

The Fluidity of Tradition: Place-Names, Travelogues, and Medieval Tales of the Western Icelandic Shoreline



Matthias Egeler

Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich

Abstract: This article discusses the fundamental fluidity of Icelandic place-lore. It approaches this topic through the example of the settlement of Auðr the Deep-Minded in western Iceland as described by the thirteenth-century 'Book of Settlements' (Landnámabók). I undertake an analysis of this medieval account, which places a central focus on the naming and narrative interpretation of the local landscape of the Hvammsfjörður fjord, with recourse to material preserved in nineteenth-century travel writing, folklore, and toponymy. I then relate my findings to classic perspectives in landscape theory and highlight the extreme ambivalences that become visible in the landscape construction represented by this material if one considers its linguistic minutiae.

INTRODUCTION

The present contribution takes its starting point from a small landscape feature in the western Icelandic fjord of Hvammsfjörður: the coastal rock Auðarsteinn. At first glance, this rock may, in just about every respect, seem quite insignificant. Yet if put into context, this feature of the western Icelandic shoreline is able to illustrate several points that deserve attention within the wider discourse on medieval landscapes: the heuristic usefulness of connecting place-lore with the physical places in which it is set; the potential significance of recent folk memory and folklore; the value of historical travel accounts for the interpretation of landscapes; and, especially, the importance of linguistic analysis for interpreting the original etymology of place-

names as well as later semantic reinterpretation and resegmentation in the context of, often much later, narrative traditions.

It should be emphasised from the outset that the way in which the following discussion will combine data from very different time periods has its own methodological problems, namely, those posed by the chronology of the sources used. In addition to linguistic analysis, the following discussion will use material from nineteenth- and twentieth-century storytelling and toponymy to present a reading of a medieval text and its possible genesis. Such an approach cannot yield secure insights about the Middle Ages, however carefully ‘retrospective methods’ are applied.¹ Nevertheless, I hope the following discussion will show that such an approach can deepen our understanding of important aspects of the complexity of the material, and of the very uncertainty of its interpretation. Icelandic narrative tradition is characterised by not only continuity, but also fluidity. The following discussion should, therefore, be understood not so much as a historical analysis trying to uncover medieval ‘truths’ but rather as a landscape-focused exercise in a method highlighting some complexities which so far have not received as much attention as they should have.

LANDSCAPE IN MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIAN STUDIES

In the wake of the ‘spatial turn’ most famously proclaimed by Michel Foucault,² the topic of ‘landscape’ has in the last decades become increasingly prominent in the study of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and cultural history. An early precursor of the present trend towards landscape analyses in Old Norse studies was *Landscape of Desire*, a book by Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn, who in the mid-1990s presented a panorama of Old Norse as well as Old English literary landscapes in which they studied places connected with the Old English epic of Beowulf and sites from medieval Icelandic saga literature.³ In this monograph, Overing and Osborn state as an underlying principle and motivating factor of their study that ‘we share places with the past, and we view the experience of a place as a negotiative activity whereby

¹ For a more general discussion of retrospective methods in the study of Old Norse literature see Eldar Heide and Karen Bek-Pedersen (eds.), *New Focus on Retrospective Methods, Folklore Fellows Communications 307* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2014).

² Michel Foucault, ‘Von anderen Räumen (1967)’, in *Raumtheorie. Grundlagentexte aus Philosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. by Jörg Dünne and Stephan Günzel in collaboration with Hermann Doetsch and Roger Lüdeke (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), pp. 317–29. There p. 317, where he defines the present as an ‘epoch of space’, in contrast to the ‘epoch of history’ that was the nineteenth century.

³ Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn, *Landscape of Desire. Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World* (Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

we may extend, develop, or invent our dialogue with the past'.⁴ Using this approach, place and landscape become a gateway through which modern scholarship may access the past.⁵ More recently, scholars such as Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, Carl Phelpstead, Eleanor Barraclough, Sverrir Jakobsson and others have dealt with topics such as the construction of Icelandic landscapes as carriers of meaning in individual sagas; the use of place-names, place-naming and place-storytelling; specific types of places; and more general questions of the Icelandic narrative and cultural construction of space.⁶ This current trend in research on Old Norse-Icelandic literature is founded on a prominent trait of medieval Icelandic narratives, or at least of those genres of Icelandic literature that are set in historical settings in Iceland: their focus on localising the events they recount. This is particularly central for the genre of the Sagas of Icelanders and Icelandic historiography. Generally, the Sagas of Icelanders are concerned

⁴ Overing and Osborn, p. xi.

⁵ In my usage of the terms 'space' and 'place', which have been defined in various different ways, I generally follow the approach chosen, for instance, by Tim Cresswell. Cresswell, following Yi-Fu Tuan, conceptualises 'space' as a kind of empty slate which forms the basis from which 'place' is created by an act of differentiation, by personalising it or giving it some kind of meaning. For this approach, (meaningless, anonymous) 'space' is the raw material from which (personal, personalised, meaningful) 'place' is created (Tim Cresswell, *Place. An Introduction*, second edition (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015); Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience* (London: Arnold, 1977)). In my usage of the term 'landscape', I follow a common (but by no means universal) usage which conceptualises 'landscape' as the combination of a territory's physical topography with its culturally ascribed semantics. A good example of this usage is provided by Tim Robinson's definition, who understands landscape as 'being not just the terrain but also the human perspectives on it, the land plus its overburden of meanings' (Tim Robinson, 'Listening to the landscape', in *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara & other Writings*, by Tim Robinson (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1996), pp. 151–64 (p. 162)).

⁶ E.g. Matthias Egeler, *Atlantic Outlooks on Being at Home: Gaelic Place-Lore and the Construction of a Sense of Place in Medieval Iceland*, Folklore Fellows Communications 314 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia (Academia Scientiarum Fennica), 2018); Matthias Egeler, 'The narrative uses of toponyms in *Harðar saga*', *NORDEUROPAforum* 2018, pp. 80–101 (<<https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/handle/18452/20300>>, accessed 09/12/2018); Matthias Egeler, 'The medialization of the supernatural in the toponymy of the Book of Settlements', in *Hvannadalir – Beiträge zur europäischen Altertumskunde und mediävistischen Literaturwissenschaft. Festschrift für Wilhelm Heizmann*, ed. by Alessia Bauer and Alexandra Pesch, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 106 (Berlin – Boston: de Gruyter, 2018), pp. 47–66; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Space', in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London – New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 175–86; Matthias Egeler, 'Constructing a landscape in *Eyrbyggja saga*: the case of *Dritsker*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 132 (2017), pp. 101–20; Emily Lethbridge, 'The Icelandic sagas and saga landscapes', *Gripla* 27 (2016), pp. 51–92; Matthias Egeler, 'Reading sacred places: geocriticism, the Icelandic *Book of Settlements*, and the history of religions', *Philology* 1 (2015), pp. 67–90; Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, 'Introduction: *Minni* and *Muninn* – Memory in medieval Nordic culture', in *Minni and Muninn. Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, ed. by Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir. *Acta Scandinavica* 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 1–10; Lisa Bennett, 'Burial practices as sites of cultural memory in the *Íslendingasögur*', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 10 (2014), pp. 27–52; Carl Phelpstead, 'Ecocriticism and *Eyrbyggja saga*', *Leeds Studies in English* 45 (2014), pp. 1–18; Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, 'Naming the landscape in the *Landnám* narratives of the *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók*', *Saga-Book* 36 (2012), pp. 79–101; Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, 'Inside outlawry in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*: landscape in the outlaw sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 82 (2010), pp. 365–88; Pernille Hermann, 'Founding narratives and the representation of memory in saga literature', *ARV Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 66 (2010), pp. 69–87; Jürg Glauser, 'Sagas of the Icelanders (*Íslendinga sögur*) and *þættir* as the literary representation of a new social space', transl. by John Clifton-Everest in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross. *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature* 42 (Cambridge – New York – Melbourne – Madrid: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 203–20.

