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‘To Talk of Many Things’

Whales, Walrus, and Seals in Medieval Icelandic Literature

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Abstract

The sea and its inhabitants occupied a crucial and multifaceted place in the lives of medieval Icelanders, and this is reflected in their literature. In comparing the roles of whales, walrus, and seals, this study will examine the themes that recur throughout the Old Icelandic literary tradition, and how these may have been influenced by the circumstances of the time. *Íslendingasögur* and *förnaldarsögur* alike used sea animals in the stories that they told, depicting these creatures alternately as mysterious monsters, valuable resources, and catalysts of human conflict.

The use of whales, walrus, and seals in the sagas illustrates a cultural map of the ocean. This network of places, known and imagined, is filled in by trade goods, species and place names, and stories that incorporate the denizens of the deep. At the edges of the land, they are nonetheless constantly intruding upon human space, impacting human settlement, or transforming between human and animal forms. As such, they illuminate such concepts as the division of land and sea, and complicate the modern categories of natural and supernatural.

The classification of animals is a telling aspect of the relationship between people and their environment. This study will examine the ways that whales, walrus, and seals were named and categorised, and draw connections between this and the literary roles that they play, shedding light on the stories that compose scientific concepts.

Hafið og íbúar þess gegndu mikilvægu og fjölbreyttu hlutverki í lífi Íslendinga á miðöldum, sem endurspeglast í bókmenntum þeirra. Ég ætla í þessari ritgerð að bera saman hlutverk hvala, rostunga og sela til að skoða minnin sem koma upp aftur í forníslenskum bókmenntahefðum, og áhrif sem miðaldaaðstæður höfðu á þau. Sögurnar lýsa dýrunum til skiptis sem dularfullum ófreskjum, verðmætum auðlindum eða hvötum til mannlegra barátta; auk þess úthluta þær þeim nöfnum og stöðum í samræmi við hlutverk þeirra.

Notkun sjávardýra í sögunum sýnir menningarlegt kort hafsins. Þetta kerfi af þekktum og ímyndöðum stöðum samanstendur af viðskiptavörum, dýrategundum, örnefnum, og frásögnum sem segja frá íbúum djúpsins. Á jöðrum landsins þröngva dýrin sér þó inn í hinn mannlega heim; þau hafa áhrif á landnámi, eða umbreytast í mannlegum gerðum og aftur í dýrslegum gerðum. Þannig varpa þau ljósi á hugtök eins og skiptingu landsins og hafsins; þau sýna einnig félagslega verð af þekkingu á náttúrunni og flækja frumhugtök „hið náttúrulega“ og „hið yfirnáttúrulega“, því að mörkin milli þeirra voru óskýr.

Skipting dýranna í flokka er athyglisvert einkenni af sambandi milli manna og umhverfis þeirra. Ég ætla þannig að skoða hvernig hvalir, rostungar og selir voru nefnir og hvernig þeim voru skiptir í flokka; tengsl milli þess og bókmenntalegs hlutverks þeirra varpa ljósi á sögur sem búa til vísindarleg hugtök.

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To the gull's way, and the whale's way, where the wind's like a whetted knife.

- John Masfield, *Sea Fever*

Introduction

In journeying to Iceland, medieval seafarers would have gained familiarity with the places of the sea, and in crossing them, encountered the denizens of the deep first-hand. How would the knowledge they gained in this fashion have affected the stories they told? What is the narrative role of whales, seals, and walrus in texts pertaining to the settlement of Iceland and Greenland? What can this tell us about the relationship between medieval Norse society and the marine environment on which they depended?

In examining whales, walrus, and seals in turn, this study will attempt to illuminate their role in the literature of medieval Iceland, theorising at the outset that they played a part in the division of land and the understanding of interactions between land and marine environments. Taking a primarily literary approach, this project has attempted to explore these subjects focussing on the following primary texts:

- a selection of *Íslendingasögur* (*Grettis saga*, *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Króka-Refs saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Kormáks saga*, *Fostbræðra saga*, *Barðar saga Snæfellsás*, *Grænlandinga saga*, and *Eiríks saga rauða*)¹

- a selection of *fornaldarsögur* (*Ketils saga hængs*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Hjálmþés saga og Ölvis*, and *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna*)²

- the *biskupa saga* text *Guðmundar saga biskups* (B-redaction; AM 657c 4to)

- the *konungs saga* text *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*³

- the *samtíða saga* text *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* (AM 426 fol.)

- the 13th-century Norwegian text *Konungs skuggsjá*

- *Landnámabók*⁴

The *Íslendingasögur* are stories of early Icelanders written by authors two centuries distant from the events they describe.⁵ In this study, they will be considered a form of dialogue

¹ *Íslensk Fornrit (ÍF)* editions.

² *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* editions.

³ *ÍF*.

⁴ *ÍF*.

⁵ See Clunies-Ross 2010; Vésteinn Ólason; and Jón Karl Helgasson for further detail.

and negotiation with the past, and an effort to establish a sense of history and its actors for the new country.⁶ Saga texts give a useful double-image of Icelandic society, viewing the settlement age through the lens of the 12th-14th centuries, with variations each time they were copied. As with any history, their interpretations of the past may not have been recognisable to its people, but they also demonstrate notions of historical plausibility from the time of their writing. Mentioning details of the past, and including an interpretation, makes them valuable social mirrors, to the point that they have been compared to ethnographic texts.⁷ Sagas include memories and ideas of the past, which have been lost to the new society — in contrast to tradition, which is entirely dependent on a perception of continuity.⁸ Most importantly, sagas contain an interpretation of the settlement of Iceland and the people involved in this process.

The *Íslendingasögur* describe the settlement, but in a different way from historical writings such as *Landnámabók*, the Book of Settlements. This study will follow the characterisation of *Landnámabók* as a work in progress, frequently rewritten to suit the changing priorities of medieval Iceland.⁹

Konungs skuggsjá, the King's Mirror or Speculum Regulæ, is a Norwegian text from approximately 1250, written in the style of a dialogue between father and son.¹⁰ Instructive texts were common in the courts of medieval Europe, and the content is in some ways typical of this genre, laying out particulars on the behaviour of kings.¹¹ However, the first section, concerning merchants, includes a breadth of material on the seas around Iceland and Greenland that is indicative of interest and in-depth observation.¹² It is in these chapters that whales and seals take prominence, the father explaining and enumerating the types that are found in northern waters.

⁶ See Hermann 2010.

⁷ See Lindow 1973; Gísli Pálsson 1995; Clunies-Ross 2010 on *fornaldarsögur*.

⁸ See Hermann on cultural memory as an approach to Icelandic sagas (2013), and in the context of a founding narrative (2010); also Nora (1989).

⁹ Barraclough 2012 (1): 91; Jesch 2004: 121; see Jakob Benediktsson 1969.

¹⁰ Magnús Már Lárusson ed. 1955.

¹¹ See Bagge 8, 34.

¹² *Konungs skuggsjá (KS)* 26-33; 52-56.

The *förnaldarsögur* — legendary sagas — often concern explicitly fantastic scenes and events, giving a different picture of their authors' preoccupations. They will be used differently in this study, providing examples of a corpus that was not necessarily split along the lines of fantasy and reality, but on the matter of which stories were worth telling, and how.¹³ Their setting is generally outside of Iceland; they do not concern the settlement era. However, as stories written in Iceland, their use of the same themes is significant. This study will treat these sagas as a historical 'secondary world,' as defined by J. R. R. Tolkien, taking place in legendary time, with internal consistency and reason regardless of resemblance to the primary world; however, it is important to note that they occasionally connected to the world of the *Íslendingasögur*.¹⁴

There is room in the field of ecocriticism to argue that the sagas engage with their environment in significant ways.¹⁵ Building on the scholarship discussed below, this reading will propose a world where the ability to understand natural phenomena, and to use what the land provided, was not only necessary for survival but culturally significant and the source of certain prestige within society. The intent is not to suggest that cetaceans or pinnipeds were the sole motivating factors for settlement (although they may have been a compelling reason to sail northward¹⁶), but that they open a window into the perceptions of nature that existed at the time of saga composition, and allow the reader a way into the physical world of that age.

The value of such an approach is primarily grounded in curiosity and an interest in drawing together the themes of place and knowledge, through the lens of early Iceland. Combining formal, received knowledge, and the education obtained from the 'University of the Sea,' the picture that emerges is multifaceted and diverse.¹⁷ Because on the one hand, the environment has changed since that time, and on the other, many of its place-names remain and raise hints of continuity, the shifting relationship between time and place has continued to be relevant. The sea, as a complex multiplicity of places and undefined space, shared between many

¹³ On the *fornaldarsögur* as a genre, see Clunies-Ross 2010: 76; Tulinius 2004: 447.

¹⁴ Tolkien 8; Ingold also discusses the establishment of a mythical past (142).

¹⁵ For discussion of *Eyrbyggja saga* (*EyrS*) and ecocriticism, see Phelpstead.

¹⁶ See Szabo 2012; Moulinier.

¹⁷ Jesch 2009: 62.

cultures, plays an ever-changing part in cultural memory, making it a point ‘where poetry, thought and science can converge.’¹⁸ As such, this study will incorporate material from anthropology, folklore, and archaeology, to support the literary evidence explored. It will build upon the current foundation by reading this material from the perspective of the settlement narrative, a term which here means an account primarily concerned with the claiming and continuous occupation of a land considered to be new.

In recent years, the use of heritage and tradition to justify whale hunting, often assuming a continuity of purpose and mentality, has been a part of the debate in Iceland regarding this practice.¹⁹ Although this study will not dwell extensively on the repercussions of such an assumption, it will work with the understanding that the Iceland portrayed in the sagas had a distinctive outlook towards the natural world which is not necessarily shared by Icelanders today: essentially, that the hunting and harvesting of whales as it is portrayed in the sagas is an activity with a certain set of meanings, some of which remain, and some of which have changed.

This study will, through the interactions between sea animals and humans portrayed in the sources above, continue to pursue the matter of ‘the sea’s often perplexing existence in cultural memory.’²⁰ In medieval Icelandic literature, whales, walrus, and seals helped to define the sea, demarcate it from land, and establish boundaries which they then proceeded to cross.

¹⁸ White 1989.

¹⁹ See Gísli Pálsson 152, 160; Roberts 2007.

²⁰ Sobecki 5.

Literature Review

The scholarship that has oriented and grounded this study is diverse. On the perception and hunting of whales in the medieval North Atlantic, this study will build on both Vicki Szabo's and Ole Lindquist's contributions to the field, especially in regards to the social and legal aspects. Szabo's primary focus is on the hunting strategies of the medieval North Atlantic, proving that active hunting did take place, and establishing the social context in which this occurred. In using saga sources, she draws out the themes of legal conflict and transformation which illustrate the perceptions of whales among early Icelanders.²¹ Lindquist's research into the North Atlantic whale hunt likewise gives an informative picture of the methods used and attitudes thereon.²² His study of the grey whale in North Atlantic literature and natural history has helped to illustrate the classification of whales through the comparison of old and new names, referents, and euphemisms for different species.²³

The work of Astrid Ogilvie et al. on the sea ice levels and fisheries of medieval Iceland demonstrated that the sagas have practical applications in the field of environmental history.²⁴ The information garnered by archaeologists such as Birgitta Wallace Ferguson has also allowed for an in-depth reading of the land which features in the *Vínland* sagas.²⁵ In the case of whales, as Szabo suggests, written sources may on occasion be more informative than the physical evidence, which often is so minimal that they have been nicknamed 'the invisible resource,' a phrase which applies to their natural habitat, as well.²⁶ This line of thinking has been useful in this study as a means of regarding the sagas from an environmental perspective, and Ogilvie's work on the perceptions of sea ice in the sagas provides another dimension to that world.²⁷

²¹ Szabo 2008, 2012.

²² Lindquist 1997.

²³ Lindquist 2000.

²⁴ Ogilvie et al. 2009.

²⁵ See Wallace Ferguson 'L'Anse aux Meadows and *Vínland*' in *Approaches to Vinland* (2010).

²⁶ Szabo 6.

²⁷ Ogilvie 2012.

There has been significant work on the medieval trade in walrus ivory, including Kirsten Seaver's research, which takes on the trade of ivory throughout Europe; and Thomas McGovern's, providing a view to the Greenland hunt.²⁸ The research of Karin Frei et al. has been instrumental in turning the focus of the analysis from continental Europe, where ivory was a luxury item, to Greenland, whence it originally came, and in using saga sources to fill out social context, suggesting walrus as a prime motivating factor in the Greenland settlements.²⁹ In using these sources to complement the few mentions of walrus in the sagas, this study will aim to connect the growing body of knowledge surrounding practical use of walrus materials with the limited, but distinctive, role they occupied in stories concerning early Iceland.

Gísli Pálsson, in directly studying Icelandic fishing communities of the 20th century, sheds anthropological light on the customs that are considered to be built from older traditions. His analysis is founded largely on the complex interplay of land and sea, going beyond simple contrast, and working into the idea of exchange.³⁰ Kirsten Hastrup's anthropological work in Iceland is influenced by, and has been critiqued by, Gísli's, but adds to this idea by presenting the sea as the country's 'original medium of history.'³¹ The possible applications of this idea to the medieval literature will be central to this study.

Incorporating methods and themes from folklore studies will be another matter. In drawing the distinction between saga texts, including *fornaldarsögur*, and folklore, this study will look to Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir's work on the connections between the two, as distinct forms, and argue for the thematic resemblance of several of the scenes analysed below.³² In making reference to Icelandic folklore, this study has used the collections of Jón Árnason, and the research of Terry Gunnell, Jacqueline Simpson, and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson.³³ The social

²⁸ Seaver 2009; McGovern 1994 and 2006.

²⁹ Frei et al. 441.

³⁰ Gísli Pálsson 1949.

³¹ Hastrup 1998: 128; Gísli 1995.

³² Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2006, 2014.

³³ Gunnell 2015; Einar Ólafur 2003; Jón Árnason 1961.

realities reflected by the persistent, lively legends of seals are a topic too broad to do justice here, but in the presence of seal stories in sagas, it is possible to see some of their history.³⁴

The social and textual context in which these ideas were communicated must be recalled, especially in relation to the question of otherness and belonging. Sirpa Aalto's analysis of otherness in *Konungasögur* has helped in building a definition of this term. For the purposes of this study, otherness will be defined as the portrayal within the text of belonging to a group to which the protagonist, or the assumed authorial voice, explicitly does not.³⁵ The shared heritage constructed by sagas is complex and multipurpose, but one aspect of it is the integration of history and legend, throughout which identity is defined and extended into the distant past, and in this view, Pernille Hermann's study of sagas and cultural memory has been instructive.³⁶

For Scandinavia from the 16th century onward, *Um Íslands Aðskiljanlegar Náttúrur* by Jón Guðmundsson *lærði* (1574-1658) and *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* by Olaus Magnus (1490-1557) are useful tools for examining continuities and, with caution, adding further detail to medieval accounts of sea mammals. However, in order to focus upon medieval Iceland, these will be used sparingly, and only by means of comparison.

