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Sailing the Saga Seas: Narrative, Cultural, and Geographical Perspectives in the North Atlantic Voyages of the *Íslendingasögur*

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Abstract - Given the geographical magnitude and cultural significance of the medieval Norse voyages across the North Atlantic, the Norse-Icelandic *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Icelanders) may seem to accord such crossings relatively limited dramatic intensity and narrative weight, at least at first glance. However, close analysis of the texts reveals how deeply ingrained these sea journeys were in the Norse cultural mentality. The following paper explores narrative descriptions of sea voyages in the sagas, focusing on three key areas of this North Atlantic diaspora: Norway, Iceland, and Greenland. By identifying the narrative patterns associated with these journeys and situating them within their wider literary, cultural, and geographical contexts, the aim is to demonstrate that the accounts of sea journeys in the sagas, however fictionalized and stylized, are closely aligned with the geographical reality of the voyages as well as with the medieval Icelandic perception of the wider Norse diaspora and their place within it. The sagas in themselves are a type of textuality that both reflected and helped to shape the "cognitive mapping" of the geographical region as it was perceived in Norse-Icelandic society (and often in the wider Norse diaspora), both at the time of saga writing and also all the way back to the earliest Norse voyages in the Atlantic. In the analysis that follows, I aim to move towards an understanding of how these narrative, cultural, and geographical impulses come together to shape the Norse textual imagination and the picture of North Atlantic voyages that emerges from the sagas.[1]

Introduction

Spread out across the islands of the North Atlantic and some coastal areas of the European mainland, the medieval Norse diaspora was a culture predicated on sea travel. Such voyages were deeply ingrained in the Norse cultural mentality, as Judith Jesch (2001) has shown in her extensive study of the evidence for Viking-Age ships and voyages in runic inscriptions and skaldic verse.[2] Yet often in the *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Icelanders), journeys across the vast span of this ocean are described with a cool nonchalance that may seem fitting for the reputed bad boys of the medieval sea, but in fact belies the magnitude of these voyages. In his discussion of the sea route west to Greenland, G.J. Marcus (1957:14) observes "how often what was unquestionably the longest and most formidable ocean voyage known to the medieval world was commemorated in a brief sentence or so". Compared to the dramatic seascapes found elsewhere in medieval literature—Old English texts such as *Beowulf* and *The Seafarer*, Irish navigational stories such as *Immram curaig Máele Dúin* or Latin equivalents such as *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, not to mention the descriptions of stormy voyages to be found in skaldic poetry—the sagas take a muted approach to the subject, in keeping with their general laconic style. At the same time, this reticence should not be interpreted as negating the significance of these lengthy and perilous voyages. As Kristel Zilmer (2005:73) notes in an article on travelling in the sagas, such narrative brevity "does not automatically mean that the act of travelling is in itself regarded as insignificant—otherwise it could simply be left unmentioned. Rather, this presentation strategy stands in connection with the general style of saga writing, which concentrates on the most dramatic events".

Lamenting the "remoteness of the academic tribe from the realities of the 'sea affair'", Marcus (1980:xii) observes that descriptions of sea voyages in the sagas are rarely analyzed as literary narratives embedded in the physical world in which they developed. Marcus could speak with authority here, since his own analysis of the written sources was informed by his practical experience of sailing these waters. In the ensuing discussion, I intend to redress this imbalance by examining the narrative patterns associated with these journeys and situating them within their wider literary, cultural, and geographical contexts. Through close textual analysis, my aim is to demonstrate that the accounts of sea journeys in the sagas, albeit fictionalized and stylized, are closely aligned with geographical and meteorological realities as well as with medieval Icelanders' perception of the wider Norse diaspora and their place within it. My focus will be on journeys to three key destinations: Norway, Iceland, and Greenland.

We must start with the caveat that the sagas that describe these voyages are in part literary creations: voyage motifs have important narrative functions, to be discussed presently, that contribute to the dramatic coloring of the sagas and the events they describe. As Robert Kellogg (2001:31) points out, "these were

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narratives with their own aesthetic ends; not just records […] of important geographical and historical facts." Some motifs would be considered highly improbable or even supernatural by today's standards, although it is rarely possible to separate experience from imagination in these texts in a definitive fashion.

Likewise, we should always bear in mind that the saga-writing period in most instances comes centuries later than the implied date of the voyage being described. With the principles of cultural memory in mind (see Glauser 2007), we can reasonably assume that the texts were strongly influenced by the social and political complexion of the period of writing (particularly in the case of the *landnám* narratives associated with voyages to Iceland). Astrid Ogilvie and Gísli Pálsson (2003:269) have suggested that the natural landscape described in the *Íslendingasögur* was "closely intertwined with the cultural landscape" of medieval Icelandic society. If this is so, it follows that both the cultural and natural landscape—or in this case seascape—would have colored the literature produced by this culture.

These caveats notwithstanding, highly realistic elements within the saga narratives of voyages have been pointed out by scholars such as Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson (2001) and Gísli Sigurðsson (2004:253–302), who note the evident interest in precise seafaring routes and geographical "immanent maps" of the lands travelled (ibid.:299). Jesch (2009:79), for her part, argues that a major impulse behind these medieval Icelandic narratives "came from [Icelanders'] history of experiencing and perceiving the wide world around them, and their experience of extending its boundaries far to the west." Altogether, then, it seems a reasonable premise that the sagas both reflected and helped to shape the "cognitive mapping" of the geographical region as envisioned by the medieval Icelanders—and perhaps in the wider Norse diaspora—both at the time of saga writing and all the way back to the earliest Norse voyages in the Atlantic and the earliest oral accounts thereof.[3] Such mapping, in an on-going, self-renewing process, could naturally help to shape the contemporary accounts of sea journeys undertaken by Norse sailors, as well as the narrative conventions of saga writing and the traditional conceptualizations of this geographic space informed by centuries of sea travel in the region.