with the lives and deaths of prominent inhabitants of Iceland between the island's settlement in the ninth century and the dramatic political changes of the thirteenth. In some respects, there is no hard boundary between historical literature and the Sagas of Icelanders, as these sagas use the literary device of pretending that their plots are historical in nature and their stories recount real occurrences, not entirely unlike historical novels. As part of their narrative realism, the Sagas of Icelanders put great emphasis on localising their plots: every event is given a place in real-world geographical space, sometimes to the point where descriptions of journeys recount the name of every single farm passed on the way even if nothing happens there. A similar interest in localisation is often found in more strictly historical texts. It is particularly pervasive in *Landnámabók*, the Icelandic 'Book of Settlements', which even organises its material according to a geographical framework.

AUÐR THE DEEP-MINDED

A good example of this preoccupation with localisation is the account of the life and death of Auður the Deep-Minded in the earliest extant recension of *Landnámabók* in *Sturlubók* (hereafter *Landnámabók S*). *Landnámabók* is a historical text which gives an account of the first settlement of Iceland in the ninth century – even though it is anything but unproblematic how close this account comes to the historical 'truth'.⁷ Its oldest extant recension, found in the manuscript *Sturlubók* from the late thirteenth century, contains the following description of the settlement and religious life of Auður the Deep-Minded, one of the most famous female settlers of Iceland (*Landnámabók S*97, 110):

Epter vm vorit fór Auðr i Landa leit in i Breidafjord ok Lags með heðar. þau átu dagurd fyri nordann Breidafjord þar er nu heiter Daugurdarnes. Síþan foru þau in eyiasvnd. þau lendu vid nes þat er Auðr tapadi kambí sinum. þat kalladi hun Kamsnes. Auðr nam aull Dalalaund i inannverdum firdinum fra

⁷ The *Sturlubók*-recension of *Landnámabók* has been edited by Finnur Jónsson, *Landnámabók. I–III. Hauksbók. Sturlubók. Melabók* (København: Thieles bogtrykkeri, 1900), pp. 127–231. For a normalised composite edition of *Landnámabók*, see Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók, Íslensk fornrit 1* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968). For an English translation see Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *The Book of Settlements. Landnámabók*, translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards. *University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies 1* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1972 (reprint 2012)). On the problems and potential of *Landnámabók* as a historical source, see Matthias Egeler, *Atlantic Outlooks*, esp. pp. 280–1; Matthias Egeler, 'A retrospective methodology for using *Landnámabók* as a source for the religious history of Iceland? Some questions', *RMN Newsletter* 10 (2015), pp. 78–92 (<https://www.helsinki.fi/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rmn_10_2015.pdf>, last accessed 23/01/2019); Jakob Benediktsson, 'Landnámabók. Some remarks on its value as a historical source', *Saga-Book* 17 (1966–69), pp. 275–92.

Daugurdar á til Skramuhlaups áar. hun bio i Hvammi vid Aurrida aar ós þar heita Audartopter. hun hafdi Bænahalld sitt æ Kroshólum. þar let hun reisa Krosa þviat hun var skird ok vel truud. þar haufdu frændr heNar síþan ætrunad mikIN á hólana var þa giaur haurg er blót toku til. trudu þeir þvi at þeir dæi i hólana. ok þar var Þorðr Gellir leiddr i adr hann tok maNvirding sem seiger i sogu hans. [...]

Auðr var vegs kona mikil. Þa er hun var elli mód baud hun til sin frændum sinum ok mægum ok bio dyrliga veislu. EN er þriar nætr hafde veizlan stadi þa valdi hun giufer vinum sinum ok red þeim heilrædi. sagde hun at þa skyllði standa veizlan enn iij. nætr. hun kuad þat vera skylldu erbi sitt. þa nott epter andadizt hun ok var grafinn i flædar mæli sem hun hafdi fyrer sagt. þuiat hun villdi eigi LiGia i ovigdri molldu er hun var skird. Eptter þad spilltizt trva frænda heNar.

In the spring Auðr set out to look for land in Breiðafjörður, and her companions went with her. They took their breakfast towards the south of Breiðafjörður, at a place that's now called Dögurðarnes ('Breakfast Peninsula'). Then they sailed up past the islands in the sound and landed at a certain headland where Auðr lost her comb, so she called it Kambsnes ('Peninsula of the Comb').

Auðr took possession of the entire Dalir district at the head of the fjord, between the Dögurðará and Skraumuhlaupsá Rivers. She made her home at Hvammur near Aurriðáárós River Estuary, at a place now called Auðartóptir ('Auðr's Ruins'). She used to say prayers at Krosshólar ('Cross Hills'); she had crosses erected there, for she had been baptized and was a devout Christian. Later her kinsmen worshipped these hills; then when sacrifices began, a pagan temple was built there. They believed they would go into the hills when they died. Þórðr gellir was led to the hills before he took over the chieftaincy, as it is told in his saga. [...]

Auðr was a woman of great dignity. When she was growing weary with old age, she invited her kinsmen and relatives by marriage to a magnificent feast, and when the feast had been celebrated for three days, she chose fine gifts for her friends and gave them sound advice. She declared that the feast would go on for another three days and that it would be her funeral feast. That very night she died, and she was buried at the high water mark as she'd ordered, because having been baptized, she didn't wish to lie in unconsecrated earth. Afterwards her kinsmen lost the faith.⁸

This short passage has received much attention – not least because Auðr is one of the most prominent, if not *the* most prominent, female figures of Icelandic historiography – and it would be impossible to exhaustively discuss its implications for the various fields of research in Old

⁸ Translation by Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, pp. 52, 55, slightly adapted to achieve consistency in the use of personal and place-names with the rest of the article.

Norse-Icelandic studies.⁹ Here, its main interest lies in what it shows about medieval Icelandic perspectives on landscape.

