# Landscape and Myth in North-Western Europe

# BORDERS, BOUNDARIES, LANDSCAPES

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# Landscape and Myth in North-Western Europe

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# Contents

## Myth and the Landscapes of Literature

# Aesthetic Appreciation of Landscape in the Sagas of Icelanders

Reinhard Hennig

Did medieval Icelanders consider their country's landscapes to be beautiful? In an article published in 2012, Edda R. H. Waage claims that they did, and that they moreover were the only people in medieval Europe who had a concept of landscape that 'shares to a large extent the most common meaning of the English landscape concept today, which is aesthetic appreciation of natural scenery'.[1] Waage argues that there was even a particular term in medieval Icelandic that in its connotations corresponded exactly to the modern concept of landscape: *landsleg*.

This term is usually translated as 'the nature, "lie" of a country'[2] or as 'nature (physical conditions) of a land'.[3] According to Waage, however, *landsleg* implies more than just a description of the physical geography of a piece of land. Based on an analysis of eight instances of this term occurring in six medieval Icelandic sagas — all of which belong to the genre of the Sagas of Icelanders or are closely connected to it — she argues that there was 'an association of beauty with *landsleg*'.[4] Moreover, she claims that it is implied in the respective texts 'that

* This research was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship from Wenner-Gren Foundations.

[1] Waage, 'Landscape in the Sagas of Icelanders', p. 177.

[2] Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 371.

[3] Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, p. 259.

[4] Waage, 'Landscape in the Sagas of Icelanders', p. 188.

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*landsleg* is independent of human actions' and that 'none of the instances suggests an economic or a social connotation regarding the land under discussion'.[5]

The term *landsleg* would, then, signify a view of elements of nature that is contrary to a perception of them as natural resources. The concept of natural resources is linked to an instrumental view of nature, since resources commonly are defined as 'parts of the physical environment that are considered useful for satisfying human needs and wants'.[6] Yet *landsleg*, following Waage's interpretation, implies an entirely non-instrumental perspective.

This would make the Sagas of Icelanders even more exceptional than they are usually thought to be. As Richard Hoffmann points out, detailed descriptions of the non-human environment are generally relatively scarce in medieval European written texts.[7] Furthermore, even where medieval texts include representations of non-human environments, these are in most cases extremely standardized and do not provide 'realistic' descriptions of nature in the meaning of particular places or 'landscapes'. Ernst Robert Curtius, for instance, traces back most medieval descriptions of nature to the classical topos of the *locus amoenus* or 'pleasant place' with its stereotypical elements such as trees, springs, and flowers.[8] Images of nature based on literary traditions are therefore much more characteristic for medieval literature than representations of individual natural environments.

Waage's results are, however, even more remarkable considering that the existence of an aesthetic appreciation of nature's beauty has been denied for the Middle Ages in general,[9] and for Viking Age and medieval Iceland in particular. Iceland's Nobel laureate in literature Halldór Laxness, for example, argues that the first settlers had considered the country's nature solely as a resource to be exploited, and that there is no indication at all in medieval Icelandic literature of an admiration of nature's beauty.[10] Michail Steblin-Kamenskij even claims that '[i]n the family sagas there is absolutely no landscape or description of nature'.[11]

[5] Waage, 'Landscape in the Sagas of Icelanders', p. 187. Waage's results have been adopted by, for example, Cole, 'Homotopia, or, Reading Sagas on an Industrial Estate', p. 113, and Ástráður Eysteinsson, 'Point of Contact', p. 43.

[6] McManus, 'Natural Resources', p. 535.

[7] Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe*, p. 86.

[8] Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, pp. 191–208.

[9] Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 31.

[10] Laxness, 'Hernaðurinn gegn landinu', p. 10.

[11] Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind*, p. 76.

Can it really be that both Laxness and Steblin-Kamenskij completely overlooked not only evidence for an aesthetic appreciation of landscape in the Sagas of Icelanders, but that these texts with *landsleg* even contain a specific term signifying a 'modern', non-utilitarian, and purely aesthetic view of landscape? The extreme contradiction between Laxness's and Steblin-Kamenskij's argument on the one hand and Waage's recent results on the other hand necessitates a reconsideration of the evidence provided by Waage. The questions I will evaluate in the following are: What does the term *landsleg* signify in the Sagas of Icelanders? In which narrative contexts is it embedded? Is it indeed connected to a purely aesthetic appreciation of the natural beauty of individual landscapes?