Norway

Voyages from Iceland to Norway in the sagas are described with a characteristic brevity and understatement, and the protagonists tend to reach Norway at the appointed time and place. Some of the more minimalistic descriptions tend to lack distinctive content and are devoid of documentary significance. Their main function seems to be narratological, to bridge the interval between episodes and thus create a sense of continuity. Even so, such journeys are described as being actively good, rather than merely passed over as uneventful. Their very presence suggests that the community producing and consuming sagas could readily accept that voyages to Norway *could* be as straightforward as these. Had such an assumption been counter-factual, the saga compilers/authors could hardly have used this narrative function as frequently as they do.

Egils saga is a particularly useful text to mine for Norwegian voyages typical of those found elsewhere in the saga corpus, since its international and political dimensions mean that many of its characters are often on the high seas. The "narrative-bridge" formula *greiddisk þeim vel* (*ESS* 87, "they had a smooth passage") occurs on several occasions, almost always in connection with the journey to Norway (see also *ESS* 79 and 133). At certain points in the saga, the narrative is more detailed, for instance through mention of favorable winds: "[Þorgils and Þórólfr] heldu aptr um haustit; þeim byrjaði vel, kómu at Hǫrðalandi" (*ESS* 42, "[Þorgils and Þórólfr] set off [for Norway] in the autumn; they had good winds and landed in Hǫrðaland"), "Konungr sigldi hraðbyrja, til þess er hann kom í Naumudal" (*ESS* 55, "the king sailed with good winds until he came to Naumudalr"), and "byrjaði þeim þá […] þeir sigla norðr um Sognsæ byr góðan ok bjart veðr" (*ESS* 67, "then they got a favorable wind […] they sailed north into Sognfjǫrðr with a good wind and in fine weather").

Conversely, when sailors attempt to *avoid* Norway for political reasons, sailing conditions become rough, implying perhaps that conditions would be better if they were not attempting to steer clear of the area and thus having to navigate open waters: "þeim byrjaði illa ok hfðu réttu stóra ok velkði lengi í hafi, því at þeir váru øruggir í því at firrask Nóreg sem mest" (*ESS* 85, "the wind was unfavorable with a strong headwind, and they were tossed about at sea for a long time, because they wanted to stay as far from Norway as possible"). Although the *Íslendingasögur* does not explicitly mention this, when parties were sailing without such constraints they could hug the Norwegian coast and also use portages and canals (where available, as at Selja) so as to avoid the most exposed sea-routes.

Elsewhere in the saga corpus, similar patterns are discernible. *Vatnsdæla saga* states perfunctorily, "honum fórsk greitt ok kom við Nóreg" (*VS* 44, "the journey went well for him and he reached Norway"). Likewise in *Króka-Refs saga* we are told, "Bárðr lætr nú í haf ok fersk vel. Kom hann í þær stöðvar, sem hann mundi kjósa" (*RS* 142, "now Bárðr put out to sea and his voyage [to Norway] went well. He came to the ports that he would have chosen").[4] Later in

the tale, Refr and his sons also have "útivist langa ok hæga" (*RS* 150, "a long, easy voyage") and reach Norway in the winter (an unusual piece of timing that will be considered presently). In *Gunnlaugs saga*, Gunnlaugr enjoys good winds on his journey to Norway: "er þeim gaf byr, létu þeir í haf ok kómu skipi sínu norðr við Nóreg" (*GnlS* 68, "as soon they got a good wind they put to sea and their ship reached the north of Norway"). Fair winds are also mentioned in *Fóstbræðra saga*'s description of Skúfr's voyage to Norway: "þeir fá góða byri; fersk þeim vel, taka Nóreg" (*FbS* 257, "they got fair winds and their voyage went well and they reached Norway").

Laxdæla saga describes Hǫskuldr and his crew en route to Hǫrðaland, where the winds are good: "láta þeir í haf, ok gefr þeim vel, ok tóku Nóreg heldr sunnarliga" (*LS* 22, "they set out to sea and had favorable winds and landed in the south of Norway"). Óláfr *pái* meets with similar conditions on both his journeys to Norway: "þegar kom byrr á, er Óláfr kom til skips, ok sigla þeir þegar í haf" (*LS* 51, "a favorable wind rose as soon as Oláfr reached the ship and they put out to sea immediately"; see also chapter 21, *LS* 59). Given the frequency with which young Icelandic heroes visit the Norwegian court in *Laxdæla saga*, it is not surprising that this motif occurs so frequently (see *LS* chapters 30, 38, and 40). This point will be returned to later in the discussion.

Comparable descriptions feature in the outlaw sagas. In *Gísla saga*, Vésteinn's sons escape Iceland and "þau váru skamma stund úti ok kómu við Nóreg" (*GSS* 117, "they were at sea a short time and reached Norway"). Similarly, *Harðar saga* describes how Grímkell and his ship's company "fóru síðan utan […] ok kómu við Björgvin heilu skipi" (*HS* 35, "went abroad after that […] and got to Bergen with the ship unscathed"). More detail is provided in *Grettis saga*, which describes how Þrándr and ǫnundr "sigldu vestan um haf til Nóregs ok fengu svá mikit hraðbyri, at engi njósan fór um ferð þeir"' (*GSÁ* 15, "sailed from the west across the sea to Norway and got such a favorable wind that there was no advance intelligence of their journey").

Very occasionally, there are exceptions to this pattern. In such cases the sagas take pains to explain the reasons for a poor voyage to Norway, which is usually due to the part of the country they are heading for and/or the time of year when they are sailing. Winter is a particular problem, for, as Brian Fagan (2000:73) has noted, "the prudent medieval mariner avoided going to sea in winter. Thirteenth-century Scandinavians with their open boats stayed ashore from November to March." Two rare cases of unpropitious voyages to Norway occur in the outlaw sagas *Grettis saga* and *Gísla saga*.

