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THE MYTHOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE OF SONATORREK: AN EXPERIMENT IN CONTEXTUALISING POETIC EXPERIENCE¹



One of the established methods of analysing Norse poetry is an analysis of its kennings and *heiti*.² The present essay will attempt something similar: it will discuss a number of kennings and poetic images used in Egill Skallagrímsson's poem *Sonatorrek*.³ The kennings and poetic images to be discussed will be selected not primarily according to formal criteria, but rather according to thematic considerations: the focus will be put on poetic expressions that

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² For a recent example see J.G. Jørgensen, *Óláfr Haraldsson, King, Warrior and Saint: Presentations of King Óláfr Haraldsson the Saint in Medieval Poetry and Prose*, in: *Kings and Warriors in Early North-West Europe*, eds. J.E. Rekdal, C. Doherty, Dublin-Portland 2016, pp. 345-398, there pp. 364-398, espec. pp. 364-365.

³ As the publication of the new edition of *Sonatorrek* by Margaret Clunies Ross in the projected vol. V of the *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* is still pending, the following discussion is based on the most recent available edition of the poem by Bjarni Einarsson in the context of his edition of *Egils saga* (Bjarni Einarsson, *Egils saga*, London 2003, pp. 146-154). See also the editions by Finnur Jónsson, *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning A.1-2: Tekst efter håndskrifterne, B.1-2: Rettet tekst*, København-Kristiania 1908-1915, A.1, pp. 40-43; B.1, pp. 34-37; Jón Helgason, *Skjaldevers*, Nordisk filologi: Tekster og lærebøger til universitetsbrug, A. Tekster, XII,

have a distinctly environmental character, referring to the sea, forests, or the coastline.⁴ The imagery employed in these passages, which in a sense is spatial and landscape-focused, will then be compared to Icelandic cultural and narrative attitudes to places and landscapes as expressed in Icelandic toponymy and, to a lesser degree, place-storytelling. By doing so, the essay will make an attempt to contextualise the way how this part of the poetic imagery of *Sonatorrek* might have been experienced by an Icelandic audience, grounding (quite literally) its poetic cosmos in the everyday environment in which it was composed. Thus, the intention of the following pages will **not** be to identify specific locations associated with *Sonatorrek*, but rather to attempt a general cultural contextualisation of the imagery employed in the poem.

Traditionally, *Sonatorrek* has been ascribed to the Icelandic poet Egill Skallagrímsson, who according to medieval Icelandic tradition lived ca. 900-983 and composed *Sonatorrek* in AD 960 or AD 961.⁵ In recent years, however, it has sometimes been argued that the poem should be seen as the creation of a much later, Christian period, with only the writing of *Egils saga* in the 13th century as the *terminus ante quem*, as the poem is cited in this saga.⁶ Yet about this point no agreement has been reached yet, and the question of whether the poem belongs to the Settlement Period or to the High Middle Ages must currently be seen as undecided. However, as similar problems of

København-Oslo-Stockholm 1962, pp. 29-38; G. Turville-Petre, *The Sonatorrek*, in: *Iceland and the Mediaeval World. Studies in Honour of Ian Maxwell*, eds. G. Turville-Petre, J.S. Martin, Clayton 1974, pp. 33-55; E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, Oxford 1976, pp. 24-41; and the commentary by M. Olsen, *Commentarii Scaldici. I. Sonatorrek*, "Arkiv för nordisk filologi" LII (1938), pp. 209-255.

⁴ While focusing on the environment as described and filled with associations by the poetry, the following analysis will not be a classic ecocritical study. For an example of an application of an ecocritical paradigm to Old Norse-Icelandic literature see C. Phelpstead, *Ecocriticism and Eyrbyggja saga*, "Leeds Studies in English, n.s." XLV (2014), pp. 1-18. Rather, its approach is loosely based on landscape theoretical considerations about the 'meaning' of places and their importance for a given culture as represented by C. Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape. Places, Paths and Monuments*, Oxford-Providence 1994, or T. Cresswell, *Place. An Introduction*, Chichester 2015², and in particular the potential importance of place-names as bearers of meaning as shown by K.H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places. Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, Albuquerque 1996.

⁵ E.g.: Finnur Jónsson, *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning...*, A.1, p. 40; in recent years see, for instance, J. Harris, 'Myth to live by' in *Sonatorrek*, in: *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, eds. J. Tolmie, M.J. Toswell, *Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe*, XIX, Turnhout 2010, pp. 149-171, there pp. 150, 152-153 (with further literature); J. Harris, *Homo necans borealis: Fatherhood and Sacrifice in Sonatorrek*, in: *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. S. Glosecki, *Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, XXI, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, CCCXX, Tempe 2007, pp. 153-173, pp. 153-154.

⁶ E.g., Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Conversion of Sonatorrek*, in: *Analecta Septentrionalia. Beiträge zur nordgermanischen Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte*, eds. W. Heizmann, K. Bödl, H. Beck, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, LXV, Berlin-New York 2009, pp. 701-714, with further literature.

dating apply, in one way or another, to virtually all the material discussed in this article, this uncertainty about the poem's date does not substantially affect the argument presented in the following pages. The literary culture of the Icelandic High Middle Ages was fundamentally characterised by a backward gaze directed at the Settlement Period in the 9th and 10th centuries, and the features of *Sonatorrek* that will be discussed in the following may just as well be a result of this backward gaze as they could be a reflex of attitudes that genuinely date to the time of the first settlement of Iceland.

Sonatorrek has often been held to be one of the most important works of Old Norse literature.⁷ According to *Egils saga* (ch. 80),⁸ Egill composed *Sonatorrek* after one of his sons was lost at sea, using the process of composing the poem as a means of coping with his grief. In line with this, *Sonatorrek* begins with a description of the poet's despair over the death of his son and his wrath at Odin and the supernatural powers of the sea. In the end, however, the ageing poet comes to accept what has occurred and makes his peace with Odin when he remembers the value of the gift of poetry that the god has bestowed on him. So in balance, he comes to feel, he has received more good than ill from the gods, and with this thought in his heart he is able to regain an inner equilibrium that allows him to face the short rest of his life without fear and too much anger. While all these thoughts unfold, the poetry repeatedly draws on a highly charged and multi-layered landscape imagery, especially imagery referring to the sea and the shoreline, the places where the central tragedy of the poem occurred.