## *Færeyinga saga*

The first example of the term *landsleg* considered by Waage is from *Færeyinga saga*, a text about the history of settlement on the Faroe Islands which, however, probably was written in early thirteenth-century Iceland. The term appears in Chapter 24 in the context of a ship journey to the Faroes: men aboard *kenna landsleg* ('recognize the *landsleg*') and are therefore able to identify the island they see.[12] The term seems here to refer mainly to outward characteristics of land. The importance of recognizing the island lies in this case primarily in being able to orientate oneself geographically, while no relation to beauty is indicated. The text passage from *Færeyinga saga* does therefore not provide any evidence for a meaning of *landsleg* that goes beyond its above cited conventional translations as the physical conditions of a land.

## *Laxdœla saga*

In Chapter 38 of *Laxdœla saga*, a sorcerer called Stígandi who had been causing trouble in a region in west Iceland is caught by his enemies and a bag is drawn over his head:

> Rauf var á belgnum, ok getr Stígandi sét ǫðrum megin í hlíðina; þar var fagrt landsleg ok grasloðit; en því var líkast, sem hvirfilvindr komi at; sneri um jǫrðunni, svá at aldregi síðan kom þar gras upp. Þar heitir nú á Brennu.[13]

[12] *Færeyinga saga*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, p. 52. All translations in this article are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

[13] *Laxdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 109.

> (There was a hole in the bag, and Stígandi could look at the hillside on the other side. There was a beautiful *landsleg* and thickly grown with grass. Yet it was as though a whirlwind came; the earth was blown upside down so that there never grew any grass again. That place is now called 'the burning'.)

After that, Stígandi is stoned to death. Waage notes that this episode has a parallel in Chapter 26 of *Vatnsdœla saga*, in which an old female sorcerer unsuccessfully attempts to 'snúa þar um landslagi ǫllu' (turn upside down the entire *landslag* there)[14] through magic in order to avenge the killing of her son.

While the passage from *Vatnsdœla saga* contains no information at all about what *landslag* (which Waage equates with *landsleg*) refers to here, it is clear in the *Laxdœla saga* episode that the place in question has substantial vegetation in the form of grass, which in medieval Icelandic society constituted a valuable resource as hay and pasture — a resource that in the saga is destroyed by the sorcerer. The notion of beauty can thus here very well be connected to an instrumental perception of the element of nature in question. Waage's claim that '*landsleg* was regarded as something that humans could generally not modify'[15] is in any case not convincing, since the (real or intended) change of the *landsleg* is explicitly attributed to human beings in both text passages, and although today a 'magical' explanation for detrimental environmental change would be rejected, it may have fitted well into a medieval frame of interpretation.

## *Vatnsdœla saga*

There are two other occurrences of *landsleg* in *Vatnsdœla saga*. This saga is set in the Settlement Period and focuses in its first part on Ingimundr, a follower of the Norwegian king Haraldr Fairhair. A seer predicts that Ingimundr will migrate to the newly discovered Iceland, and that an amulet he owns mysteriously has made its way there already. Ingimundr announces that he has no intention of ever moving to what he in Chapter 10 calls both an *eyðisker*[16] ('desert skerry') and *eyðibyggðir*[17] ('desert country'). Yet he becomes curious about his amulet and in Chapter 12, he asks three Sámi shamans to explore its whereabouts in Iceland through magical means and to inform him about 'her-

[14] *Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 70.

[15] Waage, 'Landscape in the Sagas of Icelanders', p. 186.

[16] *Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 27.

[17] *Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 29.

að̨s vǫxt ok lands skipun' (the district's size and the land's characteristics),[18] or, as he expresses it soon thereafter, 'segja mér frá landslegi' (to tell me about the *landsleg*).[19] The terms *lands skipan* and *landsleg* are here used interchangeably, suggesting that there was no substantial semantic difference between them, yet with little indication of what exactly they refer to.

