave as a friend” and smacked him on the head with the backside of his axe, so that he passed out. Then they dashed up the hillside. Þórður said to Eyvindur, “Men are coming up the hill and I certainly know who they are: it is Özurr coming to have a fight with me. Now we two must try to get to Skeggjahamar and from there to Sviðgrímshól, where there is a defensible position.” Eyvindur spoke, “We can certainly reach the cliff.” They ran now towards the cliff. At that moment Özurr approached them. Þórður went to the edge of the cliff. Snow laid deep on the cliff all the way to the bottom and it was very steep; it was terribly dangerous to traverse. So they put their spear in between their legs and slid in this way down the cliff face all the way to the bottom, arriving at Sviðgrímshól.]

In the preceeding chapters, *Þórður saga hreðu*'s engagements with the material world have been examined first through the lens of modern scholars (Chapters 1 and 2) and then through that of mediaeval inhabitants of Northern Iceland (Chapters 3 and 4). In this chapter, the primary interpreting human will be the modern inhabitants of the area, who seem to cluster into two groups: those focused on maintaining a local micro-identity and those working to bring the landscape of Skagafjörður into national dialogue. Each groups' focus on a particular narrative has resulted in particular objects being used to mark the landscape of Skagafjörður. On the one hand, tourism officials interested in promoting the Sturlungaöld history in the area have erected plaques around the valley and near archaeological sites. On the other hand, independent citizens have erected memorials focused on the Christian history in the area, and have reinvested in the narrative of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. These signs in the landscape are the materiality intersecting with the narrative and the interpreting humans in this chapter's meaning-matrix triad.

By moving into the present day, this chapter serves somewhat as an epilogue. It re-engages many of the issues discussed in earlier chapters. The scholarly assessment of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, discussed in Chapter 1, comes into play in terms of how that text is used by modern day inhabitants of Skagafjörður in negotiation of their identity. And as in Chapter 2, a variety of objects will be under consideration: plaques, memorials, archaeological remains, and art installations.

All of these objects, however, are embedded in the landscape, suggesting that the relationship to landscape explored in Chapter 3 has fundamentally changed in the modern period; the landscape is itself no longer a mnemonic, it must be marked by text and object to serve a memory function. Two different types of installations have been added to the landscape of Skagafjörður. One category comprises artworks made of stone and metal, whose purpose seems to be primarily evocative and emotional. The other category depends rather on a logical scientific rhetoric: large wooden placards containing text and images, a sort of enlarged page from a book turned into substantial material object. This second category includes many of the proofs of modern archaeology—maps,

aerial photographs, pictures of artifacts—such that the information conveyed there is presumably considered true. Both of these types of installations disrupt the landscapes unmediated relationship to narrative, although the stone and metal memorials present as an outgrowth of the landscape.¹ The placards are more intrusive: as freestanding text, they make stories into objects. The placard as object-story then becomes the material object communicating to the interpreting human, rather than the landscape itself. That these are also a gesture intended for consumption by tourists makes its intrusion all the more evident. Certainly much of the efforts at tourist development are supported by the state, and one could say the inhabitants of Skagafjörður are trying to resist this by erecting their own monuments.

However, despite changes in the status of the text, the objects, and the landscape, they all remain intricately involved in negotiating and renegotiating many of the same concerns that were explored in Chapter 4. Identities are still being constructed vis-à-vis narratives attached to the landscape, and there are still attempts to control what narrative that is. It is also interesting that the marking of the landscape that began in the 1980s and is continuing today has reinvigorated discussions of the place of *Þórðar saga hreðu* in the material world of Skagafjörður.

A Landscape Othered

By moving into the present time, some observations can be made about how narrative, objects, landscapes, and human beings are making hybrid² meanings today in ways that are different than in the past. Throughout much of this dissertation, a contrast has been drawn between modern ways of interacting with the material world, and the way of interacting with the world apparently displayed in *Þórðar saga hreðu* and presumably characteristic of the Viking Age and medieval northern European world. Whether one seeks to place the objectification of the physical world onto the shoulders of Enlightenment concepts like the mind-body dichotomy, as Merleau-Ponty does, or onto the shoulders of capitalist consumption, as Marxists³ would do, the result is generally the same. Even in Iceland—where Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution both arrived

¹ See Sanders 2009 for a discussion of other ways art and archaeology can mediate with landscape in the modern period.

² For the use of the term hybrid here, see Whatmore 2002.

³ Capitalism has clearly introduced a more objective, commodified, competitive relationship between human beings and their material world. It is easy to adopt a critical Marxist view of this process, and even extend Marxist theory to other parts of my discussion of *Þórðar saga hreðu*: the process that I termed “directed forgetting” in Chapter 4, under the rubric of Cultural Memory theory, could just as easily be called literary masking of material reality under a Marxist rubric. Of course, as Slaughter (1980) pointed out, “It is a caricature of Marxism to reduce literature to just an ideological mechanism through which the ruling class establishes its hegemony” (p. 206). Nevertheless, given that the primary manuscript of the complete version was likely written in a monastery or by a priest, and given the power of the Catholic Church in Iceland until 1551, and the Lutheran Church thereafter, the Christian theme in the saga could be defined as hegemonic. Once the terms of Marxism are adopted, it becomes hard not to be judgmental and reactionary to the process by which an existing narrative was recast to new ends, especially as it seems to have specifically bolstered the “Peace of God” movement.

late and were rather weakly expressed—it seems there has been a shift in how the communicative agency of the material world is understood.

I do not mean to suggest that the change in relationship to objects, landscape, and place that mark modernity off from the medieval period is so fundamental as to be absolute (Latour 1993). But positivism, nationalism, and tourism have elevated certain narratives over others, a process that has, in particular, diminished the status of *Þórðar saga hreðu* as a viable local identity-making narrative. Two developments converged in Iceland beginning in the mid-19th century to spur this transformation. The first was the development of a more professional and critical archaeological and historical practice in Iceland, a topic that I discussed at length in Chapter 2 above. This process created a division between the narratives of the sagas, and the archaeo-historical narrative. The second was the development of a tourism industry in Iceland, which came into full force in the 1970s and continues to motivate Icelanders to package and frame their landscape in a way that is consumable by outsiders.

During the 20th century—especially in the late 20th century and continuing into the present day—archaeology has become an incredibly powerful means of attaching meaning to place in Western society.⁴ The earliest archaeological investigations in Iceland were not a complete break from traditional modes of understanding the landscape; they were carried out as a sort of heritage survey, rather than site excavations (i.e., Brynjólfur Jónsson 1894). But even as early as August of 1888, when Sigurður Vigfússon traveled through Skagafjörður, a preference for objects as signifying proof seems to be emerging, as discussed in Chapter 2 above. Vigfússon’s report is interesting in that it contains all three of the competing narratives that seem to be defining Skagafjörður: a discussion of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, a survey of the civil war battle sites, and a catalogue of religious objects from Hólar. As recounted in *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélag #7*, he demarcates *Þórður saga hreðu* as less historically relevant, if not perhaps less reliable, by discussing features and objects that might be related to that saga in his preface. His report then turns to measurements of turf walls visible on the landscape, with sections devoted to each of the civil war battle fields—Örlygsstaðir, Flugumýri, and Haugsnes—and to the Landnám farm of Hjalti (after whom Hjaltadalur is named). His positive assessment of the accuracy of the civil war sites in comparison to the descriptions in the Sturlunga Sagas (*Íslendingasaga* and *Þórður saga kakala* in particular), coupled with his more skeptical use of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, seems to have influenced modern-day efforts in Skagafjörður to understand its history. As discussed in Chapter 2, this was part of an overall process in Icelandic archaeology that created a new model and mode for investigating the past, one that systematically disenfranchised the sagas from the creation of an official historical narrative.

⁴ Archaeology can and sometimes has supplanted indigenous ways of understanding the past, especially when the archaeologists come from outside the community. See for instance *Kennewick Man* (Burke et al. eds, 2008).

The Growth of the Tourism Industry

The concept of an objectified landscape was also forwarded by foreigners who came to Iceland to pursue positivistic scientific endeavors; they became in essence the forerunners of the modern-day tourist.⁵ For instance, Kristian Kålund journeyed around Iceland in the mid 19th century⁶ checking on the degree to which the narratives in the Sagas of Icelanders corresponded to the actual geography of Iceland. He utilized an informant system, asking local inhabitants about the location of many sites named in the sagas. In some cases, they would tell him about sites associated with saga characters not found in the saga itself, which suggested to Kålund an active oral traditional culture in operation. Kålund's trip was part of an antiquarian interest in Icelandic history and the sagas by foreigners—mostly Scandinavians, Germans, and Brits—that stretches back to at least the late 17th century (Wawn 2000, see also Wawn 1987). This interest was not confined only to those with a professional reason for going to Iceland—such as Alexander Calder, who painted several famous paintings of historic sites in Iceland—but also wealthy 19th-century foreigners who simply wanted an exotic and interesting journey abroad.