To study nature in the Middle Ages 'as though nature mattered'³⁷ is one of the matters that this study seeks to address. Following scholars such as Edda Waage and Eleanor Barraclough, it will attempt, by means of three animals, to begin to disentangle the relationship of early Icelanders to their environment.³⁸ Their studies have been instrumental, in portraying the depth and breadth of natural knowledge in medieval Iceland. Judith Jesch introduces the concept of *geosophy* to acknowledge the experiential element in Old Norse exploration, and to this can be

³⁴ See David Thomson's *The People of the Sea* (2000) for an eloquent, coherent picture of the Celtic seal legend in the 20th century.

³⁵ See Aalto 2010, drawing on the theories of Johan Callmer (1992) and Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2002); see also Lindow 1995, Gunnell 2005, and McKinnell.

³⁶ Hermann 2013.

³⁷ Hoffmann 2014:xv.

³⁸ Waage 2013; Barraclough 2012.

added that of *geopoetics* introduced by Kenneth White as ‘an attempt to read the lines of the world.’³⁹

The ‘reciprocal relationship’ suggested by the field of human ecology has proven central to this study, in examining the sense of exchange between human and non-human, as well as between land and sea, that is illustrated through certain of the encounters framed in the sagas.⁴⁰ This has its parallels in folklore; this study will argue for an interpretation of the saga scenes which concern sea mammals through the lens of such an exchange. Almquist’s study of death at sea in Icelandic tradition provides a useful framework for interpreting land-sea interactions.⁴¹

Jesch’s research into the explorations of the Norse as it relates to place-naming customs has also influenced the approach that this study will take, by laying the foundation for an argument in favour of the value of nature knowledge in medieval Norse society.⁴² Place-naming and place-claiming have been studied in depth by Barraclough, who argues for a reading of this process as a blending of cultural myth and history, an aspect that has played into the aims of this study.⁴³ Gammeltoft’s work on place-names, particularly those of islands, has helped inform it as well, by providing the theoretical backing necessary to read into place-names.⁴⁴

Chet Van Duzer’s argument on the placement of the monstrous in the medieval period hinges on the concept of there being a ‘here’ and ‘there’ in the dominant geographic thinking, which was pushed to the limits of the known world and fluctuated significantly through the exploration of the Renaissance and early modern eras. This is a line of reasoning that this study will follow, acknowledging that it was not always so simple — medieval maps included include monsters in more familiar places as well.⁴⁵ The location of the wilder variety of monsters,

³⁹ White 1989; Jesch 2009; *geosophy* introduced as a term by J. K. Wright in 1947, foregrounding individual and cultural imagination and perception in the study of geography. For a more recent interpretation of this concept, see Keighren.

⁴⁰ Vail 2001.

⁴¹ Almquist 1996.

⁴² Jesch 2004, 2009.

⁴³ Barraclough 2012 (2); see Hermann 2010.

⁴⁴ Gammeltoft 2005.

⁴⁵ Van Duzer 2012: 387.

however, does provide some view of the places that were considered unsettled or unknowable in the medieval period. It is with the claiming of ground, therefore, that this study will begin.

The Language of Place

The sea is full of places. Most of these are defined by their role as navigational hazards, such as standing-waves or legendary islands, but there are also undersea halls, in the realm of mythology, and currents, weather patterns, and tides on the side of geography.⁴⁶ Supplementing and supporting the naming of whales, walrus, and seals in texts are the places named after or associated with references to the animals. These can indicate much about the way that land and sea environments — known and unknown — were regarded.

One of the reasons for which place-naming has received such attention, and deservedly so, in the study of human-environment interactions is its vernacular nature. Place names can provide, as Jesch notes, geographical and navigational information from those who relied on experience over written texts.⁴⁷ To see the social value of nature knowledge, as it has changed throughout the years, one need only look to the naming of newly identified natural forms, or to the embedding of familiar terms familiar in the unfamiliar landscape. This is the aspect which this section seeks to examine, exploring places in which known narratives exist surrounding the naming of the land, and building upon this in subsequent chapters by incorporating the places mentioned in conjunction with sea animals in the sagas.

Place-names were used as a means of transmitting information, and contained embedded narratives which were likely understood by those who used them.⁴⁸ In medieval Iceland, knowledge transmitted by ‘a range of mnemonic devices, sayings, proverbs and rhymes’ would have included names and nicknames for specific places.⁴⁹ These pieces of information pertaining to the natural world can be found in more formalised contexts such as dialogues, law codes, and sagas, but may have been transmitted more efficiently through the medium of conversation. What remains to us in place-names is, in part, the remnant of interactions between individuals, and the observations they shared. In the sagas, ‘the actual process of naming seems to be to some

⁴⁶ The relationship between the standing-wave and the legendary island is explored at length in Ó hÓgáin; see Quinn 75.

⁴⁷ Jesch 2009: 61.

⁴⁸ Jesch 2009: 71.

⁴⁹ Gísli Pálsson 89.

extent a later rationalisation,' as the taking of the land is described through individual characters.⁵⁰ To look at names is also to look at the stories behind them, where such stories are available, or attempt to read between the lines of their absence.

The primary concern of saga texts as well as *Landnámabók*, in this regard, appears to be the matter of ownership. Land-naming could be a form of speech-act, or writing-act on the part of later generations, as Barraclough illustrates using the example of *Vatnsdæla saga*: Ingimundur's claim to the land is 'secured—across time as well as space—through his very utterance of the place-name,' a preoccupation of the subsequent generations.⁵¹ The 'lasting power, both magical and legal' that names possessed was well understood by Norse settlers.⁵² The meticulous description of Skalla-Grímr's land-claiming, and the names he gives to each part of his claim, appears likewise to be an effort towards securing it to himself. It is also the sort of claim that could not be enacted in Norway, where the land was imbued with a longer history.⁵³ The *Vínland sagas* also place a heavy emphasis on the assignment of names, and the explanations thereof, which have been the subject of debate throughout the subsequent centuries.⁵⁴ Place-names of early Iceland can therefore be of great use in demonstrating the preoccupations of its settlers, as well as their extension of these traditions to new lands.⁵⁵

Because this study is concerned with sea animals, the question of land ownership necessarily extends into the water, and the stories that take place at sea must be regarded with an eye to how they represent its character as the setting for the tales. In the context of early Icelandic settlement 'the primary meaning of *land* is "dry land" as opposed to the sea,' a definition which differs from *land* in the sense of nation, and even land owned and worked by people.⁵⁶ Land and sea were demarcated in a way that made sense to a society whose living

⁵⁰ Barraclough 2012 (2): 84.

⁵¹ Barraclough 2012 (2): 85.

⁵² McGovern 130.

⁵³ Phelpstead 5.

⁵⁴ See Wallace Ferguson for an archaeological approach to resolving this.

⁵⁵ Nicolaisen notes some relevant factors in the relationship of place name to personal narrative (8).

⁵⁶ Waage 180.

required detailed knowledge of both, and whose voyages by water involved recognition of landmarks from both perspectives.⁵⁷

In the process of defining of a landscape, ‘islands are likely among the first localities to be named.’⁵⁸ In contrast to a whale imitating an island, a theme which will be explored below, Whalsay in Shetland is an island named for a whale, apparently due to its shape when viewed from the sea.⁵⁹ This explanation is plausible, as the purpose of naming islands, as Jesch notes, was not solely or even primarily for the people living on them, but for those whose approach from the sea meant using them as navigational aids.⁶⁰ The naming of whales and the naming of land meet in the example of Whalsay, and the folklore surrounding vanishing islands bears some resemblance to the island-whale motif.⁶¹ The bulk of animal names, however, revolve around domestic animals, extending to the underwater or inter-island places. According to Gammeltoft, ‘Norwegian island-names containing words for pigs, dogs, oxen, etc. are often thought to signal dangerous water or passage with submerged reefs and strong currents,’ though his inclination is to interpret them as referring to the rearing of animals.⁶² *Egils saga* follows similar resource-based reasoning in Skalla-Grímr’s naming of ‘Hvalseyjar,’ so called because of the presence of whales in the nearby waters, and the prospect of taking them.⁶³

Lindquist surveys a number of *Hvalvágr* and *Hvalvík* place-names in Norway; these are distributed along the coast in great numbers, unsurprisingly.⁶⁴ These are compounded names, as a rule; the generic *vágr* or *vík* preceded by the specific *hval*. The study includes little in the way of

⁵⁷ Barraclough 2010.

⁵⁸ Gammeltoft 123.

⁵⁹ Mills 492; the 1866 *Transactions of the Philological Society* explains it as ‘doubtless from whales having been captured there’ (151).

⁶⁰ Jesch 2009: 77.

⁶¹ The study of lost or vanishing islands has been approached by Heide (2011) and Ó hÓgáin among others.

⁶² Gammeltoft 124; see Arge on the Faroe Islands.

⁶³ *Egils saga (ES)* 75.

⁶⁴ Lindquist 1997: 34-35.

background information, save for speculation that they are sites of whale garths or voes; while helpful, they do not explain everything. In Iceland, the mention of whales in place-names begins with medieval sources on the settlement of the country. *Landnámabók* mentions multiple whale-names, implying possible origins as stranding sites, but rarely provides a lengthy explanation to accompany them.⁶⁵ One interesting point is the presence of generic *hval*-terms, contrasted against names that incorporate *reyður*, or rorqual.⁶⁶ Lindquist's study does not refer to specific whale species in Norway's place-names, nor does Iceland appear to have many of these. Where they do appear, however, they can be significant, as in the case of Rosmhvalanes ('Walrus' Headland') in Iceland, and sixteen northern Norwegian walrus place-names.⁶⁷ Frei et al. suggest the implication of walrus-hunting in the names *Hvallátrar* and *Hvallátur*, suitable sites for walrus haul-outs, and therefore for walrus-hunting.⁶⁸ The extirpation of the walrus in Iceland complicates matters, making it possible that these names were used long after their meaning had been lost. The study of place names can be seen as an attempt to grasp what the landscape of the past meant to its inhabitants; as the above section has sought to prove, this relationship is multifaceted and complex. Places are identified in part through their animal inhabitants, which can influence their names. Likewise, encounters with animals in their own habitat could influence the names by which they were known.

⁶⁵ *Landnámabók* 39 associates the name with whales found there.

⁶⁶ *Landnámabók* 34, 298, 347, 385.

⁶⁷ Perry 117; Jesch 2015: 48; *Landnámabók* 166.

⁶⁸ Frei et al. 442; their research indicates that the Icelandic walrus population was likely hunted to extinction. Seaver (1996), Dugmore, and McGovern (1990) also discuss the archaeological evidence for walrus at the time of settlement. See *Landnámabók* 175, 272.

The Language of Nature

The naming of nature has always been a problematic question. Gísli Pálsson explores it through Plato's dialogue, *Cratylus*; do all things have a name 'which comes by nature,' or are names a matter of custom only?⁶⁹ To follow the latter argument, the language used to name natural forms is enshrined in convention and an inherently social decision. Animal names do not only reflect categories, but associations with certain languages or places. Shared naming traditions and conventions indicate mutual observation, along with communicated ideas concerning the creature in question. Names contributed to the formation of a physical, tangible world; they were the proof of a preoccupation or of an aversion to their objects.

The language in which nature was described, both in terms of individual words, and the texts that concern natural history, tells us not only what was worth writing about, but how such knowledge was interrelated with other kinds. The texts to which medieval Icelanders had access would, to an extent, have affected the writing of nature. In any case, they would have influenced the perception of the non-human world, and its part in the lives and communities people create.

The Ancient Greek text *Physiologus* was 'translated into many vernaculars from Icelandic to Syriac.'⁷⁰ As an essential text on the natural world, the *Physiologus* served to underline the expertise of the Mediterranean world, and was copied in Latin throughout Europe, serving as the basis for the bestiary tradition, in which animals were identified with moral traits and religious allegory.⁷¹ The Icelandic version exists in two incomplete, illustrated fragments.⁷²

By contrast, *Konungs skuggsjá* is written in the vernacular.⁷³ Its form echoes that of many medieval texts, and its tone is decidedly learned, but it is valuable in its enumeration of Norse terms for animals. The rare quality of this text is its putting into lasting, written words the

⁶⁹ Gísli Pálsson 56.

⁷⁰ French 277.

⁷¹ M. Jones 43; see Halldór Hermannsson 1938.

⁷² AM 673a 4to.

⁷³ Bagge 7.

knowledge of mariners, which may previously have enjoyed only oral transmission, expanding upon the narratives encapsulated in the words themselves.⁷⁴

Writing in the vernacular was not the only way to indicate familiarity with local knowledge; the manner in which information was gathered, and the sources that the medieval authors cite, are likewise telling. Bede, for example, wrote of ““things gathered by common report”” in Latin.⁷⁵ If writers employed both oral and written sources, the details of experience would have supplemented the received ideas of authoritative texts.⁷⁶ That the texts on natural history should be translated into the vernacular, as well, may have implications beyond the purview of this study, but certainly indicates some of the attention which was given to them. In the opposite direction, the commonly-held names for various species were granted some prestige in being written down. The bestiary tradition could be said to refute the notion that interest in nature in medieval Europe was limited: in giving nature theological importance, these works show rather an obsession with its relevance to human society. They may not show an interest in nature for its own sake, but nor do they indicate indifference.

Old Norse counted over a score of whale names, in total, and while the *Konungs skuggsjá* account was under the heading of merchants, poets too were possessed of such a catalogue. The *Hvalpúlur* of *Skáldskaparmál* — likely added to the latter in the twelfth century — is a list of names and *heiti* for the whales of Icelandic waters.⁷⁷ It runs:

‘Hafurhvalur, geirhvalur, hafgufa, hnísa, hafstrambur, og hnýðingar, reyður, reyðarkalfur, rauðkemingur, búrungur, rostungur, blæjuhvalur.

⁷⁴ See Jesch 2009; Moulinier proposes the history of medieval whaling as a push northwards, perhaps accounting for the level of detail drawn from experience (119).

⁷⁵ Lindquist 2000: 19.

⁷⁶ Azzolini.

⁷⁷ Faulkes 1998: xvi; Szabo 60.

