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# Ecocriticism and *Eyrbyggja saga*

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## Introduction

According to the early fourteenth-century Hauksbók version of *Landnámabók*, King Haraldr hárfagri of Norway determined that early settlers in Iceland should be allowed to claim no more land than a man could carry fire around in a single day.<sup>2</sup> In chapter 4 of the probably mid-thirteenth-century Icelandic *Eyrbyggja saga* one such early settler from Norway, Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, carries fire in this way around land that he claims as his own on the Snæfellsnes peninsula in western Iceland: ‘eptir þat fór Þórólfr eldi um landnám sitt’ (‘then Thorolf carried fire around his land-claim’).<sup>3</sup> Having established the boundaries between his land and the unclaimed country around him, Þórólfr has a farm and a temple built; the construction of boundaries and buildings endows both the cultivated land that he claims and the uncultivated wilderness beyond the new boundaries with meaning: in this way the land enters culture at the same time that it begins to be cultivated. The creation of boundaries is essential to the construction of a nation out of a wilderness: such boundaries are not only physical, but also mental or conceptual — boundaries between nature and culture, animal and human, and nature and the supernatural. In this essay I develop an ecocritical reading of *Eyrbyggja saga* that takes Þórólfr’s act of land-taking (*landnám*) as emblematic of the saga’s concern with boundaries and its revelation of their permeability.

<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of parts of this essay were presented at: the Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic Graduate Seminar, University of Cambridge; the 15th International Saga Conference, Aarhus; the Viking Society Student Conference, Leeds; the MEMORI seminar series at Cardiff University; and the Old Norse at Oxford Research Seminar series at the University of Oxford. I am grateful to all those whose contributions to discussion on those occasions enabled me to strengthen and clarify my argument. In addition, Neil Badmington, Tim Bourns, and two anonymous readers for *Leeds Studies in English* commented helpfully on drafts of the completed essay.

<sup>2</sup> *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968), pp. 337 and 339 (H294). The procedure was slightly different for female settlers, who could claim as much land as they could encompass in a day while leading a two-year-old, well-fed heifer (H276).

<sup>3</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk fornrit, 4 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), pp. 3–184 (p. 8); English translation from *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, trans. by Judy Quinn, in *Gisli Surrson’s Saga and The Saga of the People of Eyri*, ed. by Vésteinn Ólason (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), pp. 71–198 (p. 76). All further references to this edition and translation are given parenthetically in the main text. Whether Haraldr hárfagri’s ruling was in place when Þórólfr settled in Iceland is less important for the purposes of this essay than the fact that thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders thought that such procedures were followed in the settlement period.

Many of the critical and cultural theories that have influenced literary studies since the 1960s have taken an avowedly political approach to texts from the past, analysing them in ways intended to further emancipatory programmes, whether Marxist, feminist, queer, or postcolonial. Proponents of such approaches maintain that the liberal humanist tradition against which they react was itself political, though it did not often admit — or recognise — this fact. Ecocriticism is a more recent development, emerging prominently only in the late 1990s, and is perhaps most helpfully thought of as a critical orientation, rather than a narrowly defined theoretical position; the most serviceable explanations of the term tend to be very broadly conceived. One workable definition is Cheryll Glotfelty's assertion that 'simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. [...] ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies'.<sup>4</sup> Greg Garrard offers an even more capacious definition: 'the study of the relationship of the human and non-human'.<sup>5</sup> It can be helpful to distinguish between what might be thought of as traditional thematic studies of aspects of the natural world in literary texts, where the primary aim is to shed light on the text, genre, or period under discussion, and more overtly ecocritical studies in which there is an interest in reading texts in order to inform current environmental debates or action.