GIANTS AND DWARFS

The first occurrence of such landscape imagery is found in the second half of st. 3 (whose first half is unintelligible).⁹ These verses introduce a landscape image drawing on both giants (*jötnar*) and dwarfs (ll. 5-8):

⁷ E.g., K. von See, *Sonatorrek und Hávamál*, "Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur" IC (1970), pp. 26-33, there p. 26. Correspondingly, the literature on *Sonatorrek* is extensive. As one of the very few extant skaldic poems that might (though this is debated) genuinely date to the pre-Christian period, and generally one of those held to be of the highest literary interest, it is touched upon in probably every major treatment of pre-Christian Norse religion as well as playing a core role in discussions of skaldic poetry. Some analyses specifically dedicated to this poem are J. Harris, 'Myth to live by' in *Sonatorrek*; Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Conversion of Sonatorrek*; J. Harris, *Homo necans borealis...*; J. Harris, *Sacrifice and Guilt in Sonatorrek*, in: *Studien zum Altgermanischen. Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. H. Uecker, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, XI, Berlin-New York 1994, pp. 173-196.

⁸ Ed. by Bjarni Einarsson, *Egils saga*.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 147; E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry...*, pp. 29-30; G. Turville-Petre, *The Sonatorrek*, pp. 43-44; Jón Helgason, *Skjaldevers*, p. 33 (*apparatus criticus*).

jötuns háls
undir þjóta
Náins niðr
fyrir naustdyrum.

(The giant's neck-wounds roar in front of the boat-shed doors of Náinn.)

The image of the “roaring of the neck-wounds of the giant” in ll. 5-6 probably refers to the creation myth as later told in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* (ch. 8),¹⁰ where the gods kill the primeval giant Ymir and create the sea from his blood. Thus, what is described in these verses is the roaring of a heavy sea. Lines 7-8 then specify that this heavy sea crashes against coastal rocks: Náinn is the name of a dwarf (*Gylfaginning* 14);¹¹ as dwarfs dwell in rocks (*búa í steinum: Gylfaginning* 14; cf. the episode about the disappearance of King Sveigðir in a dwarf-stone in *Ynglinga saga* 12¹²), their boat-sheds are most likely to be coastal cliffs or coastal rocks of some kind. Thus, in this half-stanza a violent sea rages against the dwarf-inhabited rocky shore.

The imagery developed here has multiple layers. On one layer, the half-stanza probably refers to the storm during which Egill's son was drowned at sea (even though this cannot be entirely certain, as the first half of the stanza is corrupt to the point of unintelligibility). On another level, this death is set into a cosmic context of death, as the sea which drowned Egill's son becomes a sea of blood, shed in the first, primordial slaying. Also the mentioning of rock-dwelling dwarfs ties into this imagery. According to Snorri (*Gylfaginning* 14), the dwarfs came into being as maggots in the flesh of the slain Ymir:

Dvergarnir hofðu skipazk fyrst ok tekít kviknun í holdi Ymis ok váru þá maðkar, en af atkvæði guðanna urðu þeir vitandi mannvits ok hofðu manns líki ok búa þó í jörðu ok í steinum.

(The dwarfs had first taken shape and come to life in the flesh of Ymir, and they were maggots then, and according to the decree of the gods they became conscious with human intelligence and had human form, and yet they live in the earth and in stones.)

Thus, in this half-stanza the image of a death by drowning meets the images of spilled blood and crawling maggots in a rotting corpse, while at the same

¹⁰ Snorri Sturluson: *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. A. Faulkes, [London] 2005².

¹¹ Given the context in which this name is used here, it may be worth highlighting that this dwarf name may already by itself evoke death (see already E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry...*, p. 30; G. Turville-Petre, *The Sonatorrek*, p. 44): in the name Náinn, a speaker of Old Norse might well have heard echoes of *nár*, “a corpse”, or the underworld region of the “Corpse Beach” Náströnd: cf. Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson 1874, s.v. ‘nár’, ‘Ná-strönd’.

¹² *Heimskringla. Noregs konunga sögur af Snorri Sturluson 1*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, STUAGNL, XXIII/1-2, København 1893-1894, pp. 9-85.

time elevating the death treated in the poem to a cosmic scale and associating the accidental death at sea with a very conscious killing by superhuman beings (as Ymir was killed by the gods) – which anticipates that, as the poem unfolds, Egill accuses Ægir and Rán of having killed his son, turning maritime accident into supernatural personal guilt.

As the imagery developed in this half-stanza is presented as an (if enormously charged) landscape vignette, it may be interesting to compare the view of the landscape developed here with other interpretations of this same Icelandic landscape. Perhaps the one cultural interpretation of the landscape that is most closely attached to the land itself are place-names.¹³ Icelandic place-names generally are semantically clear. Reykjavík means “Bay of Vapours”; the name makes a statement about the place, in this case a descriptive one which highlights the local geothermal activity. Many Icelandic place-names in this way are geographically descriptive. A number of rivers are called Jökulsá because they are “Glacier-Rivers”, as the name says, and others are called Laxá, “Salmon-River”, because of the good salmon fishing they offered when the name was coined. Another type of names

