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The Medialization of the Supernatural in the Toponymy of the Book of Settlements

Abstract: Next to extended narratives as they are presented by Eddic literature, the Sagas of Icelanders, or lives of saints, one of the most important media reflecting medieval Icelandic conceptualizations of and attitudes to the supernatural is the Icelandic landscape, and here especially the toponymy, which forms a core element of the ascription of meaning to this landscape. Drawing on the corpus of placenames brought together in the *Hauksbók*-recension of the *Book of Settlements*, the article explores an approach to the supernatural in medieval Icelandic culture that differs from previous scholarship by choosing a perspective covering a wider spectrum of the religious cosmos of early Iceland than it had traditionally stood in the centre of research on sacred placenames: it looks beyond questions of pagan cult and the great gods of the North to include the mythological cosmos as a whole, inclusive of beings like giants and trolls and, furthermore, it places its focus not specifically on Old Norse paganism, but rather on the interweaving of pagan and Christian elements in Icelandic sacral toponymy. Thus, in short, it attempts to explore not pre-Christian *paganism*, but the *supernatural* in Icelandic toponymy, approaching a holistic picture of the supernatural cosmos of medieval Iceland as it is presented to us in the *Book of Settlements*.

The present essay will explore the possibility of approaching the supernatural in Old Norse culture through the medium of landscape. In doing so, it will focus on placenames with supernatural referents and, particularly, on the intermingling and entanglement of pagan and Christian motifs within this corpus. This exploration, it should be emphasized, is very much a first and somewhat experimental attempt, more intended to test the viability of the proposed approach than to offer definitive conclusions. As such, it will also restrict itself to a very small selection from the toponymic corpus, the placenames of the *Hauksbók*-recension of *Landnámabók*, the 'Book of Settlements' (in the following quoted as H + chapter). I do have some hope, however, that this exploration will venture into territory that might, in the end, open up some new and unconventional perspectives on the supernatural in the Norse culture of the Middle Ages.

For the present purpose, I will use the term 'supernatural' as a generic term that equally covers pagan and Christian motifs and that encompasses both matters of cult and narrative themes. Approaching the supernatural within the framework of a philological discipline, it goes without saying that traditionally what has stood in the centre of research have normally been its reflexes in the great works of literature: in the lives

of saints, in the Sagas of Icelanders, or in the stories about the Norse gods collected in the poems of the Poetic *Edda* and in Snorri Sturluson's Prose-*Edda*. Such literary texts present us with extensive narratives about the supernatural and thus constitute the single most important type of source for the supernatural and the conceptualizations of and attitudes towards it in Old Norse culture. Literary texts, however, are not the only medium through which we can glimpse Old Norse engagements with the supernatural. Another one is iconography: monuments like the picture stones of Gotland or the sculpted crosses of Northumbria and the Isle of Man carry narratives of the supernatural, of gods, heroes, and all manner of fantastic beings, out of the scribe's chamber into the open space of the landscape.¹ Furthermore, even this landscape itself carries such narratives and, by doing so, meaning and significance. For 'landscape', in the sense in which the term is used by current writers such as Robert Macfarlane (2008), Simon Schama (1996), Tim Robinson (1994), or Christopher Tilley (1994), is more than just 'natural' space or mere topography – an insight that in recent years has also increasingly been taken up in research on Old Norse religious history (e.g. Brink/Nordeide 2013; Brink 2001; Vikstrand 2001, esp. 17–20). In the sense in which the term 'landscape' is used in landscape-theoretical writing of the last decades, it designates "not just the terrain but also the human perspectives on it, the land plus its overburden of meanings" (Robinson 1994, 162). Landscape, understood in this way, is first and foremost (in the words of Simon Schama) a "work of the mind" that is "built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock" (1996, 7): when we look at a landscape, or when we look at a representation of a landscape or read a literary account of it, what we are engaging with is not primarily something 'natural', but rather a space that is charged with a wide range of associations that exist in the mind of the viewer long before the act of viewing and deeply, fundamentally colour the viewer's perception of what they see.² The *Book of Settlements* is a treasure-trove of examples. When Þórólfr Beard-of-Mostr takes land on Þórsnes Peninsula and for the first time sees the prominent outcrop of Helgafell, the most eye-catching rock formation on the peninsula, he immediately recognizes it as a 'holy mountain' (*Helga-fell*) into which he and his relatives will go after their deaths (H73): the gaze of the viewer does not merely see the bare rock that 'is really there' but rather what he 'knows' to be there on the basis of his cultural and religious background, and thus he recognizes a mere rock outcrop to be a place of the supernatural, a manifestation of the other-world of the dead in this world. Similarly, when Þorsteinn Rednosed makes sacrifices to the waterfall at Fors (H313), his identification of this waterfall as a sacred site has

1 On the picture stones of Gotland cf., for instance, Karnell 2012; Nylén/Lamm 2003; Lindqvist 1941/42; on the sculptural monuments from northern England cf. CASSS; Kopár 2012; Bailey 1980; on the Manx Crosses cf. Margeson 1983; Kermodé 1907.

2 On the importance of associations for the cultural construction of landscapes cf. Egeler 2016b, 3, 5f., 8f., 22.

its basis in a pre-existing Norse religious convention according to which waterfalls could be viewed as holy places – as illustrated by the Swedish theophoric toponyms *Odensfors*, ‘Odin’s Waterfall’, and *Ullfors*, ‘Ullr’s Waterfall’ (cf. Egeler 2016a, 280–283; Brink 2007, 113, 129 [nos. 2, 23], 134 [no. 9]). In both these cases – Þórólfr’s Holy Mountain and Þorsteinn’s sacred waterfall –, features of the natural landscape are not primarily perceived as the formations of rock and water that they are, but, drawing on encultured patterns of an Old Norse religious worldview, they are viewed as entities transcending the natural world into the realm of the supernatural. Thus, what is seen by the contemporary observer is not so much the natural topography, but rather the cultural construct of the landscape: the landscape as a work of the mind, where physical features and cultural semantics are inseparably intertwined.