With the possible exception of feminist criticism (broadly conceived), explicitly political critical approaches have had a relatively limited and delayed impact on the study of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Although ecocriticism has recently become a fairly common critical orientation in some other areas of medieval literary studies, it is only just beginning to make an impact on saga studies. Previous work focusing on the relationship between Old Norse-Icelandic literature and the physical environment includes interesting research on landscape, including Gillian Overing and Marijane Osborn's engagingly idiosyncratic book, *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World* (1994), articles by Ian Wyatt, and recent work by Eleanor Barraclough.<sup>6</sup> Two contributions that relate more self-consciously to current theoretical developments are Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's brief but stimulating comments on the roles of landscape and objects in *Grettis saga* and an unpublished article by Chris Abram on trees in medieval Iceland and its literature, which in its combination of detailed textual analysis with insights from history and archaeology offers an excellent model for future green readings of Old Norse literature.<sup>7</sup> The saga specialist interested in an

<sup>4</sup> *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. xix. Good, up-to-date introductions to ecocriticism include Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, New Critical Idiom, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2011) and Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn, *Landscapes of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Ian Wyatt, 'Narrative Functions of Landscape in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas', in *Land, Sea, Home*, ed. by John Hines, Alan Lane, and Mark Redknap (Leeds: Maney, 2004), pp. 272–82, and, specifically on the use of topography, weather, and geography in an episode in *Eyrbyggja saga*, 'Landscape and Authorial Control in the Battle of Vigrafjörðr in *Eyrbyggja saga*', *Leeds Studies in English*, n. s. 35 (2004), 43–56; Eleanor Barraclough, 'Inside Outlawry in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*: Landscape in the Outlaw Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies*, 82 (2010), 365–88, and 'Land-Naming in the Migration Myth of Medieval Iceland: Constructing the Past in the Present and the Present in the Past', *Saga-Book*, 36 (2012), 79–101.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Introduction: All Things', in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington: Oliphaunt, 2012), pp. 1–8; Chris Abram, 'Felling Trees and Feeling Trees in Medieval Iceland', unpublished essay. I am grateful to Dr Abram for kindly sending me his article in advance of publication.

environmentally aware or earth-centred approach can also take inspiration from a very rapidly growing body of ecocritical work on other medieval literatures.<sup>8</sup>

If, as Scott Slovic argues, no text is off-limits to green reading,<sup>9</sup> then this must be as true of an Icelandic saga as of any other text, but one might very justifiably ask what possible use texts from such a remote past as medieval Iceland might be in the environmental debates and interventions of the twenty-first century. Part, at least, of the answer is that the study of such texts can help to bring clarity to the issues. The pioneering British ecocritic Jonathan Bate has written that ‘the relationship between nature and culture is the key intellectual problem of the twenty-first century’.<sup>10</sup> If so (and one might justifiably query whether those are precisely the terms in which the problem should be framed), then texts from the past, even such a remote past as the world of the sagas, can contribute to understanding that relationship by revealing ways in which it has been understood and negotiated historically; as Laurence Coupe neatly puts it, ‘the writer who challenges modernity needs memory’.<sup>11</sup> Knowledge that things have been different in the past and so need not be the way that they are now offers encouragement to those who seek to ensure that things will be different again in the future.<sup>12</sup>

The Icelandic sagas (and related texts such as Ari Þorgilsson’s *Íslendingabók* and the extant versions of *Landnámabók*) offer rich material for ecocritical reading, but this essay focuses primarily on a single text: *Eyrbyggja saga*. The saga was composed around the middle of the thirteenth century, though the earliest surviving manuscript fragment is from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Like other sagas of Icelanders written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, *Eyrbyggja saga* recounts events presented as taking place in the period c. 870–1030, the period during which Iceland was settled, its legal institutions were established, and it converted to Christianity, changing in the process from an island without a human population into a nation of Christendom. The text offers a particularly rich case study for ecocritical saga studies; indeed, a reader new to the saga who turns to the recent Penguin Classics edition of Judy Quinn’s translation will find the text introduced by Vésteinn Ólason in terms that immediately resonate with ecocritical concerns: Vésteinn writes that the saga ‘draws a memorable picture of a chaotic and half-wild society where either brutal force or a

<sup>8</sup> Two pioneering books are: Alfred Siewers’s idiosyncratic, occasionally frustrating, but ultimately stimulating *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), concerned primarily with Welsh and Irish literature, and Gillian Rudd’s *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), on Middle English texts.