13 In general on place-names as a medium of cultural meaning cf. C. Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape...*, pp. 18-19; K.H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places...*; T. Robinson, *Listening to the Landscape*, in: T. Robinson, *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara & Other Writings*, Dublin 1996, pp. 151-164; T. Cresswell, *Place...*, pp. 139-140. Specifically on Icelandic place-names and place-naming cf. for instance O. Bandle, *Die Ortsnamen der Landnámabók*, in: *Sjötiú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakóbi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977*, eds. Einar G. Pétursson, Jónas Kristjánsson, I-II, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, XII, Reykjavík 1977, I, pp. 47-67; Þórhallur Vilmundarson, Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Harðar saga / Bárðar saga / Þorskfirðinga saga / Flóamanna saga / Þórarins þáttur Neffólfssonar / Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts / Egils þáttur Síðu-Hallssonar / Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar / Þorsteins þáttur tjaldstóðings / Þorsteins þáttur forvitna / Bergbúa þáttur / Kumlbúa þáttur / Stjörnu-Odda draumur*, Íslenzk fornrit, XIII, Reykjavík 1991, pp. XXX-XLI, LXXIX-XCVIII, CXX-CXXVIII, CLV-CLVI; R. McTurk, [Review of] *Harðar saga*, edited by Þórhallur Vilmundarson, Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. *Íslenzk fornrit XIII. Hið íslenzka fornritafélag*. Reykjavík, 1991. ccxxviii + 528 pp., “Saga-Book” XXIV (1994-1997), pp. 164-172, there pp. 166-170; P. Hermann, *Founding Narratives and the Representation of Memory in Saga Literature*, “ARV Nordic Yearbook of Folklore” LXVI (2010), pp. 69-87, there pp. 76, 78-79; E.R. Barraclough, *Naming the Landscape in the Landnám Narratives of the Íslendingasögur and Landnámabók*, “Saga-Book” XXXVI (2012), pp. 79-101; E. Lethbridge, *The Icelandic Sagas and Saga Landscapes*, “Gripla” XXVII (2016), pp. 51-92; M. Egeler, *Constructing a Landscape in Eyrbyggja saga: The Case of Dritsker*, “Arkiv för nordisk filologi” CXXXII (2017), pp. 101-120; M. Egeler, *Atlantic Outlooks on Being at Home: Gaelic Place-Lore and the Construction of a Sense of Place in Medieval Iceland*, Folklore Fellows Communications, CCCXIV, Helsinki 2018; M. Egeler, *The Narrative Uses of Toponyms in Harðar saga*, “NORDEUROPAforum” (2018), pp. 80-101. From a different angle, an important example for the importance of place-name semantics for our understanding of Old Norse-Icelandic literature is also J.E. Schnall, *Hömlubarði – ein ruderloses Schiff, auf Grund gesetzt. Zu Konungs skuggsjá, Barlaams saga ok Kosaphats und skandinavischen Ortsnamen*, in: *Namenwelten. Orts- und Personennamen in historischer Sicht*, eds. A. van Nahl, L. Elmevik, S. Brink, *Ergänzungsbande zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, XLIV, Berlin-New York 2004, pp. 277-291.

refers to persons who founded or at some point owned a place; here belongs in particular the large number of farmsteads and settlements that have names ending in *-staðir*, such as Egilsstaðir in eastern Iceland, which means “Egill’s-Steads”, “Egill’s Farm”. A third type of place-names, furthermore, is mythological or, more generally, religious in nature, so their semantics make reference to the contents of a mythological narrative, a mythological being, or a religious structure. According to *Landnámabók* (S343/H301),¹⁴ for instance, Þórsmörk is called “Thor’s Forest” because its first settler dedicated this valley to this god, and the hills of Krosshólar, “Cross Hills”, were so called because the first settler in the area had crosses erected there to create a place of Christian worship (*Landnámabók* S97).¹⁵ The farmstead of Hof, “Temple”, in the Vatnsdalur valley is said to have been given this name from the temple erected there by Ingimundr the Old (*Vatnsdæla saga* 15).¹⁶

Giants, *jötnar*, appear as part of the fabric of the land not only in *Sonatorrek*, where the blood of a giant fills the sea, but occasionally also in Icelandic toponymy. In modern toponymy, among others,¹⁷ a mountain in Helgafellssveit is called Jötunfell, “Giant’s Mountain”; a sea-stack belonging to the Westman Islands is simply called Jötunn; and two caves in the sea-cliffs of the Látrabjarg promontory are called Jötunsaugu, “Giant’s Eyes”. The last one of these names goes back to the 1880s at the latest, when it was mentioned in a travelogue,¹⁸ but generally of course such modern names do not necessarily have to have a great age; an extreme example for a very young topographical name would be the island of Surtsey, “Surtr’s Island”, which is named after the *jötunn* Surtr but only came into being during a volcanic eruption that started in 1963.

In the present case, however, there is at least one pertinent toponym for which strong indications exist that its roots may go back all the way to the Settlement Period. In the 1770s, Eggert Olafsen in his description of Iceland mentioned the cave name Surtshellir, which is the name of a large lava tube in the lava field Hallmundarhraun in the western Icelandic highlands.¹⁹

14 *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit, I, Reykjavík 1968.

15 On the latter cf. M. Egeler, *Atlantic Outlooks on Being at Home...*, pp. 156-168.

16 *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, VIII, Reykjavík 1939.

17 See *Landmælingar Íslands* (<<http://ornefnasja.lmi.is/>>, last accessed 9 February 2018), s.v. ‘Jötun*’.

18 *Ibidem*, s.v. ‘Jötunsaugu’; Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, *Ferðasaga frá Vestfjörðum*, “Andvari” XIII (1887), pp. 99-203, there p. 111.

19 E. Olafsen, *Des Vice-Lavmands Eggert Olafsens und des Landphysici Biarne Povelsens Reise durch Island, veranstaltet von der Königlichen Societät der Wissenschaften in Kopenhagen, aus dem Dänischen übersetzt*, I-II, Kopenhagen-Leipzig 1774-1775, I, §349-375; later cf. P.E.K. Kålund, *Bidrag til en historisk-topografisk Beskrivelse af Island*, I-II, Kjøbenhavn 1877-1882, I, p. 338.

This name simply means “Cave of Surtr”, Surtr being the giant (*jötunn*) who according to *Völuspá* (espec. st. 52)²⁰ and *Gylfaginning* (ch. 4) will at the end of the world kindle the blaze that will devour the whole cosmos. This toponym does not as such appear in the medieval textual sources. However, the place-name Surtshellir ultimately is nothing more than a compressed statement that this particular cave belongs to the giant Surtr, and this statement is found already in *Landnámabók*. *Landnámabók*, the “Book of Settlements”, presents a history of the first settlement of Iceland between ca. 870 and 930. The text is extant in several recensions, the oldest one of which, the *Sturlubók*-recension, was compiled ca. 1275-1280. This text contains a short anecdote about what seems to be Surtshellir (S208/H175):

Þorvaldr holbarki [...] kom um haust eitt á Þorvarðsstaði til Smiðkels ok dvalðisk þar um hríð. Þá fór hann upp til hellisins Surts ok færði þar drápu þá, er hann hafði ort um jötuninn í hellinum. Síðan fékk hann dóttur Smiðkels [...].

(Þorvaldr Hollow-Throat [...] came, one autumn, to Þorvarðsstaðr to Smiðkell and stayed there for a while. Then he went up to Surtr’s cave and there recited the praise-poem which he had composed about the giant in the cave. Then he married Smiðkell’s daughter [...].)