The Sámis' report about their spirit journey to Iceland, however, demonstrates that Ingimundr had asked for a primarily geographical description of the place and its surroundings:

> Þar kómu vér á land, sem þrír firðir gengu af landnorðri ok vǫtn váru mikil fyrir innan einn fjǫrðinn. Síðan kómu vér í dal einn djúpan, ok í dalnum undir fjalli einu váru holt nǫkkur; þar var byggiligr hvammr, ok þar í holtinu ǫðru var hlutrinn.[20]
>
> (We came ashore where three fjords stretched from the north into the country and large waters were in the interior close to one of the fjords. Then we came into a deep valley, and in the valley under a mountain there were some hills; there was a habitable grassy slope, and in one of the hills was the amulet .)

Natural wet meadows, as the grassy slope (*hvammr*) mentioned here, would have been the places preferred by early settlers, since they provided hay and pasture without necessitating an initial clearing of woodlands.[21] The described spirit journey can therefore be seen as not only an exploration of the land's geographical characteristics but also of its qualities as a place for human settlement and thus as a resource base, while an appreciation of natural beauty is not mentioned at all.

Despite his initial resistance, Ingimundr eventually decides to migrate to Iceland. When he in Chapter 15 arrives in the valley Vatnsdalr, he states:

> Sú mun sannask spáin Finnanna, því at nú kenni ek landsleg at frásǫgn þeira, at hér mun oss at vísat, ok vænkask nú mjǫk; ek sé nú ok land at víðleika með vexti, ok ef þar fylgja kostir, þá má vera, at hér sé vel byggjanda.[22]
>
> (The Sámis' prediction seems to come true — for now I recognize the *landsleg* from their report — that this must be allocated to us, and now things improve much. I see now very wide land and if there are resources available, then it may be a good place for settling.)

[18] *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 33.

[19] *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 34.

[20] *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 35.

[21] Orri Vésteinsson, 'Patterns of Settlement in Iceland', pp. 7–8.

[22] *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 41.

This second occurrence of the term *landsleg* in *Vatnsdœla saga* is even more obviously embedded in a context of resource exploration than the first one: Ingimundr evaluates the place with regard to its suitability for settling, which requires that natural resources for subsistence are available.

Natural beauty is indeed mentioned a few sentences later, yet again in a very marked resource context: 'Síðan sótti liðit upp í dalinn ok sá þar góða landakosti at grǫsum ok skógum; var fagrt um at litask; lypti þá mjǫk brúnum manna' (then the group went up the valley and spotted there land of a good quality with regard to grasses and woodlands; it was beautiful to look around; the people's faces then lit up a lot).[23] The perception of natural beauty and the following human delight are here explicitly linked to rich resources of grass and wood as the prerequisites for settling and farming. If, as Waage suggests, this sentence is to be read in connection to the term *landsleg* that appears shortly before, then *landsleg* here certainly refers not to a non-utilitarian, purely aesthetic perception of 'landscape'.

This is confirmed by what follows after this passage: 'Ingimundr kaus sér bústað í hvammi einum mjǫk fǫgrum ok efnaði til bœjar' (Ingimundr chose for his dwelling a very beautiful grassy slope and prepared to raise a farm).[24] The *hvammr* (grassy slope) again indicates the availability of good haymaking opportunities. In the subsequent account of Ingimundr's first years in the valley Vatnsdalr, the focus is entirely on the rich natural resources that he utilizes there. The saga mentions, for instance, that Ingimundr owned a lot of livestock, and that when some runaway pigs were found and caught a year after their escape, these had multiplied so enormously that they were one hundred and twenty altogether, and all of them extremely fat.

That the place where Ingimundr finally chooses to settle is characterized by abundant resources and by a natural beauty connected to them links its description to similar passages in medieval hagiography. Christian writers often drew upon the classical pastoral tradition of idealizing rural places and made use of the likewise classical topos of the *locus amoenus*. In lives of the saints such as the eighth-century *Vita Philiberti*, Eigil's ninth-century *Vita Sturmi*, or Herigert of Lobbes's late tenth-century *Vita Remacli*, 'pleasant places' are equipped with a huge variety of overabundant resources, and at the same time connected to concepts of holiness, as they function as the places where hermits and monks choose to dwell.[25]

[23] *Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 41.

[24] *Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 42.