Although some early travelers visited the “sagasteads of Iceland”, the journey of Lord Dufferin was more the norm (1856). He traveled by horseback from Reykjavík towards Lake Þingvellir, and after stopping at the historic site of the old Icelandic parliament meeting grounds, proceeded further inland, into Haukadalur, where Geysir is located, and then onto Gullfoss waterfall. Indeed, although Kålund's journey is more noted and memorable for scholars in the field of saga studies, it was the journey of lay people like Lord Dufferin—who then went home and wrote a popular account of his travels—that generated public interest in Iceland. Dufferin was particularly fascinated by the geography of Iceland, and wrote extensively about Geysir and other geological anomalies. He was also interested in the contemporary culture of 19th-century Iceland; on the other hand, the sagas were not of all that much interest to the scientifically-minded Lord Dufferin. It is remarkable the degree to which his framing of Iceland continues to influence the modern tourism industry.

Since the 1970s, tourism to the island has grown exponentially, providing jobs and income for a larger and larger sector of the economy; about half a million people every summer visit Iceland, and that number is only expected to grow. Almost every single one of these tourists to Iceland today replicates Lord Dufferin's exact route: buses leave Reykjavík several times a day bound for Þingvellir and then continuing on to Geysir and Gullfoss before returning back to the capital—a tour referred to as the “Golden Circle”. None of the stops on the Golden Circle is tied to saga narratives or personages. Although

⁵ Icelanders traveling within Iceland as domestic tourists is also a fairly recent phenomenon, spurred by the construction of the Ring Road in the 1970s. They are also targeted in the tourist development efforts around the island. I am however focusing on foreign tourists here because of the impact their opinions seems to have on identity politics, as discussed in Sverrick Jakobsson, ed., 2009.

⁶ Kålund's publication following this trip was recently republished in Icelandic as Kålund 1986. Its original Danish title, published in two volumes between 1879 and 1882, translates as “A Historic-Geographic Description of Iceland.”

certainly the tour guides note Þingvellir's historic role as the national assembly site, this is rather an aside to its unique geology (Þingvellir sits astride the North Atlantic rifts and the tectonic dynamics of this are clearly visible in the landscape). Indeed, the tourism industry in Iceland primarily focuses on the natural wonders of Iceland: the glaciers, the geysers, the volcanoes, and the waterfalls. These are the things that photograph well, these are the things that are easily advertised to potential travelers as the lure—or product if you will—that they would enjoy should they come to Iceland.⁷

Once the tourism industry became a ubiquitous force in the 1980s, the number of visitors rose steadily, until there were more visitors to the island than permanent inhabitants.⁸ Most Icelanders have therefore had the experience of trying to view oneself through the lens of an outsider. Certainly this outside attention influenced how Icelanders thought of themselves and their patrimony (see Sverrir Jakobsson 2009). In fact, it is a standard joke in Iceland today—even parodied on T-shirts—that Icelanders are constantly asking visitors to Iceland, “How do you like Iceland?”. While perhaps innocuous and friendly at a surface level, it also underlines the extent to which Icelanders are concerned that their understanding of their culture, landscape, and history are congruent with international norms.⁹ This concern presents a particular challenge: the modern tourist rhetoric about raw nature is directly at odds with the much longer standing tradition of viewing the landscape as interesting because it is imbued with compelling narratives.

Since at least the late 1990s, led perhaps by the example in Hvalsöllum of the Saga Centre (Ward and Bollason 2002), communities all over Iceland have sought ways to make the saga narratives consumable by the many tourists who come to Iceland. Many communities in rural areas and small fishing villages had suffered economically due to several historic changes, and turned to the tourism industry as a way to bolster their local economy. In addition to summer festivals and shops offering hand-made local goods, the saga narratives presented as a viable attraction. While it is likely this move was partially inspired by the journeys of antiquarians like Kálund—who clearly found the saga landscapes very interesting—its seems to also be a non-critical use of the native perspective rather than a willful reassertion of these ethnographic landscapes as essentially valuable. If the local population finds these stories interesting, it is not unnatural to think visitors would as well. But because most modern, foreign tourists do not have that sort of narrative relationship to landscape, local communities have had to experiment with different ways to package the saga narratives. Unlike attempts to modernize interest in the sagas for the younger generation of Icelanders—children books,

⁷ I learned about the tourism industry in Iceland while consulting for Víkingaheimar Museum in Reykjanesbær in Iceland between 2006-2010. I also participated in meetings of the Saga Trails Association, and thank Rögnvaldur Guðmundsson for including me.

⁸ In 2010, a half-million tourists visited Iceland. The base population is approx. 325,000 people.

⁹ In a more critical mode, one might even adopt the modernist rhetoric that the growing extent to which Icelanders became aware that they were being observed and studied would have created a sort of Lacanian crisis of identity, if one considers the tourist gaze (Urry 2002) as not just empowering for the beholder, but mirroring for the beheld.

movies, plays, and several recent novels inspired by the sagas—one way the sagas have been made accessible to tourists is through an every-growing army of signs around the landscape. This means chunks of narrative taken from the sagas are accessed specifically at the place in which the saga narratives are set. Icelanders do not seem to find this place-dependent presentation of narrative at all unusual; in fact, the book *Íslenska vegahandbókin* (1973), which has been updated regularly since the 1970s, has a page for every section of road in Iceland along with a selection of interesting events and narratives that took place in the areas around that section of road. One could therefore say that the placards, markers, statutes, and artworks that have been put up all around the Icelandic countryside allow foreigners some sense of this rich heritage of narratives embedded in the landscape.¹⁰ But because these markers all try to make the invisible, intangible cultural heritage of Iceland visible and tangible, they also represent a change in the traditional Icelandic way of integrating narrative into landscape; this change was brought on by the growth of the tourism industry.

Not all of these efforts have succeeded or are succeeding. It seems to depend not only on presenting an objectified sense of landscape and a commodified sense of the past, but also on the status of the saga in question as marketable. Those that have been successfully utilized by enterprises in their respective local regions as a tourist draw—*Njáls saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Eiríks saga rauða*.¹¹—all enjoy considerable international acclaim, and in the case of *Eiríks saga rauða*, even renewed historical respect (Fitzhugh and Ward 2000). These sagas were therefore able to persist despite the scholarly dismissal of the historic value of sagas generally.

Such is not the situation for *Þórðar saga hreðu*. In Chapter 1 above I discussed the (rather unfair) judgment against *Þórður saga hreðu* by the literary masters of Icelandic saga scholarship. Because this judgment came very early on, it also influenced the translation of the saga to other languages; it was translated as a romance, not as a historic national Icelandic epic. Thus *Þórður saga hreðu* never became the subject of saga pilgrimages for learned foreigners, the way *Njáls saga* did, for instance. Though this did not decrease local interest in the saga, judging from its lively rímur tradition, it does seem to have made the saga a much less likely subject for touristic promotion in the area. This is arguably because the scholarly demotion of *Þórður saga hreðu* to the status of “late derivative saga,” which clearly made the archaeologist Sigurður Vigfússon hesitant to rely on the saga, has inadvertently problematized its overall relationship to the landscape, as will be further discussed below.

¹⁰ This extends beyond saga narratives. The beginning of Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Center of the World* is set in Snæfellsnes Iceland, and the locals have put up a sign in front of one of the caves in the area, officially marking it as “the cave” where Jules Verne’s character’s descended into hell.

¹¹ The Saga Centre in Hvollsvölur is based around *Njáls saga*, Viking Days in Miðfjörður is based around *Grettis saga*, and the recreated Viking longhall at Eirík the Red’s farm is populated by historic re-enactors for several weeks every summer. *Laxdæla saga* is also being used by hotels in the Breiðafjörður area for advertising purposes. See www.sagatrails.is for a complete listing of historically-themed tourist sites in Iceland.

Memorializing the Landscape of Skagafjörður

In the context of these recent trends, the narratives that have been privileged in Skagafjörður by being transformed into material representations begin to make more sense. One of the first installations into the landscape of Skagafjörður was a copy of a statue made in 1939 by one of Iceland's most respected sculptors, Ásmundur Sveinsson. It was installed inside the churchyard of the 18th century turf farmhouse at Glaumbær, which was turned into a folkmuseum for Skagafjörður in 1952. The subject of the statue is Guðríður Þorbjarnadóttir, who is known from the Vinland sagas. According to the *Grænlandingasaga* version of the Vinland sagas, Guðríður moved to Glaumbær from Greenland after she and her husband had explored North America. Indeed the design of the statue—it shows a woman standing on the prow of a ship—evokes her journeys. However, the title of the work—*Fyrsta hvíta móðirin í Ameríku* [The first white mother in America]—and the inclusion in the sculpture of the figure of a young child, standing naked on his mother's shoulder, is the artist's attempt to focus the attention instead on her role as a mother.¹² Finally, the placement of the statue inside the churchyard evokes yet a third aspect of her life: upon her return to Iceland, she became an abbess, and her son is said to have built a church at Glaumbær in her honor while she was on pilgrimage to Rome.¹³ Thus although tourists may connect to Guðríður as a female explorer in North America 500 years before Columbus, the placement of her statue in the landscape allows an alternative narrative to be invoked, one involving Christianity.

