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Migration, Home, and Playfulness: Viking Age Perspectives on the Creation of a Sense of Place

BY EDITORIAL BOARD · PUBLISHED 5. SEPTEMBER 2018 · UPDATED 4. SEPTEMBER 2018

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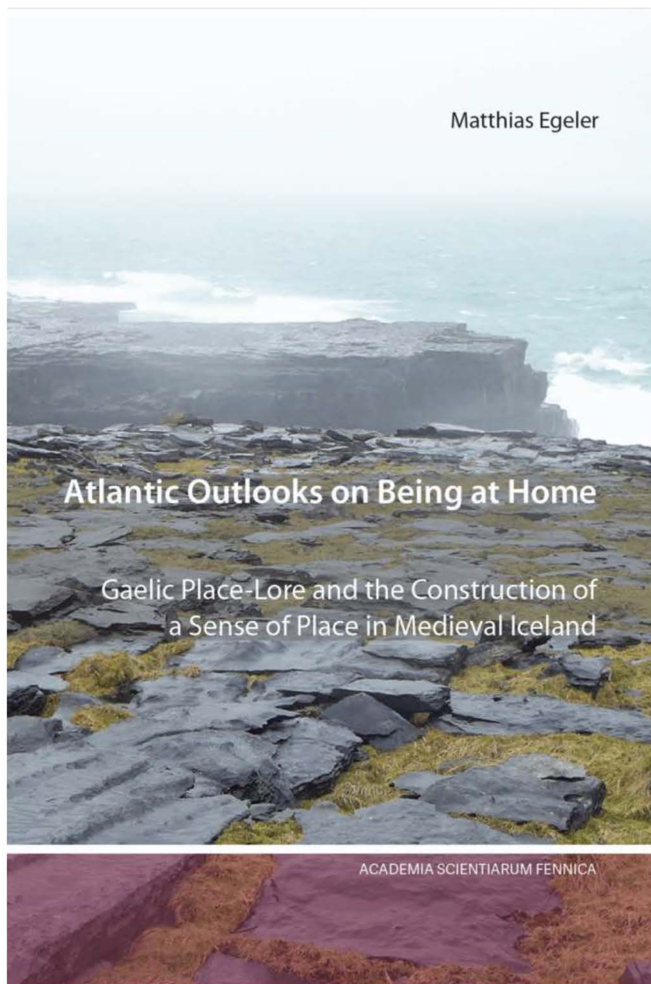
'Migration', 'home' and the creation of a 'sense of place' are topics of utmost actuality. In the current situation, not least the scale of population movements in and beyond politically volatile regions gives it particular topicality and explosive power. Also, many challenges that result from a large-scale movement of people remain unresolved, such as how the acceptance of migrants can be increased or how frictions between incomers and longer-established populations can be defused. This keeps migration and the issues resulting from it not only in the forefront of academic debate, but also in the headlines of popular mass media.

At the same time as being a topic of extreme actuality, however, migration as a phenomenon also has a considerable time-depth: there probably was no epoch in human history that did not see at least a measure of migration. And sometimes, if we look at things from a distance, some features stand out more clearly than they might have if studied close-up. This is also true for the concepts of 'home' and a 'sense of place', both of which are central issues for migrants. The debate about these concepts may have something to gain from considering historical cases alongside contemporary ones. The first human settlement of Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries might be a prime case in point. There are few cases in human history where written documentary evidence allows us to get as close to the first human settlement of an area as it is the case in Iceland; in a way, this makes early Iceland an almost unique laboratory case for understanding some of the mechanisms involved in migration and the resulting need for a construction of 'home' and a 'sense of place'.

Iceland was first discovered in the middle of the ninth century. According to vernacular Icelandic tradition, permanent settlement of the newly-discovered island then began in the year 869/870, and by around AD 930 Iceland was fully settled by migrants coming both from mainland Scandinavia and from the Norse ('Viking') colonies in Ireland and Britain. The sixty-year period from the beginning to the end of the first settlement of Iceland, the so-called Settlement Period, forms one of the most central topics of high medieval Icelandic historiography and storytelling. From the twelfth century onwards, the Icelanders



Book cover of "Atlantic Outlooks on Place: Place Lore and Storytelling Traditions in Iceland and Ireland", Folklore Fellows Communications 314, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia (Academia Scientiarum Fennica) 2018. 324 pp., 35 €.

began to compose a vast literature, which, to the point of obsession, is focused on the settlement of Iceland and the developments that unfolded on the basis of the social constellations established then. Much of this literature may reflect later 'pseudo-historical' constructs rather than history 'as it really happened'. Yet comparison with medieval Irish sources indicates that, at least in so far as settlers coming from Britain and Ireland are concerned, considerable amounts of genuine material found their way into this writing. Such material seems not only to claim, but really to reflect elements of the historical situation of the Settlement Period.