[25] Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, p. 307; Howe, 'Creating Symbolic Landscapes', pp. 210–12; Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape*, pp. 56–62, 100–09.

The resource abundance at such places indicates God's benevolence towards these saints — that it is His will that they should stay precisely there. Furthermore, as John Howe points out with regard to medieval descriptions of monastic sites, '[i]t seems to have been generally accepted that human improvements could enhance natural paradises'[26] and that thus a *locus amoenus* would not have deteriorated through its utilization as a resource base. That there is a fundamental contradiction between the natural beauty of a place and the exploitation of its natural resources seems therefore not to be a medieval but rather a modern assumption.

Many of the Sagas of Icelanders — although set in the pre-Christian period — make use of motifs and narratives that also are found in hagiographic texts.[27] This is especially true of myths of Iceland's first settlement, and it applies also to *Vatnsdœla saga*'s description of how Ingimundr finds and explores the place where he finally raises his farm.[28] The entire story of Ingimundr's migration to Iceland indicates a strong involvement of fate: a higher will directs him to Vatnsdalr. In the end, it is precisely the abundance of natural resources that finally convinces Ingimundr that this is the place that has been predestined for him. While a strong emphasis on natural resources can not at all be surprising in a narrative about the colonization of a new country, their overabundance in *Vatnsdœla saga* indicates a mythical dimension reminiscent of Christian hagiography. The description of the natural environment in this saga is thus probably not independent from a wider, European literary tradition and from the Christian culture in Iceland at the time the saga was written. This intertextuality suggests that *landsleg* does not signify a concept of 'landscape' that was entirely unique to medieval Iceland.

## *Eiríks saga rauða*

*Eiríks saga rauða* describes the settlement of Greenland and the subsequent Norse travels to 'Vínland' on the North American coast. In Chapter 5, Leifr, a son of Eiríkr the Red (the first Norse settler in Greenland), accidentally discovers a land with 'hveitiakrar sjálfsánir ok vínviðr' (self-seeded wheat fields and grapevines).[29] In Chapter 8, people in Greenland start talking a lot about what

[26] Howe, 'Creating Symbolic Landscapes', p. 212.

[27] Roughton, 'A Hagiographical Reading of *Egils saga*', pp. 816–22.

[28] Wellendorf, 'The Interplay of Pagan and Christian Traditions', p. 15; Egeler, 'Reading Sacred Places', pp. 75–79.

[29] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 211.

they call 'Vínland it góða' (the good Wineland) and speculate 'at þangat myndi vera at vitja góðra landskosta' (that there might good lands to be found there).[30] Therefore, an expedition with two ships is launched, whose crews soon succeed in confirming the availability of the aforementioned resources. In a fjord which they call Straumfjǫrðr, they discover an island with so 'mǫrg æðr […] at varla mátti ganga fyrir eggjum' (so many eider ducks […] that one could hardly walk there without stepping on eggs),[31] indicating abundant resources of both food and feathers. The explorers then stay at this fjord: 'Þeir hǫfðu með sér alls konar fénað. Þar var fagrt landsleg; þeir gáðu einskis, útan at kanna landit' (they had with them all kinds of livestock. There was a beautiful *landsleg*. They did not care about anything except exploring the land).[32] The wording slightly differs in another version of the saga: 'Þeir hǫfðu með sér alls konar fénað ok leituðu sér þar landsnytja. Fjǫll váru þar, ok fagrt var þar um at litask. Þeir gáðu einskis nema at kanna landit. Þar váru grǫs mikil' (they had with them all kinds of livestock and made use of the land's resources there. There were mountains and it was beautiful to look around there. They did not care about anything except exploring the land. There was a lot of grass).[33]

Waage argues — analysing both versions in connection to each other — that in the former, the term *landsleg* 'clearly refers to the total appearance of the land, and particularly mountains in that context, and thus corresponds to the modern lexical definition' of 'landscape'.[34] A closer look at the two differing text passages shows, however, that in both of them the description of the land as beautiful is embedded explicitly in a context of exploration and utilization of natural resources such as pasture and eggs.