This intertwining of physical topography and cultural meaning brings about that physical topography is charged with significance. Yet this is not a unidirectional process, but one which acts in two directions: topography is charged with meaning (and thus it is transformed from mere nature into a culturally constructed ‘landscape’), but by being charged with such meaning, it also – to quote W. J. T. Mitchell – becomes a “physical and multisensory medium [...] in which cultural meanings and values are encoded” (2002, 14). As a medium, it acts as a conveyor of cultural significance: the observer of a place does not merely see (feel, smell, walk) its natural topography, but the act of observing also turns the observer into a recipient of the ‘message’ conveyed by the specific cultural connotations of a place. In this way, Þórólfr’s Holy Mountain and Þorsteinn’s waterfall serve as constant reminders of a whole complex of ideas about the world, the otherworld, and the powers that act between the two; and in doing so, they make a significant contribution towards naturalizing these ideas.

There is a broad range of strategies of how landscape can be turned into and act as a medium encoded with meanings and values. Buildings can be constructed and proclaim a message: a little chapel by a farm or the steeple of a church proclaim that the observer is seeing Christian territory – here belongs, for instance, the church built by Ørlygr Hrapppson in ch. H15 of the *Book of Settlements*. The ruins of a building may be connected with narratives about their former inhabitants: in H303, the *Book of Settlements* points to the large ruins of a house once inhabited by Ketill Salmon and his most famous son. Monuments can be erected to commemorate persons and, by implication, their deeds, as is the case with the grave mounds of which the *Book of Settlements* repeatedly points out that they can still be seen in the landscape, such as the mounds of the men fallen in the fight between Þórarinn Angle and Steinólfr the Short in H92. One of the most prominent, and characteristically Icelandic, strategies of semanticizing the landscape, however, is the use of semantically clear toponyms.

To name a place is to give it an individual identity, opening up the possibility of associating it with narratives that give it significance and meaning (Tilley 1994, 18). For it is only the name that allows the place to become part of speech and thus to become part of a narrative, acting, as it does, as the connection between language and

the physical world: “Placenames are the interlock of landscape and language” (Robinson 1994, 155, cf. *ibidem* 163 and Vikstrand 2001, 18–20 with fig. 1:1; Vikstrand 2002, 121 f. with fig. 1). In Iceland the near-exclusive prevalence of semantically clear placenames greatly encourages this aspect of toponymy. An Icelandic placename is not just a designation of a location, it does not merely refer to degrees of longitude and latitude, but it makes a statement about a place (cf. Robinson 1994, 156). Thus, *Kristnes*, ‘Christ-Peninsula’, is not just a location in northern Iceland, but over and above defining a location the name also evokes that the place is a Christian place filled with trust in the Christian saviour; *Helgafell* is not just a rock outcrop that happens to be located roughly in the centre of Þórsnes, but it is the ‘Holy Mountain’; *Þórsmörk* is not just a valley in southern Iceland, but it is the ‘Forest of Thor’. Being semantically clear, Icelandic toponyms convey associations that imbue the thus-named places with meaning. Importantly, that placenames semanticize places is not just a modern interpretation: it is made virtually explicit in Icelandic literature itself. One instance of this is provided by the account of where Ketill the Foolish claimed land (H280):

Ketill hinn filfski [...] *hann* fór til Íslandz af Svðreyivm ok var vel kristinn. Ketill bio i Kirkív bæ. þar hoðv aðr setið Papar ok eigi mattv þar heiðnir menn bva.

Ketill the Foolish [...], he went to Iceland from the Hebrides and was a good Christian. [...] Ketill lived at Kirkjubær (‘Church-Farm’). Before, Irish monks (*papar*) had sat there, and pagan men could not live there.

In this narrative, the placename Kirkjubær, ‘Church-Farm’, is explicitly given an association with the Irish monks that were thought to have been the first human beings to have discovered Iceland, and furthermore it is connected with a story according to which this place was so deeply Christian that a pagan would not have been able to live there – which later is confirmed when the pagan Hildir tries to move to Kirkjubær, but drops dead at the fence of the home-field (H283). The narrative complex formed by the placename Kirkjubær and the stories associated with it illustrates that semantically Christian placenames were indeed connected with a concrete Christian religious significance, i. e.: the meanings of placenames did indeed colour the meaning of their places. In this way, by conveying connotations (religious or otherwise) to their places, Icelandic toponyms fundamentally contribute to filling the Icelandic landscape with cultural and religious significance: named places, already by force of their name, evoke associations, connotations, and even whole narratives. In fact, their names *are* narratives in (if extreme) miniature.³

³ Helgesson, correspondingly, even classifies placenames as one of the three main categories of textual sources for the study of Norse ritual and religious history (2015, 159; cf. 165).