Another Christian-themed installation in the landscape is located on the farm of Ás, although this one is far less visited since it is well off the main road, off a dirt side-road (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Christian marker at the farm of Ás.

It was raised in the year 2000, to commemorate the 1000-year anniversary of the coming of Christianity to Iceland. This beautiful pink limestone edifice was erected here, a bronze plaque informs the visitor (in Icelandic), because the first church in Iceland was built on this farm according to *Kristni saga*.¹⁴ Its etched surface and upright

¹² See Ingibjörg Þórisdóttir's 2009 M. A. Thesis from Bifrost University, Iceland, for a discussion of the politics around installing another copy of this statue at Laugabrekkur, the farm on Snæfellsnes where Guðríður is said to have grown up.

¹³ A replica of this statue has recently been installed at the Vatican.

position in the landscape serves today in a similar way to what I am arguing *Þórðar saga hreðu* did: it reinforces the link between this farm and Christianity. So whereas the medieval audience of the saga would have to remember the Christian association of the farm to make sense of the saga narrative, today the memory practice tied to landscape requires a physical marker as aid, in this case a stone artwork.

A third Christian-themed monument in Skagafjörður, at the farm of Víðivellir, is especially interesting for the way in which both its placement and subject matter



Fig. 7: Three Brother Monument.

underscore the contested nature of modern efforts to define the landscape of Skagafjörður. The monument is compelling visually: three long black stone pillars rise up from a light brown stone pedestal and join midair above a large spherical boulder (Fig. 7). The three pillars represent three brothers, all of whom were upstanding members of the community in the mid-19th century: the eldest was in fact Bishop of Iceland. In that sense, the placement of this monument seems

natural enough—all three brothers lived on the farm of Víðivellir. However, the motivation behind the descendants of these three brothers, the youngest of whom died in 1896, deciding to erect this impressive monument in the year 1988 becomes a bit more suspect when one notes that in the same year, another monument was erected very nearby.

Directly across from Víðivellir farm, several score meters from the road, is the Örlygsstaðir battlefield. In 1988, a modest marker was placed at the outer-edge of the turf defensive structure, still somewhat visible in the landscape, that Sighvatur Sturlason had erected before being killed by Kolbeinn the Younger of Skagafjörður. The monument itself consists of an assemblage of small stones piled into a rectangle shape with an etched metal plate fastened to its top (Fig. 8). The etching is a reproduction of a map published in 1988 as part of a popular Icelandic edition of the complete three volumes of the Contemporary Sagas, which includes the two sagas that recount the battles of the Sturlungaöld in Skagafjörður, *Íslendingasaga* and *Þórðar saga kalaka*. The etching is of

¹⁴ It is interesting that this was erected despite the fact that archaeological investigations of this site (Orri Vésteinsson 2000) questioned this chronology. The series of churches found at the site date to the 12th century.

the defensive structure that Sighvatur Sturlason erected at the Örlygsstaðir battlefield in preparation for the arrival of Gizurr and Kolbeinn's troops. One doubts if this marker was meant for tourist consumption, inasmuch as the map is in Icelandic.

The Three Brothers memorial also was probably not intended for tourists so much as locals, although its dramatic design, prominent placement along the road, and inviting parking lot insures it gets more visitation than the Örlygsstaðir battlefield (at least on the five occasions I have been there). It is extremely tempting to suggest that the descendants of these three upstanding Christian brothers purposely choose to erect this monument in the exact same year that the Örlygsstaðir marker was put on the field directly opposite to Víðivellir. By erecting this monument, a positive family narrative of the farm becomes the materially realized one, even though in point of fact Víðivellir features in *Íslendingasaga* as the location where Sighvatur stayed before the battle, and had his prophetic dream. A few meters up the road from Víðivellir is the farm of Miklabær; this is where Sturla and his son, along with several other chieftains on the Sturlunga side, were dragged out of the church where they were seeking asylum and killed. Today, there is no signage at all on this farm to indicate that it was involved in the events of the 13th century, in favor of a more modern, and more Christian, one. Its erection may indicate there was a hesitancy on the part of the people of Skagafjörður to memorialize the Sturlungaöld part of their past.

However, by the late 1990s, things seemed to have changed in regard to how the people of Skagafjörður, or at least the regional tourist association, chose to depict their landscape. The story of a long Christian heritage in the area was probably not seen as particularly alluring to tourists, and given the negative assessment of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, the tourist board of Skagafjörður turned to the more cumbersome Sturlungasögur for their tourist-friendly saga heritage. Although Úlfur Bragason has recently argued for their literary merit (2010), these sagas, written as they were shortly after the events they describe, are densely packed with many details that most readers find bewildering.

Moreover, the events of the Sturlungaöld have not traditionally been highlighted in Iceland's national narrative, inasmuch as they represent a rather dark chapter in the nation's history. Snorri Sturluson is celebrated as an author of works dealing with the settlement and Viking mythology, while his role in the political machinations of the 13th



Fig. 8: Marker at Örlygsstaðir

century are relegated to a footnote. There is no museum exhibition anywhere in Iceland focusing on this period, not even at the National museum, and no annual national commemoration of dates associated with any of the Sturlungaöld events, even though those events directly resulted in Iceland becoming part of the Norwegian kingdom.

Thus the erection of wooden placards at Haugnes, Örlygsstaðir, and Flugumýri, which may seem like innocuous information, represent the most comprehensive public treatment of the Sturlunga period anywhere in Iceland. It is in this context that the signs take on an additional rhetorical flair, one that makes them a forceful challenge not only to the traditional Icelandic way of viewing the landscape, but also to the standard national narrative.

At the edge of the road near the Örlygsstaðir battlefield, a large wooden placard with text in English and Icelandic was placed explaining the importance of Örlygsstaðir (Fig. 9). When I first visited the site in 2001, there was no path from that sign to the stone marker erected in 1988. In 2010 there still was no path all the way to the 13th century fortification ruins, but there is a path to a new addition to the site: a second stone marker, placed closer to the main road on a slight elevation, along with a bench that seems to invite visitors to sit there and imagine the events of the civil war. These later additions now more effectively vie for travelers' attention with the Víðivellir Three Brothers monument directly juxtaposed to it in the landscape.



Fig. 9: Placard at Örlygsstaðir

At the other major civil war battle site, the one at Haugnes/Róðugrund, an even more dramatic transformation has taken place in the last few years in terms of a willingness to memorialize the events that took place there 700 years ago. When I first visited the valley in 2001, a wooden placard similar to the one at Örlygsstaðir had been erected near at the driveway leading to the farm today called Grund (Fig. 10). Like the sign at Örlygsstaðir, this was in

both English and Icelandic, but slightly more compelling in that it included a painting made in 1993 of the Battle at Haugnes. It was clearly part of an overall effort in Iceland to attract tourists into the countryside: signs like this were also placed at the Hagranes assembly site, at the farm of Flugumýri, and along Highway 1 as one enters into

Skagafjörður from its largest nearby city, Akúreyri.¹⁵ But as with the Örlygsstaðir site, there was no clear path in 2001 at Haugnes for tourists to walk, and in fact a gate right behind the sign likely deterred most from entering the farm (although the gate is in fact meant to keep the sheep in, not tourists out). When I revisited the site in 2010, the dynamics of the site had changed considerably with the addition of an extremely large and impressive stone monument topped with a large wooden crucifix. Signage there explains that at the end of the battle of Haugnes, a rod was erected on the spot where Brandur died, and that this modern memorial replaces it. An informal path towards the cross is visible across the grass, and a wooden sign on the gate with the name of the farm makes visitors feel more welcome.



Fig. 10: Placard at Haugnes, a.k.a. Róðagrund or Grund.