Norðhvalur, kýrhvalur, náhvalur, leiftur, skeljungur, fiskreki, skútuhvalur, sléttibaka, skjaldhvalur, sandlægja, hrosshvalur, andhvalur, hrafnreyður og vögn.⁷⁸

If it is less detailed than *Konungs skuggsjá* (see Appendix A for comparison), it nonetheless offers some interesting insight into the names by which common species were designated. The names of the whales in the *Konungs skuggsjá* tend to follow a similar descriptive pattern, often remarking on the same physical traits of the whales they designate. Some of these have been directly translated, while others are as yet questioned. This multiplicity of unidentified names raises the question of address among sailors, and the existence of euphemistic referents to indicate whales while at sea. Lindquist's suggestion of 'accepted *noa*-names' might be an established tradition including evil whales; in the hunt especially, they can be referred to only indirectly, and their influence thus averted.⁷⁹ *Noa*-names indicate words that were permissible, as opposed to taboo-words, and their use at sea has historically been widespread.⁸⁰ During fishing expeditions, both the object of the hunt and the perils inherent in it could remain unsaid, a custom somewhat attested in Iceland as well as other fishing cultures.⁸¹

Although never explicitly stated, the multiplicity of names of *Hvalþulur* and *Konungs Skuggsjá* might suggest euphemisms or synonyms which were taboo during the hunt. In the description of whales, certain parts are frequently emphasised, or used to indicate the whale as a whole: this pattern continues in the assignation of Latin names, such as in the *Megaptera novaangliae*, or humpback whale — flippers and back are alternately given prominence. Lindquist claims that '[o]n the present evidence the *skeljung(u)r* name can only be associated with the humpback whale,' citing the accompanying description of its large flippers.⁸²

⁷⁸ *Snorra Edda* 256 verses 480-481 ['Buck-whale, pike-whale and sea-steamer, dolphin, *haf-stramb* and porpoises, rorqual, rorqual-calf and red-crest, sperm whale, walrus, nordcaper.

Greenland whale, cow-whale, narwhal and pilot whale, humpback, fin whale and *skuta*-whale, right whale, killer whale and sei whale, horse-whale, bottle-nosed whale, lesser rorqual and grampus.'] Faulkes trans. 162.

⁷⁹ Lindquist 2000: 16.

⁸⁰ Lockwood 1; Westerdahl 7, also 16 on speculation as to symbolic animal-human allegiances at sea.

⁸¹ Perkins 208.

⁸² Lindquist 2000: 17.

Similarly to the place-naming systems examined above, many names in the list as well as in *Konungs skuggsjá* consist of a generic and a specific part; the former highlighting their similarities with others of the same kind, the latter singling them out as distinct.⁸³ Drawing a comparison between Latin naming and attribution of kennings is useful for two reasons. Firstly, it can relate the medieval world to the modern through that which would seem to separate them most bluntly — natural science.⁸⁴ Secondly, it allows for a relationship of poetry to proof, riddle to reality, that illuminates differences in perception. However, skaldic verse which directly concerns sailing tends to exclude elaborate kennings, and thus the overall impression of the sea that can be drawn through kennings and *heiti* is incomplete.⁸⁵

Despite the long list of *heiti*, there are few kennings for ‘whale,’ in either the generic or specific sense.⁸⁶ *Hymaskviða* refers to ‘brimsvín jötuns,’ and in *Skáldskaparmál* the formulation ‘Viðblinda galtar’ is explained: ‘Hér er kallat hvalir Viðblinda geltir. Hann var jötunn ok dró hvali í hafí út sem fiska.’⁸⁷ The image of the jötunn easily lifting whales is echoed in *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*, which sees the jötunn Selr carrying ‘bjarnýr á herðunum, en hvalkálf fyrir sér.’⁸⁸ Such comparisons to domestic animals are mirrored in the kennings for ‘sea,’ which often put whales in a domestic position.⁸⁹ Whales are given the reign of the sea conceived of as a kingdom, in phrases such as ‘whale’s hall,’ or the ‘house of the rorqual,’ using familiar images to conceive of the places that people could not entirely know.

The walrus, the only animal in the current study which today stands alone in a genus, was in medieval sources alternately incorporated into the categories of whale and seal, and given attributes that ranged from realistic to remarkable. It exemplifies the case of an animal

⁸³ Heller 33.

⁸⁴ B. Ogilvie 6.

⁸⁵ Jesch 2004: 128

⁸⁶ Lindow discusses the distinction between these two terms, concluding that they are ‘subclasses of the same phenomenon’ (1975: 317).

⁸⁷ Faulkes ed. 63, verse 201.

⁸⁸ Faulkes ed. 191; *Hálfðanar saga* 272.

⁸⁹ Quinn 78.

reclassified based on its use, as the 14th-century decline in the European trade of walrus products became pivotal to the changed understanding of what a walrus was, and where it lived.⁹⁰ Lindquist reasons that ‘the termination of walrus hunting in northern Norway in the early Middle Ages resulted in the walrus’ Old Norse names of *hrosshvalr* and *rauðkemingr* becoming associated with fabulous sea monsters while the real walrus was referred to as *rosmhvalur* and *rostungur* in Iceland and Greenland where the hunt continued.’⁹¹ Nonetheless, he does not mention the appearances of *hrosshvalur* in the Icelandic saga texts, something which continues to be reinterpreted and retranslated.

Konungs skuggsjá refers to the *rostungur* as an animal ‘er Grænlandingar kalla í tölu með hvölum,’ a category which the author believes ought to be questioned.⁹² Notably, it also places *hrosshval* and *rostungur* in two separate sections, reflecting both its ambiguous classification and its questionable placement in the sea itself. The *hrosshval* is a danger to ships travelling to Iceland; the *rostungur* belongs to the Greenlandic seas, and it is here that it is hunted. The difference between the two, based on where they are found, is the merchant’s point of view. The walrus thus lies at the intersection of monstrous and mundane, as well as the borders of whale and seal. As a whale, it shared certain behaviours with other types. It shared both habitat and habits, however, with seals, and were, like seals, unsuitable for fast days⁹³ This simple explanation of the *hrosshval* has been debated, significantly by Tolkien in his research for the Oxford English Dictionary, in which he struggled to determine the etymology of the modern word.⁹⁴ As a descriptive term, however, its kenning-like structure seems apt: 20th-century

⁹⁰ Hastrup 1990: 269.

⁹¹ Lindquist 2000: 41.

⁹² *KS* 56 [‘which the Greenlanders class as a whale’] Larson trans. 140; Larson translates ‘hrosshval’ at face value to ‘horse-whale,’ while Magnus Már Jónsson’s French translation notes that the author appears to have included the walrus or *morse* twice, without realising that they spoke of the same animal. He notes as well that Olaus Magnus appears to have followed the same trend, Latinising the name to *equinus cetus*, yet indicating the walrus under the ‘habitual name’ later on (Larson 122; MMJ 229).

⁹³ *Grágás* 32; see Hoffmann 665.

⁹⁴ Dent 2013.

testimony evidences such alarming behaviours as leaping on small vessels.⁹⁵ One might compare it, in name and in nature, to the hippopotamus — both aquatic animals whose leaps were likened to those of horses. For the purposes of this study, the *hrosshval* will be regarded as though it is a walrus, and included among representations of walrus in the sagas, following Lindquist’s reasoning above, and Zoëga’s translation.⁹⁶

The walrus is not the only animal in *Konungs skuggsjá* subject to ambiguity. The *geirhvalur*, mentioned briefly, and translated as ‘spear-whale,’ receives little elaboration. Little elaboration is given, though it may be an early version of the *geirreyður*, ‘a kind of fin whale.’⁹⁷ The name suggests a narwhal, and it is mentioned also in *Konungs skuggsjá*, in which it is said to have spots on its body, distinguishing it from white or black whales.⁹⁸ This fits the description of a narwhal, but the context in which it appears is unclear. Given that the *náhvalur* appears with a lengthy description in *Konungs skuggsjá*, and that although *geirhvalur* is described as edible, the *náhvalur* is dangerous to eat, it seems likelier that the association with *geirreyður* is more accurate. The French translation suggests a female narwhal for *skjaldhvalur*, as it does not have a tusk, and minke whale for *geirhvalur* — the French common name, ‘rorqual à bec,’ may account for the association with a spear.⁹⁹

Transmission, too, could impact the perception of distinctions between species. According to Halldór Hermannsson, the presence of the two sea monsters *Lyngbaki* and *Hafgufa* in *Örvar-Odds saga* has its origins in the B-fragment of the Icelandic *Physiologus*, in which the two qualities of the *aspidochelone* are illustrated separately.¹⁰⁰ *Konungs skuggsjá* includes *Hafgufa* only, yet conflates its traits with those later attributed to *Lyngbaki*.¹⁰¹ The difference between a whale and a sea-monster is debatable, and in the case of the regurgitating *Hafgufa*, an

⁹⁵ Perry 41.

⁹⁶ Zoëga 211.

⁹⁷ Halldór Halldórsson 38.

⁹⁸ *KS* 29.

⁹⁹ Jónsson 228.

¹⁰⁰ Halldór Hermannsson 10-11.

¹⁰¹ *KS* 33.

animal with its origins in the *aspidochelone* of the *Physiologus*, and echoed in *Konungs skuggsjá*, there seems to be some resemblance. There is a suggestion of ambergris, one of the valuable goods found in sperm whales, in the description.¹⁰² It appears to have been conflated with the more allegorical images of sea-monsters, but given the imprecise understanding of ambergris and its origins, such an identification does not seem implausible.¹⁰³ The subsequent naming of the sea monster as an individual, rather than a species of whale, is indirectly explained in *Konungs skuggsjá*. As a monster of prodigious dimensions, the father explains to the son, it would be impossible for this species to reproduce without taking up too much room in the sea: ‘Og eigi muni öðrum fiskum hlýða, að þeir væri svo margir sem aðrir hvalir fyrir mikilleika sakir þeirra og svo mikillar atvinnu, er þeir þurfa.’¹⁰⁴ In maintaining solitude, the two maintain the order of the world, and the father, despite his doubts, explains their existence rationally.

The classification and description of species, then as now, serves to define the world in relation to the human community. *Fiskreki* (fish-driver), the whales renowned for their benevolent behaviour towards fishermen, were perhaps the first species of protected whale — not due to scarcity, but because of their eminent usefulness.¹⁰⁵ If they were the same species, as we would understand it, as the humpback or the spouter, they differed in their behaviour and were thus a different whale. Two simultaneous patterns seem to emerge, in the naming and definition of whale types. There is the name based on the action of the animal; for example, *hrosshval*, or spouter. Then, the comparison to an animal of the land, domesticated and under human control. As in the place-name evidence, the traditions exist simultaneously and seem to be based on either form or activity. The means of classification and the structure of connections between species have varied with time and place, and natural science became increasingly important in exploration throughout Europe.¹⁰⁶ By the 18th century, Linnaean binomial

¹⁰² Szabo 47; it was said to attract prey by its sweet-smelling vomit.

¹⁰³ See Azzolini.

¹⁰⁴ *KS* 33; [‘Nor would it be well for other fishes if they were as numerous as the other whales, seeing that they are so immense and need so much food.’] Larson trans. 125.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 29.

¹⁰⁶ A. Cook 128.

nomenclature emphasised hierarchical systems of distinction, rather than the kenning's simple juxtaposition.¹⁰⁷ Yet both rely upon the trick of comparison, often between disparate (but illustrative) things.

¹⁰⁷ See Heller 38, 42; see the Skaldic Poetry Project for an index of known kennings.

Chapter One: Whales

a. Claiming ground

The presence of whales as resources with many uses influenced the formation of the settlement narrative of Iceland, whether as attractive factor or source of conflict. In this chapter, examples from the *Íslendingasögur* (*Grettis saga*, *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Fostbræðra saga*) will illustrate the role whales played in dividing land, according to saga authors. Focussing on historical time, this section has as its theme the use of whales as drift goods, used in the establishment of boundaries and the division of land as property. Following this, the portrayals of whales on the open sea in *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur* will be examined from the perspective of navigation. The *Vínland sagas*, which employ the literary theme of the stranded whale, but with significant differences, will provide a study in contrast.

To settle in Iceland required a motivation, an impetus. Both attraction and necessity spur saga characters to leave Norway and claim land in Iceland, the latter framed in *Grettis saga*, *Egils saga* and *Laxdæla saga* among others as the desire not to live under the rule of King Haraldr hárfagri.¹⁰⁸ This drive becomes the underpinning factor leading to the claiming of land, and this claiming relies heavily on the natural resources available to the newcomers. These three sagas provide examples of whales as part of their settlement narrative as attractive factors, though as will be explored further on, *Grettis saga* does not allow such plenty to last.

The push and pull factors of migration to Iceland are illustrated early in *Laxdæla saga*, when Ketill flatnefr's sons begin to chafe under the king's rule, and the possibility of abundant resources and personal freedom in Iceland becomes tempting. 'Ek vil gera at dæmum gøfugra manna ok flýja land þetta,' claims Björn; this sense is cemented when he fixes upon Iceland as a destination.¹⁰⁹ 'þeir þóttusk þaðan mart fýsiligt fregnt hafa, sǫgðu þar landskosti góða, og þurfti ekki fé at kaupa; kǫlluðu vera hvalrétt mikinn ok laxveiðar, en fiskastǫð ǫllum misserum.'¹¹⁰ The

¹⁰⁸ Hartman, Ogilvie, and Hennig (2016) analyse the settlement narrative as portrayed in the sagas, as does Hermann (2010).

¹⁰⁹ *Laxdæla saga* (LS) 4 ['I want to follow the example of other worthy men and flee this country'] Kunz trans 277.

¹¹⁰ LS 5 ['they claimed they had heard many favourable reports of the country; there was enough good land available, they said, without having to pay for it. There were reported to be plenty of beached whales and salmon fishing, and good fishing every season.'] Kunz trans. 277.

possibility of fishing and of finding whales year-round makes for a desirable settlement, and accords with the notion of land and resources free for the taking. In this respect, there is some affinity with the mention of whales in *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*. *Egils saga* begins, as many *Íslendingasögur*, some generations before the titular character's birth. This allows the establishment of relationships and land ownership to root itself firmly in the settlement era, drawing the action down through two generations, in this case, in the setting of the scene. As Barraclough notes, 'The linking of the narrative of Skalla-Grím's *landnám* to the place-names ensured that future generations who claimed descent from this *landnámsmaðr* would also have access to such resources.'¹¹¹

In a similar vein to *Laxdæla saga*, the prospect of land free for the taking and a strained relationship with the Norwegian king, leads the titular character's family to settle in Iceland.¹¹² Egill's father Skalla-Grím establishes himself at a seemingly idyllic peninsula, where resources were plentiful, and animals were 'óvant manni,' unused to humans.¹¹³ This made it easy to hunt, but the currents that brought driftwood, as well as whales, close to land — 'Hvalkvámur váru þá ok miklar, ok skjóta mátti sem vildi' — were indicative of the advantageous position which he had chosen.¹¹⁴ Skalla-Grím would have been well familiar with the nature of drifted goods, as the land was chosen where his father, Kveld-Úlfr, had been found drifted ashore in his coffin.¹¹⁵

Here, whales are shown as part of an untamed landscape, in which the needs of the human community are served by the fortunate confluence of various natural forces, although the arrival of stranded whales also required a weather-facing coast. Skalla-Grím is also an active shipbuilder, a trait worth mentioning as it connects him with the resources of the sea.¹¹⁶ Skalla-

¹¹¹ Barraclough 2012 (2): 83; Orri Vésteinsson et al. suggest the use of strandage in the sagas is used to show that things were 'better (or at least more dramatic)' in the settlement period (104).

