

Foreword

Much of both Icelandic and medieval Irish literature is, in one way or another, storytelling about places, reflecting a deep engagement with the concept of ‘place’ and the creation of a ‘sense of place’. This book will take as its starting point the shared interest that Icelandic and Irish literature have in ‘place’ and will ask whether the medieval Icelandic sense of place, as reflected in Icelandic narrative culture, has been influenced by the close contacts that existed during the Viking Age between Iceland and the Gaelic-speaking world of Ireland and Scotland. By attempting to answer this question, the book will contribute to the long-standing debate about Gaelic influences in Icelandic culture, the much more recent discourse on the spatiality of medieval Icelandic literature, and perhaps even (if in a rather more speculative and oblique manner) the debate about the origin of Icelandic saga literature.

To approach the question of a Gaelic impact on the Icelandic sense of place, Chapter 1 will first outline some general theoretical and structural aspects of the problem. The first section of this chapter will serve as introduction to the concept of ‘place’ in modern theorising, which tends to understand ‘place’ as signifying ‘space made meaningful’. This will be the basis for all further discussion and in particular it will clarify what exactly is meant by the creation of ‘place’ and a sense of place in medieval Iceland and Ireland. Furthermore, the concept of ‘home’ will be introduced as it is approached by some classic theoretical works. After the scene has been set theoretically, the second section of the chapter will outline the broader historical context of the question. This will be done by giving a general outline of contacts between Iceland and the Gaelic-speaking world during the Viking Age, including apparent or arguable transfers of Norse place-names from Scotland and the Scottish Isles to Iceland. It is only after the theoretical and historical groundwork has been laid in this way that the last section of the chapter will then begin to examine parallels between the Icelandic and the Irish narrative engagement with space and place. More specifically this last part of the chapter will highlight some structural similarities; as early as the 1960s it was Theodore Andersson who remarked that in the modern study of narratives ‘influences are conceived not

only in terms of matter but also in terms of attitude and technique',¹ and the present study will attempt to consider both. Therefore, even though 'attitude and technique' are notoriously tricky to study and compare in a systematic fashion, the last section of Chapter 1 will highlight at least some of the most striking parallels between the Irish and the Icelandic techniques of engaging with space and place through narrative.

Chapter 2 will then turn to the 'matter' of place-storytelling, that is to say: it will analyse, in their wider Atlantic and specifically Gaelic context, Icelandic place-narratives that seem to be borrowings or adaptations of place-stories otherwise known from medieval Irish literature or upon which Gaelic motifs and practices have at least had a formative impact. This chapter will be introduced by a section on method, which will discuss how to decide whether a motif, or a whole tale, is a borrowing or an adaptation from Irish storytelling. Then the chapter will proceed to discuss nine specific examples of Icelandic-Gaelic place-lore adaptations: the water-horse story in *Landnámabók* H71/S83; the account of Órlygr Hrapsson's settlement in *Landnámabók* H15; the biographies of 'Saint' Ásólfur in *Landnámabók* S24 and H21; the account of Auðr the Deep-Minded and the Krosshólar Hills in *Landnámabók* S97; the accounts of *papar* in *Landnámabók* (S1/H1, S320/H280, S323=H283) and *Íslendingabók* (ch. 1); the early modern folklore of the Ódáinsakur in the Hvanndalur Valley and its possible Viking Age prehistory; the accounts of houses of excessive hospitality in *Landnámabók* (S72/H60; S86/H74; S200=H168) and *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 8); the story of Þórólfr Twist-Foot and his transformation into a splendid but violent bull in *Eyrbyggja saga* (especially chs 33–34, 63); and the report of Hvíttramannaland in *Landnámabók* (S122/H94). With some important *caveats*, these nine examples aim to be an exhaustive survey of major Icelandic adaptations of Gaelic place-lore. They will be discussed in considerable depth and with full attention given to their structures and various wider contexts, be they historical, social, or (in one case) even art-historical. Particular attention will also be paid to the use of toponyms in such narratives and to the specific historical situation of the Icelandic settlement, including the strong emphasis on the narrative construction of 'home' that results from this historical situation.

In Chapter 2 these stories are presented in detail but with a focus on the respective individual Icelandic narratives and their Gaelic elements rather than on cross-connections between the Icelandic tales. Chapter 3 will begin with a summary of the main findings of this chapter and will then go on to analyse the material laterally, highlighting themes that appear to recur and

1 Andersson 1964: 97.

play dominant roles across the Icelandic material, rather than connecting the Icelandic with the Irish material. Among the most notable of these recurrent themes are a marked emphasis on the Christian religious semantisation of the land and a pervasive focus on the creation of ‘home’ – both of which arise naturally from the overall historical situation of the Settlement Period where early Icelandic Christianity was first and foremost dependent on Irish and Scottish Christianity and where the settlement on a previously entirely empty island necessitated a concerted effort to establish a bond between the settlers and this new, empty land. Taking the implications of this emphasis on the creation of ‘home’ one step further, the chapter and the book will then conclude by considering some recent and classical contributions to the discussion of the origins of Icelandic saga literature. Here the book will close with the question as to whether the Icelandic reception of Gaelic place-lore, which first and foremost seems to reflect a deep yearning for ‘home’, might not be just another expression of the same need that was also to bring forth the Icelandic sagas more generally.

While the number of examples of an Icelandic reception of Irish place-lore discussed in this book is limited, focusing just on the nine clearest instances, these examples will be discussed in considerable detail and will be presented as if the reader were entirely unfamiliar with the chosen texts. Since none of the selected passages are particularly obscure and most will be familiar to any reader conversant with the Icelandic material, this might need a word of explanation. The first and more obvious reason for choosing such a presentation of the material is of course that this book should be accessible not only to scholars of Icelandic literature but also to readers more familiar with the Irish material, hoping that the Icelandic reception of Gaelic place-lore will be of as much interest to the Celticist as it is to the Norse scholar. Perhaps even more important, however, is a methodological reason. Past proposals of Gaelic influences on Icelandic literature and culture all too often have suffered from a regrettably cursory presentation of the material, which often has meant that not only was material used in a way that a closer analysis would have shown to be extremely problematic but this was also made virtually impossible to spot for any reader not profoundly familiar with this material, as he or she is given insufficient information to make an informed assessment of the proposed parallels and influences.² This present book prefers to err on the side of caution. In order to allow the reader a more informed assessment of the proposed arguments, I will give a detailed summary and where possible a complete translation of the relevant stories or sections of narratives, both

2 Cf. my detailed critique in Egeler 2013.

Gaelic and Norse. I hope this will make for a transparency sadly lacking in much previous research on Irish-Icelandic relationships.

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All maps used in this book are based on data from the National Land Survey of Iceland (Landmælingar Íslands 2014/2017), used by permission (Landmælingar Íslands – License 2017).

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Matthias Egeler