The recent changes to Örlygsstaðir and Haugnes are likely a result of the formation of an interpretive project called Sturlaslóð begun officially in 2008, though with informal roots prior to that.¹⁶ Including the publication of a book, the creation and maintenance of a website, and the organizing of special tours and events annually, Sturlaslóð is a public/private cooperation intended to bring visitors to Skagafjörður. It is specifically focused on the events of the Sturlungaöld civil war, and is in fact the only heritage site in Iceland with such a focus. By using the term “slóð”, a term for a geographic feature created by a single force,¹⁷ the group coordinating the Sturlaslóð project is making a bold

¹⁵ Coming into Skagafjörður from the other direction—from Reykjavík—there is also a stopping point with signage. It is however a stone monument erected in memory of the poet Stefán Stefánsson by his descendants. Coincidentally, the farm where Stefan was born, with its expansive view over all of Skagafjörður, was also the site where Þórður battled Ormur’s business partner, Illugi, when first fleeing Miðfjörður, but no mention of that is made at the site today (See Fig. 1 in Chapter 3).

¹⁶ The Sturlungaslóð website is www.sturlungaslod.is.

¹⁷ In the singular, it usually refers to a path, but in the plural, it refers to a region.

statement about how pivotal and important the events of the Sturlungaöld were for Skagafjörður.

Despite the early resistance to creating physical markers of the civil war battle sites by local inhabitants, it seems to have been embraced by at least one local person. The farmer who owns the land at Haugnes, Sigurður Hansen, decided in 2010 to further augment that field—already graced with a large stone monument and cross—with a new material installation. Over a period of a year and a half, he brought in large rocks to the exact spot on his land where the battle lines were drawn in 1246 (as best as can be determined from the description of the battle in *Bórðar saga kakala*). At the actual site of the battle, where over 1200 men battled and at least 110 men died, Sigurður has arrayed the stones into the approximation of battle lines and placed small metal crosses on certain stones on each side, equaling the number of fatalities on that day.¹⁸ His memorial is personal and intimate, and he often accompanies groups who want to visit the site.

Sigurður's augmentation of the landscape in this way is not visible to visitors in the same way that the cross is: because that monument rises above a very flat field near the middle of Skagafjörður, it is actually quite visible (Fig. 11). If the medieval monument were in a similar location, and of similar size, it would have been a constant physical reminder to the people of Skagafjörður that the last of their local chieftain line—the Ásbirning clan—had died on that spot. According to the historian on the Sturlungaslóð project, that cross was removed during the Reformation. The website for the site points out, however, that a prayer house was located at the farm of Grund until the 18th century, tacitly suggesting that this place of worship was related to the events of the battle. The text on the cross and at the website both therefore make an effort to emphasize that Róðugrund has always been a sacred and holy spot memorialized by the people of Skagafjörður and that the recent efforts to bring attention to it are nothing new. This strikes me as an overt effort

to make local people not view the tourist development efforts of Sturlaslóð as an intrusion into their landscape, whereas the Three Brothers Memorial at Víðivellir may indicate just how uncomfortable some people in Skagafjörður are with the distinction of being the site of the bloodiest and largest battles in Icelandic history.



Fig. 11: The recently installed memorial at Róðugrund.

¹⁸ He was interviewed as part of the focus on Iceland for the Berlin book fair in 2011. The video is posted at <http://www.sagenhaftes-island.is/upplestur-manadarins/nr/1308>.

Even Sigurður Hansen's efforts may not be as wholeheartedly in favor of the Sturlungaslóð initiative as it seems at first glance: it seems that Sigurður Hansen of Haugnes was also seeking to memorialize Þórður hreða. In the video interview with him about the site, he states that one of the reasons he was inspired to make an army of boulders on his land was because "Þórður has always been my man. He was always very reluctant to kill people except when he was forced." It seems here that Sigurður may be combining Þórður kakali, the member of the Sturlunga clan that killed the last leader of the Ásbirnings, with Þórður hreða, the Viking hero who always took his victims in Skagafjörður to the doctor to get healed. Such a conflation would be well in keeping with the intentions of the full version of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, a text that, as I mentioned in Chapter 4, delighted in such linguistic coincidences.

Þórðar saga hreðu re-emerges

But other than Sigurður's possible linguistic slippage, *Þórðar saga hreðu* has been left out entirely from this transformation of narrative into object. The narratives so privileged have been either related to the civil war, or to the Christian heritage in the area. But in 2008, just as the Sturlungaslóð project got underway, *Þórðar saga hreðu* re-emerged into the local consciousness of the area, in the form of a debate printed in the pages of the local history journal. Two recent issues of Skagafjörður's local history journal, *Skagfirðingabók* (2008 and 2010), featured an in-depth discussion of the scene quoted at the outset of this chapter, the dramatic wintery showdown between Þórður and Özurr. The subject under discussion in the history journal was the placenames mentioned in that passage, Sviðgrímshólar and Skeggjahamar, neither of which is attested in the modern landscape of Skagafjörður. These are the only two placenames in the saga that put into question the local knowledge of the sagateller; otherwise, the saga has been judged to be in good accord with the landscape of the area. The authors of these articles each offer different "fits" for these placenames in the landscape of Skagafjörður, and can therefore be seen as a response to this scholarly critique. The articles also cite the Master's Thesis written by Jón Torfason, which I discussed in Chapter 1, because it opens up the possibility that scholarly judgment against this saga has been overhasty. Both of the articles are therefore trying to contribute to what they see as a wider scholarly debate. The desire to resurrect the reputation of *Þórðar saga hreðu* may be a response to the strong identification of the landscape of Skagafjörður with the Sturlungaöld.

The debate about these placenames has been longstanding, starting already in the 19th century, when Kristian Kålund (1844-1919) came through the area. The locals of the area at that time explained to Kålund that the area called Sviðgrímshólar in the saga is now called Sviðningshólar, and that a rock outcropping in the hillside on the southside of Kolbeinsdalsá were the cliffs that Þórður had skied down, which the informants told him were called Hreðuklettur (Kålund 1986, p. 64). The battle they said took place on the other side of the river, at a place the locals referred to as Hreðuhólar. Notice that both of these placenames have the word "Hreðu" in them, presumably a reference to Þórður hreða.

However, Jón Árne Friðjónsson disputed these placenames in his article “Þórður hreða í Kolbeinsdal: Um Þórðarsögu, Þórðarrímur og örnefni” (2008). Jón Árne felt the place names Hreðuklettur and Hreðuhólar were most likely an attempt by locals in the 19th century to try to fit the saga onto the landscape. Jón Árne argues that sometime after a printed publication of the saga appeared in 1756, or even more likely after the publication of the rímur about the saga appeared in 1851, an attempt was made to locate the site of this battle on the landscape, and the names Hreðuklettur and Hreðuhólar were bestowed at that time (p. 128-130). Hreðuklettur, as the second element in the name suggests, is not a perfect match for the saga description of the cliff down which Þórður rides on his spear; that was a “hamar” (cliff) not “klettur” (rocks).¹⁹ Indeed, it appears there was confusion about where to locate these placenames even in the 16th and 17th century, since some manuscripts of the saga call it Skogarhamar instead of Skeggjahamar. Jón Árne suggests instead that the placename Skogarhamar (forested cliffs) is the original placename. If so, it could well have referred to the very top of a mountainside facing Kolbeindalsá, from which boulders have clearly fallen over time (p. 135, see also photo p. 133), meaning it once may have been a cliff-face. If the forest that presumably once grew there disappeared, the place name Skogarhamar would have ceased to be used. When interest in the saga reawakened in the 19th century, a new place name, referring to a different landscape feature, was born.

Looking at the aerial photo of the mountain above Sviðningshólar, Jón Árne’s suggestion for the “right” location of Skeggjahamar seems very plausible. I imagine, however, that the 19th-century saga enthusiasts—who pointed to a different location when telling Kristian Kálund where Þórður heroically shimmied down a steep embankment—had good reason to believe their hypothesis as well. Indeed, the explanation offered to Kálund seemed plausible enough that the placename “Hreðuklettur” has persisted. What is perhaps more interesting here, however, is that even for someone willing to discount the value of local oral tradition about the saga, the argument is based on the idea that the saga itself would have originally fit the landscape.