This being so, one wonders what picture would arise if one tried to approach Old Norse-Icelandic attitudes to the supernatural not through the classic medium of literary narratives (Eddas, sagas, lives of saints, etc.) but through Icelandic toponymy. Much valuable work has of course already been done on religion and the supernatural in Old Norse placenames. The main thrust of this research to date has particularly been aimed at studying the reflexes of Old Norse cult in this material, and here much headway has been made.⁴ The approach I want to explore builds on this line of research, but it differs from it by choosing a somewhat different focus in two respects: first, I will look beyond cult and the great gods of the North to include the mythological cosmos as a whole, inclusive of beings like giants or trolls; and second, I will not focus on the reflexes that have been left specifically by Old Norse paganism, but rather I will pursue the interweaving of pagan and Christian elements in Icelandic sacral toponymy.⁵

Given the large number of Icelandic toponyms that contain religious and supernatural references, spread across the whole country from Þórsmörk in the south to Þórshöfn in the north of Iceland and from our earliest textual sources up to the present, a complete survey of this material would of course be a truly monumental undertaking. The scope of the present, purely exploratory essay must be more restricted: on the following pages, I will try to develop a few first impressions that arise from reading the toponymy of a single recension of a particular text. The text chosen for this exploration is the *Book of Settlements*. Other texts could have also been chosen, but this particular text has the alluring trait that, by giving an account of the settlement of the whole of Iceland, it provides us with a cross-section of what a medieval writer, perhaps after long deliberation, thought important of Icelandic placenames.⁶ The question to be pursued on the following pages will be: what is the overall picture of Icelandic attitudes to the supernatural that is presented to us by the placename evidence collected in this text? Or perhaps better: what is the religious-supernatural cosmos, seen in its totality, that is created by the toponymy of the *Book of Settlements*? The following discussion will be based on the *Hauksbók*-recension of the work, as this is the most detailed of the extant medieval recensions of this text.⁷ Questions of chronology will, unfortunately, have to be left aside: while the *Book of Settlements* in many cases makes claims about the time at which a particular toponym

4 Cf., for instance, Vikstrand 2016, 2002, 2001, 1999; Brink 2013, 2008, 2007; Særheim 2012.

5 For a survey of some research that, over the last century or so, has to some extent anticipated this approach (yet always remained on the margin of the scholarly discourse), cf. Særheim 2012, 195 f.

6 Cf. also Bandle 1977, 47, who calls the *Book of Settlements* our most important source for the oldest stratum of Icelandic toponymy.

7 Ed. by Finnur Jónsson 1900, 1–125. The more recent edition by Jakob Benediktsson (1968) is primarily based on the *Sturlubók*-recension, and its presentation of the H-text partly conflates this text with the S-text, making it impossible to use this edition as the basis of a discussion of specifically the H-recension.

supposedly was coined, it is virtually impossible to verify such claims, since Icelandic placenames cannot be dated linguistically and since there are no independent sources for them that would predate the great flowering of Icelandic literature from the twelfth century onwards. The chronological problem is similar to the chronological problems we are faced with when dealing, for instance, with the literary mythological tradition of the Poetic and the Prose-*Edda*: *a priori*, we have to assume that the extant material reflects a complex stratigraphy grown over a time-span of several centuries and combining very old material, potentially even dating back to the Viking Age, with much later, high medieval innovations as well as everything in between these two extremes. The only truly fixed point in our chronologies is the writing-down of the material in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The rather soft chronological focus that this situation necessitates for any overall interpretation of the supernatural material is regrettable, but cannot be avoided. For the purpose of the following discussion, the only fixed chronological point is the *terminus ante quem* provided by the *Hauksbók*-recension, which was composed c. AD 1302–1310.

If one, for the present purpose, assumes ‘supernatural toponyms’ to mean ‘toponyms that make reference to any aspect of religion and the supernatural’, then the *Book of Settlements* mentions supernatural toponyms referring to places in Iceland in some fifty of its 356 chapters.⁸ Thus, supernatural placenames – even broadly understood – form the minority of toponyms; the vast majority of Icelandic placenames make reference either to persons (Náttfaravík, ‘Náttfari’s Bay’) or are topographically descriptive (Húsavík, ‘Bay of Houses’; Jökulsá, ‘Glacier-River’).

The majority of the religious and supernatural placenames is, broadly speaking, pagan in character: pagan toponyms appear in some 37 chapters. The relevant instances in the *Hauksbók*-recension are:

⁸ Here left aside are toponyms referring to places outside of Iceland as well as names of places where supernatural occurrences take place but where the toponym itself does not directly make reference to these happenings. Also not individually counted are places named from burial sites and instances of supernatural toponyms used merely as distinguishers of persons, such as it is the case in the name of ‘Hof-Kolli’ (‘Temple-Kolli’) or in the repeated recurrences of ‘Eiríkr in/of Goðdalir’, the ‘Valleys of the Gods’ (chs. 151, 162, 232, 354; furthermore cf. the ‘daughter of Þorkell from Guðdalir Valleys’, *dottvr Þorkels* or *Gvðdolv*m, in ch. 178). Functionally, in these instances the Goðdalir are used as a nickname and thus appear to have little or no geographical force. On the semantics of the toponym cf. below, n. 10.

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| 29: Hofstaðir ('Temple-Steads') | 175: Hof ('Temple') |
| 49: Þursstaðir ('Giant's Steads') | 187: Hørgárdalur ('Altar-River-Valley'), Hørgárdalsá ('Altar-River-Valley-River') |
| 58: Hørgsholt ('Altar-Forest') | 188: Hørgá ('Altar-River') |
| 61: Hofgarðar ('Temple-Yards') | 189: Hørgárdalur ('Altar-River-Valley') |
| 70: Tröllaháls ('Ridge of the Trolls') | 190: Hørgárdalur ('Altar-River-Valley') |
| 71: Tröllaháls ('Ridge of the Trolls') | 192: Hørgárdalur ('Altar-River-Valley') |
| 73: Þórsnes ('Thor's Peninsula'), Hofsvágr ('Temple-Bay'), Hofstaðir ('Temple-Steads'), Þórsá (Thor's River'), Helgafell ('Holy Mountain') | 202: Lundr ('Grove') |
| 86: Hofstaðir ('Temple-Steads') | 230: Hof ('Temple') |
| 124: Gýgjarsporsá ('River of the Ogress' Track') | 232: Hofslönd ('Temple-Lands') |
| 141: Ægissíða ('Ægir's Water-Side') ⁹ | 236: Hofsteigr ('Temple-Meadow') |
| 145: Hof ('Temple') | 266: Hof ('Temple') |
| 147: Hof ('Temple'), Hofsland ('Temple-Estate') | 272: Hofsfell ('Temple-Mountain') |
| 154: Hof ('Temple') | 273: Hof ('Temple') |
| 155: Hof ('Temple') | 301: Þórsmørk ('Thor's Forest') |
| 163: Goðdalir ('Valleys of the Gods'), ¹⁰ Hof ('Temple') | 302: Ægisdyrr ('Ægir's Door') |
| 164: Goðdalir ('Valleys of the Gods') | 303: Hof ('Temple') |
| 170: Hofstaðir ('Temple-Steads') | 305: Hof ('Temple') |
| 174: Hof ('Temple') | 312: Tröllaskógr ('Forest of the Trolls'), Hof ('Temple') |
| | 328: Goðdalir ('Valleys of the Gods') |