Waage moreover ignores that these short passages, through emphasizing that the ship crews did not care about anything other than resource exploration, already contain a hint of what inevitably follows once winter sets in: 'Þar váru þeir um vetrinn, ok gerðisk vetr mikill, en ekki fyrir unnit, ok gerðisk illt til matarins, ok tókusk af veiðarnar' (they were there over the winter and it became a harsh winter, but they had not prepared for it. The food became scarce and hunting and fishing did not yield anything anymore).[35]

[30] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 221.

[31] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 224.

[32] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 224.

[33] *Eiríks saga rauða: Texti Skálholtsbókar*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, p. 425.

[34] Waage, 'Landscape in the Sagas of Icelanders', p. 186.

[35] *Eiríks saga rauða: Texti Skálholtsbókar*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, p. 425.

Since this part of the saga is set in the time shortly after Norway's, Iceland's, and Greenland's conversion to Christianity, the ship crews pray to God for food, 'ok varð eigi við svá skjótt, sem þeir þóttusk þurfa' (but their prayers were not heard as quickly as they thought they needed it).[36] One day, a whale is washed ashore, but all who eat from it get sick. It turns out that one of the crew, Þórhallr the Huntsman, who still adheres to the pagan religion, had asked the god Þórr to send them food in this way. When the Christians learn of this, they throw away what is left of the whale and 'skutu sínu máli til guðs. Batnaði þá veðrátta, ok gaf þeim útróðra, ok skorti þá síðan eigi fǫng, því at þá var dýraveiðr á landinu, en eggver í eynni, en fiski ór sjónum' (commended their matters to God. Then the weather improved, they could go fishing and had no lack of food from then on, because there was game on the land, eggs on the island, and fish from the sea).[37] Þórhallr later sails away with eight other men on his ship, yet bad weather drives them to Ireland where they are tortured and killed.

This shows that there is a religious dimension to the entire Straumfjǫrðr episode. The availability of abundant natural resources at this place makes the explorers forget to make provisions for the winter. Starvation then threatens both Christians and pagans, but real help can only be expected from the Christian God as a reward for adhering to the true faith even in problematic situations, while those who revert to the pagan religion are punished. The description of the land at Straumfjǫrðr as beautiful in a context of temporarily abundant resources thus indicates danger emanating from worldly temptations and is not an expression of a 'modern', non-utilitarian, and purely aesthetic appreciation of landscape. The term *landsleg* appears therefore in *Eiríks saga* not at all unrelated to a view of land as a resource, but it is precisely this resource function which adds another, namely a moral, Christian framing to the narrative.[38]

[36] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 224.

[37] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 224–25.

[38] The medieval accounts of Vínland seem moreover to be at least as much inspired by descriptions of the Blessed Isles in learned Latin geographical literature as by any individual 'real' landscapes (Egeler, *Islands in the West*, pp. 65–70), which further emphasizes that they have little to nothing to do with an aesthetic appreciation of landscape, rather than with its literary construction as a bearer of meaning.

## *Reykdœla saga*

In *Reykdœla saga ok Víga-Skútu* — which is set in the tenth century and thus before Iceland's Christianization — the righteous chieftain Áskell is living on the farm Hvammr in northern Iceland. In Chapter 16, when departing for a journey to Eyjafjǫrðr together with two companions, they stop at a place called Leyningsbakki close to Áskell's farm. Áskell then states 'at þar vildi hann vera grafinn, þá er hann andaðisk, ok þótti þar vera gott landslag, ok sagði, at hann vildi ekki fé hafa með sér' (that he wanted to be buried there when he died. He thought that the *landsleg* was good there, and he said that he didn't want to have any grave goods).[39] Although his companions assure him that it will take a long time until he dies, Áskell receives a mortal wound already the next day. Leyningsbakki is not mentioned again directly in the saga, but it is stated that Áskell's relatives bury him the way he had wished.