In the subsequent issue of *Skagfirðingabók*, a rebuttal was published offering up yet a third possibility as to the “right” place. That article was written by Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson (2010a), and his argument turns on this sentence from *Þórðar saga hreðu*: “Þeir ríða út í Sviðgrímshóla.” Most everyone has presumed that Sviðgrímshólar is the same place as Sviðningshólar, based on the probability that the form Sviðningshólar replaced Sviðgrímshólar. Sigurjón points out, however, that Sviðningshólar shows up in documents from 1388, which actually means it predates the saga manuscripts, and therefore the two placenames must refer to different places (p. 145). This would also rectify a problem identified by Kr. Kálund: when Kálund was told Sviðningshólar was the modern name for Sviðgrímshólar, he noted that it made no sense for the text to say that Þórður was traveling “út” from Miklabær, which is on the coast of Skagafjörður, inland towards Sviðningshólar, which is in Kolbeinsdalur. Although the meaning of the

¹⁹ Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson includes a picture of Hreðuklettur in his 2010 rebuttal article, which makes it clear it is a craggy rockface jutting out from the hillside, not a cliff one could come to the top of from the backside and then descend.

directional adverb “út” varies somewhat by context, it is never used when going inland within one’s own district. Kálund presumed the saga author was either unfamiliar with the landscape or simply wrong, but Sigurjón’s nomination for the “right” location of Sviðgrímshólar and Skeggjahamar rectifies this discrepancy. Sigurjón suggests that a different set of hills, north of Miklabær and not inland from it, should be understood as the proper referent for Sviðgrímshólar. From those hills, he is able to identify a narrow valley with a neck and with a cliff, which would better fit the description of “Skeggjahamar” and thus the saga narrative. Such a location, considerably north of Miklabær, would also fit better with the mapping of battle locations I discussed in Chapter 3, where I demonstrated that Þórður spares his opponents within the boundaries of Skagafjörður. It is also possible that a location outside of the main settlement area would more easily be lost over time.

Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson, who is also on the editorial board of *Skagfirðabók*, added onto the end of his article about this placename another short article, which seems almost an addendum. It has a brief discussion a 18th-century manuscript written by Jón Ólafsson úr Grunnavík (2010b), but primarily consists of long quotes from that manuscript. Jón Ólafsson (1705-1779) had identified certain mounds as the likely burial of saga heroes, including Þórður hreða. Though Sigurjón does not attempt to confirm Jón’s supposition, he does call for the publication of this manuscript as an important source of information. It is apparent then that together, these articles offer an important reassertion of the role of *Þórðar saga hreðu* into the local history of the area, a role that has been denied by the landscape installations aimed at tourists.

A Fictional Place Revisited

As discussed in Chapter 4 above, I believe it is possible that Sviðgrímshólar may be a fictional place, thus the resistance by Jón Árne Friðjónsson and Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson to this idea is intriguing to me. Jón Árne of course does not make his opposition categorical, admitting that “[e]infaldasta skýringin er auðvitað sú að Skeggja- eða Skóga(r)hamar sé einungis hugarfóstur höfundar” (2008, p. 129) [the easiest explanation is that Skeggjahamar or Skogarhamar are authorial inventions]. But the conclusion of his article rests on the supposition that the landscape and the saga fit one another when the saga was originally composed. Sigurjón is even more insistent on the idea that the saga and the landscape should perfectly correspond. To reclaim the status of the saga as a legitimate part of the local history, the authors of both of these pieces have tried to make an argument for perfect parity between the saga and the landscape.

Although my suggestion that Sviðgrímshólar could have been understood as fictional may seem to disagree with these authors, on a more fundamental level, we are in agreement. The difference is mainly that the authors in *Skagfirðingabók* are attempting to resurrect *Þórðar saga hreðu* on the terms set by the scholarly community. To adopt the idea of the landscape having to fit every detail of the saga is to adopt the modern archaeological standard of objectified truth. They are also working within the modern frame of genre classifications: works of literature must fit either in the category of fact or fiction. I do not believe either of these criteria ought to be applied to a saga that was

created in a non-modern milieu. In Chapter 4 above, I argued that in the medieval period, there was room to have some elements in the saga—such as particular scenes or dialogues—be understood as fictional without that undermining the overall historical legitimacy of the narrative. I also suggested that perfect fit between the saga narrative and the landscape, though generally utilized, was not absolutely necessary, because the saga existed in creative tension with the real, local landscape. The narrative and the landscape were co-constitutive.

It is encouraging that the native understanding of the saga and landscape having a strong relationship still exists, as evidenced by these articles, although I would argue for a fluid and dynamic relationship, rather than separate and fixed. However, that the saga should not be removed from this local landscape is as fundamental to my understanding as it seems to be to Jón Árne and Sigurjón Páll. It is therefore in my mind less important to specify exactly where in the landscape Sviðgrímshólar might have been than it is to question the scholarly paradigm that places an onus of complete fitness on the saga narrative. The usefulness of this saga as a means to build and maintain historical identity in the area is readily apparent. It is unfortunately that small details and narrative flourishes can be used to deem a saga of questionable historic merit, and to de-center it from its long-term cultural role as a bearer of memory and identity.

Conclusion

This snapshot of the status of *Þórðar saga hreðu* in Skagafjörður today suggests that many of the same concerns I discussed in Chapter 4 are still in operation. The signs highlighting the Sturlunagöld battles are still not entirely welcome, because they open up old wounds in the landscape. The national narrative had done its best to ignore this part of the story, and the local inhabitants had done their best to focus on their Christian heritage. Even Sigurður Hansen's installation is about coming to terms with the death of all these men on a personal level. Unlike the signage, objectively describing what happened, the events of the Sturlungaöld still seem to be felt as an intrusion onto the landscape. A turn to *Þórðar saga hreðu*, just as attention builds onto the Sturlungaöld, is as natural today as it was 500 years ago.

But what this analysis has also revealed is how much the material means by which this is accomplished have changed. The format of the wooden placards in the landscape challenges the traditional Icelandic way of relating to the landscape. In the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, the circulation of *Þórðar saga hreðu* orally and in written form reinforced the association between the landscape and the story. In the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, the *rímur* of Þórður hreða were widely recounted, reminding people of Þórður's exploits in the landscape²⁰; by contrast, no *rímur* was made of Sturla's *Íslendingasaga* or *Þórðar saga kakala*. In the 20th and 21st century, physical signs in the landscape of Iceland are new phenomena that now carry tremendous signifying power, inasmuch as they are government sanctioned and aimed towards outsiders. None of

²⁰ It is interesting that one of the features of *rímur* is a constant mention of placenames (see Hans Kuhn 2008 for a discussion of the *rímur* of Þórður hreðu).

them, as of 2011, mention Þórður hreða, the traditional local hero of the area. I would imagine that Sigurjón, who wrote the article in *Skagfirðingabók*, would be very glad if the cliff he identified were to be graced with a placard stating, “This is where Þórður hreða successfully ended his dispute with Özur”, even though 100 years ago such a sign would have been seen as wholly unnecessary. The need for narratives to take on a material form, or to have a material representation and manifestation, is in some ways the opposite of the dynamic identified in Chapter 3, where the landscape itself was understood to signify, or that the placenames were material enough to serve a memorial function, as argued in Chapter 4.

In Chapter 4 above, I argued that one of the primary impetuses for *Þórður saga hreðu* to take the shape it did in the 14th century was the events of the Icelandic civil war. I suggested that the saga sought to combat the associations of the landscape with the events of that war by redirecting the audience to think of other, similar sites around Skagafjörður with a much more laudable narrative. By instigating purposeful forgetting through the aegis of a narrative, *Þórður saga hreðu* allowed the people of Skagafjörður to think instead of their heroic past and their Christian core identity. What is perhaps most surprising is how well this narrative sleight of hand seems to have worked. The people of Skagafjörður from the 14th through the 20th century did very little to remember the events of the Sturlunga battles, and the national narrative did even less.

With the repackaging of the battles that took place in Skagafjörður in the last 20 years as a potential tourist draw, one could say a challenge has been raised to how modern day people of Skagafjörður think of themselves. The modern tourist efforts, which are following the practice throughout Iceland of highlighting particular sagas for particular valleys, are forcing the people of Skagafjörður to confront a social memory they have rather successfully forgotten, and one that directly contradicts their image of themselves as particularly Christian. Sigurður Hansen’s unique embrace of this part of his land’s legacy indicates that perhaps the time may be right for a re-remembering of those narratives, so long buried. But as the articles in *Skagafirðingabók* indicate, while the civil war battles are long over, the battle over how to present, understand, and narrativize the landscape of Skagafjörður is still going strong.

CONCLUSION:

ENGAGING WITH THE MATERIAL

This study has looked at one rather neglected Icelandic saga, *Þórðar saga hreðu*, and has used it as a test case for a method that takes seriously the engagement of the saga with the material world that contextualized it and continues to contextualize it. Rather than thinking of the saga only as a work of literature created directly by a human intellect, I have inserted into that dynamic a third element: the material world. Thus each chapter of this dissertation looks at a particular tripartite arrangement of human, narrative, and material culture, which I argue form a “meaning matrix.” The material culture in question ranges from the physical manuscripts to archaeological objects, from human-made structures to named farms to the landscape itself. In all cases, the meaning of the saga was not to be found in any one part of that triad, but in the combination of all three. In the composition process, the interpretation of the saga, and its long-term transmission, the material world would have been integral to the meaning of the saga. Its material engagement, in other words, is deep, constant, and important.