The majority of these toponyms refer to cult buildings: *hof*, 'temple' (i. e. a rich farm on which cultic celebrations were held?); *høgrgr*, 'altar, temple'.¹¹ The use of *Lundr* as a

⁹ Cf. Bandle 1977, 49 for comparative material. Bandle considers the possibility that in this toponym *ægir* could simply be a common noun denoting the sea, but given the prominence of the mythological person Ægir, it seems unlikely that the toponym would not have been perceived as being connected to the figure of the sea-giant.

¹⁰ Linguistically, the toponym Goðdalir appears to be a stem compound of *goð*, n., 'pagan gods', plus the geographical term *dalir*, 'valleys' (Bandle 1977, 56). If this analysis is correct, this formation closely parallels the *Goðheimr* that is attested in a number of continental Scandinavian placenames (*Gudhem*, *Gudme*, etc.), in Egill Skallagrímsson's *Sonatorrek* (stanza 21), and (in the plural form *Goðheimar*) in ch. 9 of Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*; in the two latter attestations, this name appears to refer to the abode of Odin and the dead warriors. It should be noted, however, that the interpretation of *Goðheimr* has not always been uncontroversial; for a detailed discussion and summary of the history of research on this toponym cf. Brink 2011, esp. p. 17 on linguistic aspects. As a *caveat*, it should also be noted that the pattern of *Kristnes* (which likewise is a stem compound) and the spelling *or Gvðdolvum* in H178 suggests the possibility of understanding Goðdalir as a compound containing the Christian term *Guð*, m., '(the Christian) God', and with a corresponding meaning 'Valleys of God'. The predominance of the *o*-spelling in *Hauksbók*, however, suggests that most Icelanders would probably have understood the name as a primarily pagan one.

¹¹ In detail on these terms as part of toponyms cf. Vikstrand 2001, 207–225, 253–272, 424 f.; 2016, 179; 2002, 132–135. As Per Vikstrand points out in these discussions of the two terms, not all Norse placenames formed with one of these elements necessarily seem to have been sacral toponyms, as both words not only had a religious, but also a topographical meaning (with *hof* designating an 'elevated

toponym derived from a sacred grove also belongs here, since the eponymous ‘grove’ (*lundr*) – being a natural place used as a cult site – is the functional equivalent of a temple.¹² There is only one deity whose appearance in the corpus of placenames in the *Book of Settlements* is beyond dispute:¹³ the god Thor, who is referred to in the three toponyms Þórsnes (‘Thor’s Peninsula’), Þórsá (‘Thor’s River’), and Þórsmörk (‘Thor’s Forest’). The comparative frequency of toponyms formed with the name of the god Thor ties in with the huge popularity of personal names formed with *Þór-/Þor-*. In addition, this also correlates well with Per Vikstrand’s (2001, 422) observation that also among the theophoric placenames of his study area (the Lake Mälaren region in central Sweden), toponyms formed with the name of this god are the ones that are most common; both factors suggests that the medieval toponymy of the *Book of Settlements* may to some extent still reflect the actual religious preferences of the Icelanders, and more broadly the Scandinavians, of the late pagan period. Apart from this god, only one other indubitable mythological personal name appears in the toponymic corpus of the *Book of Settlements*:¹⁴ the sea-giant Ægir gives his name to the two places Ægissíða (‘Ægir’s Water-Side’) and Ægisdyrr (‘Ægir’s Door’), the former of which seems to refer to a stretch of shoreline, while the latter is suggestive of a harbour-entrance.¹⁵ Here, the zone where the area of human habitation and the sea meet is named after a mythological being of the sea. That Ægir is named side by side with a major god corresponds to the fact that Eddic poetry recurrently describes him as a close associate and frequent host of the gods, and thus as a figure (nearly) on a par with them.¹⁶ Here, the literary and the toponymic evidence strikingly agree with each other: in placenames, only mythological beings from the world of the gods appear as individuals.

Beyond the world of the gods lead the placenames Þursstaðir (‘Giant’s Steads’), Gýgjarsporsá (‘River of the Ogress’ Track’), Tröllaskógr (‘Forest of the Trolls’), and Tröllaháls (‘Ridge of the Trolls’). Of these, the mythological significance of Þursstaðir is insecure in that the narrative of the *Book of Settlements* explains the name as being derived not from a giant, but from one Þórðr þurs (‘Þórðr Giant’); while this person may be a secondary invention created to explain the toponym rather than its true origin, it has to be noted that in any case, the tradition represented by the *Book of*

tion, hill’ and *høgr* indicating ‘stony ground’), and as the number of Icelandic toponyms containing these elements is suspiciously high. However, the usage of both terms in medieval Icelandic literature suggests that in medieval Iceland such placenames would at least have been thought to refer to built structures used in the context of pagan cult practices (cf., for instance, *Book of Settlements* H268; *Völuspá* st. 7; *Hyndluljóð* st. 10 [see Edda]).