The episode in *Grettis saga* can be explained by both the time of year when they are sailing—the beginning of winter—and the location, Staðr (Cape Stad). The saga states that Grettir and the rest of the crew "fóru norðr með landi ok fengu opt hǫrð veðr, því at þetta var ǫndverðan vetr. Ok þá er þeir sóttu norðr at Staði, fengu þeir illviðri mikit með fjúki ok frosti ok tóku nauðuliga land eitt kveld" (*GSÁ* 129, "sailed north along the land and often had harsh weather, because it was the start of winter. When they came north to Staðr, they experienced a great storm with driving snow and sea-rime and made it to land with difficulty one evening"). Renowned for its harsh and extremely windy conditions, Staðr is the only mainland peninsula in Norway that juts out into the open sea.[5] In addition to this verisimilitude, the account of the adverse conditions plays an important role in the narrative as part of the cause and effect sequence that leads to Grettir's eventual outlawry. In order to get fire to warm up his storm-battered shipmates, he swims across the channel, but his cloak freezes when he gets to the other side and magnifies his bulky form, so that the men at the house he is making for mistake him for a troll. In the panic that follows, the house is set on fire and the occupants are burnt to death.

In *Gísla saga*, too, Gísli and Vésteinn's shipwreck on the way to Norway is linked specifically to the fact they are travelling at the start of winter, at the dead of night, and with a blizzard blowing: "[þeir] váru úti meir en hundrað dægra ok sigla um vetrnáttaskeið at Hǫrðalandi í miklu fjúki ok ofviðri um nótt, brjóta skipit í spán, en halda fé sínu ok mǫnnum" (*GSS* 27, "they were out at sea for more than one hundred days and around the first day of winter came to Hǫrðaland at night in heavy driving snow and stormy weather, breaking their ship to splinters but without losing their goods and men").

These exceptions notwithstanding, the stereotype is a benignly favorable voyage eastwards. This is not merely literary convention, because such descriptions make sense in terms of the prevailing oceanographic conditions that generations of Norse voyagers would have experienced on the journey from Iceland to Norway. It is actually the case that the prevailing currents and wind patterns tend to make for a swift passage east. The key current is the fairly weak, northward-flowing North Atlantic Drift located between Iceland and Norway, which becomes the Norwegian Atlantic Current further north (CIMAS 2012). Journeys from the west to Norway would have benefited from the direction of flow, while on the final approach to the Norwegian coast the sailors would have picked up the system of warm currents heading north. The latter would be especially helpful if the destination lay in a more northerly part of the country such as Þrándheimr (as described in *Egils saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*), Niðaróss (as in *Laxdæla saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*), and Staðr (as

in *Grettis saga* and *Laxdæla saga*). The prevailing westerly jetstream would also have contributed to the general trend of west-to-east voyages being easy.

A third factor shaping the saga descriptions seems to be the cultural valences assigned to Norway in the general medieval Icelandic world view, in terms of the historical and political position it occupied within the Norse sphere and beyond. A tendency towards swift and easy sea journeys east to Norway fits with the country's culturally secure, politically dominant position in the Norse diaspora, traditionally viewed as the homeland for fledgling Norse societies such as Iceland. The same attitude is also reflected more generally in Norse-Icelandic directional vocabulary, for, as Jesch (2005:120) explains, "The primal voyage from Norway to Iceland is fossilized in the directional adverbs used by medieval Icelanders, in life and in literature. To sail *út* 'out' was to sail from Norway to Iceland, while the journey from Iceland to Norway was figured as a return journey, as *útan*, literally 'from the place which is 'out' ', with Iceland as the outpost, in relation to the point of origin in Norway."

In many of these episodes, this cultural context fits with the subsequent narrative pattern that takes place once the voyagers have landed in Norway. When—as is often the case—it is a young Icelandic hero who is at the center of the story, his smooth, swift journey east is invariably followed by a character-forming episode during which he proves his manliness and worth at the royal court. Often this episode is preceded with a brief spell of tension during which he locks horns with the king, thus emphasizing the fact that Icelanders are—at the very least—equal to Norwegian monarchs. Subsequently, the youth is feted as a great hero, converts to Christianity, and returns to Iceland with tokens of royal favor (for discussions of this motif see Harris 1972, 1976; Schach 1982). Within this context, his easy voyage to Norway is a fitting portent of the noble destiny that awaits him.

In short, it is likely that a mix of narratological, geographical, and cultural factors contributes to form the saga descriptions of voyages from Iceland to Norway.

Iceland

Voyages in the opposite direction, from the east to Iceland, are described most fully in the sagas when they occur within the context of the ninth-century *landnám* ("land-taking" or "settlement") narratives. The significance of this "migration myth" as part of the cultural memory of thirteenth-century Icelandic society has been discussed at length, and Pernille Hermann (2010:72) has drawn attention to the way in which the past dealt with in the *Íslendingasögur* "is seen through an interpretative web indebted to contemporary experiences and current ideologies", not least the political turmoil of the later period. By means of a set of narrative conventions common to many Norse texts—indications that the proto-Icelander's destiny lies in Iceland, the voyage there, quasi-supernatural signs directing the ship's company to land, land-claiming and place-naming strategies, and beneficial relationships formed with land-spirits—the story of the *landnám* demonstrates the process by which the settlers take control of the Icelandic landscape and forge a cultural and social identity within it. Before they even reach Iceland, the settlers' interaction with the seascape is a preview of the way in which they will later form a relationship with the topography of this new land.