¹¹² *ES* 65.

¹¹³ *ES* 75.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* ['Whales beached, too, in great numbers, and there was wildlife for the taking'] Scudder trans. 48; the meaning of 'skjóta mátti sem vildi' has been interpreted by W. C. Green (1893 trans.) as the right to shoot whales that came close to land, which on the basis of the Old Norse text seems more convincing.

¹¹⁵ *ES* 73; Clunies-Ross also explores the idea of 'supernatural authorisation' in relation to settlement (1992: 22-25).

¹¹⁶ *ES* 75.

Grímr's and Ketill's choices of settlement sites highlight the image of the Icelandic waters containing riches, but also serve to show the newness of the settlement, not yet divided into private holdings. The process of division based on driftage, and certainly the value of drifted goods, can be seen in the theme of casting high-seat pillars, a practice attested in *Landnámabók* and echoed in Kveld-Úlfr's request to have his coffin cast into the waves.¹¹⁷

Grettis saga is one of the later *Íslendingasögur*, written early in the 14th century or later.¹¹⁸ Its central character may take prominence, but its minor characters are equally intriguing, and tell much about the context in which they were written. Grettir's ancestor Qnundr, like the saga itself, is a latecomer, and must take what land he can, as opposed to whatever he pleases.¹¹⁹ He interacts with the earlier settlers, those mentioned in *Landnámabók* and previous sagas, but he arrives once all the best land has been claimed and the main settlement is complete.¹²⁰

The saga elaborates on the matter of driftage rights, if briefly. That the right to claim what the sea washed ashore in Strandir, where Qnundr settles, had not yet been established at the time of his arrival, is a reminder that while settlement was complete, it was still in its first generation. The land had been claimed, but 'um rekann var ekki skilit, því at þeir váru svá nógir þá, at hverr hafði þat, er vildi.'¹²¹ This state of unsettled bliss is short-lived, as will be discussed below: two chapters later, an argument erupts over the ownership of a stranded whale.¹²²

That it took, according to *Grettis saga*, three generations for the Icelandic driftage rights to go from a state of idyllic harmony to one of conflict, is both a surprising detail to include and an interesting piece of information. Lindquist notes the wide 'driftage zone' of medieval Iceland

¹¹⁷ *Landnámabók* 44, 164; contrast with Kveld-Úlfr's story (68); see Barraclough 2012 (1).

¹¹⁸ R. Cook in Pulsiano 241.

¹¹⁹ Zori and Byock intro. viii.

¹²⁰ *Grettis saga* (GS) 22.

¹²¹ GS 23 ['No agreement was made about harvesting the beach, because so much drifted in that everyone could take what he wanted.'] Scudder trans. 58.

¹²² GS 29.

in comparison to Norway, and highlights a break with the Norwegian *Gulaping*: the driftage rights contained in that code pertain to the king.¹²³

The sagas of the 13th century describe not only the settlement, but its immediate inheritors, those who experienced the shift from new territory to home ground. Enumerating the generations, describing death and burial, and drawing the focus occasionally back, to elucidate on the legal systems of the time, they provide a troubled picture of their immediate predecessors. While the whales that drifted ashore on Skalla-Grímr's newly-claimed land were positive forces in the drive to claim land, the post-settlement drift whale was also a fraught literary topos with the power to draw out existing conflicts and send characters into direct opposition. In *Grettis saga*, the first whale-stranding conflict opens the twelfth chapter:

‘Þorsteinn hét maður er bjó á Reykjanesi. Hann fann hval rekinn innan fram á nesinu þar sem hét að Rifskerjum. Það var reyður mikil. Hann sendi þegar mann til Flosa í Vík og svo til næstu bæja.’¹²⁴

In alerting Flosi and his nearest neighbours, Þorsteinn lets the word out and opens the doors to competition. The whale ignites the long-standing resentments of the characters, likely due in part to the famine conditions and desperation in which they find themselves. The unresolved question over the division of land now comes into play, recalling the need for clear demarcation of driftage rights, and the marked change from the previous generation: ‘In contrast to the generosity with which Eiríkr snara gave a large portion of his land to Qnundr trefotr, Eiríkr's son Flosi treats Qnundr's sons with unjustified pettiness.’¹²⁵ The legal settlement which follows the fight determines the fates of both characters and land, as Flosi is outlawed, and must

¹²³ Lindquist 1997:17; see *Grágás* 355-357; *Gulaping* 106, 108 ‘Recr hval i almenning þann á konongr.’ [‘If a whale drifts up on the shore of the common, it belongs to the king’], ‘Rec þau oll er reca í almenninga, þa á konongr.’ [‘All the goods that drift in upon the [shore of the] common belong to the king.’] Larson trans. 127, 124.

¹²⁴ *GS* 29 [‘There was a man called Thorstein who lived at Reykjanes. He found a whale beached on the inner side of the promontory, at a place called Rifsker (Reef Skerry or Rib Skerry). It was a huge finback whale. He sent a messenger off to Vík at once to tell Flosi, and then to the neighbouring farms.’] Scudder trans. 61. The chapter also hearkens back to the settlement of Rosmhvalanes.

¹²⁵ R. Cook 135.

sell his lands to Geirmundur; the settlement also stipulates that “að skipað sé brotgeiranum og hafi hvorirtveggju að jafnaði. Síðan sé það lögtekið að hver eigi reka fyrir sinni jörðu.”¹²⁶

The second whale stranding scene is recounted briefly, and shared with *Fostbræðra saga*, in which the same characters appear briefly. The composition of *Fostbræðra saga* is thought to predate *Grettis saga* by over a century, and its description of the fight over the whale is far more detailed, though the latter tells of the following lawsuit with greater precision.¹²⁷ Both sagas detail the manner in which the quarrel erupted: the site of the stranding gave the property owner certain harvesting rights, but these had been ignored by men trying to claim meat and blubber for themselves, which they took without first obtaining legal permission.

Fostbræðra saga's account begins with a famine, in which ‘Sóttu margir menn norður á Strandir til hvalfanga.’¹²⁸ As the sworn brothers themselves take their ship northward, they learn of a stranded whale such as they had been seeking, on the common lands nearby, and attempt to claim rights to it themselves.

Þorgils svarar: “Lítið er mér um að ganga af hvalnum en vér erum ráðnir til að láta eigi lausan þann hlut fyrir yður er skorinn er meðan vér megum á halda á hvalnum.”

Þorgeir mælti: “Það munuð þér þá reyna verða hversu lengi þér haldið á hvalnum fyrir oss.”¹²⁹

The ensuing fight ends in victory for Þormóðr and Þorgeir, but of a hollow kind. The latter is outlawed, and their fellowship is soon broken by the question of future competition between them. It is a central moment in the saga, and an early one, setting the characters on the courses that would determine their continued careers. As in the first *Grettis saga* whale conflict,

¹²⁶ *GS* 32 [“the disputed land should be shared out equally between the two parties. Then it will be agreed as law that each shall have the right to whatever drifts ashore on his own land.”] Scudder trans. 62.

¹²⁷ P. Schach in Pulsiano 216; *GS* 89-94.

¹²⁸ *Fostbræðra saga (FS)* 147 [‘Many men went to Strandir to hunt whales.’] Regal trans. 343; although in both *Fostbræðra saga* and *GS* the whale appears at a time of famine, there is no indication that whales were regarded as food of last resort.

¹²⁹ *FS* 149 [‘Þorgils replied, “I’m not inclined to leave the carcass, nor do I plan to give you the meat I have already cut from it — not while we still have the whale.” Þorgeir said, “Then you will have to see how long you can hold us away from it.”] Regal trans. 343.

the commons are in question, with the idea of equal rights for all being challenged by the reality of unequal sharing.

The whales of the *Íslendingasögur* — the one shared by *Grettis saga* and *Fostbræðra saga* in particular — are thus the source of legal contention and wrangling in these narratives. The landscape of resource-based settlement appears to have been shaped by stranded whales among other factors, which is unsurprising, given the quantity of meat, blubber, and bone to be had from one stranded whale. As Iceland became a fully-settled country, the abundant natural resources it provided, such as whales, were used to demarcate land claims. Along with determining ownership of lands and drift goods, the fights over drifted whales were the cause of outlawry, effectively removal from the common land.¹³⁰

In contrast to these mundane encounters, the later *Barðar saga Snæfellsás* takes the opposite tack by portraying the ‘landhreinsan’ effect when the hero defeats two trolls who had begun cutting into a drifted whale.¹³¹ Rather than sparking outlawry, Barðr’s killing of his opponents is met with narrative approval, and seen as improvement of the land.¹³²

¹³⁰ *Grágás* 404, 431 outlines the property rights of full and lesser outlaws and their dependents, including confiscation of land; Barraclough (2010) investigates uses of outlawry and landscape in sagas.

¹³¹ *Barðar saga Snæfellsás* (likely 14th cent.) 113; translated by O’Connor as ‘land-cleansing’ (193).

¹³² See Heide (2014) on the depiction of landscape in *Barðar saga Snæfellsás*.

b. Navigation and communication

The division of whales was intimately tied to the division of land in the early settlement of Iceland. The analysis will turn now to a parallel, related motif, which ran alongside the theme of the stranded whale: that of the geographical knowledge that live whales conveyed.

Whales made for desirable settling grounds, but not only for their own sakes. The behaviour of certain varieties of whale were thought to be directly, and deliberately, beneficial to humans. The *fiskreki* or fish-driver may be referenced via the kenning *unnsvín* in *Haralds saga gráfeldar*, in a verse on herring.¹³³ The kenning recalls *Skáldskaparmál*'s reference to boars, and Samuel Laing's 1844 translation praises the herring as fish that 'the whale drives to our cook's pot.'¹³⁴ According to Lindquist, the idea of the fish-driver 'was embedded in ... the ancient Norse and mediaeval cosmic orders and world views,' a bold claim, but supported somewhat by the verse above and the description in *Konungs skuggsjá*.¹³⁵ Along with the *fiskreki*, a form of symbiosis was possible with orcas: they would sometimes drive larger whales into bays where they would be trapped, or chase them ashore where they could be claimed.¹³⁶ Whales' value then depended upon their behaviour, affecting the success of a voyage or a fishing expedition. Understanding how to turn these to one's advantage would have been a valuable asset.

Regarding the intangible value conveyed by whales, that is, the social prestige which came with the ability to classify species and understand their movements, both *Konungs Skuggsjá* and saga texts seem to indicate that familiarity with the workings of the natural world was a necessary element of education. It does not require much speculation to imagine why. To observe the local fauna has been necessary for seafarers throughout the centuries. Associating certain whales with specific waters at specific times of year, based on their migration, would be

¹³³ *Haralds saga gráfeldar* 223; Perkins suggests, following Finnur Jónsson, that the intended meaning is 'ship.'

¹³⁴ Laing trans. chapter 18.

¹³⁵ Lindquist 1997:28; *KS* 29.

¹³⁶ Lindquist 1997: 29.

something understandable and tangible, and so it is surprising that there are so few references to whales as navigational aids in the Icelandic sagas.¹³⁷

The voyage narrative in any context requires navigation, and in many cases, this meant navigation beyond the known or from being lost. Nature knowledge in this context was often framed as the ability to read an unfamiliar environment. Birds especially, but ‘together with whales, narwhales, walruses, and other fauna’ helped sailors who were misplaced at sea.¹³⁸ The whale in the unknown sea and the appearance of the whale as island were more than frivolous fantasies; they were also story-marks for places beyond the known and navigable.

One striking scene in *Ketils saga hængs* concerns the protagonist’s autumn fishing expedition, which ends when a violent gale sends him out to sea, off of Finnmark. This is a hostile shore, inhabited by a ‘tröllkona,’ and he is soon back on the open water once more. During heavy weather, ‘lagðist hvalr at honum ok skýldi skipinu við veðrinu, ok þótti honum manns augu í honum vera.’¹³⁹ The whale’s protection sends him within swimming distance of a friendlier shore than before; his claim in verse that ‘Hvalr kyrrði haf’ follows on his assertion that ‘Finns fjölkynngi’ had caused the storm in the first place. The whale and its human eyes belong to Finnmark’s waters, but this time, it is not a threatening presence. *Ketils saga hængs* is placed among the *förnaldarsögur*, legendary sagas concerning explicitly fantastic occurrences and unspecified times, and both it and *Gríms saga loðinkinna* are later additions to the corpus, thought to date from the 13th and 14th centuries.¹⁴⁰ It is possible to speculate that the whale as supernatural navigational aid has its origins in the theme of navigation by fauna.

The *Hauksbók* copy of *Landnámabók* allows for the birds and whales of Iceland as primary points on which to rely, on the journey westwards.¹⁴¹ Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson suggests ‘unspoken rules’ to Norse navigation, which may go some way towards explaining why this

¹³⁷ See Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson; Marcus; Jesch 2009 for further elaboration on navigational methods and their portrayal in sagas; the use of tame ravens is recounted in *Landnámabók* 36.

¹³⁸ Marcus 604.

¹³⁹ *Ketils saga hængs* (KSH) 158 [‘A whale came swimming towards him and sheltered the ship against the wind, and it appeared to him that the whale had human eyes.’] Waggoner trans. 9.

¹⁴⁰ in Pulsiano 353 (M. Ciklamini), 243 (P. Jorgensen).