12 Cf. Egeler 2016a, 289–304; Bandle 1977, 58. On the term ‘natural place’ cf. Bradley 2000.

13 Cf. the appendix to this essay.

14 Cf. the appendix.

15 On Ægisdyrr cf. Kålund 1877–1882, vol. 1, 280.

16 Introductory prose of *Lokasenna*; *Grímnismál* 45; *Hymiskviða*.

Settlements did not consider the toponym Pursstaðir to be a mythological one. The three remaining toponyms of Gýgjarsporsá, Tröllaskógr, and Tröllaháls are as graphic as they are undetermined. In the extant medieval literature, Tröllaskógr appears only in the *Book of Settlements* and in *Njáls saga*. In the latter text, the place as such does not play a noticeable role, though it just *might* be significant that Tröllaskógr is the place of origin of the disagreeable character Qnundr Kolsson, who takes part in Gunnarr's killing and personally slays Gunnarr's hound Sámr (ch. 76).¹⁷ In modern-day toponymy, Tröllaskógur appears as the name of an abandoned farm in the Skógshraun,¹⁸ roughly in the area where one would expect the Tröllaskógr of the *Book of Settlements*. The name Gýgjarsporsá does not seem to be attested elsewhere in the literature and furthermore has fallen out of use in contemporary toponymy; the river probably is today's Skorará that flows from Lake Skorarvatn and the Drangarjökull glacier into the innermost part of the fjord Hrafnfjörður in the West Fjords. There are, however, possible reflexes of the old name Gýgjarsporsá in the modern folklore of this river: an alternative name of the river is Sporhamarsá, 'Track-Rock's River' (Jakob Benediktsson 1968, 196 n. 6), which refers to the Gýgjarsporshamar rock ('Rock of the Ogress' Track'), a mountain spur located above the northern bank of the river and identified as a settlement of elves.¹⁹ Tröllaháls, finally, is attested in modern-day toponymy, but this modern attestation of the placename designates a ridge above the fjord Vatnsfjörður in the West Fjords rather than the place on Snæfellsnes referred to by the toponym in the *Book of Settlements*; thus, the Tröllaháls of this work remains restricted to this text. It may be worth highlighting that all these three 'troll places' – Tröllaskógr, Gýgjarsporsá, and Tröllaháls – are located at the outer borders of the land-claims in connection with which they are mentioned; this seems very fitting, even though no explicit connection is made between their peripheral location and their association with trolls and ogres.

Christian toponyms appear in a significantly smaller number of passages than pagan ones, being attested in a total of some 19 chapters:

¹⁷ Cf. Orri Vésteinsson and Sædís Gunnarsdóttir 1999, 212f.

¹⁸ Ferðakort 2013: 21 P 12.

¹⁹ On the folklore of Gýgjarsporshamar cf. the *Sagnagrunnur* database of Icelandic folk legends (<<http://sagnagrunnur.com/>>, last accessed 26 June 2016).

1: Papey ('Papar-Island'), Papýli ('Papar-Abode') ²⁰	191: Kristnes ('Christ-Peninsula')
15: Patreksfjörðr ('Patrick's Fjord')	221: Krossáss ('Cross-Ridge')
21: Ásólfsskáli ('Ásólf's Hall'), ²¹ Kirkjubólstaðr ('Church's-Farm-Stead'), Kirkjusandr ('Church's Sand')	229: Krossavík ('Bay of the Crosses')
68: Kirkjufjörðr ('Church-Fjord')	233: Krossavík ('Bay of the Crosses')
69: Kirkjufjörðr ('Church-Fjord')	255: Krossavík ('Bay of the Crosses')
71: Kirkjufell ('Church-Mountain')	273: Pappýli ('Papar-Abode')
184: Kristnes ('Christ-Peninsula')	280: Kirkjubœr ('Church-Farm')
190: Kristnes ('Christ-Peninsula')	283: Kirkjubœr ('Church-Farm')
	301: Krossá ('Cross-River')
	312: Kirkjubœr ('Church-Farm')
	338: Byskupstunga ('Bishop's Tongue of Land')

The composition of this group of placenames shows certain parallels to the composition of the pagan group. As is the case with the pagan toponyms, the majority of the Christian ones are formed with reference to a sacred building: just as most pagan toponyms refer to a *hof* ('temple'), most Christian ones refer to a church (*kirkja*).²² Here, a particularly striking parallelism is constituted by the names *Kirkjufell* and *Hofsfell*, 'Church-Mountain' and 'Temple-Mountain'. There may also be a structural parallel between the usage of *Kross-/Krossa-* and *Hørg-*, since both the cross and the *høgr* (esp. if the latter is an altar rather than a 'temple')²³ can be viewed as monuments representative of their respective religions. The toponym *Byskupstunga* ('Bishop's Tongue of Land') probably expresses land ownership,²⁴ just as the pagan name

20 Papýli (this form in H1; in H273 it appears as 'Pappýli') probably is to be understood as a contraction of an earlier **Papa(r)býli* (Ahronson 2015, 67 f.), **Pap(a)-býli* (Bandle 1977, 61), or **Pap-býli* (Jakob Benediktsson 1968, 32 n. 2), the second element of which would be the word *býli*, 'an abode', a word which is predominantly used in compounds (Cleasby/Gudbrand Vigfusson 1874, s. v. 'býli'). Oskar Bandle (1977, 61, 63 f.) assumes that this toponym might have been transferred to Iceland directly from the British Isles (cf. Ahronson 2007); in detail see Egeler, forthcoming.

21 On Ásólf as a Christian saint (which makes Ásólfsskáli a Christian sacral toponym) cf. Clunies Ross 2002; Egeler 2015b, 79–81, Egeler, forthcoming.