In the first part of the passage quoted here we see Auðr moving through western Iceland in search of a location where she wants to settle down. The situation around which the story revolves, importantly, is one of a first settlement. At this juncture in the narrative, set at some point in the late ninth century, we are in the founding years of Iceland as a country inhabited by humans: the island, only recently discovered by Scandinavians, is still largely empty.¹⁰ There are no settlements, no roads, and not even its headlands and mountains have names yet. Auðr travels through this empty land, naming it as she goes: where she eats breakfast becomes ‘Breakfast Peninsula’ (Dögurðarnes), where she loses her comb becomes the ‘Peninsula of the Comb’ (Kambsnes).

It is worth highlighting how tongue-in-cheek these place-names sound. Thus, one wonders whether a name like ‘Breakfast Peninsula’ really is quite what it seems: that is, until one investigates the use of toponymy based on time reference points. One class of Icelandic place-names is formed from references to times of the day.¹¹ Just as the liturgical day is divided into Canonical hours, pre-modern Icelandic time measuring divided the day by eight *eyktir*, comprising three hours each. These start with *óttá* (3 am, corresponding to the liturgical matins), followed by *miður morgunn* or *rismál* (6 am), *dagmál* (9 am), *miðdegi* or *hádegi* (12 am), *nón* (the Canonical None at 3 pm), etc.¹² Since time of course was estimated from the position of the sun, a specific type of Icelandic place-name became established which names landscape features from the names of hours: the place where the sun stood at a specific hour as seen from

⁹ Furthermore, see, for instance, Miriam Mayburd, ‘The hills have eyes: post-mortem mountain dwelling and the (super)natural landscape in the *Íslendingasögur*’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 10 (2014), pp. 129–54; Sofie Vanherpen, ‘Remembering Auðr/Unnr *djúp(a)uðga* Ketilsdóttir: construction of cultural memory and female religious identity’, *Mirator* 14 (2013), pp. 61–78; W. Heizmann, ‘Totenberg’, in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 35. *Speckstein – Zwiebel (Nachträge und Ergänzungen)*. Second edition ed. by Heinrich Beck, Dieter Geuenich and Heiko Steuer (Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), pp. 186–89; Magnús Már Lárusson, ‘Krosshólar’, in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder 9: konge – kyrkorummet*, ed. by Johannes Brøndsted, Bernt Hjejle, Peter Skautrup, Axel Steensberg, Georg Rona, and Allan Karker (København: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1964), cols. 455–6.

¹⁰ There is good reason to assume that the medieval Icelandic idea of a pre-Norse settlement of Iceland by Irish anchorites, the so-called *papar*, is an unhistorical or (as it would be termed in the research discourse on Ireland) ‘pseudo-historical’ construct: Egeler, *Atlantic Outlooks*, pp. 169–87.

¹¹ Cf. Hilmar Egill Sveinbjörnsson, *Örnefni tengd landbúnaði og sjávarútvegi í Kirkjubólshreppi á Ströndum*, B.S. ritgerð (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, Maí 2000), pp. 44, 46 (Mynd 11).

¹² For a more detailed discussion of the Icelandic *eyktir* see the University of Iceland’s *Vísindavefurinn* at <<https://www.visindavefur.is/svar.php?id=4343>>, last accessed 10/10/2019, Hilmar Egill Sveinbjörnsson, p. 44, and Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. With an introduction and life of Richard Cleasby by George Webbe Dasent (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), s.v. ‘dagr’, ‘dag-mál’, ‘nón’, etc.

the farm building could be named from the name of this hour. Thus, the measuring of time was toponymically inscribed into the land. At least in parts of Iceland, this way of forming place-names is very common; for instance, the farm Kleifar in Strandir has a Nónsker ('None Skerry', 'Three-o'clock Skerry'), a Dagmálahóll ('9 am Hill'), and a Hádegishóll ('Midday Hill'). In a study of place-names in Kirkjubólshreppur in Strandir, Hilmar Egill Sveinbjörnsson noted that every single farm in his study area had at least two such 'time place-names'; some had as many as four.¹³ This raises a tantalising possibility: could the puzzling Dögurðarnes be a variant of a toponym of the type 'Dagmálanes', '9 am Peninsula'? This seems particularly likely given that already Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson noted that *dagmál* and *dagverðarmál* ('breakfast-time') are synonymous to the point that *dagmál* and *dagverðarmál* are used indiscriminately in Icelandic manuscripts.¹⁴ It seems that Dögurðarnes/Dagverðarnes¹⁵ simply is a variant of a very common theme in Icelandic toponymy where a landscape feature is used as a reference point for measuring time and is named from this. In *Landnámabók*, however, the resulting name is connected with a story that tied it to the area's founding heroine and thus made it rather more special, though in a way so understated to seem almost funny. What we seem to be witnessing here is a narrative play with place-names.

An even clearer indication that this place-storytelling contained an element of playfulness is given by the story connected with Kambsnes. Linguistically, Kambsnes is a straightforward composite noun consisting of the genitive singular of *kambr* + *nes* ('peninsula'). Yet while the morphology of the name is unambiguous, its meaning is not quite so: *kambr* has the same semantic ambiguity as, say, modern German *Kamm* and thus can denote a 'comb' (both the kind to wear in a hair-do and the kind to card wool with) as much as the 'crest, ridge' of a hill.¹⁶ If one considers the topography of Kambsnes, which forms the pointed end of a prominent ridge jutting out into the Hvammsfjörður fjord,¹⁷ it seems quite clear that, contrary to what the narrative of *Landnámabók* tells, Kambsnes was not originally a 'Peninsula of a Comb', but a 'Ridge Peninsula'. The change from 'Ridge Peninsula' to 'Peninsula of a Comb' seems to have come about by a process not entirely unlike a 'folk etymology' or 'pseudo-etymology', though I shy away from either of these two established terms, as they could be taken to imply an unwitting mistake on the part of the storyteller where there might never have

¹³ Hilmar Egill Sveinbjörnsson, p. 44.

¹⁴ Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, s.v. 'dag-mál'.

¹⁵ The forms *dagverðr* and *dögurðr* are equivalent, see Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, s.v. 'dag-verðr'.

¹⁶ Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, s.v. 'kambr'.

¹⁷ Landmælingar Íslands, <<https://ornefnasja.lmi.is>>, s.v. 'Kambsnes (Dalabyggð)', last accessed 21/01/2019.

been such a mistake. The change from ‘Ridge Peninsula’ to ‘Peninsula of a Comb’ is more likely to have been by purposeful narrative design rather than error because the original, topographically descriptive meaning of the toponym is too obvious to be mistaken.¹⁸ The method of this narrative device was a re-interpretation of the toponym on the basis of the double-meaning of *kambr* (‘comb’/‘ridge’): in its original meaning, the toponym Kambsnes probably referred simply to the real landscape feature of ridge (*kambr*) near the peninsula (*nes*). Yet such a straightforward topographical reference does not make for much of a story: the narrator reinterpreted Kambsnes through the second of the two meanings of *kambr* and turned it from a ‘Ridge Peninsula’ into a ‘Peninsula of a Comb’. Thus, an interesting narrative was created by using the most unlikely interpretation of the toponym as the basis for a story. The ‘humanist geography’ of Yi-Fu Tuan emphasises that in a settlement situation, it is a central human desire to fill the newly settled landscape with meaning by naming its elements and connecting it with stories and thus humanising it.¹⁹ The story of Auðr’s search for a settlement site strongly suggests that in Iceland, this process of humanisation involved a considerable degree of playfulness where a story could be created by re-reading a pre-existing name.