¹⁴¹ *Landnámabók* 33.

advice is so rarely mentioned otherwise; it is possible that the migration and feeding habits of northern species of whale were well enough known to be followed fairly accurately.¹⁴² The modern Icelandic fishing community relied on similar signs, as ‘appearances of particular species of birds were taken as signs for the migration of particular species of fish.’¹⁴³

In *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar (Heimskringla)*, the warlock sent by King Haraldr of the Danes sets off to Iceland in the shape of a whale, to report back to the vengeful king on the prospect of attacking the country whose residents had insulted him. The whale’s journey is a circumnavigation of Iceland, an exact detailing of the coast, in which the various monsters of the country appear to drive the whale away: ‘En er hann kom til landsins, fór hann vestr fyrir norðan landit. Hann sá, at fjöll qll ok hólar voru fullir af landvéttum, sumt stórt, en sumt smátt.’¹⁴⁴

Settlement in Iceland, on the basis of the picture in the sagas, involved an attempt to gain familiarity with the land, and a measure of control over its resources. The warlock, in choosing to go to Iceland in the form of a whale, provides the reader with a maritime view of Iceland’s geographic layout, seeing the country in the same manner as the first settlers, although framed in a much more hostile way: it is chased off by supernatural beings from one quarter of the land to another. Yet the names of land-forms were becoming fixed and known, and the names and farms of important settlers are provided. The land was still wild, newly settled, but the meticulous circumnavigation of the island, from the northeast, counter-clockwise, echoes the alleged patterns of the initial settlement, and crucially, recounts the place-names already in play, setting up Iceland as an inhabited country that could be set apart from and against the king.¹⁴⁵

The perception implied here, of an Iceland still hostile and unsettled, lasted in mainland Scandinavia to a certain extent up to the 17th and 18th centuries, when Icelanders were still having to refute the notion that their country contained a gateway to Hell and ‘whales as big as

¹⁴² Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson 113.

¹⁴³ Gísli Pálsson 86.

¹⁴⁴ *Heimskringla* 271 [‘And when he came to the land, he went westwards round the north of the country. He saw that all the mountains and hills were full of land-spirits, some large and some small.’] Finlay and Faulkes trans. 168.

¹⁴⁵ The settlement period is traditionally given as 870-930 (see Smith 319); see Ellis Davidson 29.

mountains.¹⁴⁶ Such perceptions are similar to those gathered by the warlock-whale sent by the king, making it something of a traveller's tale, if framed in a fantastical manner.

Faring into distant seas, as well, demanded attention to the surrounding environment, as evidenced by *Konungs skuggsjá*'s inclusion of whales, icebergs, and sea phenomena in its passages concerning merchants.¹⁴⁷ 'Norse seafarers were generally well informed about whales in the North Atlantic, and ship masters — like Þorfinnr *karlsefni* [of the *Vínland sagas*] — particularly so,' although it is noteworthy that the latter's whale expertise is only ever portrayed in the negative.¹⁴⁸ In being unable to identify a whale, his knowledge fails him, yet this is the one instance in which that knowledge is relevant to the narrative. Even in the navigation of the *Vínland* coast, there is no mention of using animals to interpret distance from shore, or presence of fish, though the narration does stress the presence of birds on *Straumey*.¹⁴⁹

Looking further into medieval sources, precious little is to be found as far as exact information on which whales were helpful for the specific purpose of navigation. *Landnámabók* has one of the rare instances of explicit instruction, and *Konungs skuggsjá* may have an eye towards navigation in its enumeration of the wonders of Icelandic and Greenlandic waters. There are indications of certain phenomena being well-known to navigators, also. The protagonist of *Örvar-Odds saga* demonstrates surprising ineptitude in his inability to recognise an island-backed whale: 'En er menn Odds kómu á eyrna, höfðu þeir litla stund þar verit, áðr eyin sökk, ok drukknuðu þeir allir.'¹⁵⁰ His son Vignir castigates him for this mistake, readily identifying *Lyngbaki* as 'mestr allra hvala í heiminum.'¹⁵¹ In a break from the *Physiologus* characterisation of the island-whale, Vignir suggests that he has been sent by Ögmundur by way of magic, a logical means of interfering in a sea voyage.

¹⁴⁶ Oslund 2004: 316.

¹⁴⁷ *KS* 7-73.

¹⁴⁸ Lindquist 2000: 37.

¹⁴⁹ *ESR* 224; Vohra suggests unwritten oral transmission of such navigational aids (151).

¹⁵⁰ *Örvar-Odds saga* 289 ['But when Odd's men landed on the island, they were only there for a short while before the island sank and they all drowned.'] Waggoner trans. 102.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Themes of setting off further north in times of famine, to find better fishing or to try to find help, are central to *Gríms saga Loðinkinna* and *Ketils saga hængs*. Father and son alike head from Halogaland to Finnmark. The son, Grím, ventures north and discovers a large, stranded rorqual. Upon being accosted by the owner of the land, who specifies his rights to drifted goods, a fight ensues of a bloodiness equal to *Grettis saga*.¹⁵² Grím himself is spared from death by a ‘tröllkona’ who is his own fiancée, enchanted; after this turn of fortune, he returns home, and finds ‘hvalr í hverri vík.’¹⁵³ In this matter, he fared better than his father, Ketill hæng, whose encounter with a ‘tröllkona’ on his quest for famine relief ends with her transformation into a whale.¹⁵⁴ Ketill’s own saga includes one of the few instances in which whale meat is left unused: at the beginning of his fishing trip, he discovers a pit full of salted meat, including whale — but ‘á botninum í hverri gröf fann hann mannakjöt saltat.’¹⁵⁵ This understandably ruins his appetite for the rest. The tone of both stories is adventurous, yet they echo the tales of Iceland’s settlement, with the key differences of setting and timing.¹⁵⁶

Voyages into even more distant territory, however, were accompanied by more uncertain signs, among them unknown species of whale. In *Eiríks saga rauða*, the image of the whale arriving in times of need is turned on its head, and the drifted whale defies definition: ‘Karlsefni kunni mikil skyn á hvöllum ok kenndi hann þó eigi.’¹⁵⁷ This incident follows upon the exploration and assignation of names to the land, and assessment of its resources; ‘þeir gáðu einskis, útan at kanna landit,’ but as winter descends, the party finds themselves without sufficient food supplies.¹⁵⁸ The whale meat causes illness to those who eat it, but even then, it is not identified with the species that are said to be unfit for human consumption. After Þórhallur’s

¹⁵² *Gríms saga loðinkinna* 190.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* 194.

¹⁵⁴ *KSH* 172.

¹⁵⁵ *KSH* 156.

¹⁵⁶ The connections between the Hrafnista sagas and the *Íslendingasögur* are explored in Waggoner’s introduction (ix); Ármann Jakobsson 35.

¹⁵⁷ *Eiríks saga rauða* (*ESR*) 224; this line is found in the Skálholtsbók version (AM 557 4to).

¹⁵⁸ *ESR* 224.

suggestion that the whale was a gift from his patron, Þórr (“‘‘Hefi ek þetta nú fyrir skáldskap minn, er ek ortu um Þór, fulltrúann’’”), the meat is discarded, a rare occasion in which whale meat is deliberately left unused in the sagas.¹⁵⁹

It is in the spring after this that Karlsefni and Þórhallur part ways. The scene occurs towards the end of the saga, as the party has explored and named the land that they have seen, but have not yet come into conflict with the ‘Skrælings.’ The land seems to be on the verge of settlement; it may be that the whale acts as foreshadowing, or it could be a variation on the tension between old and new, pagan and Christian.¹⁶⁰ The crew have brought their own arguments, interpersonal and religious, with them.

Whales filled out not only a sense of landscape, but land-scope, in illustrating the possibilities of the land, along with shades of its limitations. Such limitations could incorporate the impossibility or undesirability of settlement, or could reinforce the divisions of land and sea, as in places where the latter was an important actor upon the former.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.; Þórhallur’s apparent summoning of the whale is echoed in the folktale *Grímsborg*, in which a famine is ended by an appeal to the *huldufólk*, who send a whale ashore. (Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon trans. 34).

¹⁶⁰ Zilmer remarks on the use of an island setting to heighten the sense of contrast (2011: 32).

c. Unsettled places

The ‘monster whale at the ends of the Earth’ has continued to be a theme in literature and lore, as the whaling stories of the 18th and 19th century sperm whale fishery demonstrate. Tales of ‘Mocha Dick’ and other notorious whales of the South Pacific were not merely adventure stories designed to show off; they were a continuation of the named, monstrous, threatening whale tradition.¹⁶¹ Their purpose and geographical effect seems twofold. On the one hand, they served to identify with living markers the places where hazards were met and dramatic scenes took place; on the other, they took place at the ends of the Earth and in foreign waters. The uncertainty represented by the whales in these narratives shows a contrast to the stories of settlement and subsequent argument that are traced out in the sagas.

When the titular character of *Friðþjófs saga* encounters an unknown whale, in an unknown sea, while at odds with a powerful king, it seems clear from the outset that it will be an unpleasant encounter. His crew are sailing from Sognefjord to Orkney, a journey which, up to that point, had been orientated through various points of reference — ‘Nú fundu þeir, at skriðr varð á skipinu mikill, en ókunnigt var þeim, hvar þeir váru komnir.’¹⁶² This prefigures the appearance of a monster whale; although Friðþjóf correctly interprets this as indicating nearby land, it is land in the negative: the whale has been sent to prevent their reaching it.

“‘Hvalr einn liggir í hring um skip várt, ok vér eigum landa ván nær oss, ok get ek hann vilji banna oss landit, ok hygg ek þá Helga ok Hálfðan búa við oss eigi vingjarnliga, ok munu þeir hafa sent oss enga vinsending. Tvær konur sá ek á baki hvalnum gera oss fararbann.’”¹⁶³ This encounter differs vastly from that of *Ketils saga hængs*, in which a whale protects Ketill’s ship from heavy winds, while the two sagas bear a strong resemblance in the context of an unfamiliar sea and foul weather. It is not the whale that features as the primary opponent, in Friðþjóf’s case, but the two ‘tröllkonur’ on its back, who cause wild weather to waylay the ship.

¹⁶¹ Botkin ed. 199.

¹⁶² *Friðþjófs saga* 87 [‘Now they found that they had sailed a great way, and they did not know where they had come to.’] my trans., adapted from William Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon 13.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* 88 [“‘A whale lies in a ring around our ship, and I guess it would bar us from the land, and think I that Helgi and Hálfðan bear us no friendship, and have sent us no friendly messenger. Two women saw I on the back of the whale, making to hinder us.’”] my trans., adapted from Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon 14.

Once these are dispatched, the whale disappears into the depths of the ocean. The weather calms after this incident, and the voyage is allowed to continue. As in *Heimskringla*, the whale is only the messenger, sent along with the troll-women by Friðþjóf's king and adversary Helgi. The whale is not mentioned in the kennings of the boastful verse that accompanies the fight, which focuses on the troll-women as the main adversaries.¹⁶⁴ Unlike in the examples of walrus and seals below, transformed whales in the sagas are rarely the attackers in an encounter at sea, but often appear in a hostile role nonetheless.

The whale's role, in this saga, is to indicate land but prevent landing. It is effectively an inversion of the navigational advice given in *Landnámabók*, for the crew are in an unknown sea, and faced with a whale behaving unnaturally, unable to reach the land that it indicates. The troll-women on the back of the great whale recall the theme of the whale mistaken for an island, seen throughout medieval literature.¹⁶⁵ This motif not only demonstrates the perils of sea travel, and confounds the familiar with the alien through the presentation of an un-land, but presents an eerily un-claimable territory: the land cannot be held. Despite constant overtones of religious imagery, the island-whale reflects a reality that can also be found in legends of vanishing islands. It is an eminent motif among voyage narratives, but it is worth mentioning in the context of settlement, in that it presents an insurmountable obstacle to the settler.

Örvar-Odds saga includes an encounter with the monster *Lyngbaki* ('Heather-Back'). *Lyngbaki* seems to live on the margins of the world, near a mythologised Helluland, but his attributes were evidently known within the saga.¹⁶⁶ In the context of medieval Iceland, a place deeply involved in writing its own history at the time, the motif of disappearing land is strikingly vivid, due to the preoccupation of the texts with the claiming of territory. The protagonist's decision to send men ashore has points of resemblance elsewhere in the corpus. *Grænlandinga saga* tells of Bjarni Herjólfsson, whose reluctance to land on unknown shores is criticised by his crew; his 'lack of curiosity' is, for the horizon-expanding tone of the Vínland sagas, not

¹⁶⁴ *Friðþjófs saga* 88.

¹⁶⁵ See Pastoureau 182; Barber trans. 204; Barron and Burgess 34.

¹⁶⁶ *Örvar-Odds saga* 289.

commendable.¹⁶⁷ While *Örvar-Odds saga* is not a settlement narrative, there is one unifying theme that should not be overlooked. The goal of both parties is to cook food and find water. In this way, exploration and voyage narratives overlap with those of settlement, by referring to the most basic needs, presenting a place where they can be met, and then reversing it entirely.

Contrasting with the tales of successful and lasting settlement, there are the *Vínland sagas*. Composed two centuries distant from the settlement's abandonment, *Grænlandinga saga* (earliest ms. *Flateyjarbók* GKS 1005 fol., 1387-1394) and *Eiríks saga rauða* (*Hauksbók* AM 544 4to, 1290-1360) are found in separate manuscripts, and vary in their accounts of the attempted colony.¹⁶⁸ Both describe the finding of a great whale — in the former, a rorqual; in the latter, as described above, an unknown and implicitly sinister creature.¹⁶⁹ These whales strand without physical effort on the part of human characters, unlooked-for in the first case, unused by native people in both. Apart from Þórhallr's verse to Þórr, neither Viking nor 'Skræling' has any part in catching them, and the latter are completely absent.¹⁷⁰ This is an interesting aspect to note, as the presence or absence of native people in any settlement or voyage narrative is part of its character. Although 'Skrælings' are present in both sagas, their interactions with the Norse settlers is limited; there is no skirmish over the whale as there might have been in Iceland. The *Vínland sagas* demonstrate the same motif that *Egils saga* and *Grettis saga* embraced, but the whale, far from being fought over, is rejected. The land, far from being continuously occupied into the time of the sagas' writing, was briefly built upon but eventually abandoned.

Possession of land was possession of a past within it.¹⁷¹ In a newly settled land, there were ways of expressing this which compensated for the lack of concrete history. The anchoring of living history within a legendary past was one way, but there were still points of unsettlement, and whales could appear either as markers of continuity or as agents of that very uncertainty.

¹⁶⁷ Jesch 2009: 70; *Grænlandinga saga* 248.

¹⁶⁸ Vohra 151.

¹⁶⁹ *Grænlandinga saga* 261, described as 'mikil ok góð'; *ESR* 224.

¹⁷⁰ *ESR* 224; discussion of the term 'Skræling' and the challenges in interpretation thereof can be found in Sverrir Jakobsson.

¹⁷¹ Hermann 2010: 78.

Chapter Two: Walrus

a. Traveling tusks

The walrus's ambiguous classification and probable separation into two animals, as explored above, gives it a unique role in medieval Icelandic literature. The separation of the *hrosshval* and the *rostungr/rosmhvalr*, and the identification of them both as walrus, must always be taken with a grain of sea salt. This chapter will attempt to trace the contexts in which the *hrosshval* and *rostungr/rosmhvalr* alternately appear, in order to pinpoint when a pinniped is present, and distinguish the former from the generic *hval* or specific *reyður* of the previous chapter. In exploring its contributions to saga literature, as living animals or valuable products, it will separate these two concepts in their representation.