22 The main difference between *hof*-names and *kirkja*-names is that *hof* can be used as a toponym even as a simplex, while *kirkja* only appears in composites; i. e., there are numerous instances of places simply called *Hof*, but there is no single instance of a place simply called *Kirkja*. The reason for this might be that *hof*, at least in its sacral meaning (cf. above, note 11), implies a complete working farm which *also* has a sacral function, whereas *kirkja* designates specifically, and exclusively, the cult building as such. This may have made the term as a simplex less suitable for the formation of placenames which, after all, first and foremost are names of farmsteads.

23 Even where it is used as a sacral term (cf. above, note 11), the exact meaning of the term *høgr* is unclear, except that it designates some kind of built cultic structure: in *Hyndluþjóð* st. 10 it is used of a stone-built altar (which is frequently thought to be its original meaning, cf. Brink 2008, 65), whereas in *Völuspá* st. 7 it seems to refer to a timbered building.

24 In H338, *Byskupstunga* is mentioned among the land taken by the first settler at Mosfell, which lies opposite the episcopal see of Skálholt, separated from it by the river Brúará. Thus, the narrative of the *Book of Settlements* anachronistically describes the property relations of the Settlement Period by using a name which semantically appears to reflect property relations consolidated only much

Hofsteigr is claimed to do in H236.²⁵ Furthermore, just as among pagan placenames, direct references to the highest divine power(s) are rare in Christian toponymy: there is only one single Christian placename that directly refers to the Christian saviour (*Kristnes*). In this sense, references to the highest power are even rarer in the Christian material than they are in pagan toponymy. This extreme scarcity of Christian toponymic references to the highest deity is, however, to some extent offset by some placenames formed with the names of saints (*Patreksfjörðr*, *Ásólfsskáli*) and the saintly Irish *papar* (*Papey*, *Papýli*/*Pappýli*) (on these see Egeler, forthcoming).

The parallels that can be observed between pagan and Christian toponymy strongly suggest that the one should not be seen in isolation from the other: both form part of one and the same culture of naming the land, and as such they are reflective of a particular cultural attitude to the semantization of the landscape and the medicalization of religious meaning through toponyms. In fact, pagan and Christian toponymy are even more closely intertwined than it is suggested by the way of presentation chosen so far. So far, I have listed and discussed pagan and Christian toponyms separately. By doing so, I have, if implicitly, suggested a fundamental distinction between them. This, however, is not how they are used in the *Book of Settlements*: there, pagan and Christian toponyms are not two segregated classes of placenames, but intermingle indiscriminately. Therefore, if one were to follow the way how these two groups of religious toponyms appear in the text as it stands, one should perhaps list them not so much as two separate groups, as I have done above, but rather as a continuous sequence, in a way something like this (with Christian toponyms set in italics):

Papey ('Papar-Island'), *Papýli* ('Papar-Abode'), *Patreksfjörðr* ('Patrick's Fjord'), *Ásólfsskáli* ('Ásólf's Hall'), *Kirkjubólstaðr* ('Church's-Farm-Stead'), *Kirkjusandr* ('Church's Sand'), Hofstaðir ('Temple-Steads'), Þursstaðir ('Giant's Steads'), Hofgarðar ('Temple-Yards'), *Kirkjufjörðr* ('Church-Fjord'), *Kirkjufjörðr* ('Church-Fjord'), Tröllaháls ('Ridge of the Trolls'), Tröllaháls ('Ridge of the Trolls'), *Kirkjufell* ('Church-Mountain'), Þórsnes ('Thor's Peninsula'), Hofsvágr ('Temple-Bay') ...

Rather than separating pagan and Christian placenames, the toponymy of the *Book of Settlements* intermixes them. This not only happens within the larger structure of the text as a whole, but recurrently it even takes place within one and the same chapter of the text:

later, after the establishment of the episcopal see. Bandle 1977, 47 is likely to be correct to consider this placename to be a particularly late one.

²⁵ The *Book of Settlements* claims about the origin of this name that Teigr ('Strip of Meadow') lay untaken between the land of the two settlers Þorsteinn the Charmer and Hákon, who then transferred ownership of Teigr to the local temple (*hof*); therefore it was renamed Hofsteigr ('Temple's Strip of Meadow').

- 71: Tröllaháls ('Ridge of the Trolls') and Kirkjufell ('Church-Mountain')
 190: Hørgárdalur ('Altar-River-Valley') and Kristnes ('Christ-Peninsula')
 273: Pappýli ('Papar-Abode') and Hof ('Temple')
- 301: Krossá ('Cross-River') and Þórsmörk ('Thor's Forest')
 312: Tröllaskógr ('Forest of the Trolls'), Hof ('Temple'), and Kirkjubær ('Church-Farm')

In some of these instances, Christian and pagan toponyms are also associated with each other through close geographical relationships. The valley Hørgárdalur opens onto the same fjord on which the peninsula Kristnes is located; this geographical intimacy appears to mirror the tradition that one of the sons of Helgi the Skinny, the Christian name-giver of Kristnes, "built a big temple" (*reisti þar hof mikit*, H184) at his home, the son of the Christian erecting a pagan sanctuary. Similarly, Hof and – by implication – its eponymous temple were located in the district Pappýli, an area thought to be named from – and probably blessed by – its previous saintly Christian inhabitants. Here, the district takes its name from the *papar*, the holy Irish monks that Christian Icelanders used as a religious foundation myth by projecting them into their own prehistory; however, the sacred building standing in this district is a pagan *hof*, creating a situation in which the paganism of the building almost seems enveloped by the Christianity of the larger geographical unit. And similarly again, the Krossá, 'Cross River', flows through Þórsmörk, 'Thor's Forest' (fig. 1), creating a situation in which the pagan sacred nature alluded to by the valley name 'Forest of Thor' virtually seems to envelope the Christian sacral element suggested by the river name 'Cross River'.²⁶

Looking at this intermingling of Christian and pagan elements in the toponymic cosmos of the *Book of Settlements*, and at the landscape of the mind created in this way, the question arises: what does all this mean? One possible answer is a confrontational one: perhaps the Christian-named river Krossá flowing through the pagan-named valley Þórsmörk is meant to split and break the pagan sacredness of the place; perhaps a Christian toponym Pappýli is meant to create an all-embracing, all-enveloping Christian significance intended to smother the paganism inherent in the farm-name Hof. This is one possibility, and – as far as I can see – one that cannot be falsified, at least not easily. Yet, perhaps, it is not the only possible reading of the material.