<sup>9</sup> Scott Slovic, ‘Ecocriticism: Containing Multitudes, Practising Doctrine’, in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. by Laurence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 160–62 (p. 160).

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Bate, ‘Foreword’, in Coupe, *Green Studies Reader*, p. xvii.

<sup>11</sup> Coupe, *Green Studies Reader*, p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> On the value of knowledge of the past for improving the future cf. Terry Eagleton’s memorable rhetorical question: ‘who is cocksure enough to predict that medieval love poetry might not prove a more precious resource in some political struggle than the writings of Surrealist Trotskyists?’ (Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 125).

<sup>13</sup> On manuscripts and editions of the saga see the Íslenzk fornrit edition, pp. xliii–lvii. A brief summary of the arguments for the dating of the saga to the mid-thirteenth century is provided in Bernadine McCreesh, ‘*Eyrbyggja saga*’, in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano et al. (London: Garland, 1993), pp. 174–75 (p. 174); cf. Klaus Böldl, *Eigi einhamr: Beiträge zum Weltbild der ‘Eyrbyggja’ und anderer Ísländersagas* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), p. 24 on a consensus dating the saga to c. 1250, and Vésteinn Ólason’s suggestion of ‘around 1270’: ‘Introduction’, in *Gisli Sursson’s Saga and The Saga of the People of Eyri*, pp. vii–xlvii (p. vii). In the Íslenzk fornrit edition, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson proposed an earlier date (pp. lvii–lxiv), but his arguments have persuaded few other scholars. Several contributors to *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions*, ed. by Else Mundal (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013) consider the dating of *Eyrbyggja saga*; they discuss a variety of arguments for datings in the period c. 1230–c. 1270.

sly deception seems to decide issues', but also of 'a certain order that is gradually strengthened as the story progresses'.<sup>14</sup>

According to Laurence Coupe, 'the most fundamental question of all for green studies' is 'that of the relationship between the non-human and the human'.<sup>15</sup> In what follows, I explore two different aspects of this question in *Eyrbyggja saga*: the relationship between humans and the non-human physical environment or landscape, and the relationships between humans and non-human forms of life, both plant and animal. My aim is likewise twofold: to demonstrate the difference that taking an environmentally aware approach may make to a reading of the saga and to suggest the difference that ecocritical readings of sagas might make to ecocriticism.

## Settling in the landscape

Ecocritics often explore the ways in which humans relate to 'wild' or 'untouched' environments. The encounter with such environments frequently takes the form of attempted mastery, whether physical (for example, by farming) or mental (for example, by naming places, or ascribing meanings to particular features in the physical environment). *Eyrbyggja saga* is, among other things, concerned with the relationship between natural environment and human civilisation — between nature and nation — and specifically with the transition from a physical environment unaffected by humans to a state of 'natureculture' in which human cultivation and culture both bring about changes in the physical environment and also endow it with culturally contingent meanings. To put the matter in these terms is, however, to stage an opposition between two notoriously slippery concepts: 'nature' and 'culture'. Raymond Williams famously described 'nature' as 'perhaps the most complex word in the language' and the word 'culture' is scarcely simpler.<sup>16</sup> In what follows, I make a consciously provisional deployment of the terms 'nature' and 'culture', and 'human' and 'non-human', for heuristic purposes; these oppositions enable an analysis of aspects of the saga text which in turn reveals the inadequacy of the opposition from which that analysis proceeded. Thus, although much of my discussion of *Eyrbyggja saga* will be structured around oppositions between nature and culture, human and non-human, or natural and supernatural, in each case I shall show how these oppositions collapse as the notional boundaries between the two terms of the opposition become blurred. This critical manoeuvre is grounded in Kate Soper's observation that an *a priori* distinction between humanity and nature is assumed in all discussions of the two, even those that see humanity as part of nature.<sup>17</sup> She argues, moreover, that:

there can be no ecological prescription that does not presuppose a demarcation between humanity and nature. Unless human beings are differentiated from other organic and inorganic forms of being, they can be made no more liable for the effects of their occupancy of the eco-system than any other species, and it would make no more sense to call upon them to desist from destroying 'nature' than to call upon cats to stop killing birds.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, 'Introduction', p. xxv.

<sup>15</sup> Coupe, *Reader*, p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1983), s.vv. 'Nature', 'Culture'.

<sup>17</sup> Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Soper, *What Is Nature?*, p. 160.

A realist conception of nature (defined in opposition to culture, or the human) can, therefore, be seen as a pragmatic basis for political or social change, of the kind which ecocriticism seeks to facilitate, while one may still affirm, as Soper does, the culturally conditioned and contingent quality of *representations* of nature.

Old Norse-Icelandic literature deserves greater prominence in ecocritical discourse because it is unique (at least within Europe) in offering historically-grounded narratives of human settlement in a land previously completely without human inhabitants. Writing in the early twelfth century in the earliest surviving Icelandic narrative of the nation's past, *Íslendingabók*, Ari Þorgilsson does indeed famously mention Irish monks who had lived as anchorites in Iceland before the Norse settlement, but although they precede the Icelanders, it is precisely in Icelandic narratives such as Ari's that we learn of the Irish monks and their (very limited) impact on the environment. The sagas of Icelanders written in the centuries after Ari are not contemporary with the events they recount, but they offer a unique source for understanding the impact of humans on the physical environment and the nature of the relationship between environment and culture. In these narratives, indebted as they are to earlier oral traditions, we can follow this relationship between humans and their environment from its very beginning in a way that is not possible elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> The settlers come to a wild land and there establish human society, community, law, and culture.

*Eyrbyggja saga* begins with conflict over land ownership, that anthropocentric engagement with the earth which takes for granted that members of one particular species have a right to dominion over the physical environment. When Ketill flatnefr exceeds his commission from King Haraldr hárfagri of Norway and takes over the Hebrides, his estates in Norway are seized by the king (ch. 1); in the next chapter Ketill's son Björn is outlawed by the king for trying to seize back the estates. Chapter 3 reports that 'þeir menn, er kómu af Íslandi, sögðu þar góða landakosti' (p. 7) ('men who returned from Iceland spoke of the good quality of the land' (p. 75)), and in the next chapter an oracle directs Björn Ketilsson's friend Þórólfr Mostrarskegg to go to Iceland, where Björn himself will also eventually settle after visiting the Hebrides. Þórólfr is a priest of Þórr, and earth from under the pedestal on which his statue of Þórr had stood in Norway is taken with the settlers to Iceland: in Norway the land has already been endowed with meaning and value, having become the subject of what the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan calls *geopiety*, a concept to which I shall return shortly.

Although the soil Þórólfr and his men bring from Norway has been endowed with meaning — brought within culture — they need to do things to the land in Iceland in order to bring it similarly within the cultural sphere: the place where the seat-pillars come ashore is given the name Þórsnes after the god whom Þórólfr serves, beginning its transformation from the (purely) natural to the naturecultural and also associating it with the supernatural. Then, as noted at the start of this essay, Þórólfr carries fire around the area of land he claims as his own and builds his farm and temple. The construction of boundaries, both physical and mental, is the starting-point for the process of establishing a human community in the land.

## Timber

Human settlement in Iceland necessarily had consequences for the environment. In chapter 4 of *Eyrbyggja saga* we are told that 'þá var gott matar at afla af eyjum ok qðru sæfangi' (p.