The next section of the text describes how Auðr settles down. She builds her farm at Hvammr (‘Grassy Hollow’; still an inhabited farm today), and the text now switches from simply narrating the past to the narrator’s present by stating that Auðr settles ‘at a place now called Auðartóptir’. Since Auðartóptir again is a semantically clear name which simply means ‘Auðr’s Ruins’, the implication seems to be that the location takes its name from what the medieval author thought of as the visible remains of Auðr’s farm. This correlates closely with current memory-theoretical approaches to landscape: the visible ruins and the place-name that refers to them recall the history of Auðr’s settlement, pinning the memory of it down to the landscape. What the medieval author appears to be doing here thus perfectly dovetails with Simon Schama’s approach to landscape in his *Landscape and Memory*, where he emphasises

¹⁸ Medieval etymologising is too often belittled and dismissed. Concerning the Irish tradition, this has been noted already by Rolf Baumgarten, ‘Etymological aetiology in Irish tradition’, *Ériu* 41 (1990), pp. 115–22 (especially p. 115). But as Baumgarten highlighted, there simply are ‘significant epistemological differences between medieval and modern etymology’ (p. 115), and while the specific epistemology he discusses is another epistemology again from the one underlying the narrative about Auðr, his general point is of fundamental importance: to understand medieval narratives we should, at least in the first instance, assume that an author is doing what he does consciously and intentionally and in an informed manner. Only then can we hope to understand why a certain narrative strategy is chosen over another. More recently, and again in a medieval Irish context, this is also highlighted by Liam Breatnach, ‘The glossing of the Early Irish law tracts,’ in *Grammatica, Gramadach and Gramadeg. Vernacular Grammar and Grammarians in Medieval Ireland and Wales*, ed. by Deborah Hayden and Paul Russell. *Studies in the History of the Language Sciences* 125 (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2016), pp. 113–32; pp. 121–3.

¹⁹ Yi-Fu Tuan, ‘A view of geography’, *Geographical Review* 81 (1991), pp. 99–107; p. 102.

the central role of memory for the human perception of landscape. He states that 'although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.'²⁰ Through the ruins of her farm and the place-name referring to it, Auðr in this section of *Landnámabók* becomes a central layer of the 'strata of memory' that make up the medieval landscape of western Iceland.

This memory had strong religious aspects, which again are reflected in a place-name: the name of the Krosshólar hills simply means 'Cross Hills', which *Landnámabók* connects with crosses raised there by the Christian Auðr. By and of itself, there is nothing implausible about this. Auðr, according to *Landnámabók* (S13, 95), was the daughter of a ruler of the Hebrides. Since these islands had been Christian even well before the Icelandic Settlement Period in which Auðr is said to have lived, this means that Auðr would have come from a Christian area, which fits very neatly with the text's claim that she was a Christian. Also, the idea that this Hebridean settler erected crosses to create a Christian place of worship is, while historically unprovable, intrinsically plausible. Since Gaelic High Crosses were amongst the most prominent monuments of the Hebrides of the early Middle Ages, this could mean that Auðr, a settler coming from the Hebrides, might have tried to replicate the religious landscape which she had left behind in Scotland in her new home in Iceland.²¹ Again, however, *Landnámabók* emphasises the 'memory' aspect of this creation of a Christian sacred landscape in western Iceland. According to its account, Auðr's descendants soon abandoned Christianity and turned the Krosshólar hills into a pagan sacred space and a site of power which could play a part in the inauguration of a chieftain.²²

²⁰ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 6–7. More recently, and referring specifically to Norse literature and culture, see Hermann, 'Introduction'; Hermann, 'Founding narratives'.

²¹ Egeler, *Atlantic Outlooks*, pp. 156–68.

²² It is worthwhile mentioning, at least in passing, that the latter point highlights another of the many facets of landscape: its connection to power, which has been emphasised as an important feature of western landscape constructions by, among others, W. J. T. Mitchell (*Landscape and Power*, second edition, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press, 2002)). In the account of *Landnámabók*, the Krosshólar hills become a player, or at least the stage, in the drama acted out to turn a man into a chieftain. Thus, they show that also in Iceland, landscape – even the landscape of literature – is not a neutral space but one charged with claims of power and possession.

AUÐARSTEINN

The end of Auðr's story arguably is its most mysterious part: it brings us to the coastal rock Auðarsteinn. At the end of her life, Auðr predicts her death, gives instructions as to how she wants her funeral to proceed, and then is 'buried at the high water mark as she'd ordered, because having been baptized, she didn't wish to lie in unconsecrated earth' (*Landnámabók* S110). The rationale behind this request is quite opaque. Burial on the foreshore occurs elsewhere in Norse literature, but nowhere else is it applied to an honoured person; rather, it appears as a way to treat the bodies of criminals. In *Grettis saga*, evil berserks killed by Grettir are buried on a skerry that is under water during high tide (ch. 19),²³ and in continental Scandinavian laws such as the Gulaping Law, burial on the foreshore is a punishment reserved for outlaws who were not allowed to be buried in a normal Christian cemetery.²⁴ It is difficult to bring this shameful burial of outcasts together with the treatment of the body of Auðr, the venerated founder of an important farm whom *Landnámabók*, in the passage quoted above, describes as eminently pious, stating that she had been 'baptized and was a devout Christian'. Within the medieval literary frame of reference, so far no entirely satisfying explanation has been proposed.²⁵ I would argue, however, that such an explanation, even though it has to remain highly hypothetical, can be proposed if one broadens the frame of reference to include material provided by Icelandic toponymy, early travel writing, and folklore.

In the summer of the year 1858, the Munich Professor of Jurisprudence Konrad Maurer, who specialised in the history of early Germanic laws and therefore was extremely interested in the medieval north, undertook a six-month journey to Iceland. Based on his travel diary, he later composed a voluminous travelogue about this visit – which, however, was never published during his lifetime. The manuscript, thought lost for a century, was rediscovered by Kurt Schier in the 1970s and finally published by him and Alessia Bauer in 2017.²⁶ In this travelogue, Maurer, among many other things, also gives a detailed account of a visit to the places which *Landnámabók* connects with Auðr. He gives an exhaustive summary of the literary sources

²³ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson. *Íslensk fornrit* 7 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936).

²⁴ Vanherpen, p. 66.

²⁵ *Pace* Vanherpen, pp. 66–9.