²⁶ Looking beyond toponymy as such, it might also be worthwhile mentioning here that Ketilbjörn, the owner of ecclesiastically-named Byskupstunga, is connected with a story about a failed plan to build a pagan temple (H338). Similarly, according to the narrative presented in H192, it might be worth noting that Hørgárdalur, the land-claim of the son-in-law of Helgi the Skinny, one of the foremost Christians of the Settlement Period, is named from a pagan sacred site: this once again connects the same piece of land with both pagan and Christian associations. In a very different way, this might also be the case in H191. There it is told how Þorljót, the daughter of Steinrøðr, moved to Kristnes, the 'Christ-Peninsula', in order to marry one Þorvarðr. With regard to this move it might be worth recalling (though it is not necessarily significant) that the *Book of Settlements* describes both Þorljót's father Steinrøðr the Mighty and her grandfather Þórir Burster-of-Giants as great fighters against evil supernatural beings.

Seeing the close intermingling of Christian and pagan toponymic elements, and how both are used in structurally significant parallel ways, it just *might* be possible that their respective ‘sacralities’ are used not so much in a confrontational but rather in an additive fashion. Perhaps pagan and Christian motifs are so remarkably interwoven in this material because they are both conveying the same fundamental meaning: the land is sacred, or at least it is a place in which sacrality becomes manifest, and in comparison to this manifestation of sacrality it just *might* be secondary whether the specific sacrality of a particular place is a pagan one, a Christian one, or both.²⁷

From here, it is time to draw to a close, and in doing so to return to the question that was posed at the beginning of this essay: what might we be able to learn from viewing the Icelandic landscape, and more specifically, its toponymy, which represents a core strategy for inscribing significance into this landscape, as one of the central media through which the religious-supernatural cosmos of medieval Iceland is expressed? I think it is clear that – however this may be interpreted in detail – what we can see in this material is a remarkable interweaving of pagan and Christian motifs: of gods, Christ, and giants; temples and churches; crosses and altars; saints and places haunted by trolls. Thus, the toponymy of the *Book of Settlements* reflects the whole supernatural cosmos of medieval Iceland, and, importantly, it does so by spanning both its two religions in parallel and densely interwoven ways.

It is virtually impossible to reconstruct the exact chronology of the toponymic material: in most cases, the placenames recorded in the *Book of Settlements* may, strictly speaking, have been coined at any point before the composition of the text. In this respect, the situation is not much different from the situation we face when dealing with the Eddic sources for Norse mythology, however much richer Eddic literature may be in narrative detail. In the Eddas, almost as much as in Icelandic toponymy, in many instances the only truly fixed chronological point is the date of composition of our texts, or even only the date of the writing of the extant manuscripts. In both cases, considerable parts of the material may be comparatively young, but in both cases also, much of the material may well be very old.²⁸ Thus, from a source critical perspective, there is little reason to favour the picture painted by Eddic literature over the picture conveyed by the toponymy recorded in the *Book of Settlements*; and at the same time, the contrast between the two is striking. Eddic literature as a medium of the transmission of myth and as a way of engaging with aspects of the

²⁷ Cf. Wellendorf 2010 on the depiction of the earliest settlers of the Settlement Period in Icelandic literature, where he suggests that it might have been viewed as more important that these early settlers were pious rather than whether they were pious Christians or pious pagans.

²⁸ Given recent claims to the contrary, this has to be emphasized not only for the pagan, but also for the Christian part of the Icelandic toponymy of the *Book of Settlements*, as central parts of this toponymy are associated with prominent Christians from the first generation of settlers and as there is no plausible reason to question this association, even though it cannot be strictly speaking proven: cf. Egeler 2015a, 84 f. *pace* Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 2001, 615.



Fig. 1: Krossá ('Cross River') flowing through Þórsmörk ('Thor's Forest'): does the Christian sacrality of the river name split and break the pagan sacrality of the valley name? Or is the folding-together of Christian and pagan toponyms in this valley indicative of a less confrontative relationship between Christian and pagan strategies of sacralizing the landscape? Photo: © M. Egeler, 2011.

supernatural presents us with a picture which is strikingly pagan; its nearly 'pure' paganism is especially noteworthy given that this literature was written down during the Christian Middle Ages and that already the Viking Age had been a semi-Christian period, which in itself could have suggested that we would find considerably more Christianity in Norse pagan myth than we do. In the picture that the Eddas draw of the religious cosmos of the Viking Age, Christianity is blinded out with noteworthy thoroughness.²⁹ In strong contrast to this blinding-out of Christianity in Eddic mythology, the Icelandic landscape and toponymy, if viewed as media of an engagement with the supernatural, convey a much more multi-layered, more complex, and more nuanced picture. Here, pagan and Christian concepts appear remarkably intermingled, both appearing as presences in the landscape that are nearly on an equal footing and thus suggestive of closely comparable roles in the lives of those who lived in, travelled through, and worked this landscape on a daily basis. This coexistence of paganism and Christianity in the Icelandic landscape does not mean that Icelandic Christianity was not 'proper' Christianity and that Icelandic Christians were not 'proper' Christians; nor does it mean that pagan Icelanders were not 'properly' pagan. Yet it pro-

²⁹ Though, it should perhaps be noted, the seeming absence of Christian elements from Eddic mythology is not always an 'honest' one; for instances of hidden elements of medieval Christianity and learned culture in the Eddas cf. Dronke 1997, 93–104; Maier 2003, 108; Egeler 2013.

vides us with a glimpse of the richly varied supernatural cosmos that pervaded the scenery of their daily lives, a cosmos much more multifaceted than it becomes clear from the strongly systematized presentations of the mythological (Eddic) literature, a literature that, deriving from the same time as the toponymic record of the *Book of Settlements*, ultimately has no greater authority. Thus, landscape and toponymy, and the way religious, mythological, and broadly speaking supernatural motifs are medialized through them, can serve as an important corrective to understanding the religious cosmos of medieval Iceland.