Waage speculates that the 'good' *landsleg* here might signify that Leyningsbakki (which cannot be identified in 'real-world' Iceland) may have been 'a site with an outstanding vista',[40] and that Áskell's statement constitutes an expression of an aesthetic appreciation of landscape. This interpretation could possibly be confirmed through a close parallel in Chapter 75 of *Njáls saga* of which it has been claimed that it 'memorably expresses an aesthetic appreciation of landscape'.[41] When Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi is outlawed, he prepares to leave Iceland for three years. Everything is ready for departure, and he and his brother Kolskeggr leave the farm at Hlíðarendi together:

> Þeir ríða fram at Markarfljóti, þá drap hestr Gunnars fœti, ok stǫkk hann ór sǫðlinum. Honum varð litit upp til hlíðarinnar ok bœjarins at Hlíðarenda ok mælti: 'Fǫgr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfǫgr sýnzk, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim aptr ok fara hvergi'.[42]
>
> (They ride to the Markarfljót river; there Gunnarr's horse stumbled and he jumped out of the saddle. He happened to look up to the hillside and the farm at Hlíðarendi and said: 'Beautiful is the hillside, so that it never has appeared equally beautiful to me, the pale fields and the mown home meadow, and I will ride back and travel nowhere'.)

[39] *Reykdœla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, ed. by Björn Sigfússon, p. 198. Waage points out that the spelling *landslag* in this edition is wrong, since the word is spelled *landsleg* in the manuscript.

[40] Waage, 'Landscape in the Sagas of Icelanders', p. 187.

[41] Phelpstead, 'Ecocriticism and *Eyrbyggja saga*', p. 8.

[42] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 182.

Gunnarr is killed by his enemies as a direct consequence of his staying home.

The same narrative connection between a vision of a beautiful place and a violent death following soon after appears even in Chapter 4 of *Grœnlendinga saga*, which like *Eiríks saga* describes Norse expeditions to Vínland. During one such expedition, Þorvaldr (another son of Eiríkr the Red), standing on a wooded promontory, declares: 'Hér er fagrt, ok hér vilda ek bœ minn reisa' (it is beautiful here, and I would want to raise my farm here).[43] Only shortly afterwards, Þorvaldr receives a deadly wound in an encounter with Vínland's indigenous population. Before he dies, he states that he wants to be buried on the promontory that he found so attractive for settling: '[Þ]ar skulu þér mik grafa ok setja krossa at hǫfði mér ok at fótum, ok kallið þat Krossanes jafnan síðan' (you shall bury me there, and erect crosses at my head and my feet and call the site 'Cross Promontory' ever after).[44]

This passage is explicitly set in a strongly religious — that is, Christian — context through the way in which Þorvaldr wishes to be buried. The same is, although in a slightly more implicit way, true of *Reykdœla saga*: Although not being baptized, Áskell rejects the pagan tradition of grave goods and thus wishes to be buried more in accordance with Christian burial customs. Áskell is indeed in the saga portrayed as what Lars Lönnroth calls a 'noble heathen': a pagan who through his (from a Christian point of view) morally impeccable behaviour 'appears to be a sort of precursor, or herald, of Christianity'.[45] Even Gunnarr is in *Njáls saga* consistently portrayed as such a 'noble heathen'.[46] The beautiful or 'good' *landsleg* that Áskell sees a short time before his death, and the surprising beauty of Hlíðarendi perceived by Gunnar before his inevitable killing, may therefore, as in the more explicitly Christian context of the passage about Þorvaldr's death, not at all signify a particular this-worldly 'landscape' but rather a glimpse of a heavenly Otherworld. This Otherworld was during the Middle Ages often imagined as a place of extraordinary beauty, as can be seen in numerous reports of visionary experiences, many of which were translated into Icelandic.[47]

[43] *Grœnlendinga saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 255.

[44] *Grœnlendinga saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 256.

[45] Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen', p. 2.

[46] Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen', p. 14.

[47] In an example from thirteenth-century Iceland, a woman is shown the heavenly abodes of the saints, which are located on 'uellir sléttir. ok fagrir með allz konar blome. ok unaðe. ok ilm' (flat and beautiful plains with all sorts of flowers and bliss and fragrance): *Guðmundar sögur biskups 1*, ed. by Stefán Karlsson, p. 97.

That this idea even found its way into the Sagas of Icelanders is apparent from Chapter 23 of *Flóamanna saga*, in which the Christian couple Þórey and Þorgils endure enormous hardships after having been stranded on the Greenlandic coast. One day, 'Þórey sagði draum sinn Þorgilsi, at hon kvaðst sjá fögr heröð ok menn bjarta' (Þórey told Þorgils about a dream in which she had seen beautiful lands and shining people).[48] Þorgils interprets this as an omen pointing to the Otherworld and expresses his belief that the saints will support Þórey as a reward for her impeccable Christian life. Þórey is murdered by slaves soon after.