Here a man who (one may guess) at this point already has the intention of settling down nearby pays his respect to a cave in which the most fearful giant of Norse mythology is held to live: Surtr who at the end of time will burn the world. These events are set around the year 900, and if there is anything to this story, then apparently very early on in the time of the Settlement, the cave whose name later is attested as Surtshellir was imagined in an extremely concrete way to be the abode of the giant from which it is named. This ties in strikingly well with the local geological framework. The lava-field Hallmundarhraun where Surtshellir is located is a huge field more than 50 km in length and covering a total area of some 242 square kilometres; it was created by an eruption of highly liquid lava in the late 9th or early 10th century.²¹ The date of this eruption is important, as it occurred after Iceland was already settled. Most likely, therefore, it was witnessed by some of the early Icelanders. When the eruption was at its most intense, the lake of molten rock fifty kilometres in length must to any observer have looked like

²⁰ *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern. 1. Text*, eds. G. Neckel, H. Kuhn, Heidelberg 1983⁵.

²¹ Guðmundur Ólafsson, K.P. Smith, T. McGovern, *Surtshellir: A Fortified Outlaw Cave in West Iceland*, in: *The Viking Age: Ireland and the West. Papers from the Proceedings of the Fifteenth Viking Congress, Cork, 18-27 August 2005*, eds. J. Sheehan, D.Ó Corráin, cooperation S. Lewis-Simpson, Dublin-Portland 2010, pp. 283-297, there pp. 292-293.

a rehearsal for the end of the world. That the name of a lava-tube which came into being when this lava-field slowly cooled down harkens back to Surtr is most likely to be a direct reflex of this experience of a huge conflagration. In the present context this may be relevant, as in this lake of a giant's fire, the ocean of a giant's blood that is described in *Sonatorrek* finds a fitting counterpart. At the same time, the way the motif is treated in *Landnámabók* somehow seems to bring the image of cosmic destruction back down to earth: there, it features in the preparations for a proposal of marriage.

For the rock-inhabiting dwarfs, which constitute the second part of the half-stanza's imagery, the situation is similar. In Icelandic toponymy, dwarfs (*dvergar*) are fairly common:²² leaving aside a multitude of modern house and street-names, there is a hill called Dvergabúi, "Abode of Dwarfs", in Skeiða- og Gnúpverjahreppur; a cave named Dverghús, "Dwarf-House", in Þingeyjarsveit; a hill Dverghóll, "Dwarf-Hill", in Þingvellir; or a "Slope of the Dwarfs" Dvergahvammur, by a "Stone of the Dwarfs" Dvergasteinn less than 15 km south-west of Surtshellir. Generally, boulders and rock formations feature prominently in dwarf-toponymy: there are at least nine boulders named Dvergasteinn,²³ as well as the Dverghamrar, "Dwarf-Rocks", in Skaftárhreppur. Not all these names are necessarily meant deeply seriously. The names Dvergalda, "Dwarf-Wave", for a very small mountain in Þingeyjarsveit and Dvergaspenni, "Teat of the Dwarfs", for a hill in Sveitarfélagið Skagafjörður rather seem to suggest a humorous undertone.

Also the appearance of dwarfs and dwarf-places in Icelandic storytelling tradition can have an apparently tongue-in-cheek element. In Jón Árnason's collection of *Icelandic Folk- and Fairy-Tales* from the 1860s, a story which seems humorous more than anything else is connected with the boulder Dvergasteinn on the northern coast of the Seyðisfjörður fjord in eastern Iceland.²⁴ At the time when the story was recorded, "Dvergasteinn" was the name not only of the boulder itself, but also of the church and church-farm located in its immediate vicinity, and the folk-tale provided an aetiology for why this name was applied to the church complex. The reason it gives is that, once upon a time, the church was located in a much less convenient location

²² For the following see *Landmælingar Íslands*, s.v. 'dverg*'.

²³ Ibidem, s.v. 'Dvergasteinn' lists and locates eight; a ninth example is found on the northern shore of the Seyðisfjörður fjord: M. Egeler, *Icelandic Folklore, Landscape Theory, and Levity: The Seyðisfjörður Dwarf-Stone*, "RMN Newsletter" XII-XIII (double issue 2016-2017), pp. 8-18 (open access at <https://www.helsinki.fi/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rmn_12-13_2016-2017.pdf>, accessed 22. November 2017).

²⁴ Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* I-II, Leipzig 1862-1864, II, p. 67; idem, *Isländische Volkssagen, aus der Sammlung von Jón Arnason ausgewählt und aus dem Isländischen übersetzt von M. Lehmann-Filhés*, Neue Folge, Berlin 1891, p. 61.

on the southern or western side of the fjord. At that time, the Dvergasteinn was already located next to it. At some point, however, the local inhabitants decided that it would be much more practical for everybody if the church were located on the north coast, where it was in the mid-19th century, when the story was recorded. So, the story goes, the old church was dismantled and rebuilt in its new location. The boulder by the old church, however, obviously was left where it was. Yet when the church building had been moved to the north coast and the reconstruction work was almost done, the men working on the church saw a house sailing across the fjord, which finally came ashore below the church. The dwarfs who inhabited the stone had so much missed living next to the church after it had been dismantled that they decided to move their stone-house and to follow the church. The human inhabitants of the area were so moved by this display of piety that they named the church and church-farm from the dwarf-house that was now again located next to it: Dvergasteinn.

This story of a boulder crossing the fjord seems at least a bit tongue-in-cheek, especially in a social context where living anything but close to the church was the rule rather than the exception; in this context, the ostentatious piety of the dwarfs probably would have been almost just as curious as their swimming boulder. What makes the Seyðisfjörður dwarf-stone interesting in the present context, however, are primarily its name and location. This stone is located immediately above a flat shingle beach at a small natural landing site that is protected by a spur of rock jutting out into the fjord (fig. 1). This kind of beach is particularly well-suited for landing small boats and pulling them ashore, and the location of the dwarf-stone is exactly where a Norse boat-house would be located. We do not know how old the name Dvergasteinn is or what its original story was. Clear is only that the story recorded by Jón Árnason cannot be the original story standing behind this place-name. Jón Árnason's story presupposes the presence of a church at the site, but that the church had the name Dvergasteinn implies that the stone was there first and its name transferred to the church when the latter was erected there. It is impossible to say how old the name Dvergasteinn is; but it must be older than the church, and whatever might have been its earlier story was completely superseded by the aetiological tale that later explained why the Christian church had the strikingly pagan-mythological name "Dwarf-Stone". So what we have here are narrative transformations of a rock that was a house of dwarfs, located just where a boat-house would be located, and connected with a toponym "Dwarf-Stone" of indeterminable age. Here, ll. 7-8 of our half-stanza of *Sonatorrek* about "the boat-shed doors of Náinn" find almost as fitting a counterpart as ll. 5-6 had in *Surtshellir*.