<sup>19</sup> Hence Overing and Osborn write that 'in the Icelandic sagas, more than in most other European fictions, the presence of the landscape makes a difference in how the story is imagined because the people in these particular "frontier" fictions are interacting with the terrain as well as each other' (*Landscape of Desire*, p. 105). For a

10) ('there was plenty of food to be had from the islands and the sea', p. 77). Representing the period of earliest settlement as a kind of Golden Age of plenty is a common topos of the *Íslendingasögur*; there is a hint here that the same may no longer be true and that such resources might not be inexhaustible.<sup>20</sup> Natural resources become a source of conflict on occasion later in the saga, suggesting increased pressure on such resources as time goes by: one such conflict is when a large fin whale comes ashore in chapter 57 and Óspakr Kjallaksson and his men steal from the people who have the legal right to flense it.

Probably the most notorious environmental consequence of settlement in Iceland was the island's deforestation. In *Íslendingabók* Ari Þorgilsson famously says of the period of settlement that 'í þann tíma var Ísland víði vaxit á miðli fjalls ok fjöru'<sup>21</sup> ('at that time Iceland was grown over with trees between the mountains and the shore'), phrasing that draws attention to the fact that this was no longer the case when he wrote in the early twelfth century.<sup>22</sup> The importance of timber as a natural resource becomes very clear in chapter 31 of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Þórólfr bægifótr ('lame-foot') is aware that Snorri goði would like to own Krákunes and its woods, which are said to be 'mest gersemi [. . .] hér í sveit' (p. 85) ('the most precious in this district', p. 128). 'Snorri þóttisk mjök þurfa skóginn' (p. 85) ('Snorri considered himself very much in need of the woods', p. 128) and in exchange for them agrees to take on Þórólfr's lawsuit against Þórólfr's own son, Arnkell.

Having acquired the woods, Snorri proceeds to exploit them unsustainably, threatening their destruction:

Snorri goði lét nú vinna Krákunesskóg ok mikit at gera um skógarhöggit. Þórólfi bægifót þótti spillask skógrinn; reið Þórólfr þá út til Helgafells ok beiddi Snorra at fá sér apr skóginn ok kvezk hafa lét honum, en eigi gefit. (p. 90)

Snorri the Godi started exploiting Krakunes woods with a great deal of tree-felling. Thorolf lame-foot thought the woods were being destroyed, so he rode over to Helgafell and asked Snorri to give him back the woods, claiming that he had only lent them and not given them to him. (p. 132)

Þórólfr seems surprised by the way in which Snorri is felling an excessive amount of timber, suggesting perhaps that his own use of the woods had been managed more sustainably and that his attempt to wrest back the woods may be (partly) motivated by a concern for their future (if only as a continuing resource) as much as by mere greed. Snorri opposes Þórólfr's environmental activism with the law, according to which he is now the owner of the woods: one could not hope for a clearer example of the way in which human community depends upon the control of physical environment and organises such control culturally through the law.

Þórólfr's green credentials are still more impressive, however. He asks his son Arnkell to recover the woods from Snorri because 'mér þykkir þat verst, er hann skal sitja yfir hlut okkrum, en hann vill nú eigi lausan láta skóginn fyrir mér' (p. 91) ('it's the worst thing in the world that he oppresses us and won't give me back the woods', p. 132). Arnkell refuses to help, even though he believes that Snorri lacks the legal right to the woods. Faced with this

reading of the settlement narrative in *Eyrbyggja saga* alongside other medieval sources from a different perspective from that adopted here, see Böldl, *Eigi einhamr*, ch. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Abram, 'Trees'.