²⁶ *Konrad Maurer, Reise nach Island (im Sommer 1858). Kommentierte Ausgabe*, ed. by Alessia Bauer and Kurt Schier, with a postscript by Peter Landau, 2 volumes. *Münchener Nordistische Studien* 31 (München: Utz, 2017). Ahead of this scholarly edition of Maurer's original manuscript, an Icelandic translation of his travelogue was published in 1997: *Konráð Maurer: Íslandsferð 1858*, transl. into Icelandic by Baldur Hafstað (Reykjavík, Ferðafélag Íslands, 1997).

about Auðr with particular focus on *Landnámabók* as quoted above, and then goes on to describe the locations he finds connected with her in the landscape of mid-nineteenth century Iceland:

Man weiß nun noch heutigen Tages die Krosshólar sowohl als den Auðarsteinn zu zeigen, & die, überdieß gar hübsche, Landschaft erhält durch solche Erin/nerungen noch einen weiteren Reiz. In einer wohl begrasten Mulde (:Hvammr:) eines engen & nicht sehr langen Thales liegt der Hof; über ihm steigt der Thalgrund nicht gerade sehr hoch, aber doch von schroffen Felsen gekrönt, an, die zumal gegen Süden, der See zu, recht grotesk werden: die hier gelegenen Krosshólar bilden einen großen, scharfzackigen Steinkamm, der nicht sehr hoch zwar, aber ganz isolirt ‚& auffallender Gestalt‘, weithin sichtbar, & darum wohl von der alten Christin ‚sehr‘ wohl gewählt ist. Weiter westlich, in der See, aber hart genug an der Küste um von der Ebbe noch trocken gelegt zu werden, ist der Auðarsteinn; er soll die Stelle bezeichnen, an welcher Auðr ihrem Wunsche entsprechend begraben wurde.²⁷

Even today people still are able to show both the Krosshólar and Auðarsteinn, and the landscape – which is even pretty – gains an additional charm through these memories. The farm lies in a depression that is thick with grass (:Hvammr:) of a narrow and not very long valley. Above it, the valley floor rises – not very high, but still crowned by steep crags, which, especially towards the south, towards the sea, become rather grotesque. The Krosshólar, which are located here, form a large, sharply jagged stone ridge, which is admittedly not very high, but entirely isolated and of conspicuous shape, widely visible, and therefore it was probably very well chosen by the old Christian woman. Further to the west, in the sea, but hard enough by the coast to still be laid dry by the falling tide, is Auðarsteinn; it is said to mark the spot where Auðr, in accordance with her wish, was buried.

Maurer's account is the earliest extant testimony that describes and localises the stone Auðarsteinn, 'Auðr's Rock'.²⁸ As other, slightly later nineteenth-century sources show, at the time it seems to have been fairly well known to both the local population and Nordic researchers interested in Icelandic literature and history. Thus, in the 1860s, Auðarsteinn makes an appearance in a retelling of Auðr's life-story by Jón Þorleifsson (1825–1860) which was

²⁷ Bauer and Schier, p. 367.

²⁸ There is also one testimony which slightly predates Maurer and mentions, but does not localise, Auðarsteinn. In the critical apparatus of an early edition of *Landnámabók* from the 1840s, it is noted that one manuscript of *Landnámabók* adds *þar heitir Auðarsteinn* ('the place there is called Auðarsteinn') to the passage which describes Auðr's burial: *Íslendinga sögur, udgivne efter gamle haandskrifter I*, ed. by Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab (Kjöbenhavn: S. L. Möller, 1843), p. 117, note 7. Unfortunately I cannot identify the exact manuscript to which this note refers. Neither the edition of Finnur Jónsson nor the edition of Jakob Benediktsson (see above) mention this textual variant, suggesting that the manuscript in question is particularly late and was therefore dismissed by these editors.

published in Jón Árnason's epoch-making first collection of *Icelandic Folk and Fairy Tales* (1862), one of the most prominent milestones of Icelandic folkloristics.²⁹ This testimony may be of particular significance as it highlights the importance that this rock had as a local maritime landmark:

Áður Auður andaðist mælti hún svo fyrir, að hún eigi vildi liggja í óvígðri moldu, en kvaðst óttast yfirgáng heiðinnar og bað því að grafa sig í flæðarmáli. Heitir þar nú Auðarsteinn er hún liggur, og er það enn í dag alment fjörumark á Hvammsfirði, að þá er um stórstraum rétt hálfvallinn sjór út eða að, þegar fyrst brýtur á Auðarsteini.

Before Auður died she said that she did not want to lie in unconsecrated earth, and she said that she was afraid of the aggression of heathendom, and asked therefore to bury her in the intertidal zone. The place there, where she lies, is now called Auðarsteinn ('Auður's Stone'), and that is still today a general marker of the tide in the Hvammsfjörður fjord, that the tide during a spring tide has then exactly half fallen or risen, when it first breaks on Auðarsteinn.

The next appearance of Auðarsteinn in the sources is found in the 1870s, when it is mentioned by the Danish researcher P. E. Kristian Kålund.³⁰ Kålund gives a detailed location and comments that in his opinion, the location of the stone does not perfectly fit the phrasing of *Landnámabók*, according to which she was buried *í flæðarmáli*, 'in the intertidal zone'.³¹ His doubts, however, should be seen in light of the above quotation from Jón Árnason's *Icelandic Folk and Fairy Tales*, where Auðarsteinn appears as a tide marker used to gauge the state of spring tides, implying that the location is not as incompatible with the *Landnámabók* story as it later seemed to Kålund.

²⁹ Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri*, 2 volumes (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1862–64), vol. 1, p. 147. My translation. On Jón Þorleifsson see Vanherpen, p. 74. Stones and rocks are quite important in Icelandic folklore beyond the Auðarsteinn tale and can be treated with remarkable playfulness; see, for example, Matthias Egeler, 'Icelandic folklore, landscape theory, and levity: the Seyðisfjörður Dwarf-Stone', *RMN Newsletter*, 12–13 (Double Issue 2016–2017), pp. 8–18 (<https://www.helsinki.fi/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rmn_12-13_2016-2017.pdf>, last accessed 16/10/2019).

³⁰ P. E. Kristian Kålund, *Bidrag til en historisk-topografisk Beskrivelse af Island*, 2 volumes (Kjøbenhavn: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1877–82), vol. 1, p. 484.

³¹ 'in the *flæðarmál*', which Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson (s.v. 'flæðr') define as 'flood-mark, i.e. the space between low and high water'. Hafðís Sturlaugsdóttir informs me that in contemporary speech, *flæðarmál* denotes the point at which water and land meet at any given time. The translation given in the text above follows the semantics of the term as defined by the nineteenth-century dictionary of Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, assuming that the difference between contemporary usage and their definition is due to a change in the semantics of the word rather than reflecting a mistake by Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, especially since Gudbrand Vigfusson was a native speaker.