FOREST WASTELANDS

Trees in *Sonatorrek* appear in a very conventional way in circumlocutions and images referring to men, particularly family members. Thus, in st. 21.5, Egill calls his dead son *ættar askr*, “ash of the family”. Only on one occasion is the image of the forest elaborated on a bit more: In st. 4.2-3, Egill in two verses whose transmission is highly corrupt²⁵ seems to describe his family as having come to an end:

hræbarnir
sem hlynir marka
(beaten to corpses
like maple-trees of a forest).

Associations between the image of the forest and that of destruction in Icelandic toponymy are more present in the etymology of place-names than in their synchronous meanings. The common place-name element *holt* originally designated a wood or copsewood, but through the extreme Icelandic deforestation in common Icelandic usage it came to mean a rough stony hill or ridge.²⁶ So *holt*-names mirror the imagery of these lines quite closely (at least if their conjectural reconstruction by Bjarni Einarsson is correct), but the question is whether any medieval Icelanders would have had an awareness that the semantic development of *holt* as a place-name element reflects the large-scale destruction of the Icelandic forests. A toponymic hint of an association between forests and destructive, malevolent forces may, however, be encapsulated in the place-name Tröllaskógr, “Forest of the Trolls”. This place-name still exists, attached to a place in the lava-field of Skógshraun (“Forest’s Lava-Field”), and goes back at least to the 13th century, being attested in medieval literature in *Landnámabók* (S354/H312) and *Njáls saga* (ch. 76).²⁷ The attestation in *Landnámabók* perhaps is of particular importance for assuming an early date of the toponym, at least if Oskar Bandle was right to consider this text to present a basically accurate overall picture of the early Icelandic toponymy of the first two centuries after the beginning of the settlement of the island.²⁸

So to some extent also the figurative association between forest and destruction in st. 4.2-3 is mirrored in Icelandic toponymy, though any

25 Bjarni Einarsson, *Egils saga*, p. 147; cf. E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry...*, p. 31; G. Turville-Petre, *The Sonatorrek*, pp. 44-45; Jón Helgason, *Skjaldevers*, p. 34 (*apparatus criticus*).

26 Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson 1874, s.v. ‘holt’.

27 *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, XII, Reykjavík 1954.

28 O. Bandle, *Die Ortsnamen der Landnámabók*, p. 48.

correlation is limited both by the limited relevant toponymic evidence and by the highly problematic transmission of the verses in question.

ÆGIR AND THE DESTRUCTIVE SEA

Ægir and his wife Rán are mentioned a number of times in *Sonatorrek*, generally as the unreachable targets of the revenge for the drowning of his son that Egill is dreaming of. Both function as images for the sea, identifying the core landscape feature of the poem with mythological persons and thus filling this landscape element with a specific meaning and cluster of associations. In the execution of this poetic technique, Egill's focus is firmly on Ægir. Rán seems to be simply identified with the sea (st. 7) or is described as "Ægir's wife" (*Ægis man*, st. 8.8), so she does not gain much if any character of her own, but merely seems to function as a poetic extension of Ægir. The treatment of Ægir himself is considerably more interesting, as it employs an elaborate imagery. In st. 8.3, he is called *ólsmið[r]*, "beer-brewer", which in st. 19.1, 3 is circumscribed with the more elaborated kenning *fens hrosta hilmir*, "chieftain of the fen of the beer-mash" = "chieftain of the beer" = "brewer, dispenser of beer".²⁹ The mythological background of this way of circumscribing Ægir is elaborated on in the Eddas, where he is not only the 'sea-giant' whose name can be used as a *heiti* for the sea and whose wife Rán catches the drowned in a net (*Skáldskaparmál* 33), but where Ægir repeatedly also appears as the host of the Æsir, providing the gods with a feast and brewing ale for them (introductory prose of *Lokasenna*; *Grímnismál* 45; *Hymiskviða*; *Skáldskaparmál* 33). That the imagery of *Sonatorrek* emphasises this aspect of Ægir as a beer-brewer of the gods is worth highlighting. Brewing beer and offering splendid hospitality, Ægir is a welcoming figure; the image of his hall with its freshly-brewed beer offers an invitation and a promise of comfort – or at least an image of the lure of the otherworld. Thus, the imagery of these verses forms a striking counterpoint to the death in a cold northern sea that is the central theme of *Sonatorrek*.

In medieval Icelandic toponymy, Ægir is attested in two place-names:³⁰ Ægissíða, "Ægir's Water-Side", in *Landnámabók* S175/H141, and Ægisdyrr,

²⁹ On the problems of the transmission of these verses cf. Jón Helgason, *Skjaldevers*, p. 37 (*apparatus criticus*).

³⁰ Rán is richly attested in modern-day Icelandic toponymy (see *Landmælingar Íslands*, s.v. 'Rán*'), but almost exclusively in street names which as such clearly are of very recent date. The one occurrence of Rán in a topographical name which structurally might be old (referring to a geological formation rather than a recent man-made structure) is "Rán's Glen" Ránargil, a side-valley of the "Rich Man's Valley" Sælingsdalur in Dalabyggð, and a number of names in the immediate surroundings of this valley (Ránarskriða, Ránargilskvíslar, Ránargilsbunga).