Throughout this study, I have thought of *Þórðar saga hreðu* paired along side the material world in a co-constitutive relationship, as if the saga were the script to an exhibition. Clearly this analogy was not chosen to emphasize the moment of composition, since there is no way the structure of the sagas was in any way influenced by modern museum practice! Rather, my analogy is based on the idea that what happens in the museum context is not unique to that context, but rather is a manifestation of certain aptitudes inherent in human cognition. People like to “think through things” (Henare et al. 2007); the material world is a ready platform upon which and through which human beings form language and thoughts. I also believe museum exhibition copy is an appropriate analogue to the sagas not only because it was written with the idea in mind that the text would be paired with objects, but also because both texts are experienced collectively, and both audiences are bodily engaged at the same time as they are intellectually engaged, making their experience place-specific. This is also part of material engagement.

I have found this to be a productive way to reexamine the saga, in that it has brought to light nuances and details of the text that are overlooked if one focuses only on character, plot, narrative technique, and themes. In the past, *Þórðar saga hreðu* has been dismissed as frivolous, but my method has instead revealed a richly communicative and nuanced saga. But more important than salvaging the literary reputation of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, this study has sought to return this saga to its rightful place at the center of a community in northern Iceland. The evidence in this study—from the existing manuscripts discussed in Chapter 1 all the way through to the modern period discussed in Chapter 5—demonstrates that this saga ought to be thought of primarily as a local saga. The title of this dissertation, “Nested Narrative” refers not just to the fact that the saga is

nested in its landscape, but also that it is nested in a particular community. It both shapes that community and is shaped by it just as it is performative for the community rather than reflective of its culture. Culture is “contested, temporal and emergent” (Clifford 1986, p. 19), not a stable thing that exists outside and above the daily lives of people. As an enacted practice that is constantly formed and reformed, *Þórðar saga hreðu* was integrated at multiple levels; it was not a product of that community but a member of that community. Always in concert with the material world and the human inhabitants, *Þórðar saga hreðu* helped negotiate everything from local identity to intrusive violence. It was the glue that held together the people who created it. This anthropological approach to the saga is not an approach aimed at mining the saga for ethnographic or sociological tidbits, but rather as a means to understand the community that produced it on a very intimate level.

Such a statement however begs the question whether I mean to suggest all Sagas of Icelanders should be similarly understood as first and foremost products of a specific community, and on a related note, whether all Sagas of Icelanders should be understood as particularly materially engaged. Because Þórður is himself a skilled craftsman, unlike most other saga heroes, we could here be dealing with a saga much more interested in the material world than is typical for the genre. One could embark on a comprehensive re-examination of the entire corpus with just this question in mind, and by gathering up enough examples, be able to quantify the degree of locality or material engagement in a range of sagas, perhaps even creating a new subgenre of such sagas. Although I would be happy to undertake such an effort—especially as it would require spending much more time in the countryside of Iceland—I think the onus ought instead to run in the opposite direction. The basic working assumption for every Saga of Icelanders should be that it is first and foremost a local saga, and that it exists in productive engagement with the material world around it. The support for this assumption is not to be found in a statistical analysis of the existing texts, but rather in the historical circumstances of their creation. Saga scholars know and recognize that they are not dealing with modern, mass-produced novels, and that the cultural world depicted in the saga narratives is not the same as our own. Unfortunately, this has not always translated into a sensitivity of the role of the material world in this corpus: because engaging with objects is something we do so often in our daily lives, attitudes towards objects and the material world come to be seen as natural, when in fact they are just as subject to cultural and historic forces as, for instance, ideas of gender. It is therefore important that saga scholars specifically work to recognize the way materiality is engaging with the sagas. Indeed, it ought to be one of the joys of perusing the pages of the sagas that we are welcomed into a physical world conceived of very differently from our own. By starting an analysis of the sagas with the expectation of difference, rather than similarity, we may be better able to appreciate the specific contours of how object agency and the material world were conceived in this historic milieu.

Determining a way to discuss productively the material engagement of saga literature has seldom been attempted. Certainly, this dissertation is not the only work of recent scholarship that sees the sagas not just as a literary composition, but it is one of the

few to work to reclaim the historical value of the saga through a re-examining of its material matrix. The recent turn towards manuscript collections (Ármann Jakobsson 2002, Ashman Rowe 2005, and the Njáls Saga project¹) can be seen as another means to do this, inasmuch as the findings of those studies are very specific to a discrete context that has a material manifestation. Saga scholarship has however been more reticent to re-engage with the places and landscapes of the sagas. Although Emily Lethbridge's visitations to the saga landscapes received popular attention through her website *Saga Steads of Iceland* and in other popular forums,² many scholars are more reluctant to admit how helpful it is to have seen the landscape in order to understand a saga. This seems to me an over-corrective to the scholar-tourists of the 19th and early 20th century. There are theoretically and methodologically robust ways in which the physical world can be re-entered into the discussion of sagas without resorting to Romanticism.

Fortunately, certain recent broad cultural developments may make it easier for scholars today to embrace the material engagement of the sagas without Romanticizing it. As Walter Ong (1982) has argued, certain modern technologies, such as the telephone and television, have brought communication in Western civilization into a more oral realm, without obliterating our literary capabilities. So although scholars living in the early 21st century are surely not at the exact same point along the Oral-Written continuum as early medieval Icelanders, we are perhaps closer to appreciating how the sagas as a genre functioned in that society than our predecessors of 50 or 100 years ago, who were more concerned with maintaining the boundary between literary products and oral products of human language, or who idealized oral cultures. Similarly, modern technology has brought with it a certain understanding of object agency (Watts 2008) that would have felt entirely foreign to scholars in the field even 50 years ago. We live with and through our computers in a way that reveals our comfort with an independently communicating material world. The time is therefore ripe for the field to open itself up to a much broader conversation about material engagement, as has taken place, for example, in much of anthropology and archaeology. This would make saga scholarship more relevant to several interdisciplinary issues, as well as being useful for the field of saga studies.

The Sagas and Philosophy

Let me begin with perhaps the widest debate that could be addressed by specifically studying the contours of material engagement in the sagas. The present relationship to objects and materiality is not considered the historic norm; rather, the rationalist, objectivist, positivist turn is an anomaly in human history. An array of philosophers,

¹ The Njáls Saga project is being run by Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir of the Árni Magnússon Institute, Reykjavík, and is a comprehensive reexamination of all manuscripts containing Njáls Saga. Some of their preliminary findings and methodologies were presented in a special session of the 15th International Saga Conference.

² Her travels are documented at <http://sagasteads.blogspot.com/>. A recent exhibition at the Scandinavian House in New York, as well as interviews by the BBC, have also brought attention onto this important effort at personal engagement with the saga narratives.

historians, and anthropologists have argued that a deep engagement with the material world is basic to humanity, and it is only through extreme mechanisms, developed since the 16th century, that human beings come to see themselves as separate from the world around them. Material engagement has been the concern of philosophers like Merleau-Ponty and Walter Benjamin³ in terms of what it tells us about the condition of modernity, which is very specifically understood as an estrangement from the world.

The scholars charged with analyzing the Sagas of Icelanders could be providing much more relevant analysis to philosophical debates about the condition of modernity, since the Sagas of Icelanders represent one of the best-documented cases of a non-modern society available for scholarly research. While not as famous as the Greco-Roman examples, and perhaps not as central to the development of Western Civilization, the sagas have an advantage over classical documents in that the society depicted in the sagas is far less hierarchical, which means it is a closer reflection of what other, less formalized, human societies may have been like. Saga production did not take place in a society with a printing press and a complex hierarchy; it most likely also did not take place in a society that had learned to objectify the material world. The methodology of material engagement employed in this study is therefore specifically designed to reflect the historic milieu in which the sagas emerged, that is to say, a pre-16th century world. Given what I have found in *Þórðar saga hreðu*, it is likely that a broad analysis of the sagas would confirm that this literature reflects a far greater degree of material agency than modern literature displays, which could be of interest to a broader philosophical community. But it is also possible that this saga is a genre outlier, and that other sagas ascribe the material world a much more conservative role; indeed other scholars have seen fit to think for instance of landscape merely as setting. Although I argued in Chapter 3 this may be an uncritical use of the modern perspective, it is also possible that the philosophers have been wrong in thinking such a perspective is strictly modern. If so, a broad discussion of the material engagement of the sagas is certainly warranted.