In the 1880s, Þorleifur Jónsson gives Auðarsteinn an entry in a discussion of local place-names relating to medieval saga literature, where he also claims that the type of this stone suggests that it was quarried at the shore and then dragged out;³² thus, he seems to implicitly endorse the claims of local tradition that it was a grave marker. In the 1890s, Sigurður Vigfússon dedicated a short, one-page discussion to Auðarsteinn, where he gives detailed measurements of the rock and its location. Sigurður Vigfússon finds this rock unlikely to be Auðr's tomb stone, as in his assessment it lies about 150 fathoms too far out to sea.³³ His description thus jars with the earlier statements of Maurer and Jón Þorleifsson. The problem is unlikely to lie with the older accounts: the account of Jón Þorleifsson in particular should not be dismissed lightly, as Jón had grown up in Hvammur, the farm allegedly founded by Auðr, where both his father and his grandfather had been the incumbent priests;³⁴ thus, he was deeply familiar with the local topography and the local tides. The disagreement between the accounts of Sigurður Vigfússon and his predecessors therefore is in need of explanation – and such an explanation is indeed possible, if contemporary oral tradition is considered. According to Ástvaldur Elísson and Jón Egill Jóhannsson, the farmers who now (2019) own the farms of Hof-Akur and Skerðingsstaðir, the two farms closest to Auðarsteinn, the stone was shifted by sea ice in the 1880s: in these years, sea ice encased the stone, and when the ice broke up into floes, enough ice remained attached to the stone to lift and move it. In the following decades, this is said to have recurred several times, fundamentally altering the location of Auðarsteinn.³⁵

There is, however, some disagreement about whether today's Auðarsteinn is the same stone as the old Auðarsteinn. In a report that he published in 1882,³⁶ Sigurður Vigfússon says that there used to be a much bigger stone off the shore, which he thinks was probably taken by the ice, and the not-quite-so-big stone which now is seen off the shore in his opinion is a different stone. Today's local opinion, however, is certain that the one big offshore stone must be Auðarsteinn. In this, it agrees with a long-standing tradition in Icelandic cartography. In the early twentieth century, Auðarsteinn is marked on the sheet *Laxárdalur* of the *Atlaskort* map of

³² Þorleifur Jónsson, 'Örnefni nokkur í Breiðafjarðar-döllum, úr Laxdælu, Landnámu, Sturlúngu, Grettis sögu, Fóstbræðra sögu og Kórmaks sögu, eptir sira Þorleif prófast Jónsson í Hvammi', in *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenskra bókmenta að fornu og nýju 2*, ed. by Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag (Kaupmannahöfn: S. L. Möller, 1886), pp. 558–77; p. 558.

³³ Sigurður Vigfússon, 'Rannsóknir á Vesturlandi 1891', *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags*, 1893, pp. 61–73; p. 64.

³⁴ Vanherpen, p. 74.

³⁵ Valdís Einarsdóttir, pers. comm.

³⁶ Sigurður Vigfússon: 'Rannsókn í Breiðafjarðardöllum og í Þórsnesþingi og um hina nyrðri strönd 1881', *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags* 1882, pp. 60–105; pp. 76–7.

Iceland, which was first published in 1933 (Map 1); and today it is still marked on the official online-maps of Iceland published by the National Land Survey of Iceland (*Landmælingar Íslands*).³⁷ According to local opinion, Auðarsteinn is now (2019) located outside of the mouth of the Hvammsá river, on the side of the river facing towards Hof-Akur. The *Atlaskort* map located the stone more towards Skerðingsstaðir, but this does not appear to be a mistake, as Ástvaldur Elísson and Jón Egill Jóhannsson still remember that it used to be located towards Skerðingsstaðir, from where it was again moved by sea ice. At its present location, Auðarsteinn is visible at low tide, and at a very low tide it can be reached on horseback, though it is not a ride for the faint-hearted (Fig. 1).³⁸



Map 1: Detail from the 'Laxárdalur' sheet of the *Atlaskort* map of Iceland, first published 1933: the northern tip of the Hvammsfjörður fjord with Auðarsteinn, Hvammur (in the modern spelling Hvammur) and Krosshólar. Based on data from National Land Survey of Iceland (*Landmælingar Íslands*) at http://atlas.lmi.is/pls/apex/f?p=201:3:1969917866722137::NO::P3_ID:2203, used by permission (<https://www.lmi.is/en/licence-for-national-land-survey-of-iceland-free-data/>), accessed 22/01/2019).

³⁷ <https://ornefnasja.lmi.is/>, accessed 26/11/2019.

³⁸ Valdís Einarsdóttir, pers. comm.



Fig. 1: Auðarsteinn (in the centre of the photograph) at low tide. The stone is the only sizeable rock on this stretch of the shoreline, but not big enough to resist the forces of the sea ice. Photo by Valdís Einarisdóttir, reproduced with permission.

AUÐARSTEINN, 'MEMORY', AND THE 'CHARM' OF LANDSCAPE

Auðarsteinn, just like the place called Auðartóptir ('Auðr's Ruins') that has already been discussed above, is another example of how the 'memory' of an episode of Icelandic history is inscribed into the Icelandic landscape. What happens here – the inscription of Auðr's name and story into the landscape through a place-name and a narrative attached to it – is exactly what classic treatises on landscape would lead one to expect. Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* has already been mentioned, where landscape is treated as a creation of the human mind that is constructed from strata of memory. Arguing along a similar vein, Christopher Tilley in his *A Phenomenology of Landscape* views place-names as 'mnemonics for the historical actions of individuals and groups' that are 'crucial for the establishment and maintenance of their identity' and invest places with 'meaning and significance'.³⁹ It may be worthwhile highlighting that in this particular case, the approach suggested by such modern-day theorising is anticipated by our oldest source, Konrad Maurer. Maurer emphasises the effect that the memories ('Erinnerungen') of Auðr engrained in sites like Auðarsteinn have on his perception of the landscape: his perception of these places is deepened and receives 'noch einen

³⁹ Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape. Places, Paths and Monuments* (Oxford – Providence, USA: Berg, 1994), p. 18.

weiteren Reiz' ('an additional charm'). This comes strikingly close to Tilley's surmise, written over a century later, that place-names referencing historical persons and occurrences imbue places with 'meaning and significance'.

That said, Maurer's use of the phrase 'noch einen weiteren Reiz' ('an additional charm') gives us an insight into his perception of the landscape, to which he lends less significance when compared with Tilley. Yi-Fu Tuan, in the introduction to his foundational *Space and Place*, refers to a conversation which the two famous physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg had when visiting the castle of Kronberg in Denmark. Bohr here remarked to Heisenberg how the castle becomes altered when one imagines that it was the place where Hamlet had lived, how the memory of the Shakespearean tragedy transforms it into an entirely new world even though he as a scientist knows perfectly well that Hamlet historically is nothing more than a name mentioned once in a medieval text.⁴⁰ What one should note here is the conscious disjuncture between belief in the story on the one hand and its effect on the other: Bohr does not believe in the historical reality of Shakespeare's tragedy, but he still feels the presence of Hamlet. For the story to work its magic on the place, it is not necessary to believe that it is true. In this sense, Maurer's 'Reiz' ('charm') may describe the effect of place-lore connected to place-names more accurately than Tilley's perhaps over-emphatic 'meaning and significance'.