To some extent, the seascape is still marginal, for, as has been noted by Margaret Clunies Ross (1998b:130), "this privileging of the idea of land taking as a means of humanising the environment had its antithesis in the relative neglect of matters to do with the waters and their inhabitants which were placed in a special, somewhat marginal category associated with anomaly and uncertainty". As with the seas around Greenland—which will be discussed below—and occasionally Norway, there are descriptions of rough passages in the sea around Iceland as the sailors near their destination. However, whereas the many Greenlandic storms and shipwrecks described in the sagas have significant repercussions in the narratives, their Icelandic equivalents are more subdued in their effects. Storms blow over quickly, voyagers land without further ado, and even if there is a shipwreck, the travellers usually reach their intended destination. As Jonathan Grove (2009:41–42) notes, in comparison to the sea voyages to Greenland, "the winds that blow about early Iceland in the sagas tend to draw pioneers to their destined landholdings in the new country rather than threatening them with hardship and destruction at the edge of the known world." Examples of such episodes appear in *Laxdæla saga* (chapter 5), *Grettis saga* (chapter 8), *Bárðar saga* (chapter 3), and *Egils saga* (chapter 33). Another episode from *Egils saga*, Skallagrímr's *landnám*, is a particularly good illustration of this motif and worth quoting in full:

> "Er þeir váru komnir við Ísland, þá sigldu þeir sunnan at landi; þeir sigldu vestr fyrir landit, því at þeir hǫfðu þat spurt, at Ingólfr hafði sér þar bústað tekit; en er þeir kómu fyrir Reykjanes ok þeir sá firðinum upp lúka, þá stefna þeir inn í fjǫrðinn báðum skipunum. Veðr gerði hvasst ok væta mikil ok þoka; skilðusk þá skipin. Sigldu þeir inn eptir Borgarfirði, til þess er þraut sker ǫll; kǫstuðu þá akkerum, til þess er veðr lægði ok ljóst gerði."
> (*ESS* 71–72, "When they came offshore from Iceland, they sailed towards land from the south,

> then west along the coast, since they had heard that Ingólfr had settled there. When they sailed around Reykjanes and saw the fjord open up, then they sailed both ships into the fjord. The weather grew rough and there was much rain and fog and the ships were separated. They sailed along Borgarfjǫrðr beyond all the skerries; they cast anchor until the storm died down and it became light.")

In this measured approach to the land, despite the rain and darkness, Iceland appears as an open landscape where sailors are able to make their way around sections of the coast. At least in terms of syntax, the land itself is a dynamic agent in this interaction, actively responding to the settlers' approach as they see the fjord opening up to receive them (*þeir sá firðinum upp lúka*). Even when a storm hits, they ride it out without incident, casting anchor and waiting for it to pass.

Such *landnám* voyages to Iceland are purposeful, quasi-supernatural events, often guided by prophecies that are made before the settlers even set off for Iceland (as in the case of the reluctant *landnámsmaðr* (settler) Ingimundr in *Vatnsdæla saga*). Once at sea, the use of *ǫndvegissúlur* ("high-seat pillars") to direct the would-be settlers to their new land is a classic *landnám* motif that appears throughout the relevant Icelandic literature. The trope has been thoroughly analyzed elsewhere (see particularly Clunies Ross 1998b:122–157, Strömbäck 1970, Wellendorf 2010:11–12), so here a brief summary will suffice.

The practice of throwing high-seat pillars overboard on the approach to Iceland in order to determine the place of settlement is described in numerous episodes in the sagas (not to mention *Landnámabók*), including *Laxdæla saga* (chapters 3 and 5), *Kormáks saga* (chapter 2), *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts* (chapter 1), *Flóamanna saga* (chapter 4), and *Eyrbyggja saga* (chapter 4). An episode from *Eyrbyggja saga* encapsulates the importance of semi-supernatural forces in enabling the seafarers to approach and settle the land, with the Þórr-carved pillars driving Þórólfr towards both the land and his destiny:

> "Síðan sigldi Þórólfr í haf, ok byrjaði honum vel, ok fann landit ok sigldi fyrir sunnan, vestr um Reykjanes; þá fell byrrinn, ok sá þeir, at skar í landit inn fjǫrðu stóra. Þórólfr kastaði þá fyrir borð ǫndvegissúlum sínum, þeim er staðit hǫfðu í hofinu; þar var Þórr skorinn á annarri. Hann mælti svá fyrir, at hann skyldi þar byggja á Íslandi, sem Þórr léti þær á land koma. En þegar þær hóf frá skipinu, sveif þeim til ins vestra fjarðarins, ok þótti þeim fara eigi vánum sinna. Eptir þat kom hafgula; sigldu þeir þá vestr fyrir Snæfellsnes ok inn á fjǫrðinn."
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> (*EbS* 7–8, "Then Þórólfr sailed out to sea and he got a fair wind and sighted the land and sailed along the south coast, west towards Reykjanes; then the breeze dropped and they saw where large fjords cut into the land. Then Þórólfr cast overboard the high-seat pillars that had stood in his temple; Þórr was carved upon one of them. He said that he would settle in Iceland at the place where Þórr caused the pillars to land. As soon as the pillars were thrown from the ship, they were swept towards the western side of the fjord and it seemed to them [the voyagers] as though they [the pillars] moved in other than the way they expected. After that a sea breeze sprang up; then they sailed west around Snæfellsnes and into the fjord.")

Here, rather than running into storms as they approach the coastline, the voyagers experience a drop in the wind and are able to see the broad fjords that will bring them to land. Once the pillars have been lowered into the water, the text creates a sense of supernatural interaction with the meteorological and oceanographic conditions, working in concert to welcome them and to create an effortless entry into the country. The verb *sveif* ("swept") emphasises the sense of the pillars' swift movement, which is accentuated by the information that the manner in which they are moving is somehow unexpected. As with the description of Skallagrímr's *landnám* in *Egils saga*, the sailors are able to sail freely around the coast, arcing around Reykjanes and the headland of Snæfellsnes before being propelled into the fjord by a *hafgula* ("sea breeze") that springs up to speed them on their way.

An important cultural explanation for such positive descriptions of the westward voyages is the medieval Icelanders' fierce desire to define and legitimize a strong sense of Icelandic identity, particularly in opposition to Norway. These deep-seated tensions grew in the thirteenth century, during which many of the sagas were committed to writing, as Norway flexed its political muscles, eventually taking control of Iceland in 1262–1264. Under these circumstances, the sagas became an important social and political tool. As Clunies Ross (1993:379–380) notes, "Icelandic literature took shape during a period of acute political crisis for the Icelanders […] They needed to tell the world, and the Norwegians in particular, that their claim to sovereignty was as good as their neighbours."