“Ægir’s Door”, in *Landnámabók* H302.³¹ The former may survive to this day as the name of the farm Ægissíða in Húnaþing vestra just above the shore of Sigríðarstaðavatn, a body of water which opens into Húnaþingfjörður; if this identification is correct, this would match the semantics of the name, which seems to constitute a reference to a stretch of shoreline. In fact, the name Ægissíða is rather common in the modern-day toponymy of Iceland, and all places of this name lie directly on the coast.³² The second place, Ægisdyrr, “Ægir’s Door”, was located on the Westman Islands, but already *Landnámabók* (H302) mentions that this particular place was destroyed by a volcanic eruption, so it is not clear what kind of place it was; the semantics of its name, however, are suggestive of a harbour-entrance.³³ These uses of Ægir’s name in the toponymy of Iceland, and especially its usage for the probable harbour entrance of “Ægir’s Door”, are suggestive of a welcoming aspect: these names do not seem to emphasise the threat and danger of the sea, but the prospect of a coming-home from the sea, a return to the safe land (where maybe a warm hall is waiting, with a cauldron full of beer inside). Thus, they correspond to the predominant character of Ægir in the literary mythology as a host, but (like this mythology) stand in a marked tension to the drowning that is the subject matter of *Sonatorrek*. One wonders whether the literary function of this joint tension between Ægir in mythology and toponymy on the one hand and Ægir in *Sonatorrek* on the other is to underscore the feeling of betrayal that haunts the poet: a core feeling of the poem is one of having been betrayed by the gods, and this point is made particularly starkly if the very supernatural powers who are directly responsible for the drowning of Egill’s son are described in images that focus not on threat, but on a warm welcoming in a well-lit hall in which a rich feast is being served.

If the name of this valley does indeed make reference to the wife of Ægir, it is not obvious in which sense it does so, as this valley, being located rather far inland, appears to lack maritime associations.

³¹ In Icelandic literature, a place called Ægisdyrr is also mentioned in *Jómsvíkinga saga* (*Jómsvíkinga saga eftir Arnarnágrænska handskriften N:o 291. 4:to i diplomatariskt aftryck*, ed. C. af Petersens, København 1882, pp. 24, 26 [ch. 6]). This Ægisdyrr, however, is not a place in Iceland; Chambers has identified it with the Eider in northern Germany, see R.W. Chambers, *Widsith. A Study in Old English Heroic Legend*, Cambridge 2010 [original edition: 1912], p. 204.

³² *Landmælingar Íslands*, s.v. ‘Ægissíða’.

³³ On this Ægisdyrr cf. P.E.K. Kålund, *Bidrag til en historisk-topografisk Beskrivelse...*, I, p. 280. Chambers interprets the name of the Ægisdyrr in northern Germany, where this name refers to the Eider, as designating “the mouth where the river opens on the dread sea” (R.W. Chambers, *Widsith...*, p. 204; see the note above). For lack of a local river, the Ægisdyrr on the Westman Islands must have meant something different. In the modern-day place-name of Dyrhólaey (“Island of the Door-Hills”) in Mýrdalshreppur, *dyrr* apparently refers to a huge ‘gate’ that the sea has eroded into a spur of rock jutting out into the ocean.

This being said, however, not the whole of the imagery that the poem employs for the sea has positive undertones, and its one more threatening poetic image is again mirrored by a piece of medieval place-lore. The relevant passage is found in st. 8.5, though again it has to be noted that the transmission of the passage is corrupt and its reconstruction problematic.³⁴ If the reading adopted by Bjarni Einarsson is correct, then Ægir is there called *hroða vágs bróðir*, the “brother of the buffeter of the bay”. On one level, this is a more or less straightforward kenning: the “buffeter of the bay” is the wind, and the possibility to connect Ægir and the wind is attested by Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 27), which states that the wind can be paraphrased as the brother of Ægir.³⁵

On another level, however, the image employed in st. 8.5 evokes an episode described in the *Hauksbók*-recension of *Landnámabók* (H63).³⁶ In this episode, Lón-Einarr is pursuing an enemy, and during the chase he passes the Drangar rock towers on the south coast of Snæfellsnes. Today, these rock towers have the name Lóndrangar; it seems that the story from *Landnámabók*, or a similar tale, has in modern toponymy been fossilised in a place-name.³⁷ Yet however that may be, according to the *Hauksbók*-recension of *Landnámabók*, the following occurred there:

Þá rann Einarr, sem hann mátti, en þá er hann kom hjá Dröngum, sá hann tröllkarl sitja þar á uppi ok láta róa fœtr, svá at þeir tóku brimit, ok skelldi þeim saman, svá at sjódrif varð af, ok kvað vísu:

Vask, þars fell af fjalli
flóðkorn jötuns móður
hám bergrisa ór himni
heiðins ána leiðar.
Gerir fár jötunn fleiri
fold í vinga moldu
hømlu heiðar þumlu
hamváta mér báta.

(Then Einarr ran as he could, and when he came past the Drangar Rock Towers, he saw a troll sitting up there and letting his feet swing, so that

³⁴ Bjarni Einarsson, *Egils saga*, pp. 148-149; E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry...*, pp. 32-33; G. Turville-Petre, *The Sonatorrek*, pp. 46-47; Jón Helgason, *Skjaldevers*, pp. 34-35 (*apparatus criticus*).

³⁵ Cf. also Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Conversion of Sonatorrek*, pp. 710-711, who compares Egill’s desire to take vengeance on the sea with the Persian emperor’s raging against the sea after the destruction of his fleet, which is mentioned elsewhere in 13th-century Icelandic literature.

³⁶ Recently on this episode cf. R. Simek, *Trolle. Ihre Geschichte von der nordischen Mythologie bis zum Internet*, Köln-Weimar-Wien 2018, p. 87.

³⁷ Incidentally, in modern folklore the Lóndrangur pinnacle can be thought to be a troll turned into stone, see file SÁM 91/2470 EF (recorded in 1972) in the *Ísmús* database: *Ísmús*, <<https://www.ismus.is/i/audio/id-1014482>> (accessed 14 February 2018).

they touched the surf, and he banged them together, so that it made the sea foam, and he spoke a stanza:

I was there, where fell from a mountain
 a flood-grain of the giant's mother,
 out of the high sky of the mountain-giants,
 ...
 The giant achieves that he makes
 on the plain of the rowing bench
 ...
 more boats hull-soaked than I.

Flood-grain = cliff, rock. Sky of the mountain-giants = mountain. Plain of the rowing bench = the sea. Hull-soaked = by being swamped and sunk.)

While the stanza contains considerable unsolved problems,³⁸ the overall story is clear enough: Lón-Einarr passes the Drangar rock towers where he sees a troll sitting and churning up the sea, and hears him recite a stanza in which he reminisces about rock-falls caused by giants which sank boats, probably by the waves they created. This troll presents himself and his ilk as “buffeters of the bay” indeed, providing another closely parallel example (if a narrative rather than a toponymic one) of how the landscape imagery of *Sonatorrek* mirrors Icelandic place-lore.