Some types of traditions connected with the Settlement Period are of particular interest because they are plausibly datable: in a number of cases, early Icelandic settlers that had reached Iceland from Britain or Ireland are connected with anecdotes that reflect the culture and storytelling traditions of the medieval Gaelic world. Since close contact between Icelandic settlers and the Gaelic world is a typical feature of the cultural history specifically of the Viking Age in the ninth and tenth centuries, such traditions in all likelihood have genuine roots in the first settlement of Iceland in this period. Traditions of this kind, then, allow us a glimpse of what can happen when a new population moves into a previously entirely uninhabited area.

If one studies the medieval accounts of the first settlement of Iceland, there is much that is extremely familiar from classic and current theories about 'place'. In line with current theorising, the Icelandic accounts show a pervasive interest in naming the land: many texts describe how and why elements of the Icelandic landscape received this or that name. Such names often establish personal relationships between settlers and their land; for instance, the river Kalmansá, 'Kalman's River', is said to be named from an Irish settler called Kalman (Irish *Colmán*). Typical also is a fierce attempt to connect Icelandic places with as much history as possible; novel-length accounts can be written about events that occurred in small areas, and one medieval text presents us with a survey of (more or less) all the main places in Iceland, who settled and named them, and what occurred there. Just as spatial theorising has been postulating since Yi-Fu Tuan and even Bronisław Malinowski, the land is filled with meaning through naming and storytelling.

If one studies accounts of the Icelandic Settlement Period, especially those which to some extent allow to cross-check their historicity by a comparison with material from medieval Ireland, such features are prominent. Yet there is also, markedly, something else. Much of current writing on place and landscape (often reaching even broader public, as the works of Robert Macfarlane) emphasises the profoundness of the 'meaning' connected to places, its existential importance, its ethical implications. The title of Keith H. Basso's classic *Wisdom sits in Places* (1996) is both research program and summary of a wider trend that has long characterised this research field. Yet, in contrast to what this theoretical trend would lead one to expect, in the first hour of the settlement of Iceland, considerable effort seems to have been invested not only in profundity, but also in filling the land with playfulness.

In the 'Saga of the Inhabitants of Eyr', for instance, an equally elaborate and surreal drama is played out on the Álftafjörður fjord in western Iceland, where the life, death, after-life, and after-after-life of the particularly unpleasant character Þórólfr Twist-Foot unfold. This Þórólfr had in his youth been a raider and pirate. When he settles down in Iceland towards the end of the first wave of settlement, he extends his family's landholding by killing an old man and then, throughout his life, goes on to bully and tyrannise his surroundings – until, in the end, one of his schemes is thwarted and he dies of his anger about this setback. Þórólfr is then buried in a mound, but soon returns from the dead as a revenant that haunts his old home and threatens to turn the area into a wasteland. To put an end to these troubles, his son disinters Þórólfr's body. With many difficulties he transports the corpse to a headland on the shores of the fjord and reburies him there. Now, for a while, there is peace. Yet years later, after Þórólfr's son as well has died, the revenant returns and resumes his hauntings, which if anything are now worse than before. Finally, a group of brave men open the mound on the headland, lever the body (which is undecayed, swollen, and big as an ox) out of its grave, and burn it on a pyre. This seems to be the end of it all – except that it isn't. A cow licks the stones where the ashes from Þórólfr's pyre have been blown, gets in calf, and in due time gives birth to a bull calf. This calf receives the name Glæsir, 'the Shining'. Against the better advice of an old clairvoyant woman, the local landowner raises this calf, which develops into a huge, splendid bull. This bull, of course, reincarnates Þórólfr's malicious and violent character, and in the end it kills its owner. Only after this last slaying does the story end when the bull runs into a marshy area and disappears in a bog. This bog afterwards, and to this day, is called Glæsiskelda: 'Spring of Glæsir' or 'Spring of Brightness'.

