The Cultural Reconstruction of Places

Edited by Ástráður Eysteinsson
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Home, Home in the Dales

The Dialogism of Toponymy in Laxdæla saga

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'Not why do I write, but where am I writing? The question of place is usually regarded as contingent, merely contingent, a circumstance that in no significant way impinges on the writing.' This is how Charles Lock begins his essay on 'The Writing of Elsewhere'1 and I quote it here since although our circumstances are dissimilar, we are both subject to the same constraints. Lock is writing in Copenhagen, on Nigerian themes, to be published in Canada, and he is struck by the lack of contiguity between his writing surface and the geographies of his material. I encounter a different topology: my computer screen, my paper, is contiguous with Iceland, and Iceland is contiguous with the saga that I shall be referring to, and this topogrammatology is crucial to my topic, to my topos, and to my grammar.

For we have a problem when discussing textuality in Iceland: a hackneyed, universal problem perhaps, but not a trivial one that we can afford to ignore. It is this: there are untold places on this island, most of them little places, familiar hillsides and small vistas, whose beauty and power is completely beyond the reach of language. They are extratextual and extralingual; their silence is punctuated by the call of the plover. And so how do we get them into our texts?

Through toponymy of course: the naming of places and the creation thereby of indices to extratextual reality. This is a remarkable manoeuvre, a method of mapping physical terrain into a text while leaving the text intact, untouched by wind and rain; we understand this movement when we become literate, and very

soon forget that it is a manoeuvre at all. The name Helgafell, the Holy Mount, is not open to discussion, it brackets off as inadequate a whole encomium: you have to go there, in all seasons and weathers, to know its unspoken name, and listen to the silence—or rather the absence of language—which alone establishes Helgafell. The text—in our case Laxdela saga—is full of hints and indications towards this silence, expressions of human motions and emotions grounded in the named places. Yet in spite of their restless gestures towards the outside, these names work primarily within the text, structuring the narrative; they are intratextual rather than extratextual. This is one of the fundamental linguistic aspects of the dialogic between Me and the Other. To quote Charles Lock again: ‘Writing marks space, and creates the very idea of distance’. The space is marked by terms such as home, here, outwards, east and south, deictics which appear to have a single location and a single location: that of the speaker. But what is home to you is way down the valley for me. We are two Others whose homes belong to different bodies: we reach out in fascination to speak and discover each other. In Iceland, although the distances between farmsteads are usually far greater than among the copses and hedgerows of Europe, you may stand on your doorstep and survey all of your neighbours. No traveller arrives unawares; you have watched her approach for many kilometres. The Other moves always in full sight, and in the present time—distance and chronology arise only in writing.

The Icelandic family sagas are impressively topographical texts. They might aptly be called the Home Sagas, for they purport to deal with events which happened at home in Iceland, albeit with a North Atlantic backdrop, or at home in this or that area of Iceland, or this or that homestead. The term home resonates as the centre of the Otherness of each protagonist. Compare them to earlier epics: who can draw up a map of the wanderings of the brothers in search of their valkyrie brides in Völundarkvida?

Aust skreið Ægill at Ölriðo
ens suðr Slagfjör at Svanhvító
en einn Völund sat í Úlfabolm

(Egill glided eastwards for Ölrið
Slagfjör south for Svanhvit
But Völund sat alone in Úlfaból)

2 There are several hills or small mountains with this name in Iceland, many rising from fairly low-lying land and framed by a horizon of higher mountains. Our Helgafell is on the north side of the Snæfellsnes peninsula, just south of the town of Stykkishólmur.
5 Völundarkvida 4-5. I quote with a slight change of format from Edda: Die Lieder des Codex
The space marked out here is not physical or geographical, but an inner space, within the boundaries of the text and of the mind: we do not know the geographical location of Úlfdalir. Or take Beowulf: no easy task to map out the path from Heorot, the high-gabled hall of the Danish king, to the hellish lake on the moors that was home to Grendel. The description is vivid enough, but it tallies poorly with the site in modern Denmark. Owen Barfield would say that these are *participated* spaces, alive with our own thoughts and the creatures that inhabit them; it was not until we began to learn to step back from our perceived phenomena, to clothe them in an independent existence, that we could map them into written space, distanced and vectored on the parchment. Even the expressly topographical charters of the Anglo Saxons, for example the 8th-century charter from my home territory in Sussex which establishes the holdings of the Canons of Malling in a plodding legal macaronic of Latin and Old English, is largely inscrutable: the place names have strayed and become twisted by time, the directions have changed, the boundaries shifted, the modern Ordnance Survey maps triangulate a different landscape.