An extraordinary beauty perceived by an impeccable person shortly before her or his violent death seems therefore in the Sagas of Icelanders, as in the cases of Þorvaldr and of Þórey, to be not at all of this world, but rather to signify heavenly joy awaiting those who lead their life in accordance to the Christian code of morals. The same applies even when they, like Gunnarr and Áskell — given the time period they are born into — cannot be 'officially' Christian yet. This means then, however, that the term *landsleg* as it occurs in *Reykdæla saga* does not express a 'modern' aesthetic appreciation of a real, individual landscape, but rather is embedded in a Christian religious framing.[49]

## *Króka-Refs saga*

*Króka-Refs saga*, from which the last instance of *landsleg* cited by Waage stems, may be one of the rare examples in which the term does not appear in a mythic or religious context. This saga's main character is an Icelandic farmer's son called Króka-Refr. After having killed two men in Iceland, he sails to Greenland. In Chapter 6, when standing on a high mountain far north from the Norse settlements there, he discovers an uninhabited, hidden valley, with 'góð höfn. Skógi var vaxit allt um hlíðir ok grænar brekkur. Jöklar girtu þar um allt báðumegin. Þar var fjöldi dýra. Rekaviðr lá þar um allar fjörur, en veiðiskapr nógr' ('a good harbour. Wood was growing on the hillsides and the hills were green. Glaciers girdled the valley on both sides. There was a lot of game. Driftwood lay on every

[48] *Flóamanna saga*, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 286.

[49] The beauty perceived by both Gunnarr and Áskell is moreover not purely 'natural' but associated with an agricultural landscape (in *Njáls saga*, fields and hay meadows are explicitly mentioned), and Þorvaldr clearly expresses the wish to raise a farm at the place he considers beautiful. Perceptions of beauty are thus even here connected to an instrumental view of nature as a resource.

shore and there was abundant fish to catch').[50] Refr and his crew stay there for the winter yet travel south to the inhabited parts of Greenland in the following year, where Refr gets married and stays for eight years. After having killed a neighbouring farmer and his four sons, Refr retreats to the hidden valley.

Bárðr, a liegeman of the Norwegian king Haraldr Sigurðarson, has come to Greenland to acquire walrus tusks and hides for the king. Together with Gunnarr (a relative of those whom Refr has killed), he launches a search expedition to the uninhabited parts of Greenland in order to find Refr. In Chapter 10, when standing on a headland at a fjord, Bárðr sees 'hvar annarr fjörðr hófst upp, mikill ok langr, ok þar sá hann dal ganga upp at fjöllum, fagran ok mikinn' (where another fjord opened up, large and long, and there he saw a valley reaching up to the mountains, beautiful and large).[51] At the lower end of this valley is Refr's abode, where the latter has built a wooden fortification which proves to be invulnerable. Gunnarr sends extremely valuable gifts to King Haraldr (among others a polar bear and an ornate walrus head) in order to gain the king's advice on how to overcome Refr. In Chapter 12, the king then asks 'hversu þar væri landslegi háttat' (which characteristics the *landsleg* there had) and is told so by Bárðr, yet without the saga mentioning exactly what Bárðr says.[52]

Waage interprets the king's question concerning the *landsleg* as being connected to the two previous descriptions of the hidden valley and concludes that there is an 'aesthetic appreciation'[53] of the area's natural features connected to its conception as *landsleg*. This is, however, not as clear as Waage suggests. When the valley is described first, the focus is almost exclusively on the natural resources available there in the form of a harbour, woodland, driftwood, and food (game and fish). The glaciers on both sides of the valley serve mainly to emphasize its hidden and thus protected location (which plays an important role in the story), not its natural beauty. When in the second instance the valley is called 'beautiful and large', this may equally well constitute a reference to its qualities as a resource base as to the visual impression it creates on the spectator.

The export of luxury goods such as walrus tusks was central to the Norse-Greenlandic economy from its beginnings and throughout the Middle Ages.[54]

[50] *Króka-Refs saga*, ed. by Jóhannes Halldórsson, p. 132.