The walrus hunt receives little attention in the sagas, but when it does feature as part of the plot, it provides a connection with mainland Europe by means of tusks.¹⁷² The ivory it provided was a source of wealth for the Greenland Norse, and in much demand among élites, but declined throughout the 14th century.¹⁷³ Reasons for this varied, but the record of increased sea ice played its part along with the Black Death and subsequent economic shifts in mainland Europe.¹⁷⁴ In the sagas, walrus primarily appear through minor lines on the subject of walrus-hide ropes, or ivory work indicating wealth and quality, as for example in *Laxdæla saga*'s 'mikit vápn ok gott, tannhjolt at.'¹⁷⁵ The *Króka-Refs saga* is more detailed in this regard. Barðr's gifts to the Norwegian King Haraldr include the wonders of Greenland: a well-trained polar bear, a walrus ivory game board, and a complete walrus skull 'grafinn allr ok víða rennt í gulli.'¹⁷⁶

Even in the sagas which feature Greenland as a setting, however, the walrus hunt goes almost unnoticed, though it occurs once in Icelandic waters. *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* recounts that at Dyrafjörður, in the Westfjords, a walrus comes ashore, a rare occurrence in the

¹⁷² See Grove 2009.

¹⁷³ McGovern 1994: 146.

¹⁷⁴ For further analysis of the factors affecting European trade in walrus goods, see Ogilvie et al.; Seaver.

¹⁷⁵ *LS* 79.

¹⁷⁶ *Króka-Refs saga (KRS)* 142 ['engraved all over and and was extensively inlaid with gold.'] Clark trans. 612.

sagas and likely in Iceland by that time.¹⁷⁷ The *Grágás* (*Konungsbók*, Gl. kgl. sml. 1157 fol., estimated production date 1260) laws make provision for hunting walrus on holy days, in the same section as the polar bear, another rare visitor.¹⁷⁸ Possibly, the fact that it appeared alone was itself indicative of this reduction in numbers, and eased its capture. The interactions and exchanges present in this scene are entirely between people, with religious flavour: Hrafn invokes Thomas à Becket for help in landing the catch. The difficulty in securing the walrus, in this case, is greater than the difficulty in killing it, and requires intercession. Walrus sink when they are killed, and so the possibility of losing the catch is fairly high. Hrafn recognises this risk: ‘Þá hét Hrafn á inn helga Tómas erkibyskup til þess, at nást skyldi hvalrinn. Hann hét at gefa hausfastar tennar ór hvalnum, ef þeir gæti nátt hvalinn at landi fluttan. Ok síðan, er hann hafði heitit, þá varð þeim ekki fyrir at flytja at landi hvalinn.’¹⁷⁹

Once the walrus is safely brought to land, its tusks are removed, and Hrafn brings them to Canterbury as a gift at the beginning of his pilgrimage.¹⁸⁰ The fate of the tusks, sent overseas as tribute, is typical, and the possible connection between Hrafn’s and Thomas’s lives, suggested by Gúðrun Helgadóttir, is made explicit.¹⁸¹ Unlike *Kormáks saga* or *Hjálmþés saga*, which will be explored below, this animal is identified with the word that has come to mean ‘walrus,’ without ambiguity. It is also identified as an ordinary quarry, not the result of supernatural powers or human transformation. As in *Króka-Refs saga*, there is no mention of the *hrosshval*. Kings and archbishops are the recipients of walrus goods in these examples, bringing the Greenland Norse colony closer to the rest of Europe, and connecting it with the idea of wealth and status symbols.

¹⁷⁷ Frei et al. 445.

¹⁷⁸ *Grágás* 29.

¹⁷⁹ *Hrafns saga* 3 [‘Then Hrafn promised the Holy Bishop Thomas that if he succeeded in getting the walrus ashore, he would give him the tusks. No sooner had he made this vow than the walrus was brought to land.’] Tjomsland trans. 4.

¹⁸⁰ *Hrafns saga* 4.

¹⁸¹ See Grove 2009; Gúðrun Helgadóttir intro lxvii; Tjomsland notes Thomas as ‘one of Iceland’s favourite saints’ (5).

The cargo of walrus-hide, furs, falcons, and ivory that Ref brings to Denmark draws the attention of those who hear of these riches.¹⁸²

As a ‘geographically and culturally liminal setting,’¹⁸³ Greenland seems well-positioned to become the setting for human-walrus transformations, and for the appearance of the monstrous *hrosshval* in a supernatural context.¹⁸⁴ Yet the example of *Króka-Refs saga* shows the opposite: its main role in regards to the walrus was as a supplier of goods, if highly luxurious ones.¹⁸⁵ The focus is on continental Europe, and the status that these items held there, rather than on the numinous.

¹⁸² *KRS* 157.

¹⁸³ Grove 2009.

¹⁸⁴ Heide 2011: 63.

¹⁸⁵ *KRS* 139.

b. Double life

The dual identity of the walrus in medieval texts was based on perspective. The section of *Konungs skuggsjá* which deals with sea creatures is in the section of the text relevant to merchants. It is assumed that merchants will require knowledge of foreign seas; the detailed information is presented in a context of professional learning which would be of use on a sea voyage. In its content, presenting the *hrosshval* as a dangerous whale, and the *rostungr* as a useful creature, it takes a practical approach towards navigation of the northern seas.¹⁸⁶ The *rostungr* being found near Greenland, and displaying the characteristics of the seal, was unlike the *hrosshval*, named in the section on the Icelandic seas, where its presence would perhaps have been rarer, and it may have appeared alone, unusually for a walrus. If they are to be read as the same animal, the reasons for differences between them in the text are significant.

The need to be familiar with distant seas was particularly pertinent in the trade of walrus-related goods, being both extremely valuable, and requiring a long voyage to obtain. The walrus hunt was a very different task to the local taking of seals: it was an approximately fifteen-day journey from the Western Settlement to *Norðsetr*, the northern hunting ground.¹⁸⁷ Walrus ivory remained a luxury item throughout the early medieval period, pointing to the likelihood that the Greenland Norse settlers depended upon it economically.¹⁸⁸ There is evidence of walrus ivory being used in many parts of Europe, and the wealth of the Greenland colony was in tusks, sufficiently so that it became a means of paying papal tribute.¹⁸⁹ The evidence suggests that ‘the first [Norse Greenland] settlers included craft workers experienced in handling walrus ivory and in walrus butchery’ and that these settlers knew the value in their skill was evident.¹⁹⁰ The story recounted briefly in *Hrafns saga* reinforces the notion of tusks as tribute.

The role of ivory as tribute also appears in the story of Ottar, or Ohthere, the traveller from Halogaland whose visit to King Alfred is documented in the 9th century Old English

¹⁸⁶ KS 30, 56.

¹⁸⁷ Frei et al. 446.

¹⁸⁸ Seaver; Keller.

¹⁸⁹ Perry 116; Keller.

¹⁹⁰ Frei et al. 443; Seaver.

version of *Orosius*, in which the protagonist presents ‘horshwæl’ tusks and hides to the king.¹⁹¹ This is reason enough to accept ‘walrus’ as an interpretation; this is the translation given by Jones, as well as by Nansen, and more recent studies such as Seaver’s have supported it.¹⁹² Ottar puts some weight behind his boasts of travel, when he presents these teeth to King Alfred, claiming he had them as tribute from the Finns. Ottar’s voyage is relevant here as a point of comparison: his route led to northern Norway, not Greenland, where the majority of walrus ivory was sourced, but it features in the same role as a place of remote riches, another world from which gifts can be brought. Like Grím and his father Ketill, Ottar was from Halogaland, and travelled northward, though in pursuit of wealth rather than famine relief.¹⁹³

Comparison can be made here to the exploration of Vínland: Leifr Eiríksson taking ‘öllu nokkur merki’ upon finding unexpected lands filled with growing things. Hermann Pálsson and Magnus Magnusson translate this phrase, rather scientifically, as ‘samples,’ and Kunz as ‘specimens’; though this is not meant in the sense of the discovery of new natural forms (wheat and vines), it does serve as a means of illustrating the wonders of a distant world, to those who had not seen it.¹⁹⁴ Though walrus were not denizens of an entirely unknown place, they did represent an exoticism reflected in the luxury status of the goods they produced.

The behaviour of the *hrosshval* and the *rostungr* are distinct in *Konungs skuggsjá*, and this may have led the way for their portrayal in Icelandic sagas, where the hunting scene above, and the occasional mention of the use of *rostungr* tusks in various objects, show an ordinary and useful creature, unlike the actively malicious ones to be explored below. Perry’s characterisation of walrus as being ‘peaceable enough, and even timid when not provoked’ accords ill with the troublesome nature of the *hrosshval*.¹⁹⁵ Curiosity, however, is a dangerous trait, and their behaviour of hooking tusks onto nearby objects has been disastrous for small vessels. Mid-

¹⁹¹ Full translation of Ottar’s narrative found in G. Jones 251.

¹⁹² G. Jones 251; Nansen 171; Seaver.

¹⁹³ G. Jones 252.

¹⁹⁴ *ESR* 211; Magnus and Hermann trans. 86; Kunz trans. 661.

¹⁹⁵ Perry 40.

century Inuit testimony included stories of large herds of walrus, migrating together, and apparently deliberate attempts to capsize hunters' boats.¹⁹⁶

Given the herd behaviour of the walrus, it seems curious that they should only ever be portrayed alone in saga texts. Perhaps, despite the significance of the hunt in Greenland, the memory of large herds in Iceland and Norway had already faded or lost significance. This solitude may also be a factor of the walrus as a human adversary.

¹⁹⁶ Perry 38; see Brown for similar accounts (25).

c. *Who is the walrus?*

The *hrosshvalur* which appear as transformed humans are distinguished by name from the *rostungr* and its practical products. The people who changed form and took on the shape of a walrus tended to be antagonistic, and in *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, this differs from the role of other kinds of whale within the same text.¹⁹⁷ A *fornaldasaga* of which the speculated closest surviving witness (AM 109a III 8vo) dates from the 17th century, it contains much of the confusion surrounding the *hrosshval*.¹⁹⁸

Pursued by an adversarial king who can control the weather, Hjálmpēr's voyage has no sooner begun when 'einn stórr hrosshvalr lagðist með miklum boðaföllum ok ógurligum látum at þeim.'¹⁹⁹ Unlike the previous two examples, they are aided by both a whale and a dolphin, which themselves are transformed humans, including the hero's somewhat superhuman ally Hörðr. In this case, the specific term is all the more important, to distinguish the 'illhvelinu' (a term used twice in the text) from 'skeljungrinn' which comes to their aid. In a rare case, the friendly whale is identified by name, and even more unusually, it is a whale named by *Konungs skuggsjá* as dangerous to ships.²⁰⁰ O'Connor chooses to translate *hrosshvalur* as 'walrus,' but retains the generic 'whale' for the 'skeljungr.'²⁰¹ The former seems a logical choice, given the above explanation of the changes the term has undergone, though the latter is surprising, as a translation has been made — both Larson and Lindquist identify the 'skeljungr' with the humpback.²⁰²

There is perhaps some parallel between this saga and the 9th-century *Navigatio* version of the St Brendan voyage, in which a whale rescues the protagonists from a monstrous sea-beast.

¹⁹⁷ The discussion of transformation between humans or gods and animals in Norse literature has been significant; for a few examples, see Ármann Jakobsson, McKinnell, Ellis Davidson.

¹⁹⁸ O'Connor 52.

¹⁹⁹ *Hjálmþés saga* 232 ['they saw a huge walrus coming at them with great splashings and revolting noises.'] O'Connor trans. 164.

²⁰⁰ *KS* 31.

²⁰¹ O'Connor 164.

²⁰² Lindquist 2000:17; Larson trans. 123.

Given the description of its tusks, it would seem likely that the outlandish monster described in the St Brendan legend was a walrus as well.²⁰³

The case of *Kormáks saga* is an important one to study for the role of the *hrosshval* in the sagas. On the way to Norway, ‘Þá er þeir bræður létu úr læginu kom upp hjá skipinu hrosshvalur.’²⁰⁴ It is recognisable, however, as an unnatural animal: its eyes are not only those of a human, but of the vengeful Þorveig, whose enmity Kormák had incited far earlier, leading her to curse him.²⁰⁵ It is their final encounter: when Þorveig appears in the form of a walrus, she is said to be simultaneously lying ill, and Kormákr finishes off both walrus and human with one blow from a staff.²⁰⁶ In a similar fashion, the whale and dolphin of *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis* survive their encounter with the walrus, but are weakened when they resume human form.²⁰⁷

Þorveig’s pursuit of Kormákr at sea, and the recognition of her identity by way of her eyes only, is reminiscent of the seal in *Eyrbyggja saga*, rising through the floor with its gaze fixed on the bedspread, an image that will be further explored below.²⁰⁸ It also recalls the far more positive human-eyed whale of *Ketils saga hængs*, whose presence as a shield from weather in the Finnish seas spares Ketill, but causes his boat to ground on an unknown shore.²⁰⁹

Unlike the whales of *Heimskringla* and *Friðþjófs saga*, Þorveig is acting of her own accord. She is an outsider, said to be ‘mjök fjölkunnig,’ but a local one, and possesses both agency and power.²¹⁰ The king in *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis* also appears to transform of his own volition, and neither warlock nor ‘tröllkona’ act as intermediaries. If the case of *hrosshval* transformations in the sagas are to be taken as referring to walrus, then, this animal plays a large

²⁰³ Dunn 431; see Mackley 160 on different versions of this scene.

²⁰⁴ *Kormáks saga* (*KorS*) 265 [‘When the brothers put out from their place of anchorage, a walrus surfaced beside the ship.’] McTurk trans. 208.

²⁰⁵ *KorS* 221.

²⁰⁶ *KorS* 265.

²⁰⁷ *Hjálmþés saga* 233; Ellis Davidson 29.

²⁰⁸ *KorS* 265.

²⁰⁹ *KSH* 158.

²¹⁰ *KorS* 217; see Gunnell 2015: 312.

part, as supernatural and human threat. Unlike the generic whale, or the whale-island, whose role can vary greatly, the transformed walrus's main appearance seems to be in the context of direct pursuit or combat with the human protagonists.

Chapter Three: Seals

a. At the edge

Seals, by their nature, tend to intrude upon human space, blurring boundaries and inhabiting sea and shore at once. Seal places, the skerries, caves, and islets most conducive to their habitat, may have been points of local importance to medieval Icelanders, but their role in sagas is often more supernatural than mundane, as will be demonstrated. Arguably, because of their proximity to people, their role in the establishment of place and space at the margins of the sea has been ambiguous.