<sup>21</sup> *Íslendingabók*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Further discussion of Icelandic deforestation is provided in Chris Abram's unpublished article on trees in medieval Iceland and its literature.

indifference to environmental destruction Þórólfr goes home, refuses to eat, and dies during the night. Tempting though it may be to read this death as self-sacrifice on behalf of the environment, there is probably more to Þórólfr's desire to recover the woods than a love of trees. His behaviour reminds us that environmental activism may be motivated either by a sense of the independent value of the non-human environment or by self-interest, the need to preserve natural resources because humans are dependent on them.

Þórólfr's death is not the end of the matter. Having opposed the destruction of woodland while alive, Þórólfr wreaks environmental havoc as a revenant after death. Chapter 34 of the saga records that the oxen that had transported his corpse are ridden to death; all livestock that comes near his cairn goes wild and dies; a shepherd and his flock are killed; birds landing on his cairn die; Þórólfr's own wife is frightened to death. The undead Þórólfr is said to devastate all the nearby farms: the balance of the relationship between humans and their environment has been upset by Snorri's deforestation and then by the undead Þórólfr. Eventually this catalogue of environmental catastrophe is curtailed by reburial of Þórólfr in a more remote location and behind a high wall. But even that does not bring the hauntings to an end, and we shall return to Þórólfr bægifótr towards the end of this essay.<sup>23</sup>

After Þórólfr's death Snorri goði continues to exploit the Krákunes wood and is involved in a legal dispute with Arnkell over his ownership of this precious natural resource. A slave whom he sends to cut down a lot of timber is killed in the course of the dispute and Arnkell is in turn killed by Snorri's men during a fight in a haystack: the mound in which Arnkell is subsequently buried is said, with grim irony, itself to be as big as a haystack ('sem stakkgarðr mikill', p. 103). It seems fitting that this dispute over natural resources and their exploitation comes to an end in a haystack and is memorialised in a haystack-like burial mound.

## Outlawry, the wild, and geopiety

The transformation of nature into nation through settlement, cultivation, and community building is reflected in the Icelandic concept of outlawry and its association with uninhabited environments. Kirsten Hastrup, among others, has commented on the implications of the term used for full outlawry in medieval Iceland: *skóggangr*, literally, 'forest going'.<sup>24</sup> The word associates the outlaw, the one beyond human community, with wilderness. Eleanor Barraclough has similarly noted that terms such as *skógarmaðr* (forest-man) and *vargr* (wolf, used of outlaws in the *Grágás* lawcode) 'connect social outcasts with the physicality of wilderness or with the creatures that live in it'.<sup>25</sup> In *Eyrbyggja saga* the most telling example of the correlation between being outside the law and inhabiting an environment outside the settled human community is provided by Eiríkr rauði ('the Red'), who is outlawed in chapter 24 and so obliged to leave Iceland; he goes on to discover a new wilderness, Greenland, and begin a new Norse settlement there.

The most famous correlation of outlawry with environment in the sagas of Icelanders occurs not in *Eyrbyggja saga*, but in the roughly contemporary *Njáls saga*. When the outlawed

<sup>23</sup> On Þórólfr's career as a revenant see also Bödl, *Eigi einhamr*, pp. 117–24.

<sup>24</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 139. Full outlawry required that the offender leave Iceland forever; if he failed to do so he could be killed with impunity and it was forbidden to assist such an outlaw: the sentence was therefore in effect a death sentence for anyone who refused to go abroad within the allotted time.

<sup>25</sup> Barraclough, 'Inside Outlawry', p. 367.