Clunies Ross (1993:375–376) has demonstrated that central to this impulse were the traditions associated with the *landnám* and genealogies, reflecting the Icelanders' aspirations to establish their nascent nation within a larger European framework. Within this context, the positive aspects of the country's landscape and its role in the *landnám* were particularly important, not only in the outward voyage but

also in depictions of the subsequent land-claiming and settlement. Thus, the *landnám* narrative pattern underlines Iceland's identity as a land destined to be the future home of the Icelandic people, not only through prophetic statements concerning individuals but also through their interaction with the seascape and coastline on the approach to their new country. These deeply engrained narrative conventions, strongly informed by the cultural anxieties of the saga-writing period, are key to understanding why sea journeys to Iceland were depicted so positively in the sagas.

Here too, there are prevailing oceanographic conditions that must be taken into account as we assess the saga descriptions. These conditions are registered in somewhat inconsistent fashion in our texts. On the one hand, the texts do not mention adverse winds that might be expected, from present-day data on the westerly jetstream, to impede outward voyages. Possibly the saga narratives play down the prevalence of adverse winds for ideological reasons of the kind posited above. On the other hand, the pattern of sea currents in the waters around Iceland does indeed fit nicely with elements of the *landnám* narrative pattern, where settlers are swiftly pulled towards the coast and welcomed by the land itself, as if physically destined for Iceland. Under prevailing conditions, a ship coming from Norway would find the final stages of its approach to Iceland facilitated by the East Icelandic Current, which flows clockwise around Iceland. Such a direction fits with the descriptions of the settlers "curving" clockwise around the coast, with examples from *Egils saga* ("er þeir váru komnir við Ísland, þá sigldu þeir sunnan at landi; þeir sigldu vestr fyrir landit"; *ESS* 71, "When they came offshore from Iceland, they sailed towards land from the south; then west along the coast"), *Þórðar saga hreðu* ("sigldu svá vestr fyrir landit ok svá norðr […] ok nær inu norðr landinu"; *ÞSH* 269, "they carried on sailing west round the coast, then north […] and around the northern part of the land"), and *Bárðar saga* ("helt Bárðr Heyangrs-Bjarnarson vestr fyrir landit ok svá í norðr"; *BSS* 109, "Bárðr the son of Heyangr-Bjǫrn held a westerly course around the land and so to the north").

It is likely that these motifs in the sagas began life as straightforward navigational features experienced by voyagers to Iceland and reinforced over the centuries as the same routes continued to be used. Over the generations, as the significance of the *landnám* story grew in the Icelandic cultural imagination, information on oceanographic features of the journey would have become connected to and qualified by other ideologically motivated ideas about the voyage's significance, until the pattern fused into a culturally meaningful literary trope in the saga texts.

Greenland

Earlier sagas

If voyages between Iceland and Norway are depicted in the sagas as relatively smooth undertakings, those to and from Greenland are an entirely different matter. As Grove (2009:41) notes, "the turbulent voyage becomes a principal leitmotif of Icelandic tales concerning Greenland." Additionally, there appears to be a definite development in the saga descriptions over time. Establishing a chronology, either absolute or relative, is admittedly very difficult, since some sagas may have undergone mutual influence (in some cases possibly in Greenland as well as in Iceland) before being written down. However, taking the saga dates tabulated by Vésteinn Ólason (2005:114–115) and Grove (2009:33) as a rough guide, the earliest sagas associated with Greenland seem to be *Grænlendinga þáttr* (perhaps late twelfth century, although with possible incorporation of Icelandic salvage laws into the extant mid-thirteenth century version), the Vínland sagas *Grænlendinga saga* and *Eiríks saga* (early thirteenth century), *Fóstbræðra saga* (early to mid-thirteenth century), and *Eyrbyggja saga* (mid-thirteenth century). Later texts include *Flóamanna saga* (late thirteenth or early fourteenth century), *Króka-Refs saga* (mid-fourteenth century), *Bárðar saga* (mid- to late fourteenth century), and *Jökuls þáttr* and *Gunnars saga* (both late fourteenth to fifteenth century). *Gunnars saga* seems to have been pieced together from a number of other sagas and does not mention Greenland by name, so it will be mentioned only incidentally here (see Margrét Eggertsdóttir 1993).

In *Grænlendinga þáttr*, the two ships that escort the bishop to Greenland meet with storms: "létu þeir í haf, ok greiðisk eigi byrrinn mjǫk í hag þeim" (*Gþ* 275, "they put out to sea, and the wind was not greatly in their favor"). One ship is lost, with the crew meeting a grisly fate in the Greenlandic wilderness. In *Grænlendinga saga*, from the time when Bjarni sets out from Iceland for Greenland, the narrative conveys a sense of going beyond the familiar and known world of Icelandic society; Bjarni declares, "óvitrlig mun þykkja vár ferð, þar sem engi vár hefir komit í Grænlandshaf" (*GS* 246, "our journey will be considered unwise, given that none of us has sailed the Greenland sea"). A healthy respect for the perils of voyages and the discovery of unknown lands is encapsulated by *Hafgerðingadrápa*, a verse said to have been composed during one of the first voyages to Greenland: "mínar biðk at munka reyni / meinalausan farar beina" (*GS* 245, "I ask the unblemished {tester of monks} [GOD] to assist my travels"). Despite such prayers, on Bjarni's outward journey the familiar world of Iceland

retreats until "landit var vatnat" (*GS* 246, "the land was made water"), with the sense of the land itself being swallowed up by the ocean. The unfamiliar seascape is threatening and difficult to navigate: "lagði á norrænur ok þokur, ok vissu þeir eigi, hvert at þeir fóru" (*GS* 246, "northern winds and mists assailed [them], and they did not know where they were going").