In Norway and Iceland alike, seals became subjects of both legend and legality. Their ritual role may be hinted at in rock carvings at the seaboard in several Scandinavian locations; more recent beliefs attest to their role in fishing luck.²¹¹ Their social role was bound up in land ownership, as skerries were frequently part of defining private property.²¹² Tellingly, Lindquist's model of privately owned land extends as far as the net-mark, or the place in which a seal-net could stand with a float above the water.²¹³ Nets as well as clubbing were the main methods of hunting seals at this time, and this required access to shore resources.²¹⁴

In *Hvamm-Sturlas saga*, an unresolved inheritance case over the farm of Heinaberg, in Skarðsströnd, provokes conflict between Birningr and Einarr Þorgilsson.²¹⁵ Einarr's desire to obtain Heinaberg is explained in Byock's analysis as a desire for nearby islands: its abundance of seals would have provided valuable resources.²¹⁶ They are still important seal grounds today. Byock states that such islands are 'often unrecorded on even large-scale modern maps,' but he goes on to suggest that the seal rookery was the primary site of value in this dispute.²¹⁷ The saga is strangely silent on the matter; unlike whales, seals are not the clear catalysts of landowner

²¹¹ Westerdahl 11; Gísli Pálsson 89.

²¹² Nedkvitne in Pulsiano 196; see *Gulapíng* 88 on sealing grounds; *Grágás* twice uses 'af landi eða af skeri' to mark boundaries (354-355).

²¹³ Lindquist 1997: 16.

²¹⁴ Perdikaris and McGovern 195.

²¹⁵ McGrew trans. 100.

²¹⁶ Byock 285.

²¹⁷ Byock 287.

disputes in the saga narratives, and these are unnamed, in contrast to Hvalseyjar with its explicit naming narrative.²¹⁸ However, brief nods to sealing places in the *Íslendingasögur* indicate that they were important points of local geography.

In contrast to the claiming of stranded whales, the role of seals in land ownership was one of hunter to quarry, and incorporated a slightly different form of property than that of drift goods. Sealing grounds were found on skerries, coasts, and beaches, and were accessible and predictable sources of income; the canny Skalla-Grímr ensures that his skerries give him a ready supply of seal, and earlier on, his brother Þórólfur sets up in Hálogaland with an eye towards seals: ‘Þórólfr sópask mjök um fong þau, er þá váru á Hálogalandi ... selver váru ok gnóg ok eggver.’²¹⁹

The 12th-century Gulaping law in Norway expands on the matter of sealing grounds and ownership thereof.²²⁰ ‘Nu ma maðr skjóta sel af skipí ef hann rør rettleiðif; hvárt sem hann er a flote; æða á lande; nema selr liggi á latre því er stilli er til laðet; þá veiðír hann þeim er ver á. Nu skytr maðr sel af lande oc eir eigi stilli laðet.’²²¹ It is useful to note that deer were similarly regulated: ‘If a man enters another man’s forest to hunt with hounds, he hunts for the one who owns the forest.’ However, regulations surrounding the finding of animals, including seals, were different, depending on whether they were found on dry land or ‘above the shore’s edge.’²²² In the former case, it was permissible to carry off a find, but the latter required the animal to be returned to the owner of the land, along with the fine for trespass. Like the deer, seals were close residents to human dwellings, and overturned to some degree the sense of opposition between land and sea.²²³ Their habitat could be owned, by landlords and the wealthy; they exemplified the

²¹⁸ *ES* 75.

²¹⁹ *ES* 28 [‘Thorolf harvested large amounts of provisions for himself in Halogaland ... There were also good seal hunting and plenty of eggs to be gathered’] Scudder trans. 20.

²²⁰ Larson cites the ‘most satisfactory manuscript’ as dating from 1150 (26).

²²¹ [‘A man may shoot a seal from his boat, if he rows the common route, whether the seal is in the water or on the land, unless it is lying on a sealing ground where a trap has been set; in that case he kills [the seal] for him who owns the ground.’] Larson trans. 101.

²²² Larson trans. 104.

²²³ Westerdahl 13.

class structures of their particular place and age, but unlike the whale, deer in the *Gulaping* were not always subject to royal claims.²²⁴

Part of understanding the environment was understanding the restrictions of ownership. Nobility in the continental European sense may have been absent from Iceland, but the ownership of farms, cliffs, or islands was no less significant, and such divisions made for different types of stories than the commons.²²⁵ The resources skerries provided were controlled by human power, but as the most significant seals of saga texts demonstrate, their inhabitants were potent figures of the uncanny.²²⁶

²²⁴ *Gulaping* 89; for a look at hunting rights in medieval England, in comparison, see Gardiner 186.

²²⁵ *Grágás* expands on the question of drift rights, but only in reference to owned or rented shoreline, with *almennigr* (commons) being the area beyond the *netlög* (354-364).

²²⁶ Zilmer 2008: 239.

b. Transformation

The sinister potential of the seal is apparent in the story of Selkolla, recounted in the B-redaction of *Guðmundar saga biskups*. The saga, comprised of a compilation of *Prestssaga*, *Hrafns saga*, and *Íslendinga saga*, along with original material, is dated to 1340-1390, and recounts the life of the saint.²²⁷ In one passage, Guðmundr is called upon to rid the community of the monstrous seal-headed female monster which has appeared, following the lustful distraction of two parents whose failure to baptise their child leads to disaster. The couple are travelling to the nearest church for the baptism. Their journey is interrupted by their desires, and they leave the child momentarily at Miklasteinn, to lie together. However, when they return:

‘þá sýnist þeim þat dautt ok illiligt, ok láta þau eptir barnit; ok er þau koma skamt í burt, heyra þau barnsgrát, ok fara eptir hljóðunum, ok sýndist þeim þat þá enn illiligra en fyrr [...] Fara menn nú ok leita barnsins, ok finna eigi; en litlu síðarr sýnist þar kona, ok eigi fríð ásýndar, því at stundum þótti selhöfut á vera; fyrir þat var hon Selkolla köllut.’²²⁸

Her hauntings are such that ‘en sá fjandi gekk svá djarflega, at menn þorðu eigi at fara nauðsynja sinna um þær sveitir, þó at hraustir menn væri; gekk þessi fjandi svá um daga sem um nætr ... hon kom upp or jörðu, svá inni sem úti.’²²⁹ The fear that she spreads is legitimate, as the saga describes her assaults towards the farmer Dálkur in particular, and her seemingly indiscriminate and unpredictable attacks. The story is recounted in the *Selkolluvísur* by Einarr Gilsson in the D-redaction of the saga, including the farmer’s loss of sanity as a result and the bishop’s eventual vanquishment of the spirit.²³⁰

The suggestion that Selkolla is intended to represent the spirit of an exposed child has been refuted by Skórzewska, who cites the terms *fjandi* and *óhrein andi* as evidence of demonic

²²⁷ Skórzewska 25.

²²⁸ *Guðmundar saga* chapter 34 [‘it looked to them to be dead and horrible, and they abandoned the child, and as they proceeded quickly away, they heard a child’s cry; they went towards the sound, and then it seemed to them even more horrible than before ... People now went to look for the child, but found nothing; but a little later a woman appeared there—and none too beautiful in appearance, because at times she seemed to have a seal’s head, from which she was called Selkolla’] Alaric Hall trans.

²²⁹ Ibid. [‘people didn’t dare to go on their errands around the district, even if they were bold. This demon walked thus in the day as in the night ... she rose from the earth both indoors and outdoors.’] Alaric Hall trans.

²³⁰ Skórzewska 266.

possession rather than a revenant.²³¹ Lawing, however, cites Norway's 14th-century Borgarþing law, in which children with seal-like characteristics could be left at the intertidal zone, to connect the story with the sometimes inconsistent practices surrounding infant exposure in newly-Christianised Iceland.²³² Two factors in his analysis and the story itself stand out for the purposes of this study: the physical characteristics of the child, and the location at precisely the place where seals are often to be found. To situate the Selkolla story at the same location implies a connection between the two, as well as justifying the use of that place for such a purpose.

The moral implications, condemning the failure to baptise a child, are furthermore a parallel to the folktale of *Rauðhöfði*: the appearance of the seal-monster follows a sexual liaison which distracts a couple from having their child baptised.²³³ The transformation from man to whale in *Rauðhöfði* is likewise brought on by his unwillingness to have his own child baptised, after an intimacy with an elfin woman.²³⁴ In both cases, the help of a priest or bishop is required to vanquish the monster.

It is one of the rare instances of seal transformation in the sagas, but not the only one in which a supernatural seal appears to serve as a reminder of consequences. The 'seal episode' in *Eyrbyggja saga* has fascinating implications, in this regard. Not only does the seal appear to remind the living of the debt they owe the dead, but at the same moment, further deaths occur, which result in more revenants, and a continued haunting. The *Fróðárundr* is a late episode in the saga, following directly on the heels of the Christianisation of Iceland, when the Hebridean Þórgunna arrives to stay with Þóroddur and Þúrriður. Upon Þórgunna's death, the latter insists upon disregarding the last wishes of the deceased: to have her valuable bedclothes burned. The scene that follows her burial shows the result of this:

‘Það var tíðenda at Fróðá þat sama kveld, er Þóroddr hafði heiman farit, at máleldar váru gqrvir, ok er menn kómu fram, sá þeir, at selshqfuð kom upp ór eldgrófinni. Heimakona ein kom

²³¹ Skórzewska 100.

²³² Lawing; see *Grágás* 3 for baptismal laws in Iceland.

²³³ Sveinsson 157.

²³⁴ Simpson 42 ('The Red-Headed Whale'); for further material on elf-human liaisons in folklore, see Einarr Ólafur Sveinsson 178-183; the folktale in full can be found in Jón Arnason vol. I (83).

fyrst fram ok sá þessi tíðindi; hon tók lurk einn, er lá í durunum ok laust í höfuð selnum; hann gekk upp við hoggit ok gægðist upp á ársalinn Þórgunna. Þá gekk til húskarl og barði selinn; gekk hann upp við hvert hogg, þar til at hann kom upp yfir hreifana, þá fell húskarl í óvit; urðu þá allir óttafullir, þeir er við váru.²³⁵

The banishment of the seal in this case is more physical than that of Selkolla, and tellingly, requires a personal connection with the revenant, rather than spiritual superiority: ‘Þá hljóp til sveinninn Kjartan ok tók upp mikla járndrepsleggju ok laust í höfuð selnum.’²³⁶ The seal in this case exhibits traits more typical of the *draugr*, being a physical entity with the apparent preoccupations of the person it represents. As with the walrus of *Kormáks saga*, the seal’s eyes — or its gaze — are what make it recognisable, but the origins and motivation of the character in the context of the saga as a whole are notably different. The seal may not literally be a returned Þórgunna, but it does seem to represent her, and the scene brings both the unburned bedclothes and unkept promises to the fore.

As a member of the community, Þórgunna is nonetheless an outsider, being Hebridean and not Icelandic by birth. That she was at once a foreigner and an islander, from a place in which both the grey seal and the selkie legend flourish, makes Þórgunna’s appearance in the form of that particular animal more significant. She dies on Icelandic soil and initially appears as a revenant; however, after her burial, she does not return as an ordinary *draugr*, and it is the seal, both rising from the floor and invading the fish-shed, that becomes associated with her spirit.²³⁷

Selkolla is a more threatening figure, but like Þórgunna, her presence serves as a reminder of wrongs and an intrusion of the supernatural into the familiar — as opposed to the

²³⁵ *EyrS* 147 [‘In the evening, after Thorodd had gone and the fire had been lit, the people came into the living-room and saw a seal’s head coming up through the floor. One of the servants was the first to notice this as she came in, and she grabbed a club in the doorway and hit the seal on the head. This only made the seal rise up a bit more out of the ground. Then it turned its eyes towards the canopy from Thorgunna’s bed. One of the farmhands came up and started hitting the seal, but it kept rising further up with every blow, until its flippers emerged.’] Hermann Pálsson and Edwards trans. 165.

²³⁶ *EyrS* 147 [‘young Kjartan, who rushed up with a sledge-hammer and struck the seal on the head.’] 165.

²³⁷ Kanerva 29 discusses this theme and the counter-arguments of Kjartan G. Ottósson (1983); see Tulinius 2007 for a reading of these scenes as a power struggle.

monstrous whale, she appears within the local community, partly human.²³⁸ As with the whales and walrus explored above, these two seal-apparitions represent people who were presented, in very different ways, as being outsiders, an association that has lasted in several parts of the North Atlantic region. Thomson quotes one Shetland islander who associates seals with ‘Norway Finns,’ giving them the foreign status that marked Þórgunna apart.²³⁹

Seals have consistently been portrayed throughout North Atlantic folklore as animals connected to the human community, often capable of transformation between species.²⁴⁰ The most famous of the seal transformation legends, however, that of the marriage to a selkie or seal-woman, does not appear in the sagas. Though it is a known and apparently well-documented piece of folklore, detailed by Jón Árnason and frequently included in collections of Icelandic legends and folk tales, its presence does not appear to have been significant to saga literature or most medieval Icelandic writing.²⁴¹ It is also not the only piece of transformation folklore to appear: in one story, it is the Devil himself who takes the shape of a seal.²⁴²

²³⁸ See Phelpstead 16; see Van Duzer’s remarks on the placement of monsters (2012: 387).

²³⁹ Thomson 131.

²⁴⁰ See Thomson; Ní Fhloinn.

²⁴¹ Jón Árnason vol. IV 11. See Gunnell 2007, Simpson, Krappe for Icelandic folklore on seals.

²⁴² Gunnell 1998: 97.

c. Sealing their fate

The sagas demonstrate ambiguity in the depiction of the seal's human connection. The seals that appear with any significant role to play are generally supernatural, and in the two cases explored below, they are linked with death.

Seafaring societies need to reckon with the effect of death at sea, a reality which they faced on a daily basis. Such a death was frequently considered a bad kind, due to the absence of a body to bury, and often the inability to confirm the circumstances of a person's demise.²⁴³ It was effectively a placeless death, without an evident narrative or last rites. Although the sea could have been considered as consecrated ground in Icelandic custom, Christian tradition required a body to bury, leaving the status of the sea-dead unresolved, and increasing the likelihood of their return as revenants.²⁴⁴ The importance of confirming death is seen in both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdæla saga*.

The shipwreck that claims Þorsteinn's life in *Laxdæla saga* takes place shortly following the violent activity of the revenant Hrappr, whose inheritance fell, through Vigdís his widow, to her brother — Þorsteinn. However, as the latter travels to Hrappstaðir to claim it as his own, his overburdened ship is stranded on a nearby rock. 'Þeir sá sel í strauminum um daginn, meira miklu en aðra; hann fór í hring um skipit um daginn og var ekki fitjaskammr; svá sýndisk þeim ǫllum, sem mannsaugu væru í honum.'²⁴⁵

The attempt to kill the seal from the boat fails, and shortly afterward, 'þá rekr á hvassviðri mikit ok hvelfir skipinu, ok drukna nú menn allir, þeir er þar váru á skipinu, nema einn maðr.'²⁴⁶

Given the connection between the revenants of *Eyrbyggja saga* and the supernatural seal, the suggestion appears to be that Hrappr had something to do with the seal's appearance. As the

²⁴³ Schmitt 2.