HEL ON THE HEADLAND

The final stanza (25) of *Sonatorrek* describes the old poet, resigned to what has happened as well as to what is to come, awaiting the end of his life:

Nú er mér torvelt,
 Tveggja bága
 njörvanipt
 á nesi stendr,
 skal ek þó glaðr
 með góðan vilja
 ok óhryggr
 heljar bíða.
 (Now it is difficult for me,
 Odin's enemy's
 close sister
 stands on the headland;

38 See Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, pp. 106-107 (note 2).

yet I shall be glad,
with good will
and not sad
wait for Hel/death.)

This stanza as well is not without textual problems; in Bjarni Einarsson's reconstruction presented here, *nesi* is a conjecture for *nesin*.³⁹ If this captures the meaning originally intended, the stanza presents the old poet's expectation and acceptance of his own death in the image of Hel, the mistress of the netherworld, standing on a headland, waiting for him. The way how *Sonatorrek* here makes use of kennings places this image into a cosmic context: Hel is called the "sister of Odin's enemy", who is Fenrir,⁴⁰ the wolf who at the end of the world will devour Odin (*Völuspá* st. 53; *Gylfaginning* 51), and in this way the poem evokes not only the future personal death of the poet but also the destruction of the world itself.

Hel on the headland does not as such find a counterpart in toponymy (where Hel does not seem to appear) or place-lore. In north-eastern Iceland, however, there may be a place-name which could be based on a term for a demonic supernatural being derived from Hel. On the north-eastern point of Iceland, the headland of Langanes ("Long Peninsula") juts out into the North Atlantic. Exactly where this headland joins the mainland, the upland area of Helkunduheiði is located: "Helkunda's Heath". This place-name is attested already in *Landnámabók* (Helkunduheiðr in S264/H226), where it is mentioned as the border of the settlement area of a certain Gunnólfr *kroppa*. That it functioned as a boundary (and by implication might have been a liminal area) is also well-attested later on.⁴¹ The first element of the place-name, *Helkunda*, is a *hapax legomenon* in Old Norse, so no direct and straightforward evidence is available to determine what exactly the toponym meant. However, Magnus Olsen has noted that etymologically, the element *Helkunda* could refer to a female being from Hel; a close Old English parallel is provided by the Old English word *helcund*, "stemming from hell".⁴² Oskar

³⁹ Bjarni Einarsson, *Egils saga*, p. 154. Cf. E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry...*, p. 41; G. Turville-Petre, *The Sonatorrek*, pp. 54-55; Jón Helgason, *Skjaldevers*, p. 38 (*apparatus criticus*). This stanza also plays a central role in the ongoing argument about the dating of *Sonatorrek*, as the acceptance of death and the hope for salvation expressed in it have been seen as reflecting High Medieval Christianity rather than Norse paganism: Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Conversion of Sonatorrek*, pp. 708-709. In contrast to this position, J. Harris, 'Myth to live by' in *Sonatorrek*, p. 169 views the imagery employed here as purely pagan.

⁴⁰ That Fenrir and Hel are siblings is stated in *Gylfaginning* 34.

⁴¹ M. Olsen, *Helkunduheiðr*, "Namn och bygd" XXI (1933), pp. 12-27, there pp. 12-17.

⁴² *Ibidem*; cf. I. Særheim, *Sakrale stadnamn*, "Namn och bygd" C (2012), pp. 181-200, there p. 195; T. Schmidt, *Magnus Olsens bidrag til stedsnavnforskningen*, "Nytt om namn" L (2009), pp. 57-62, there p. 59.

Bandle accepted this interpretation of the name as probable,⁴³ and if it is indeed correct, then this toponym presents us if not with Hel herself, then at least with a close associate of hers standing on the shoulder of a headland and thus, again, mirroring the imagery of *Sonatorrek*.

PLACES AND THE POETIC EXPERIENCE

In the preceding pages, this essay has discussed a number of poetic images from Egill Skallagrímsson's *Sonatorrek*: the description of a stormy shore as a place where the blood of the primeval giant washes against coastal rocks inhabited by dwarf-maggots in st. 3.5-8; the forest turned into a wasteland in st. 4.2-3; various treatments of the sea in the image of the sea-giant Ægir in st. 8.3, 8.5, and 19.1, 3; and finally the haunting image, at the very end of the poem, of Hel waiting for the old poet out there on a headland in st. 25. Taken together, the imagery of these stanzas constitutes the lion's share, and in fact all central instances, of landscape imagery being used in *Sonatorrek*.⁴⁴ Each of these images and their constituent parts I have then compared with the imagery of Icelandic place-names as well as some narrative place-lore. For this, I drew particularly on *Landnámabók*, which covers the same potential chronological span as *Sonatorrek*: its oldest extant recension has been written down in the same century in which *Sonatorrek* is first quoted in *Egils saga* and it purports to speak about the same time – the Settlement Period – in which *Sonatorrek* purports to have been originally composed. The result of this comparison was that, on various levels, all core elements of the landscape imagery employed in *Sonatorrek* find counterparts in the imagery that is tied to the concrete Icelandic landscape through place-naming and place-storytelling (map 1). It is perhaps worthwhile reiterating that the intention of this study has not been to identify particular places associated with *Sonatorrek*, but a general grounding of the type of imagery that is employed in the poem. I am not attempting to place *Sonatorrek* in specific locations, but rather to highlight the extreme degree in which the environmental imagery employed in the poem is paralleled by the imagery that is tied to the concrete, everyday Icelandic landscape as illustrated by an ultimately random sample of examples of toponymic and narrative place-lore imagery. Furthermore, it might also be worthwhile highlighting that from this comparison no conclusions can be drawn about the age of any of the material discussed, let alone the dating of

⁴³ O. Bandle, *Die Ortsnamen der Landnámabók*, p. 57.