In *Eiríks saga*, the poor sailing conditions on the voyage to Greenland are even more pronounced. The departure from Iceland is attended by good weather, but "er þeir váru í hafi, tók af byri" (*ES* 205 "when they were at sea, the favorable wind ceased"). The voyage is plagued by storms and sickness associated with the Greenlandic sea: "fengu þeir hafvillur, ok fórsk þeim ógreitt um sumarit. Því næst kom sótt í lið þeira" (*ES* 205, "they lost their bearings and made little progress during the summer. Following this, illness came to the company"). Later in the saga, the bad weather associated with this stretch of water is responsible for Leifr's discovery of Vínland, while on a subsequent expedition to Vínland, the voyagers are lost at sea all summer in a storm, returning to Greenland battered and bruised. Similarly in *Fóstbræðra saga*, Skúfr's outward journey to Greenland—"skip velkir úti lengi; fá þeir veðr stór" (*FbS* 223, "the ship was tossed about at sea for a long time; they got bad weather")—stands in sharp contrast to his aforementioned journey to Norway.

In these earlier sagas, descriptions of troubled sea journeys to Greenland relate culturally to the land's comparatively insecure position in the wider Norse diaspora. Given Greenland's physical position at the western edge of the Norse world, such peripheral representation is unsurprising. In the most realistic depictions of the land and its settlements, the country is decidedly part of the Norse world, but, more generally, saga descriptions of difficult Greenland voyages can be interpreted as among the "marginalizing strateg[ies]" that serve to "place Greenland firmly at the edge of the map" (Grove 2009:32). Greenland emerges from the saga corpus as a somewhat marginal, socially unstable set of settlements, afflicted by plagues and eerie events and dominated by its dramatic physical topography of vast glaciers and towering mountains.

Many sources other than the sagas—both Icelandic and non-Icelandic—describe shipwrecks and storms on the route to Greenland, which suggests that the tradition of a bad voyage to Greenland is not confined to the thematic traditions of this literary corpus (for a broader overview of these sources, see Grove 2009:41–44). An oft-cited passage in *Landnámabók* describes how in the first voyage out to Greenland, only 14 of the 24 ships arrived safely, while geographical descriptions of the region in the manuscript *Hauksbók* (ca. 1306–1310) confirm the picture that emerges from many of the sagas, with a lengthy and evocative account of Greenland's difficult currents, disorientating winds, darkness, and glaciers. Similarly, the Skálhólt annal entry for 1347 records sailors from Markland making for Greenland but being blown off course and landing in Iceland (see Seaver 1996:28).

Norwegian sources take a similar view. In *Konungs skuggsjá* (King's Mirror, ca. 1250), the meteorological conditions experienced by sailors around Greenland are linked explicitly to the presence of the glaciers that dominate the landscape: "er þar kann illviðri að vera, þá verður það þar með meiri ákefð en í flestum stöðum öðrum, hvortveggja um hvassleik veðra og um ákefð frosts og snjóa" (*KS* 130, "when there are storms, then they develop with greater severity than in most other places, because of both the harshness of the winds and the accumulation of frost and snow"). The passage goes on to describe shadowy figures of sailors abandoning their ships and valuables at the margins between the water and the ice and dragging their boats up onto the shelf: "þeir hafa tekið smábáta og dregið á ísa upp með sér og hafa svo leitað landsins" (*KS* 119, "they have taken their small boats and have dragged them up on the ice with themselves, and thus have made their way to land").

A comparable description is given in the Norwegian-Icelandic official Ívarr Bárðarson's account of his journey to Greenland (ca. 1364), in which he describes the glaciers that sailors encounter when they near the coastline, the ice and snow that lie on the land and sea, and the storms that rage in the area (Jónsson and Pétursson 1899:48–52).[6] While the depiction of the treacherous voyage to Greenland in saga literature may have been colored by literary factors, these non-saga texts indicate that the perception of bad voyages to Greenland was held widely throughout the Norse world. Significantly, *Konungs skuggsjá* and Ívarr's account are from Norway rather than Iceland, unsurprising given that the voyages to Greenland were predominantly conducted from Norway, especially in the later period (see Marcus 1957:13–14).

All the descriptions cited above probably originate in real-life experiences of sailing to Greenland. Particularly interesting in this respect are the descriptions in the *Hauksbók* and *Sturlubók* redactions of *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements). These accounts may not be strictly accurate (see Jesch 2009:65), perhaps at best "the literary version[s] of a far longer and fuller set of oral instructions that were familiar to all mariners with long experience of the Greenlandic run", as Marcus (1957:25) describes them. Nevertheless, they outline a typical passage from Hernar (approximately 30 miles north

of Bergen) due west to Hvarf (Cape Farewell, the southern tip of Greenland) via the seas just north of Shetland but south of the Faroes. If this route is roughly correct, then the prevailing meteorological and oceanographic conditions can readily be correlated with those reported in the textual record. Marcus (1980:xiv) has drawn attention to a "crucial factor" in North Atlantic voyages, namely that "the prevailing winds were contrary for westward ventures. Throughout much of the year westerly predominated over easterly weather". Grove (2009:41) correctly notes that "[g]etting back from Greenland does not generally seem to involve the same difficulties as getting there in these tales", but his further inference that this "asymmetrical pattern bespeaks the artificiality of these narratives" (Grove 2009:41) does not necessarily follow, given the well-documented effect of the westerly jetstream.

In addition, sailors would have had to contend with all the risks of the frequently foggy, turbulent conditions at the cold–warm front found in the Irminger Sea, where the largely northward-flowing Irminger Current transports relatively warm, salty water that mixes with colder, less saline water transported by the East Greenlandic Current from the Arctic Ocean (CIMAS 2012). This area is located above the western slope of the Reykjanes Ridge to the west of Iceland (at a longitude of approximately 26° W), and runs from latitude 67° N to 55° N, making it an unavoidable part of any route from Norway/Iceland to Greenland (CIMAS 2012). Such foggy conditions may well be reflected in the various saga descriptions of poor visibility encountered as the voyagers neared Greenland.