[51] *Króka-Refs saga*, ed. by Jóhannes Halldórsson, p. 140.

[52] *Króka-Refs saga*, ed. by Jóhannes Halldórsson, p. 144.

[53] Waage, 'Landscape in the Sagas of Icelanders', p. 187.

[54] Frei and others, 'Was it for Walrus?'.

In *Króka-Refs saga*, specifically Greenlandic natural resources are mentioned over and over again and play an important role for the progression of its story. Such resources are the reason why Bárðr is sent to Greenland in the first place, and Gunnar pays with such luxury goods for the king's advice (which finally makes it possible to overcome Refr's fortress). In Chapter 18, Refr himself — who manages to escape to Norway and later to Denmark — has his ship full of Greenlandic goods, which are much appreciated in Denmark:

> Kom þat upp, at þeir hefði of fjár í svörð ok tannvöru ok skinnavöru ok mörgum þeim hlutum, er fásénir váru í Danmörk af grænlenzkum varningi. Þeir höfðu fimm hvítabjörnu ok fimm tigi fálka ok fimmtán hvíta.[55]
>
> (it turned out that they had abundant goods in the form of walrus hides and tusks, furs, and many of those sorts of Greenlandic commodities that were rare in Denmark. They had five polar bears and fifty falcons of which fifteen were white.)

What is considered to be the most interesting aspect of Greenland's nature is thus — at least in *Króka-Ref's saga* — not the beauty of its landscapes but rather the special and very valuable natural resources that can be acquired there. There is therefore even in this text no indication that *landsleg* signifies a non-utilitarian and purely aesthetic appreciation of 'landscape'.

## *Conclusion*

A thorough consideration of the eight occurrences of *landsleg* cited by Waage shows that the term itself did not comprise a meaning that exceeded that of 'physical conditions' or outward characteristics of a piece of land. A description of land as 'beautiful' appears indeed in some cases, yet the fact alone that certain elements of non-human nature are called 'beautiful' does not per se provide evidence for a 'modern', non-utilitarian, and purely aesthetic appreciation of 'landscape' in these texts. A closer analysis of the passages containing the term *landsleg* hardly confirms Waage's claim that of them, 'none [...] suggests an economic or social connotation regarding the land under discussion'[56] — to the contrary: in most cases, the term appears in a narrative context in which natural resources play a central role.

This demonstrates that the assumption that an instrumental and an aesthetic view of nature are mutually exclusive is highly problematic when applied

[55] *Króka-Refs saga*, ed. by Jóhannes Halldórsson, p. 157.

[56] Waage, 'Landscape in the Sagas of Icelanders', p. 187.

to medieval literary texts such as the Sagas of Icelanders. There is no indication of such a dualistic perspective in the texts themselves. It is indeed precisely through the function of elements of nature as resources that in many cases a more-than-material, mythic, or religious level of meaning is added to the respective text passages. This meaning derives from the medieval Christian culture that forms the sagas' background, and which provided models for the use of nature as a literary motif.

Waage does not even mention that the term *landsleg* also appears in a number of other medieval Icelandic texts many of which — other than the Sagas of Icelanders — constitute translations of non-Icelandic texts or compilations based on such texts; for instance *Rómverja saga*, *Maríu saga*, *Stjórn*, *Gyðinga saga*, *Tveggia postola saga Jóns ok Jacobs*, and *Valvers þáttr*.[57] There is no room here for a detailed discussion of how the term is used in these texts — suffice it to say that even in them there is no indication of any deviation from the conventional understanding of *landsleg* as signifying the physical conditions of land. The mere occurrence of the term in translated texts moreover suggests that *landsleg* not at all denotes a concept that was unique to medieval Icelandic culture. It is only through ignoring the possibility of intertextual relations that Waage can come to the conclusion that the term *landsleg* signified the existence of a 'modern' view of landscape in Iceland long before it evolved elsewhere. The possibility that such a view existed already during the Middle Ages can, of course, not be entirely excluded. Yet if it did, then it does not seem to have been connected to the term *landsleg*.

[57] *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*, s.v. *lands·leg* <http://onpweb.nfi.sc.ku.dk/webart/l/la/47642ckron.htm> [accessed 27 June 2016].

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