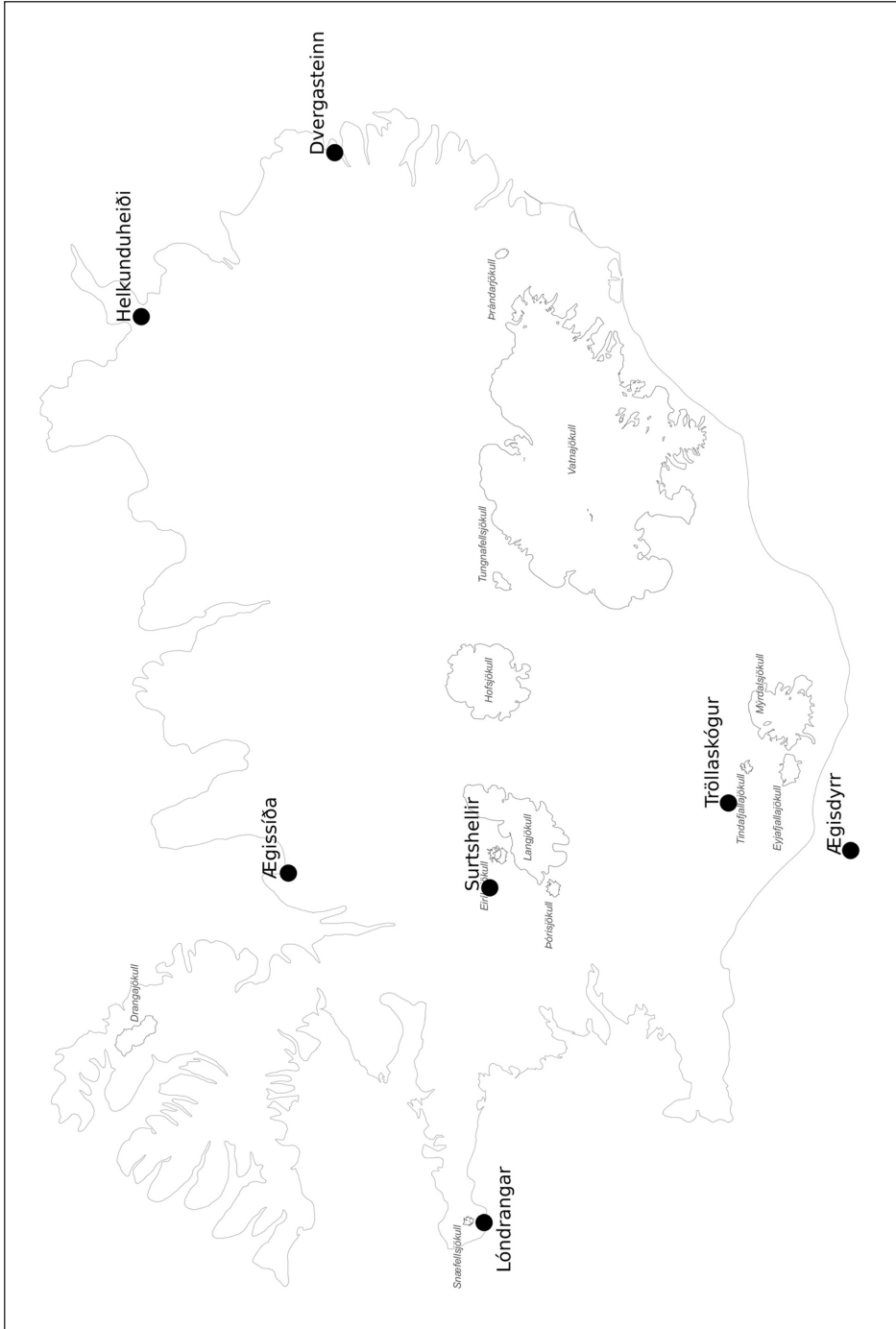
⁴⁴ I have left aside only some plain mentionings of the sea/Rán and images with very indirect 'landscape' references: the very conventional kenning *randviðr*, "shield-tree", for "man" in st. 11.5 or *Elgjar gálgi*, "Odin's gallows", for "world tree" in st. 15.4.

Sonatorrek specifically: in virtually all cases, the medieval material cited could stem from or could have been reworked in the 13th century just as well as it could present us with a direct reflex of Settlement Period attitudes.

The imageries of *Sonatorrek* and of Icelandic place-lore and place-naming closely converge. On the one hand, the parallelism between poem and landscape is not particularly surprising, as both the poetic imagery of *Sonatorrek* and the clusters of associations connected with the Icelandic landscape are products of the same Old Norse-Icelandic culture. Nevertheless, studying this parallelism opens up a new perspective on *Sonatorrek*: it fundamentally grounds the poem. Comparing the landscape of *Sonatorrek* with the landscapes of Icelandic toponymy and place-lore highlights just to which extent the poem's poetic cosmos is rooted deeply not only in literary and mythological tradition, but in fact in the everyday environment in which it was composed. What is essential here is particularly the everyday character of this environment: in spite of the often cosmic scale of its imagery, the poem never loses the firm ground that is constituted by the everyday culture reflected in something as seemingly banal and everyday as toponyms. Perhaps the way how it manages to straddle the seeming tension between the cosmic and the everyday is one of the great achievements of the poem. And perhaps how the cosmic elements of *Sonatorrek*, if compared to the imagery of Icelandic place-names and place-stories, link back to the everyday landscape of medieval Iceland in which the poem's audience lived their daily lives even allows us a glimpse of an aspect of how the poem might have been experienced: as something related to and grounded in simple, everyday experience. Perhaps *Sonatorrek* was able to speak to its audience because it speaks not just about Egill as an individual but about an Icelandic Everyman in an Icelandic Everywhere.

ABSTRACT

Egill Skallagrímsson's poem *Sonatorrek*, traditionally held to have been composed ca. 960 AD and thus perhaps one of the very few genuinely pre-Christian skaldic poems that have been preserved, treats the grief of a father who has lost his son to the sea and his reckoning with the divine powers who have allowed this to happen. The poetic presentation of this emotional struggle repeatedly draws on a stylised and fundamentally mythologising imagery of the coastal landscape in which the central tragedy – the drowning of the poet's son – has occurred. The paper will analyse the poem's use of this landscape imagery, compare it with attitudes to the landscape that can be grasped through the everyday medium of place-names as well as through Icelandic place-storytelling, and contrast the implications of this comparison with the cosmic character of much of the mythological imagery employed in the poem. This will serve to contextualise the poetic technique of *Sonatorrek* and show how it harnesses the tension between the cosmic and the everyday as a means of poetic expression.



Map 1. Main places mentioned in the discussion, by M. Egeler.



Fig. 1. The boulder Dvergasteinn on the northern shore of the Seyðisfjörður fjord, located above a small natural landing site, just as a boat-house would be. Photo M. Egeler, 2014.