Also, from within the Icelandic material, there may be reason to be wary of over-emphasis. It has already been mentioned that Kambsnes, which the story in *Landnámabók* explains as the 'Peninsula of the Comb', probably originally is a 'Ridge Peninsula', which through a re-reading of its name was later reinterpreted and connected with a story about a comb; in this way, a story is created which arguably is more interesting than a geographically descriptive toponym. Similarly, Dögurðarnes originally seems to have been an example of a common type of place-names that refer to places marking time; yet later it was reinterpreted to form the nucleus of a story about the local settler having her breakfast.

Such reinterpretations of place-names which lead to the creation of plot elements or persons seem to be a quite common feature in Icelandic place-lore. Þórhallur Vilmundarson in his edition of *Harðar saga* goes so far as to almost suggest a theory of the origins of the Icelandic sagas based on this mechanism. His idea was that saga narratives could have been created through reinterpreting place-names in such a way that topographically descriptive

⁴⁰ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, p. 4.

names were reread as referring to persons.⁴¹ One of his examples is the case of Geirstangi. Geirstangi is the pointed end of an elongated peninsula that juts into the western Icelandic fjord of Hvalsfjörður. Seen from the southern shore of the fjord, the peninsula looks like a giant spearhead placed on edge, with one edge of the blade forming the ridge of the peninsula.⁴² According to *Harðar saga* (ch. 35), Geirstangi received its name when the body of a certain Geirr was washed ashore there: the genitive singular of the personal name provided the first element of the compound, whereas *tangi* simply denotes 'a spit of land, a point projecting into the sea or river'.⁴³ However, as Þórhallur Vilmundarson has noted, *geirr* is a straightforward Old Norse word for 'spear', making it likely that Geirstangi, the pointed end of the spearhead-shaped peninsula, is to be understood as 'Spear Point' rather than 'Geirr's Point', and that the person of Geirr later on was created out of the toponym.⁴⁴

AUÐR, DEATH, AND THE GENESIS OF A PLACE-STORY

Considering the above and drawing a parallel with the cases of Geirstangi, Dögurðarnes, and Kamsnes, I propose a similar hypothesis for Auður. Linguistically, 'Auður' is not only a personal name, but, like Geirr, it is also a noun, being attested as a poetic word for 'fate, destiny' in the phrase *fá auðar*, 'to die'.⁴⁵ The existence of this homonymy may raise a fundamental question about Auðarsteinn: is this rock, which only at low tide emerges from the surf, maybe not originally the burial place of the person Auður, but rather a 'Rock of Death' whose name was then reinterpreted as referring to a person? An interpretation of the element *auður* in the name of Auðarsteinn as 'fate; death' would tally very nicely with the stone's former connection with spring tides, which is emphasised in Jón Þorleifsson's account: the sea is particularly dangerous during spring tides, so calling a reference point used to determine the state of a (potentially

⁴¹ *Harðar saga / Bárðar saga / Þorskfirðinga saga / Flóamanna saga / Þórarins þáttur Neffjólfssonar / Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts / Egils þáttur Síðu-Hallssonar / Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar / Þorsteins þáttur tjaldstæðings / Þorsteins þáttur forvitna / Bergþúva þáttur / Kumlþúva þáttur / Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. *Íslensk fornrit* 13 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991). Þórhallur Vilmundarson completed this edition after the death of Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. That he implies (but never clearly pronounces) what almost is a theory of saga origins has been noted by Rory McTurk, Review of *Harðar saga*, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. *Íslensk fornrit* XIII. *Hið íslenska fornritafélag*. Reykjavík, 1991. ccxxviii + 528 pp. In: *Saga-Book* 24 (1994–1997), pp. 164–72, esp. pp. 166–70.

⁴² I add the detail of the striking resemblance of the peninsula's silhouette to a spearhead, which is not adduced by Þórhallur Vilmundarson but, I think, further strengthens his argument.

⁴³ Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, s.v. 'tangi'.

⁴⁴ Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. xxxvi – xxxvii.

⁴⁵ Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, s.v. 'auður, f.'; cf. Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon poeticum antiquae linguae septentrionalis. Ordbog over det norsk-islandske skjaldesprog*. Originally written by Sveinbjörn Egilsson, second ed. by Finnur Jónsson (København: S. L. Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1931), s.v. '4. auður'.

deadly) spring tide a ‘Stone of Death’ would make sense. Furthermore, such an interpretation would also be particularly tempting given that not only the name of the stone, but also its story, makes reference to death: in narrative, Auðarsteinn is consistently interpreted as a burial place, which would strikingly correlate with an interpretation of the toponym as meaning ‘Stone of Death’.

This double correlation between name and story might also provide a pointer helping to differentiate between conscious wordplay and accidental reinterpretation. If a story is created by rereading a place-name in a new way, then this can be a conscious narrative device (i.e., wordplay), or it can be an accident of interpretation, a false ‘folk etymology’. In the case of Auðarsteinn, the elaborate interweaving of the different layers of meaning seems to point to a conscious creation through wordplay rather than a simple mistake.⁴⁶ If it is correct that the name of the ‘Stone of Death’ Auðarsteinn provides both its own narrative function (as a burial place) and the name of the person it is connected with (Auðr who is buried there), then this seems too elaborate a set of correlations to plausibly reflect a mere mistake.

If all this is so, then we would be facing a scenario more or less like the following: in a first step, there was a toponym Auðarsteinn, ‘Stone of Death/Fate’. An unknown storyteller, following established patterns of Icelandic place-storytelling, then used this toponym and the associated landscape feature to artfully create a story about the death and burial of a local founding heroine.⁴⁷ Later, this story (but not the underlying place-name) found its way into the historical text *Landnámabók*, whose redactor, judging from the way in which the story is presented there, seems to have missed its nature as a playful, conscious narrative construction

⁴⁶ See above, note 18. Such elaborate double correlations are not restricted to the repertoire of narrative techniques employed by Icelandic storytellers but are also attested in Irish narrative culture; e.g. see Baumgarten, pp. 118–9.

⁴⁷ Incidentally, stories about local founding heroes and heroines, whose graves often are shown in the landscape and which narratively can be quite fanciful, are a very common feature of the later folklore of the nearby Strandir region, as I hope to elaborate in the context of a project that is currently a work in progress. To quote just two examples, one could refer to Steingrímshaugur, a rock formation on a mountain above the church of Staður on Steingrímsfjörður that is considered the grave of the local founding hero Steingrímur tröllli, or Mókollshaugur in the mountains above Kollafjörður, a natural formation of strikingly pyramidal shape that in local folklore is interpreted as the grave of the fjord’s founding hero Mókollur: Helgi Guðmundsson, *Vestfirzkar sagnir*, 3 vols. (Reykjavík: Bókaverslun Guðmundar Gamalíelssonar, 1933–37), vol. I, pp. 348–53; Jón Árnason, vol. II, pp. 86–87. Such founding heroes can be Christian or pagan, human or troll, and are in the overwhelming majority of cases said to be buried in natural formations, especially natural hills and rock outcrops, which narratively are interpreted as burial mounds – just as Auðarsteinn is a natural stone interpreted as a grave marker. While it would go beyond of the scope of the present article to trace this in detail, it is therefore at least worth mentioning that the story type of the ‘narrative about the burial of a founding hero in a natural landscape feature’ is a very common element of, at least later, Icelandic storytelling. Therefore, this aspect of the Auðr story as well is typical rather than exceptional.

and instead viewed it as simple historical truth.⁴⁸ By the time we meet Auðarsteinn and its story again in the nineteenth century, this wordplay-turned-historical-fact has completely overtaken the original meaning of 'Auðarsteinn', as all our sources from this time see the toponym as derived from the person rather than the other way around. By this point, the meaning 'Stone of Death' has disappeared from living memory, and only linguistic analysis now allows a glimpse of the possibility that the relationship between Auðr and Auðarsteinn might not be as straightforward as Maurer's travelogue suggests.