Similarly, it is hardly surprising that we find descriptions of ships to Greenland meeting bad weather and being pushed north up the coast (*hefr þá norðr með landinu*, as *Króka-Refs saga* has it). As in the case of Staðr in Norway, the weather around the exposed western coastline of Greenland is notoriously bad, and the direction of travel follows the flow of the West Greenlandic Current up the coast towards the Davis Strait. A further relevant phenomenon is the "Icelandic Low", a term adopted by meteorologists to describe the semi-permanent low-pressure center between Iceland and southern Greenland. This is a principal center of action in the atmospheric circulation of the Northern Hemisphere, associated with frequent cyclone activity, and the sailors of the Middle Ages are likely to have run into it (NSDIC 2012).

Later sagas

In the later sagas, descriptions of voyages to Greenland feature ever more ferocious gales, storms, and shipwrecks. These grim accounts form part of a broader shift in the literary depiction of Greenland, where the wilderness begins to creep into the narratives, eventually replacing the settlements as the main setting (for example, in *Flóamanna saga* and *Jökuls þáttr*). At the same time, uncanny creatures such as trolls begin to supersede humans as the main inhabitants (particularly in *Jökuls þáttr*).

In *Flóamanna saga*, predictions of disaster are made even before the company set sail: Þorey declares, "misráðit mun [...] at þangat sé farit" (*FlóS* 276, "it is a bad plan to be going there"'). Once they are at sea, Þórr appears to Þorgils and threatens (then brings about) a shipwreck, visually highlighting the power of the sea by showing Þorgils a cliff "þar sem sjóvarstraumr brast í björgum,—'í slíkum bylgjum skaltu vera ok aldri ór komast' " (*FlóS* 279, "where the ocean current pounded against the rocks—'you will find yourself in such waves and never escape' "). When his threat comes true, the description of the shipwreck on the Greenlandic coast focuses on the little ship washed up below the glaciers, compounding the continuing sense of man's insignificance and vulnerability in the face of the hostile topography: "þeir brutu skipit undir Grænlandsjöklum í vík nökkurri við sandmöl. Tók skipit í sundr í efra rúmi" (*FlóS* 282, "they were shipwrecked on a gravel bar in a bay under the glaciers of Greenland. The ship split at its upper deck").

In the supernatural world of *Jökuls þáttr*, many lines are devoted to the voyage to Greenland, emphasizing an almost otherworldly disorientation, the great length of time during which they are lost at sea, and the ferocity of the shipwreck: "gaf þeim lítt byri, og rak á fyrir þeim myrkr og hafvillur, svó þeir vóru úti allt sumarið; en er hausta tók, gerði storma með miklum hríðum og frustum, svó sýldi hvern dropa [...] um síðir rak skipið að skerjaklasa miklum með boðaföllum stórum" (*JþB* 47, "they got little wind, darkness and disorientation overtook them, so that they were out at sea all summer. When autumn came, there were storms with a great deal of sleet and frost, so that every drop of water turned to ice. […] Eventually, the ship was wrecked on a great cluster of skerries in great crashes of breakers"). A similarly devastating shipwreck in the northern wilderness is described in *Gunnars saga*.

A partial exception to this trend towards the otherworldly is *Króka-Refs saga*, which, although probably to be grouped chronologically with the later sagas, as we have seen, has much in common with the comparatively realistic portrayal of Norse-Greenlandic settlements to be found in the earlier sagas. Here, the adverse phase of the voyage begins with the sighting of Greenland: "þeim ferst vel, þar til er þeir fá sýn af Grænlandi, ok síðan velkir þá lengi ok hefr þá norðr með landinu" (*RS* 131, "they travelled well until they caught sight of Greenland, and then they were tossed about for a long time and driven north along the coast").

The tendency for Greenland voyages to become stormier, wilder, and weirder in the later sagas can be linked to the growing popularity of supernaturally themed, fantastical saga literature during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is true that the traditional view of the development of saga genres from *Íslendingasögur* to *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*—as well as a shift from the more realistic "classical" *Íslendingasögur* to their more supernaturally inclined "post-classical" counterparts—has now been replaced in scholarship by a more fluid interpretation of the development of saga genres (for an overview, see Vésteinn Ólason 1998:60–61). Nevertheless, a general trend towards the fabulous still seems to be discernible. This pattern has been noted by Grove (2009:37), who goes on to remark that "it is nevertheless striking that the remaking of Greenland as a rendezvous for fabulous adventures with little regard for even the most vaguely historicized human dimension becomes most apparent at a time when regular communications with Greenland were diminishing, but, strangely perhaps, not necessarily before they had ceased altogether."

In reality, it is not so strange that such perceptions had made their way into descriptions of voyages while there was still contact with Greenland. Rather, they point to the probability that near-contemporary experiences of Greenland voyages were still finding their way into the saga narratives, reflecting the deteriorating climatic and oceanographic conditions that voyagers would have experienced on the crossing.

This shift prompts the more general question whether Greenland's representation in the sagas became colored by changing literary fashions or—as seems more plausible—Greenland became an attractive setting for eerie and supernatural saga episodes precisely because of the way the land and the journey there were starting to be viewed by the wider Norse world, as the settlements began to decline and contacts with the east diminished. The decline and demise of the Greenland settlements have a number of complex and interrelated causes (see Barlow et al. 1997, McGovern 2000), but for present purposes, particularly significant is the deteriorating climate (both on land and at sea). Sea ice and the freezing of the fjords were on the increase (see Jensen et al. 2004, Kuijpers et al. 1999, Lassen et al. 2004, Roncaglia and Kuijpers 2004) as part of more widespread changes in sea temperature and glacial ice-calving; Icelandic sources investigated by Ogilvie (1991) indicate that unusual levels of sea ice reached Iceland on numerous occasions during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (see also Barlow et al. 1997, Christiansen 1998:720–726). Ívarr Bárðarson's account mentions navigational difficulties caused by newly abundant sea ice on the traditional route. In addition, scientific studies suggest that the winds around Greenland were becoming significantly stronger between the period when the Norse settlements were established (ca. 1000) up to around AD 1300 and beyond, increasing difficulties of access (Kuijpers and Mikkelsen 2009). Two decades earlier than Ívarr, Bishop Hákon of Bergen was probably not exaggerating when he wrote in a letter to the Archbishop of Niðaróss (1341) that the way to Greenland lay *per mare non minus tempestuosissimum quam longissimum* ("over a sea no less exceedingly tempestuous than it is exceedingly wide": see Marcus 1957:28).