Possibly the medieval Icelanders were more ready—in their daily concern for time and distance, their chiselled horizons, their yearly trek to the parliament at Pingvallir, their close understanding of the North Atlantic and its weathers that had brought them to the island—to calibrate and externalize immediate distance. Whatever the reason, events in the Icelandic sagas can usually be followed on a modern map, step by step, farm by farm, with the same names now scrolling down our GPS screens. Þórhalla máliga (‘the talkative’) asks Kjartan: ‘Which way will you ride?’ and Kjartan answers: ‘I’ll take the road west through Sælingsdalur and back by way of Svinadalur.’ We know exactly his route north, which he calls west as local people still do, over Sælingsdalsheiði to Skárðsströnd. On the way back, on the fatal Thursday of Easter Week, he travelled what is now the main road south, down Svinadalur to the ridge where the brothers lay in ambush. ‘And when they had passed south of Mjósyndi (‘Narrow Passage’) where the valley starts to widen out, Kjartan told Farkell


and his men to turn back and Kjartan and the smaller party rode on into the ambush. We can drive down Svnadalur today using Laxdela saga as a travel guide.

So where is home, when it appears, as it so often does, in the saga? Which voice speaks the word? Laxdela saga is pegged down into its geographical and textual environment with voices speaking names, naming places, and creating indices, nodes of reference: these are firstly intratextual, structuring the text from within; secondly intertextual, plucking chords in other texts; and thirdly extratextual indices, mapping the narrative into a physical terrain which is also physically contiguous with the original writing, the calf-skin manuscript and the ink made from sortulyng berries. A proliferation of voices within the text will inevitably cluster around any index: as soon as the reader registers the connection with a farm on a hillside, or to another text, or to the same place name on the page before, the question must arise: who spoke? Who indicated this connection?

As an introductory example I shall use an intertextual index which is not essentially topographical, apart from the fact that it connects Iceland and Ireland in a rather striking way. We should be reminded that the Irish connection in Laxdela saga is particularly strong; the saga begins by giving a close account of the Irish element in the early settlement history of Breisafjörður and the Dales. Guðrún Ósvifursdóttir, the aneponym of the saga, the central figure who, being a woman, cannot have her saga named after her, is surrounded by Irish names and characters; Irish was still a living language in the Dales where Guðrún grew up. Towards the end of the saga she is asked a question by her son Bolli that she is unwilling to answer: which of the men in her long and turbulent life she loved most. She finally replies by quoting a ninth-century Irish poem: *To him was I worst whom I loved best*. The wording of this reply is a close sound—and sense—translation of a couplet from the poem, which has survived and is known as ‘Líadan’s Lament’. Líadan was a nun and a poet, and the story of her life parallels Guðrún’s in several significant ways.10

My question here is: where is the intertextual index in this passage? Who speaks it? Whose voice makes the connection? The manuscript does not of course use quotation marks, and in fact modern editors with their passion for punctuation are often hard-put to place the quotations marks in medieval

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9 ‘En er þeir Kjartan váru komnin suðr um Mýðyndi ok rýmask tek dalrin, mæliti Kjartan, at þeir Porkell myndi snæ aþr’ (p. 151).

Icelandic prose, which shifts easily between direct and indirect speech in mid-sentence. In this case it is clear that Guðrún speaks the words of the poem, but the linkage with the Irish does not start there, since her words also echo Bolli’s question: whom did you love best? Bolli’s question expressly cues Guðrún’s answer, and so for anyone who knows the Irish connection the narrative is painfully contrived at this point. This seems to indicate that the writer of the saga did not sense the connection; indeed, it has remained unrecognised over the ensuing centuries. But there again, which ‘writer’ are we talking about? Our text is written some 200 years after the events it purports to describe—at what stage in its prehistory was the Irish connection made? Which of these forgotten storytellers, if not Guðrún herself, was actually quoting the Irish an ro carus ro crídidiu, ‘he whom I have loved I have tormented’? Clearly the proliferation of narrators has already occurred with the movement from the oral to the literary. The Icelandic sagas are multi-voiced from their inception.