²⁴⁴ Schmitt 2; Almquist 4.

²⁴⁵ *LS* 41 ['They saw a seal, much larger than most, swimming in the water nearby. It swam round and round the ship, its flippers unusually long, and everyone aboard was struck by its eyes, which were like those of a human.'] Kunz trans. 299.

²⁴⁶ *LS* 41 ['a great storm struck which capsized the ship. Everyone aboard was drowned except one man'] Kunz trans. 299.

matter in question, in both sagas, was one of inheritance and goods possessed by the deceased, there is something alike in their motivation and behaviour towards the living.

That the seal's head in *Eyrbyggja saga* should rise mysteriously, and accusingly, on the same evening that Þóroddr and his crew are drowned, hints that Þórgunna is directly responsible, but does not affirm it aloud.²⁴⁷ The revenant-seal at Fróðá coincides with the loss of the vessel, but precedes the appearance of the crew as revenants in that same hall. The men have died but their deaths have not yet been confirmed: their liminal state, between land and sea, life and death, is foreshadowed in the seal. The simultaneity of the seal encounter and the shipwreck, in both of these sagas, heightens the connection with the skerry or coastal setting, a frequent location of wrecks on the Icelandic coast.²⁴⁸ The *Laxdæla saga* wreck brings together this not-quite-land with the theme of assuming ownership of land, and especially so in the mention of the goods in the boat in the passage preceding the shipwreck, in which it states, 'Þórarinn stýrði ok hafði aktaumana um herðar sér, því at þröngt var á skipinu; var hirzlum mest hlaðit, ok varð hár farmrinn, en lönðin váru nær.'²⁴⁹

Unlike in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the drowned travellers on Þorsteinn's boat do not return as revenants. The confirmation of their deaths can come through the sole survivor, Guðmundur, whose enumeration of their names determines the line of succession to the inheritance in question. While the bodies are not retrieved in either case, it becomes a more straightforward matter in *Laxdæla* than *Eyrbyggja*, or at least an earthly one rather than supernatural. The shipwreck effectively changes the course of the characters' lives, as Hrappr goes to lie fallow for several years before being purchased — 'Lendur þær, er Hrappr hafði átt, lágu í auðn.'²⁵⁰ Even once it changes hands and passes to Ólafur, Hrappr's revenant form returns, this time bodily, and must be properly dispatched. This accords strangely with the death and return of

²⁴⁷ Suggested by Johann Levin at the Háskóla Íslands Student Conference 2017; Kanerva 30; *EyrS* states that the seal's head appeared 'um vetrinn litlu fyrir jól, at Þóroddr bóndi fór út á Nes' (147).

²⁴⁸ Gunnell 2005: 70.

²⁴⁹ *LS* 41 ['Thorarin was at the helm. He had the straps to control the rudder bound round his shoulders as there was little room to move about aboard ship. It was loaded with chests and cases, piled high, for they were not far from land.'] Kunz trans. 298.

²⁵⁰ *LS* 66 ['The lands which Hrappr had owned were deserted'] Kunz trans. 315.

the Christian Þórgunna, whose human body rests peacefully after her burial, even if her spirit does not.²⁵¹ After he is found in his grave ‘ófuinn,’ his body is burned and the ashes flung out to sea, and subsequently his hauntings cease.²⁵² This detail is an important one, considering the appearance of the seal, and especially in comparison with the *Eyrbyggja saga* incident concerning the bull Glæsir, which will be discussed below.

However, for every tale concerning death at sea, there is one showing unexpected rescue.

Looking towards a skerry in *Fostbræðra saga*, two characters wonder whether something moving upon it is a seal; it turns out to be Þormóðr.²⁵³ Though mundane in nature, and requiring no transformation, this brief passage fulfils or presages the motif of abandonment to certain death, followed by deliverance, which would appear in seal folklore throughout the North Atlantic islands.²⁵⁴ The setting on a skerry is significant — there are ‘instances where islands and skerries are differentiated from land, whereas they are otherwise referred to as land in the meaning of dry land.’²⁵⁵ Skerries were, like seals, neither here nor there: at the edge of visibility, and a constant risk to ships, they could be fruitful and valuable for their resources, yet deadly and dangerous. Such a duality is reflected in the ways in which seals appear in the sagas, as well as in folklore. Seals as humans were said, in Orkney, to dance on ‘some lonely skerry,’ emphasising their in-between state.²⁵⁶ In the use of the skerry as the site of supernatural rescues, it becomes the unknown brought close.

Seals could cause or foretell death at sea, but they also provided the important role of warning. The silence of the saga seals is distinctive, but this runs emphatically counter to many contemporary sources which describe their vocalisations colourfully, something that has made its

²⁵¹ Kanerva questions this conclusion in light of the religious implications, but concurs that the seal represents Þórgunna (29).

²⁵² *LS* 69 [‘perfectly preserved’] Kunz trans. 317.

²⁵³ *FS* 241.

²⁵⁴ See Thomson 125; Marwick 152; Darwin 2015.

²⁵⁵ Waage 181.

²⁵⁶ Marwick 113.

way into sea-lore surrounding the warnings that are said to precede bad weather.²⁵⁷ The ability to heed a warning from the sea was a necessary part of survival, and perhaps the affinity with seals in particular was connected to this — the ‘barnsgrát’ briefly heard by the couple in the Selkolla story could indeed be its precursor.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ See Joensen 96.

²⁵⁸ *Guðmundur saga* chapter 34.

Postscript — Sea Cows

Exchange between land and sea figures prominently in seal folklore, including tales of rescue and debts repaid. Building the concept of the sea as a mirror of the land, aquatic animals are frequently compared to domestic stock, perhaps none more often than the seal — when it is not playing the part of a transfigured person.²⁵⁹ Between land and sea lies the lore of sea-cows, a curious piece with enough presence in medieval Norse literature to be worthy of mention. These cattle are said to be the best of their kind in most such stories, and to give milk freely.²⁶⁰ Some traditions directly connect the sea-cow with a transfigured seal, and another piece of the story has it return to the ocean.²⁶¹

This piece of shared lore, however, is prefigured darkly in *Eyrbyggja saga*. The calf Glæsir is said to be the result of its mother ingesting seaweed with the ashes of Þórolfr bægifótr, that troublesome revenant.²⁶² Its behaviour becomes too monstrous for it to be considered an ordinary animal, and in the end, it impales its owner, but throughout its mysterious and dangerous existence, it is described as unusually strong.²⁶³ The association with both the sea and death make it an intriguing case: Glæsir could be read as an early image of the sea-calf.

In this it recalls the story of ‘Ívarr the Boneless,’ recounted in *Ragnarssona þáttr*, in which the cow Síbylja comes through the sea in her attack on the ship.²⁶⁴ McTurk’s interpretation that it represents bad weather, heavy seas, and witchcraft is convincing, but to this mix, one might add the *hrosshval*.²⁶⁵ A reversal of the sea-cow relationship, as well, is seen in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, when the warlock-whale sent by King Haraldr is deterred by ‘gríðungr mikill ok óð á sæinn út ok tók at gella ógurliga.’²⁶⁶

²⁵⁹ See Olaus Magnus 1034; Thomson 1954.

²⁶⁰ McTurk 102.

²⁶¹ Thomson 146.

²⁶² *EyrS* 172.

²⁶³ 175.

²⁶⁴ McTurk 193.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* 271.

To end this study with a brief return to the themes on which it began, the comparison between sea and land appears to have played into the worldview of medieval Icelanders, without becoming a simplistic one-to-one exchange. If the use of *heiti* or circumlocutions such as *unnsvín* were, in the vein of *noa*-names, attempts to avoid naming the animals directly, the sea cows of the literature and folklore can be open to such an interpretation.

Conclusion

The sea is a living, practical link between the Viking and medieval periods and our own. Despite in all times providing a means of subsistence to coastal communities, it constitutes a shared unknown, an unpredictable, changeable environment that we can understand only as outsiders. Extensive knowledge of marine life, currents, and navigation is evidenced by the profusion of sea-lore and traditional knowledge found in every culture that has used the sea's resources, but alongside this, there is an acknowledgement of mystery. How people express this blend of detailed familiarity and utter strangeness is worth examining. Jesch's suggestion that the 'extraordinary medieval Icelandic interest in, and talent for, story-telling came from their history of experiencing and perceiving the wide world around them' seems particularly apt.²⁶⁷

The role of whales, seals, and walrus in early Icelandic literature is multifaceted, but through this, many patterns emerge: themes of land ownership, the gathering of exotic goods, and exchange between land and sea. As shown in Chapter 1, resources are the major factor in knowledge of whales. Ambiguity in the notion of land-ownership raises further questions: the drifted whale helped to reinforce boundaries, the island-whale to defy them. Whales had something beyond their meat and blubber to offer in these stories, namely, the redefinition of a new land. This did not always mean a successful settlement. By the time the sagas were written, the Vinland settlement been long abandoned. The inclusion of the whale scene, therefore, might have been a strategic use of foreshadowing, or might have been used to demonstrate the blurring of bounty and peril. The preoccupation of medieval Icelandic writers with the settlement period indicates the ongoing work of defining places on ground that is often enough literally unstable. The newly-formed definitions of places can provide insights that established practices in ancestral homelands cannot.

Although whales were never the sole motivating factor in choosing a place to settle, their presence in *Egils saga* and *Laxdæla saga* accords with the picture of Iceland as a land of plenty that the saga authors sought to paint. Their subsequent use as catalysts of human conflict, however, disturbs this picture and complicates their role. Along with defining the division of land, and being used to denote desirable territory, they can also disturb this image by entering the

²⁶⁷ Jesch 2009: 79.

story as a stable, resource-rich island, then diving to the bottom of the sea. Their role in the lives of early settlers can be seen in place names, as well as in drift laws, but the intangible value that they held in terms of social credit is more easily glimpsed through characters such as Þorfinnur Karlsefni, and brief lines such as their use in navigation mentioned in *Landnámabók*.

Perhaps because of the danger inherent in hunting them, walrus do not occupy the same apparent space in the imagination of the early settlers. The association with effortless plenty could not be easily made, and the question of Iceland's walrus population continues to be explored.²⁶⁸ Walrus, in providing multiple kinds of useful material, were harvested for many purposes, but their teeth were most prized. The destruction of the Icelandic walrus population turned it into an exotic beast, and the 14th-century lull in the walrus hunt gave it legendary overtones, resulting in the reclassification discussed above. The narrative role of walrus is based largely on its teeth, the part that travelled farthest and acquired the most value. Playing the part of the gift from distant, semi-mythical lands, walrus ivory was at once valuable in itself and conveyed prestige to those who could increase its worth through craftsmanship.

Seals enjoy a close connection with humankind, in Icelandic folklore, a trait which it shares with Celtic and Faroese selkie tales. Despite a remaining perception of them as outsiders, the seal's role and identity are complex. In *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdæla saga* alike, it appears as a revenant, and serves as either a warning or a cause of further death; yet throughout North Atlantic folklore, it serves as a lucky animal.

The sea itself fits into an unusual conceptual frame in relation to Iceland. With the *Konungs skuggsjá* musing on the nature of volcanoes, and concluding their origin to be the fires of Hell, along with the belief in Hekla as an infernal gateway, the spiritual health of the land could have been dubious.²⁶⁹ Yet the sea has been considered consecrated ground in Icelandic folkloric traditions, an idea Almquist suggests may be of an age with saga composition.²⁷⁰ The first settlers of Iceland were likely acutely aware of the hostility of certain parts of the land, and

²⁶⁸ Frei et al.; Pierce.

²⁶⁹ *KS* 35; Oslund 316; Falk 15.

²⁷⁰ Almquist 4.

the need for the goods of the sea — goods which, in *Grettis saga*, are portrayed as boundless, until the country becomes too densely populated for them to be freely taken.

The discussion of whales, walrus, and seals in Icelandic sagas and medieval texts can help to fill out the picture of how the saga writers interpreted both the world around them, and the world of the past, and put both to narrative purpose in depicting contemporary concerns. In a world in which natural and supernatural, as they are currently understood, were not so clearly divided, the role of animals in the lives of humans was complex, laden with spiritual meaning, and potentially threatening. Experience and received knowledge played very different parts in people's lives, but were nonetheless linked by the prevailing attitude that what could be used, harvested, or hunted also had relevance to the moral or mortal fates of those engaged in it. These aspects influenced the organisation of natural knowledge. By understanding this part of the story, we may read the past more clearly, removing some of the vagueness in the interpretation, and shedding light on the land, language, and lore of medieval Icelandic literature.

Knowledge of sea creatures is still often secondhand, to those of us who do not spend our lives on the sea — the chance to observe them is as otherworldly as ever. To learn from history and the lore of the past, however, and add to it our own understanding, may allow us to move closer to such an ambitious type of knowledge. Although nowadays the effort is usually to speak *for* the whales, we must also listen. Work still remains to allow literature and 'an ecology (including mind-ecology) well-grounded and well-developed' to combine their ideas and methods, but the sea is fertile ground in which to do so.²⁷¹ This study has been one attempt to marry the written life of sea mammals and the places they represent, or appear, in their literary worlds, but the book of the sea is in a constant state of composition.

²⁷¹ White 1989.

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Appendix A

Table of North Atlantic Whale Names

Konungs skuggsjá	Larson translation
Hnýðinga	Blubber-Cutter
Hnísa	Porpoise
Leiptr	Caaing Whale
Vögnhvali	Grampus
Andhvalir	Beaked Whale
Svinhvalir	Hog Whale
Hrafnhvalir	Raven Whale
Hvítingar	White Whale
Skjaldhvölum	Shield Whale
Geirhvölum	Spear Whale
Bárðhvölum	Baleen Whale
Fiskreki	Fish-driver
Barðhvalir	Sperm Whale
Sléttibaka	Right Whale
Hafrkitti	Greenland Shark
Hrosshvalr	Horse Whale
Rauðkembangr	Red Comb
Náhvalr	Narwhal
Skeljung	Humpback
Norðhvalir	Greenland Whale
Reyður	Rorqual
Hafgufu	Kraken (existence doubted)
Rostungr	Walrus (Greenland)

Table of North Atlantic Seal Names

Konungs skuggsjá	Larson translation
Náselr	Corse seal
Orknselr	Erken seal
Flettuselr	Flett seal
Granselar	Bearded seal
Opnuselar	Saddleback
Skemmingr	Shori seal