Consequently, although Grove (2009:46) invokes the "generic conventions [associated with the literary representation of Greenland] that did not value historical and geographical specificities in the account of that 'cold world' ", it is the very coldness of this world and its surrounding waters that plays the pivotal role in the dialogue between the sagas and the geographical reality of Norse activities in the region. As trading patterns changed and the sailing routes to the country became unviable or were abandoned, the perception of Greenland in the Norse world view also changed. The region tipped over from geographical and cultural peripherality to critical isolation. Such a status chimes with Geraldine Barnes' (1994:21) description of the "divestment" of the western world in post-classical saga traditions, with the Greenlandic wilderness and other distant lands such as Helluland merging together as a wild, barren space across the sea. Greenland was now a land beyond the Norse social sphere, its cultural place having shifted until it largely vanished from the cognitive map, leaving memories of storms, sea ice, and shadowy isolation.

Conclusion

Close textual analysis of the North Atlantic voyages described in the *Íslendingasögur* demonstrates how literary stylization and fictional impulses come together with geographical and meteorological conditions, cultural preoccupations, and historical events in order to shape and color the saga narratives. Voyages to Norway, Iceland, and Greenland invariably have important roles within the saga plots, providing the narratives with both structure and color. Yet it is also true that the brief and easy sea journeys east to Norway fit with its secure, politically dominant position within the Norse world, reflecting the cultural valences assigned to the country from a medieval Icelandic perspective. Similarly, the sea journeys to Iceland are often described in the context of the "mythically charged" *landnám* narratives, used by the Icelanders to reinforce their sense of identity, politically and ideologically distinct

from Norway in particular. Consequently, while the voyages to Norway give the impression of natural movement back to the "center" of the Norse cultural sphere, they are not described with the same sense of forward momentum and propulsion that characterizes the voyages to Iceland, particularly in the context of the *landnám* narratives. Likewise, the dangerous and protracted saga voyages to Greenland reflect the country's ever-more marginal position in the Norse cognitive "map", not only as viewed from Iceland but also in the wider diaspora.

At the same time, it is highly likely that the sagas reflect the key oceanographic conditions experienced by generations of Norse voyagers sailing across the North Atlantic, including currents, prevailing winds, and other oceanographic and climatic conditions. The navigational conditions that had been experienced over the centuries were built upon in the literary texts to produce culturally meaningful, fictionalized saga narratives. In the case of Greenland in particular, these cultural, geographical, and historical factors were tightly bound up with each other, for the deteriorating meteorological conditions on the sea routes to Greenland were directly linked to the decline and fall of the Norse-Greenlandic settlements and the increasing cultural distance between Greenland and the rest of the Norse diaspora. The motif of the difficult voyage to Greenland therefore takes on a unique chronological dimension, with the later sagas describing ever more turbulent seas and uncanny shipwrecks on the wild Greenlandic coastline.

Thus, through close literary analysis of the sea voyages described in the Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, it is possible to restore these narratives to the tangible, multi-dimensional seascape of the North Atlantic, in order to better understand the literary, geographical, oceanographic, cultural, and historical impulses that informed and shaped these unique and complex witnesses to the medieval Norse world.

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Endnotes

[1]This paper develops a topic that I began to explore several years ago at the saga conference in Uppsala; for some embryonic thoughts and general remarks see my pre-print paper (Barraclough 2009).

[2]Jesch's (2001:42) analysis of the skaldic vocabulary of ships, crews, sailing and sea battles (chapters 4 and 5) redresses Hjalmar Falk's (1912) comparative neglect of the skaldic and runic sources in his study of the language of ships and seafaring. Other studies, such as those by Brøgger and Shetelig (1950) and Schnall (1975), take a practical approach to the origin and development of Viking ships and the navigational difficulties that the medieval Norse sailors would have faced. Towards the end of their book, Brøgger and Shetelig devote some pages to descriptions of sailing and ships in the sagas, but since the bulk of their discussion is based on evidence from pre-Viking ship petroglyphs, iron rivets, hulls, rudders, and sails, the same technical approach is taken to ship descriptions in the literary material. Schnall too combines in his discussion such practicalities as coastal routes and ocean navigation with the literary evidence, once again from a predominantly technical perspective.

[3]I use the term "cognitive mapping" to refer to the geographical and cultural valences associated with the various countries of the Norse diaspora and the conceptual places they occupied in mental map of the Norse world, predominantly but not exclusively from an Icelandic perspective.

[4]Incidentally, Bárðr seems to be particularly lucky in his sea journeys, as his is one of the few non-eventful voyages to Greenland: "honum ferst einkar vel; tók hann Grænland, þar sem hann mundi kjósa" (*RS* 246, "his voyage went extremely well; he landed in Greenland exactly where he would have chosen").

[5]Even today, the area creates difficulties for the shipping routes along the Norwegian coast, and for many decades—perhaps since 1870—plans have been underway to construct a ship tunnel in order to bypass the peninsula. http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/12/17/us-norway-shipping-tunnel-idUSL1771424520071217

[6]Finnur was one of the first scholars to emphasise the relationship between Greenland's topography and the medieval Norse texts describing the country, not only in the case of historical sources such as Ívarr's description of Greenland but also in literary works such as the Vínland sagas. Alongside his discussions and editions of the material he provides maps of the Eastern and Western Settlements that enable us to match the literary accounts to the geographical reality, while Helgi Pétursson's description of a modern (i.e., 1897) journey to Iceland highlighted the link between medieval Norse descriptions of Greenland and the country's contemporary fauna, flora, human population, and topographical features. See also Jónsson (1899) and the introduction to Jónsson (1930).