Two factors make this surreal story particularly interesting. Firstly, the medieval saga localises it in great detail, mentioning the exact whereabouts and the names of the places where the action unfolds; in this, it is almost a textbook example of how places are filled with meaning through naming and storytelling, except that the naming and storytelling in this case have a decidedly surreal streak, talking about revenants and a man reborn as a bull. Secondly, the story seems to reflect a genuinely old tradition about the Settlement Period: blow by blow, the narrative follows the pattern of one of the most prominent tales of early medieval Irish heroic storytelling, the tale of the Dark Bull of Cúailnge and the Whitehorned of Aí. The parallelism includes even the etymology of the place-name created at the end of the narrative: the death of the Icelandic bull creates the place-name Glæsiskelda, 'Spring of Brightness', while the death of a bull in the Irish story creates the name Áth Lúain, 'Ford of Brightness' – both names play with the imagery of light sparkling on water, even though both are explained by the death of bulls. What seems to have happened here is that a prominent Irish story was transferred to Iceland and localised on the shores of a western Icelandic fjord. As the Icelandic adaptation even captures elements of word-play in the

original Irish story, this must have happened very early during the settlement of Iceland, when there still was a degree of Norse-Irish bilingualism. Thus, it seems that one of the first things that happened after the settlement of the Álftafjörður fjord was that a settler mapped a surreal story of death, bloodshed, revenants, and bulls onto the newly-settled landscape. This story, importantly, is first and foremost a well-told orgy of violence. It is a splendid piece of storytelling, but it does not seem to carry a shred of profoundness or ethical meaning.

In Icelandic accounts of the early naming of places, it is a recurring feature that deep meaning seems absent, and that the main interest of the story is simply storytelling for storytelling's sake, often with an undercurrent of irony or wordplay. Thus, the farm of Flugumýrr, 'Fly's Swamp', combines in its name wetland and insects, probably because its wetland area was a prime breeding ground for flies and midges. Yet the medieval story about this place claims that the fly element in the name of the farm does not refer to the local insects, but rather that the farmstead was named from a horse called 'Fly' that had won a race against a sorcerer. The headland of Kambsnes is said to be named so because an early settler lost her comb (*kambr*) there; but this probably is again just ironic wordplay, as actually the headland's name simply means 'ridge peninsula', as the Old Norse word *kambr* can denote both a ridge and a comb. (In German, the pun can easily be imitated: 'Kammhalbinsel' has the same ambivalence between hair comb and mountain ridge.) In such instances, the land is not filled with deep meaning. It is played with.

It seems that early Icelanders, when they settled Iceland after its discovery in the ninth century, were not only interested in inscribing profound 'meaning' into the land. Rather, they scattered it with men-turned-bulls, phantom combs, and insect horses. There is a remarkable playfulness in the early Icelandic engagement with the landscape. This playfulness to some extent belies the emphasis on profundity and ethics that characterises much current writing on place and landscape. The Viking Age migrants that came to Iceland and had to make themselves at home there apparently used lightness at least just as much as profundity in their struggle to develop a sense of place. This historical case thus may highlight an aspect of the construction of home and a sense of place which so far has been neglected in theorising on place. Maybe human beings, when it comes to being at home at a place, need to play as much as they need to find deep meanings. Maybe in this playing with places, as we encounter it in early Iceland, we meet a human side of migration that reflects an essential tessera in the mosaic of what it means to be at home in a place.

This aspect of 'being at home' – its playfulness – could even have implications that might have a relevance for present-day situations. Looking at how playful much early Icelandic storytelling about Iceland as the 'home' of early Icelanders seems to be, one wonders whether stories about what we are and where we are at home really always are as serious as we have become used to thinking of them. Maybe much of what now is felt to reflect deep, profound meanings might originally have been a much more playful and even somewhat fortuitous thing. This does neither qualify nor downplay the genuine challenges posed by present-day migration. Yet it might make one wonder whether aspects of national and local identity politics do not sometimes take things more seriously than they had originally been, and whether sometimes some equanimity and readiness to play might not be more helpful than building up hardened identity frontlines. The historical case may not necessarily be transferable to the present day in any straightforward manner; but it suggests a perspective that is at least worth thinking about.

About the Author

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Citation: Matthias Egeler, Migration, Home, and Playfulness: Viking Age Perspectives on the Creation of a Sense of Place, in: TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research, 05.09.2018, https://trafo.hypotheses.org/12874.