Appendix: Helkunduheiðr, Njarðvík, and other problem cases

Whether or not a placename should be considered in a treatment of sacred toponyms is not always clear-cut. For instance, the above discussion has primarily focused on passages where a toponym is used with a geographical force, designating a particular place; toponyms that are merely used to differentiate persons, and thus functionally appear as nicknames, have not been excerpted exhaustively, especially not where the same place recurs repeatedly as the determinative of one and the same person (cf. n. 8). Nor have toponyms been considered that refer to places that have a supernatural significance but where this significance is not expressed in the toponym itself. This last category is exemplified by H63: “Then Einarr ran as he could, and when he came past the Drangar Rock Towers, he saw a troll sitting up there and letting his feet swing, so that they touched the surf, and he banged them together, so that it made the sea foam” (*þa rann Einarr sem hann matti en þa er hann kom hia Drongvum sa hann trollkall sitia þar a vppi ok lata roa fœtr sva at þeir tokv brimit ok skelldi þeim saman sva at sio drif varð af*). Here, the Drangar are construed as the place of a supernatural encounter, marking the site of an intrusion of the supernatural in the physical landscape, but the placename Drangar itself, which simply means ‘Rock Towers’, has no intrinsic mythological or supernatural significance. Thus, this example illustrates a point made already by Per Vikstrand about sacred placenames and holy places (2001, 31, 34): not all holy places also have names that directly designate their holiness, meaning that only a selection of the components of a sacred landscape can be identified through its placenames. This holds true for the reconstruction of not just specifically the ‘sacred’, but also about the ‘supernatural’ landscape in a broader sense.

Furthermore, another problem are toponyms whose semantic interpretation is disputable. In chs. H240 and H246, a toponym Njarðvík is mentioned. As a placename, Njarðvík finds a direct counterpart in the Norwegian *Narvik*, which Bandle has interpreted as indicating a direct transferral of a Norwegian toponym to Iceland (Bandle 1996, 1093; Bandle 1977, 50, 63; cf. the island *Njarðey* mentioned as a place in Norway in ch. H86). This and similar *Njarð*- toponyms have in the past been, and

sometimes still are, connected with the name of the god Njörðr (e. g., Bödl 2013, 237; Sandnes/Stemshaug 1997, 338 f. [s. v. ‘Nærøy(a)’]; Bandle 1977, 50, 63). Thorsten Andersson, however, points out to me that the first part of this toponym cannot be derived from the god Njörðr, as in this case the divine name would have been expected to appear as a genitive (*Njarðar-*; cf. Vikstrand 2001, 94; Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1992, 54; Særheim 2012, 183, 193). Rather, the element *Njarð-* in such toponyms should best be seen as an adjective, related to English *narrow* (cf. Wahlberg 2003, 232 [s. v. ‘Nårdingen’, ‘Närtuna’]; Vikstrand 2001, 94–96; and the general rejection of a theophoric interpretation by Vikstrand 2016, 179). Therefore, the placename *Njarðvík* has not been taken into consideration in the above discussion. Likewise, I have refrained from including the toponym *Helkunduheiðr* in the discussion, which is mentioned in H226. Magnus Olsen (1933) has interpreted the element *Helkundu-* as referring to a female being from Hel (**helkunda*, cf. Old English *helicund*, ‘stemming from hell’). Yet given that a being called **helkunda* is mentioned nowhere else in our extant material, such an approach may perhaps seem somewhat speculative, even though it cannot be precluded that this interpretation is correct. Cf. Særheim 2012, 195; Schmidt 2009, 59; Bandle 1977, 57 (who accepts the interpretation as probable). It should, however, be noted that *Helkunduheiðr* is well-attested as functioning as a boundary (Olsen 1933, 12–17; also the attestation in H226), which constitutes a direct parallel to the other ‘troll-places’ of the *Book of Settlements* (Tröllaháls, Tröllaskógr, Gýgjarsporsá), all of which function as boundaries as well.

A further type of problem is that of transmission. Problems of transmission affect particularly the placename *Hvítbjörg* mentioned in H33, as this form of the name may be a copying mistake for a form with mythological significance: instead of *Hvítbjörg*, the S-recension gives the toponym *Hnitbjörg* (S45). Bandle (1977, 53) considers the possibility that the latter is a cultic or mythological name, pointing to the *Hnitbjörg* of *Skáldskaparmál* G57, where Suttungr hides the mead of poetry. Since the form *Hnitbjörg* is not actually attested in H, however, it has not been taken into consideration for the purpose of the present essay.

Finally, also toponyms referring to burial sites have not been considered in the above discussion, i. e. placenames formed with *-haugr* or *-leiði* (H22, H60, H63, H64, H178, H182, H195, H273, H283, H303, H332). While a point could be made for including them in a treatment of the supernatural landscape, within the restricted framework of the present article there is no space for doing so.

Acknowledgements: I owe thanks to Thorsten Andersson, Sigmund Oehrl, and the editors of this volume for detailed criticisms of earlier versions of this article, which have improved the text substantially, as well as to Courtney Burrell for numerous corrections to my English style and syntax. Any remaining mistakes of language, fact, or interpretation are, of course, solely my own responsibility. All translations are my own. This research was supported by a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Intra-European Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Programme.

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