Literature and Society

Why people write fictional narratives at all is another broad, but interesting, problem, and one that scholars such as William Goodman (1978, 1984; see also Olson 1994) have sought to understand. The issue of material engagement has sometimes been included in those discussions; recent theories have taken engagement with place as a specific theoretical problem, which has led to an interest in urban novels as a productive subgenre of study. These studies, such as Dan Ringgaard's interest in travel literature (2010), focus on the role of literature in helping modern humans come to terms with the myriad people and places we encounter in an incredibly mobile society. It strikes me that to understand the modern use of place and space, it would be helpful to have a clear example of how literary representations of place and landscape operated before modernity. The Sagas of Icelanders are indeed excellent candidates for making such a

³ See Langer 1989 for a discussion of Merleau-Ponty. Walter Benjamin's writing is more accessible, and I recommend especially the collection of his writings in *Illuminations* (Hannah Arendt, ed., 1968).

contribution, in that they comprise a non-sacred prose narrative written in the vernacular in a non-modern milieu.

As my triad suggests, *Þórðar saga hreðu* likely developed in very close concert with its material matrix from the very beginning, and at each stage of its modification. So although the impetus to narrativize has famously been ascribed to a chronological sensibility (Ricoeur 1984-1988), which makes material engagement secondary and potentially problematic,⁴ if the Sagas of Icelanders could be appreciated as widely engaged with place and landscape, rather than with time, it would make for a very interesting counterpoint. Perhaps the human interest in creating narratives has a much stronger geographic and material component.⁵

Alternatively, a focus on the material engagement apparent in the sagas may be an important way to distinguish this corpus from any other realistic prose genre that it may superficially resemble. This would allow for a specific discussion of the function of literature in a relatively non-hierarchical society, and a small one at that, where the interconnections between each individual are palpable. Surely literature in this type of society is not being employed for the purposes of creating “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991); rather, the community was experienced daily as such without the mediation of literature. Instead of fighting against this anomalous nature, and trying to analyze the sagas as we might choose to analyze modern literature or hierarchical medieval literature, we can instead embrace the intimate material engagement of the sagas as giving us a unique insight into the workings of literature in that society.

Sagas and Archaeology

I began this dissertation with the hope that it might contribute in some way to the overall discussion of the relationship between archaeology and saga studies, a problem that has lurked around the edges of Icelandic and Nordic cultural history for over 100 years. The interest in material engagement in this saga was partially chosen so that it might offer better dialogue with the discipline of archaeology, which is defined by its material engagement. Before undertaking this project, I suspected that the relationship between those two products of human creativity might simply be antagonistic; my hypothesis was that literature would work to undermine the communicative potential of objects. Indeed, I have identified an example where the text of *Þórðar saga hreðu* does seem to be deliberately trying to present a narrative at odds with the material agency of the area, namely in the obfuscation of the civil war battle sites. It was that disjuncture that originally drew me to want to study this saga, and I thought I would find myriad examples of that sort of disjuncture. Such a finding would have suited the *status quo* in Icelandic historical research. Scholars in Iceland today seem to have come to a comfortable accord that the two disciplines study different things and that there is little

⁴ See for instance Karin Sander’s understanding of mimesis as a threat to narrative integrity (1997, pp. 133-149).

⁵ Marc Azéma’s work with Ice Age cave art (2011) has suggested the strong narrativity and even cinematic nature of much of the imagery, despite a long standing assumption that they are not narrative at all.

need to find a means to cross-communicate. But as this study progressed, I began to suspect that most of the perceived disjuncture was a result of methodological and theoretical differences, and not an inherent quality in the narrative. Indeed, I came to see that the depiction of objects in *Þórðar saga hreðu* had much in common with archaeological discussions of highly-agentive objects. I therefore find myself now returning to an impulse I had when I was working on the Vinland sagas at the Smithsonian: there must be a way to get archaeology and saga studies to integrate their findings. After all, both disciplines are supposed to be revealing something about the lives of the same group of people, broadly defined.

A greater interest in material engagement on the part of saga scholarship is essential for this divide to be bridged. To date, the primary way in which material objects, such as burials or place-names or buildings, have been discussed in saga scholarship is as a self-conscious attempt by the sagateller to confirm the veracity of the saga reports. Such a claim rests on a specific understanding of objects, truth value, and proof, which seems anachronistic with respect to a pre-modern society, and it may need to be critically reexamined. It also does not address other uses of objects in the sagas; whereas it is easy to note that clothing is typically described only in scenes where a man and woman are meeting for the first time, it is quite another thing to explain what sort of object agency would account for that kind of use of objects. Also, if the pattern observed in *Þórðar saga hreðu* that the majority of objects mentioned in the saga are mentioned in skaldic verse holds true throughout the corpus, a robust consideration of what this says about objects and their referential ability is needed. If saga scholars were able to come to a consensus about what kind of object agency is being presented in the texts of saga manuscripts, archaeologists might be encouraged to consider whether the objects they excavate could be interpreted within a similar range of object agency. In this regard, I was pleased to participate in the formation of a Material Cultures working group with several other junior colleagues in the field during the 15th International Saga Conference in Aarhus. There are of course many other such efforts aimed at finding a dialogue between archaeology and saga texts, but the specific issue of the degree of object agency has not been central to these conversations.

However, it would not be sufficient to make adjustments on only one side of this dynamic. My discussion in Chapter 2 also suggests that some disciplinary adjustments are required on the part of Icelandic archaeologists, who have traditionally been rather conservative. The archaeological approaches already taken up by some research communities that come out of phenomenology and Actor-Network-Theory would allow for more fruitful cross-disciplinary conversation between saga scholars and archaeologists.

Orality and *Þórðar saga hreðu*

To move more specifically into an issue of direct concern within the discipline of saga scholarship, a greater interest in material engagement may also be helpful in reframing the debate between oral and written composition of the sagas. Throughout this

study, I have treated the oral version of *Þórðar saga hreðu* and its written version as coherent, rather than distinct. Under the current scholarly approach, such a coalescence is counter-indicated: if one focuses on the chronology and the personality of the sagateller, obviously the storytelling practice of a 10th century pagan oral performer should not be confused with that of a 14th century monk writing in a monastery. But because my focus has been on the material matrix into which they both would have been embedded, continuity rather than disjuncture has been emphasized. That material matrix consists, most importantly, of the local landscape. But even in terms of everyday material culture tied to economic livelihood, there is little to distinguish the pagan and Christian periods in Commonwealth Iceland. I therefore think there is reason to consider to what degree this material continuity might have contributed to a saga's stability through time.

As I argued in Chapter 3 above, there is evidence in the text of *Þórðar saga hreðu* that the plot of the saga was perfectly mapped onto the landscape of northern Iceland, and I argued that this suggested the landscape of the area, with its geographic features and placenames, would have served as a sort of memory palace for the saga contents. Such a supposition imagines that when a sagateller wanted to relay the saga of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, whether doing so orally or in written form, he (or she) would have conjured a mental image of the landscape of the area. In a process akin to the classical loci system, this would have activated the memory of the narrative of the saga. The structure of the saga as a whole, and the organization within specific chapters, both show evidence of this memory practice.

This kind of integration between the saga narrative and the landscape suggests an integration between time and place. Many other sagas seem to share the convention that events only happen when characters leave home,⁶ such that movement across the landscape was understood as integral to the chronological development of the plot. It would be interesting to consider whether other works in the Old Norse corpus, such as *Landnámabók*, *Íslendingabók*, and the *Sturlungasögur* show a similar conflation of time and place demonstrated through a close mapping of narrative onto landscape. If it manifests itself in a variety of texts, even those that have a clear literary origin, then works that likely have an oral foundation, like the Sagas of Icelanders, do not need to be segregated from those that presumably do not. By elevating the role of landscape, place, and the material world, the dichotomy between written and oral composition lessens, which may open up new interpretive possibilities. Synergy, continuity, and overlap, rather than difference, would be emphasized.