Ultimately, all this is impossible to prove, given that the toponym Auðarsteinn is only attested from the nineteenth century onwards, when it starts appearing in a wide range of sources such as Konrad Maurer's German travelogue, Jón Þorleifsson's story in Jón Árnason's collection of Icelandic folklore, or the work of the Danish historical geographer P. E. Kristian Kålund. However, if the toponym were as old as the medieval tale of *Landnámabók*, then it is at least tempting to entertain the idea that it was not the story that inspired the place-name but that the opposite was the case. The main point in favour of such an interpretation, which assumes that the toponym Auðarsteinn is considerably older than its first attestation in the written record, is its explanatory power. So far, it has defied explanation why the pious settler Auðr, who is a founding figure of Christianity in the area, should be buried in a way which otherwise is only attested as a type of burial reserved for criminals and outcasts. The place-lore connected with Auðarsteinn offers a, however hypothetical, possibility to explain this mystery by setting it into the context of the peculiarities of Icelandic place-storytelling with its love for reinterpreting the semantics of place-names to create stories.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION: PLAYFULNESS AND FLUIDITY

Nevertheless, given the problem of the chronology of the sources, such an interpretation of necessity must remain an insecure one. This very insecurity is a central element of the point I want to make. The rock Auðarsteinn illustrates that the cultural perception of landscape, at least

⁴⁸ A well-documented modern parallel is the case of the creation of a founding heroine Hvít out of the name of the farm Hvíta(r)hlíð in Bitrufjörður in Strandir, which likewise forms part of the project mentioned above (note 47). See Stefán Gíslason, 'Að breyta bæjarnöfnum', *Bændablaðið*, 27/03/2008.

⁴⁹ It is worth mentioning that this would not be the only instance where modern material helps to shed light on an otherwise puzzling passage in a medieval text. Thus, Wilhelm Heizmann has been able to show that an extreme escalation of violence in a passage in *Landnámabók* (S215, H182) can be explained with recourse to a tradition first attested in seventeenth-century literature: Wilhelm Heizmann, 'Hvanndalir – Glæsisvellir – Avalon. Traditionswanderungen im Norden und Nordwesten Europas', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 32 (1998), pp. 72–100.

in Iceland, is not by far as solid as its bedrock might suggest and that there is a considerable fluidity to the Icelandic place-storytelling tradition. Landscape as a cultural concept is constantly subject to reinterpretations and re-reinterpretations, until the original core of the ‘meaning’ of a landscape becomes all but impossible to grasp. At the beginning of this article I quoted a statement by Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn, where the two scholars, who were among the earliest to systematically study and theorise the narrative landscape of Iceland, defined ‘the experience of a place as a negotiative activity whereby we may extend, develop, or invent our dialogue with the past’.⁵⁰ This statement implies a considerable amount of fluidity and conscious subjectivity. In the face of a landscape monument like Auðarsteinn, which may be a ‘Stone of Death’ or ‘Auðr’s Stone’ and which may have been named from a story or may have inspired it, one sees why at least the recognition of fluidity has to be embraced as a central element of any attempt to understand the Icelandic narrative landscape – if only as a methodological *caveat*. All too often, it is almost impossible to reconstruct how exactly the landscapes of medieval literature, the toponymy that preceded and, to some extent, inspired this literature, the toponymy of the present-day landscape, and the storytelling and place-names of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries relate to each other. Often, they do not converge, and this offers many challenges – even if sometimes the divergences in and by themselves can be highly interesting. From a very early point in Icelandic history onwards, Icelandic place-lore seems to have been in a state of flux.

As in the cases of Kambsnes or Dögurðarnes, furthermore, this fluidity may have been going hand in hand with an element of playfulness. Such playfulness can be felt even in the comparatively grave narrative about the life and death of the pious Auðr, at least if it is viewed through the lens offered by Auðarsteinn: a stone whose name ‘Stone of Death’/‘Stone of Auðr’ may have inspired both the story of a burial place and the name of the buried person could reflect some nimble wordplay indeed – which strikingly counterbalances the seeming seriousness of the stone’s story. Icelanders, it seems, rather liked to play with their landscape and to give it some (narrative) lightness even where physically it was at its most unforgiving.

One aspect which, at least at the current state of research, unfortunately still escapes us is the ‘why?’ of this kind of storytelling. Why did Icelanders like to play with their landscape so much? Classical theorising on landscape emphasises very different aspects of the human engagement with the environment. Above, I have already mentioned Tilley’s focus on memory, identity, and the investing of places with ‘meaning and significance’; Schama’s focus on

⁵⁰ Overing and Osborn, p. xi.

memory; and the 'humanist geography' of Yi-Fu Tuan, who specifically addresses situations of a new settlement and postulates a fundamental human desire to fill a newly settled landscape with meaning and, thus, to humanise it.⁵¹ None of these classic approaches to landscape seems to offer an explanation for the high degree of playfulness that we can observe in Icelandic place-storytelling. Maybe Iceland thus makes a wider contribution to the field of landscape theory by raising the question: are we overrating 'meaning', 'memory', and seriousness? At the current state of research, I cannot answer the question as to why there is so much playfulness in the Icelandic engagement with landscape. But I do dare to postulate that this is a question which deserves further study.

This inclination to playfulness, which seems intrinsically interlinked with the fluidity of the 'meaning' (or better: the 'Reiz'?) of the landscape, somehow also makes it seem deeply fitting that our understanding of the landscape of the Hvammsfjörður fjord loses its solidity specifically through Auðarsteinn. Rock is one of Europe's most hallowed images of stability and solidity. It appears already in the Bible (Matthew 16:18) as well as, closer to the place under discussion, in an inscription over the door of the church at Kollafjarðarnes, which reads: *Sa sem treystir Drottni byggir hús sitt á bjargi*. 'Who trusts in the Lord builds his house on rock.'⁵² Our piece of rock, however, has been moving with the sea ice at least since the 1880s. Nothing may seem more stable than the rock which forms the bones of the landscape; but ultimately, even this is just as fluid as the place-lore traditions connected with it.

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⁵¹ Tilley; Schama; Tuan, 'A view of geography', p. 102.

⁵² Kollafjarðarneskirkja is located on Kollafjörður fjord in Strandir.



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