The physical speaker has a single voice. There is of course a potential—even essential—splintering of voices in all spoken language, both harmonic and cacophonic. The words may go one way, and the intonation another—an effect exploited by Chaplin in The Great Dictator: ‘This is a fine country to live in!’—a sentence whose double meaning needed repetition in the film, with two different intonations, since spoken intonation patterns can hint at but not itemize ambiguities. How then do we read aloud an intertextual or an extratextual index?

What is the irrealt intonation, the unspeakable intonation (Charles Lock’s term, cultivated from Bakhtin),\(^{11}\) which denotes style *indirecte libre*, that feature of novelistic discourse that informs *intratextual* indexicality, the invagination\(^{12}\) of the text upon itself, the telling symptoms of Bakhtinian dialogic? The same question arises when we consider the intertextual and extratextual linkages that peg the text into its constitutive environment: the other texts, and the other places, which give our text meaning. How do we read aloud these perilous place-names? Whose voice calls them ‘home’?

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, in his introduction to the 1934 edition of *Íslensk forrit* V, spends some time, as editors were expected to do in those days, looking for the author. He notes (pp. xxxiv–xxxv) that the writer of the saga (*sögurinarinn*, a term which can also mean ‘scribe’) appeared to be very fond of Hjarðarholt, speaking of the farm in glowing terms. Sveinsson sees him (we

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note the gender in passing) as having lived at Hjarðarholt, which thus becomes the topographic centre of orientation of the saga. He points out that the phrase *heim í Hjarðarholt* ('home to Hjarðarholt') occurs no less than 8 times in the saga, and more often than in relation to other farms.\(^{13}\) The farm Melkorkustaðir is *uppi í Laxárdal* (up in Laxárdalur) and the direction away from Hrútsstaðir is *öföin á Kambnes* (down to Kambnes): both these phrases, notes Sveinsson, might indicate directions from Hjarðarholt, although he concedes they could equally well apply to Höskuldsstaðir or Hrútsstaðir.\(^{14}\)

My statistics agree with Sveinsson’s. The adverb *heim* ('home') is used in 8 of the 40 times that Hjarðarholt is mentioned in the saga; this is a greater frequency than with any of the other place-names. Tunga has seven times out of 40,\(^{15}\) Höskuldsstaðir twice out of 13, Laugar twice out of 34, and Helgafell, arguably the most central place-name in the saga, Guðrún’s final home and later a monastery, is mentioned 38 times, and only once with the adverb *heim*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>Occurrences with 'heim(a)'</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hjarðarholt</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunga</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Höskuldsstaðir</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laugar</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helgafell</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures seem to be indicative of something, but I do not feel they necessarily refer to the writer’s familiarity or fondness for the places concerned. The adverbs *heim* (direction home) and *heima* (at home) have a range of uses quite unconnected to the geographic ego-centre of the speaking voice or even the thematic subject. Adverbs of direction such as *north, south, east and west, up and down* (the valley), *in or out* (the fjord), are regularly added to prepositional phrases of direction or location in the Icelandic of the sagas, and indeed still today. The sagas will say ‘They rode west/east to X’ or ‘He lived south in X’. The adverb *heim* is a member of this class of locative adverbs. A traveller will often ride ‘home to’ a farm he has never visited before. There is an incident in *Laxdæla saga* where a raiding party rides south into Borgarfjörður to kill Helgi Harðbeinsson in revenge for the death of Bolli, Guðrún’s husband. As they

\(^{13}\) 'Sögurininn hefar fast á þessu landi [Hjarðarholtni], og er það ekki djarflæga til getið, að hann haft einhver fimma verið þar, eða víst er að minnsta kosti, að honum er tant að segja *heim í Hjarðarholt*.' (The writer of the saga has become emotionally attached to [Hjarðarholtni], and it is no wild guess that he was there at some time; it is at least clear that it was natural for him to say *home to Hjarðarholt*.) *Laxdæla saga*, pp. xxv-xxvi.

\(^{14}\) *Laxdæla saga*, p. xxv, n. 2.