Genres in Saga Scholarship

Another issue specifically of concern to saga scholars is genre classifications within the corpus. *Þórðar saga hreðu* is an especially interesting saga to consider in this regard because of its inability to fit into any recognized Saga of Icelanders genre, as I discussed in Chapter 1. Given that my analysis of this saga has suggested its primary

⁶ Captured best in the phrase “nú var allt kyrr” which refers simultaneously both to nothing happening in the plot, and to the fact that the characters are all remaining in their respective homes.

meaning lies in its material engagement, it is appropriate to consider whether this observation warrants rethinking genre classification. The existing classifications are made either chronologically—classical vs. post-classical—or by protagonist—outlaw, skald, or family lineage. Genre classification in the field is an ongoing and difficult debate, so complex that it forms the subject of an upcoming doctoral thesis.⁷ The classical vs. post classical division is particularly problematic, in that it seems to be a scholarly convention much more so than a recognized genre distinction within the originating community. I therefore hesitate to suggest a new genre category—one of materially engaged sagas or local sagas—especially in as much as I argued above that all Sagas of Icelanders should be considered nested narratives. However, there may be a difference in regard to what form that engagement takes place: perhaps some sagas give greater agency to moveable objects rather than to the local landscape, for instance, or *vice versa*. In Chapter 2, the descriptions of objects in *Þórðar saga hreðu* were analyzed for the degree to which their agency was welcome or unwelcome, and whether that agency acted on a vertical or horizontal plane. What I found most interesting was the discord that seems to be brought by trade goods, as if that were a defining characteristic of their agency. Developing a genre classification system based on types of object agency, while certainly theoretically interesting and potentially historically relevant, could arguably also demonstrate that the originating audience was itself concerned with understanding the material world, and working through it within the saga narratives.⁸

Recovering the Local

In this study, looking closely at the material engagement of *Þórðar saga hreðu* has allowed me to recognize the strong local aspect of this saga. This recognition began through my analysis of the manuscripts themselves as part of another project.⁹ Although manuscript provenance has traditionally been interested in issues of dating, the work of philologists also has grown to recognize regional variation within linguistic usage. This, along with other techniques, makes it possible to identify certain manuscripts with certain areas. Even though some manuscripts may be silent in this regard, if several manuscript attestations—both paper and vellum—and rímur traditions of a particular saga cluster together, that should be sufficient to suggest a geographic “home” for a saga’s production and consumption. I further built on this observation of the local nature of the saga by moving myself through the landscape of Northern Iceland, which confirmed the importance of the real geography for so many aspects of the saga narrative. Finally, mapping the placenames in conjunction with types of action revealed a much greater

⁷ Bergdís Prastardóttir, University of Aarhus, forthcoming.

⁸ I would however hypothesize that the results of such a cross-comparative analysis would reveal a standardized acceptance of extreme object agency throughout the saga corpus. After all, the most agentive object in *Þórðar saga hreðu* is the sword Sköflung, which appears in several other sagas as well. While this sword’s agency is usually taken as a mark of fictionality, until we have a baseline of the general attitude in the saga corpus towards agentive objects, such an interpretation is based only on the modern view of objects.

⁹ I contributed to the Mapping Nordic Literary Cultures project run jointly by UCLA, UCB, and BYU, which was sponsored by the Sigurður Nordal Institute.

concern with regionalism than I expected—considering especially that the title of this saga does not bespeak an interest in regionalism. This experience has left me very curious to try a similar analysis on other sagas. Although Icelanders have a long and rich tradition of placename scholarship, this dissertation is the first time, to my knowledge, that that information has been specifically used in formulating an interpretation of the meaning of a saga.

While this may be a promising scholarly avenue of investigation, it is also a promising means to allow focus to return to the local community that produced a saga. In the Introduction, I stated that this dissertation was not intended to rescue the literary reputation of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. Although that statement might imply that such an effort would not be worthwhile—in that there is no way to redeem the aesthetic value of this saga—such a criticism of the saga is not what was intended by that statement. If anything, it is an indictment against the field of saga scholarship that a saga very much appreciated and beloved by its community cannot find a way to be understood and valued by scholars. In this dissertation, I have sought to address that by approaching *Þórðar saga hreðu* as an active participant in the construction, maintenance, and evolution of a particular community through time.

Although I cannot say for certain that all sagas fulfilled a similar role, I believe it is important to start with the assumption that they did, or at least that they could have, rather than to start with the assumption that they did not. Saga scholarship has too often spoken of Iceland and Icelandic culture; it is inherent in the very name of the genre, Sagas of Icelanders. Certainly some texts may have been active in constructing some sort of national identity, but even *Landnámabók*, in my opinion, is not a good candidate for that sort of operation. Each of the vignettes in that work brings attention back to the local, to the specific, and to place.

By beginning with the idea that a saga is first and foremost about a local community, and taking seriously its material engagement in that regional place, the purpose of the saga can be reexamined. This study has suggested the following chronology of how the relationship between the saga and the community unfolded. *Þórðar saga hreðu* started out rather early on, perhaps by the 11th century, as a regional tale, one that helped the communities of both Miðfjörður and Skagafjörður understand each other. The crux of the story was Þórður's move from one valley to the next, and the opportunity this move allowed for the characteristics of each valley to be discussed. Þórður is also cast as a creative contributor to each valley, building the ferry system in Miðfjörður and the distinct halls in Skagafjörður; in that sense, he is a creative force used to explain 11th and 12th century realities. The fostering relationship between Eiður and Þórður, which is at the core of the plot, was likely in place at this time as well, and it might have served as a suggestion for cooperation between the two regions, rather than competition, despite their differences.

By the late 12th century, instigated by the establishment of the Bishopric at Hólar, the saga became concerned with Christian themes of mercy and forgiveness. Þórður's efforts to heal his opponents, which take place only in Skagafjörður, was probably added

onto the saga at this point, inspired by the older plot element of battles being interrupted by Eiður. This would have been part of an effort to define Skagafjörður generally, and Hjaltadalur in particular, as a sanctified, holy landscape. When the battles of the Sturlungaöld unfolded in this landscape in the mid 13th century, the narrative was summoned to serve a new purpose: to reclaim this landscape as Christian by erasing the memory of the civil war battles as best as it could. Certain minor characters, from strategically chosen farms, were added to the plot, and perhaps one or two fictional places. I suspect that the desire to take focus away from the obvious communicative ability of the battlefields would have pushed the sagateller to take extra liberties with the inherited narrative. Thus by the late 14th century *Þórðar saga hreðu* came to take on a more fictional air than I suspect it originally had.

The saga then continued from the 15th century to be not only a popular form of entertainment in the area, but also a continued rallying point for the peaceful, skillful identity of people from Skagafjörður. The initial scholarly critique of the saga seems not to have immediately diminished its standing in the local community, but by the time Kristian Kálund and Sigurjón Vigfússon were investigating the saga in the local area, some anxiety about its status may have begun to be expressed. The additional place-names referring to the saga as identified by Jón Árni Friðjónsson (2008) seem to be emblematic of a sort of over-compensation for this perceived critique. The recent elevation of the Sturlungaöld narrative in the area has once again spurred an attempt to match the saga perfectly to its landscape, indicating that the saga at some level still has agency as a basis for local identity.

This narrative of the relationship between the saga and its community is of course, like all narrative, a simplification, and it is designed to emphasize the point it tries to prove, namely that there is a close relationship between the community and this saga. I would welcome of course any evidence to the contrary, but in my investigation, I did not find any. Thus I offer up this rather neat narrative because to me it seems true, and I hope anyone from Skagafjörður or Miðfjörður who might happen to read this would find it plausible. After all, the saga is their cultural patrimony, not mine.

Final thoughts

By looking always at the saga in context of some materiality—its manuscript, archaeological finds, the landscape, or named farms—I have found a richly communicative verbal artifact. It is surely talking about place: the audience members' place in time through objects that connect them to their ancestors, and their geographic place, understood in a very intimate, phenomenological way. I am excited by the prospect that expanding this methodology to a wider selection of sagas might allow the corpus to engage in dialogue with a range of interdisciplinary problems, and also allow new questions to be asked of the corpus. But that the method explored here—foregrounding the material matrix as a meaningful component—has already revealed new aspects of *Þórðar saga hreðu* is in itself gratifying. I am also pleased by the degree to which the text itself led this investigation; its agency expressed itself throughout, always broadening my

theoretical understanding and challenging me for better interpretations. This is probably nowhere more so the case than with the Sturlungaöld battlesites. I had begun to suspect, even before revisiting Skagafjörður in 2010, that there was something odd about a happy saga being set in such a troubled landscape. But I had originally thought this would prove to be a wonderful example of the complete disjuncture between narrative and the material world. Instead, the saga forced my attention down onto the details of the word on the page, and down to the very placenames, when my impulse had been to think only of plot and character. It made it clear to me that it was still engaging with the material world, even when it was misrepresenting it, or perhaps precisely when it was misrepresenting it.

Thus the three parts existed in a powerful hermeneutic system: the text attempted to direct meaning, the material world carried its own independent meaning, while the original audience actively negotiated between the two. This means, somewhat ironically, that by focusing on the material matrix and the saga, what I have arguably recovered is the kind of thought-processes carried out by its original audience. Of course these can only be known to the extent that they are anticipated by the text, but even to that extent, it is a humbling experience, to briefly grasp the thoughts of someone who died some 700 years ago. Perhaps this is especially so because in the case of the Sturlungaöld battlesites, what I found was a sense of communal mourning, and of violence that needed to be forgotten. This heartfelt attempt at healing was not at all the antagonistic relationship between narrative and object agency I was expecting to discuss.

Because of that example, I have tried to keep in mind throughout this study that the people who read, wrote, recited, thought about, and studied *Þórðar saga hreðu* were and are real live human beings, with complex intellectual and emotional lives. Literature's engagement with the material world may be an abstract theoretical problem, but it plays out in the everyday experience of life.

“Ok lýkr hér nú sögu Þórðar hreðu” (ÍF XIV, p. 226).

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