\(^{15}\) I do not distinguish as Sveinsson does between the three farms with this name in the saga.
approach Helgi's farm, Vatnahorn in Skorradalur, the leader of the party, Porgiis Hólluson, bids his men keep low in the woods: 'I'll go home to the farmstead and spy out whether Helgi is at home'. When Kjartan is killed, his body is first carried to the nearest farm. The text says that his body was carried home to [Sælingsdals]tunga; we have to wait until the next chapter before his father Ólafur pá has his body taken home to Hjarðarholt. Icelandic place names are notorious for their idiosyncratic choice of prepositions (which has survived into modern Icelandic): in Laxdæla saga the writer always says í Hjarðarholti (in Hjarðarholt) but á Höskuldstóðum (literally on Höskuldsstaðir). In the sagas, the preposition is sometimes even cited as part of the name, even when the name is the thematic subject:

Helgi is in summer pasture in a place called at Sarpur.
He lived in Bjarmanjóður at a farm called at Svanshóll.18

In the same way, the adverb heim is associated with certain farm names rather than others. Referring to the Episcopal seat at Hólar in the North of Iceland the term heim til Hóla (home to Hólar) is the normal form, whereas there are other important centres such as Oddi in Rangárvellir or Snorri's Reykholts that do not so consistently attract the adverb home. In Laxdæla saga this is also clearly the case with the monastic seat at Helgafell.19

The upshot is that I do not think we can follow Sveinsson in his search for a monologic text, a text which speaks in the author's voice and establishes his virtuosity. Nevertheless, in singling out the concept of home he touches on an overriding preoccupation of the saga. While not an authorial centre, home represents a multiple principle of identity, of shifting centres in the narrative and their attendant horizons; readerly centres, which proliferate with the textual voices. In Laxdæla saga, the home of each protagonist is an essential marker of identity. Nowhere does this appear more forcefully than in Guðrún Ósvifursdóttir's merciless pledge of revenge against the killers of her husband Bolli:

16 'ök mun ek fura heim til bojarins á njóss, at forvitnask, hvárt Helgi sé heima' (Laxdæla saga, p. 184).
17 'Lík Kjartans var förti heim í Tunga' (Laxdæla saga, p. 145).
18 'Helgi er í selli sinu þar er heitir í Sarpti' (Laxdæla saga, p. 62); 'Hann bjó í Bjarmanjóði á be heim er heitir á Svanshóll' (Brenna-Njáls saga, Íslensk fornrit XII, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson [Reykjavík: Háð Íslenska fornritafélag, 1954], p. 32). This was also a feature of Old English toponomy.
19 Alliteration is clearly a factor in establishing the formula heim til Hóla, but not a decisive one; while it seems to licence heim í Hjarðarholt it fails to establish heim til Helgafells. Non-alliterative formulae such as í Dali vestur are also well established.
Guðrún mælti: „Vera kann, at vör fám ekki jafnmæli af þeim Laxádlum, en gjalda skal nú einhver verð af hverjum dal sem hann býr [...].”

(Guðrún spoke: “It may well be that we won’t be able to take an equal toll of the men of the Laxa valley, but someone is going to pay the price, whatever dale he dwells in.”) 20

Not ‘whoever he is’, as we would say, but ‘wherever his home may be’. In the Icelandic family sagas we are constantly identifying and re-identifying not only the voices, but also their home: the sagas are both multivocal and multilocal. And since I have again risen to the level of the pun, that most primitive and sacred of tropes, 21 I shall repeat myself by claiming that a fundamental textual characteristic of the sagas as a genre is their synthesis of locution and location.

And so we return to the silence of the extratextual. A stone’s throw north of the church at Helgafell, outside the graveyard proper, there is a single grave said to be that of Guðrún Ösvifursdóttir. Tradition dictates that one must not speak and one must not look back as one ascends the path from the grave to the top of the mount, where one is allowed a wish in the tiny ruined chapel. We understand why we may not speak: the landscape, like our wish, cannot be contained by language. But why not look back? Because while the voice utters speech, it is sight which gives us the text. If we look back we see the Church, the tabernacle of scripture. Its text moves ever outwards, as all texts do, claiming and naming. If we are to elude it, we must take extraordinary steps.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

20 Laxdæla saga, p. 177. I cite Keneva Kunz’s fine translation here, from The Complete Sagas of the Icelanders (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), vol. V, pp. 1–120 (p. 91), in order to demonstrate the impossibility of the translator’s task. If we ignore the last three words the sense is plain enough: “someone in every dale will pay the price”. But einhverr in the sagas tends to mean ‘each and every’: the sentence is also trying to say ‘each one of them will pay the price, whatever dale he dwells in’—which contradicts the first part of Guðrún’s sentence. The anacoluthon is part and parcel of the monumental quality of Guðrún’s words.
21 For the sacred nature of the pun, see for instance Michael Holquist’s “Why is God’s Name a Pun?” in The Novelness of Bakhtin, pp. 53–69.