Gunnarr Hámundarson falls from his horse, he looks up at his farm at Hlíðarendi and fatally declares that ‘fögr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfögr synzk, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim aprt ok fara hvergi’<sup>26</sup> (‘fair is the slope, so that it has never seemed as fair to me, the pale fields and the mown home-field; I shall ride back and go nowhere’; my trans.). This passage justifies a digression from *Eyrbyggja saga* because it so memorably expresses an aesthetic appreciation of landscape; Gwyn Jones describes Gunnarr as ‘the archetypal land-lover’.<sup>27</sup> The development of ecocriticism has been closely associated with the study of literature of the Romantic period, and at first glance Gunnarr’s love of the landscape might seem ahead of its time.<sup>28</sup> It is certainly highly unusual, if not unique, in the sagas: Overing and Osborn refer to it as ‘one of the few places in the sagas where landscape is identified as aesthetically beautiful’.<sup>29</sup> It is, however, not always recognised that the landscape that Gunnarr loves is not a natural, wild one, but a thoroughly tamed one of fruitful fields and mown meadows.<sup>30</sup> Gunnarr’s words are an expression of geopiety, but his affection is for a naturalcultural, rather than purely natural, landscape, one that has been shaped by and has meaning because of human activity.

Yi-Fu Tuan adopts and adapts the term ‘geopiety’ from the work of John K. Wright; he writes that the term reminds us today of a loss: ‘by now nature is largely secularized; gods no longer inhabit the mountains’, but also notes that ‘geopious feelings are still with us as attachment to place, love of country, and patriotism’.<sup>31</sup> The key to the concept is its recognition that affection for particular places is grounded in the meanings attributed to those places within culture: ‘human territoriality, in the sense of attachment to place, differs in important ways from the territoriality of animals unburdened by symbolic thought’.<sup>32</sup>

The primary example of geopiety in *Eyrbyggja saga* is the veneration accorded to the headland and mountain of Helgafell, which the early settler Þórólfr Mostrarskegg sets apart as sacred to his god Þórr, so that it becomes a naturalcultural object of devotion:

<sup>26</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954), p. 182.

<sup>27</sup> Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 464; the phrase appears in the index and I owe this reference to Overing and Osborn, *Landscapes of Desire*, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> It indeed inspired the Romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson’s poem ‘Gunnarshólmi’, written in 1837 and available with translation and commentary by Dick Ringler at <<http://www.library.wisc.edu/etext/jonas/Gunnar/Gunnar.html>> [accessed 12 May 2014].

<sup>29</sup> Overing and Osborn, *Landscapes of Desire*, p. 65, cf. pp. 57–59, 64–66. M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij emphasises that this episode is atypical and argues that the fact that landscape is elsewhere completely absent in sagas is of much greater significance, indicating an absence of aesthetic appreciation of ‘nature’ in the world of the sagas: *The Saga Mind*, trans. by Kenneth H. Ober (Odense: Odense University Press, 1973), pp. 76–77). Lars Lönnroth’s argument that the scene may be influenced by *Alexanders saga* (*Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 154), has been rebutted by David Ashurst in his ‘Bleikir akrar — Snares of the Devil? The Significance of the Pale Cornfields in *Alexanders saga*’, *Saga-Book* 25 (2000), 272–91; for further discussion of the episode in the context of metaphors of growth and productivity in the saga see Andrew Joseph Hamer, ‘*Njáls saga* and its Christian Background: A Study of Narrative Method’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2008), available at <<http://dissertations.ub.rug.nl/FILES/faculties/arts/2008/a.j.hamer/thesis.pdf>>, ch. 4 [accessed 12 May 2014].

<sup>30</sup> One critic who does recognise this is Heather O’Donoghue in her *Old-Norse Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, ‘Geopiety: A Theme in Man’s Attachment to Nature and to Place’, in *Geographies of the Mind: Essays in Historical Geosophy in Honor of John Kirtland Wright*, ed. David Lowenthal and Martyn J. Bowden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 11–39 (pp. 12, 13). The term has been employed in relation to Old Norse literature by Osborn and Overing, *Landscapes of Desire*, pp. 8, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Tuan, ‘Geopiety’, p. 13. It may be worth noting that at least some animals may be capable of symbolic thought.

í því nesi stendr eitt fjall; á því fjalli hafði Þórólfr svá mikinn átrúnað, at þangat skyldi enginn maðr óþveginn líta ok engu skyldi tortíma í fjallinu, hvárki fé né mǫnnum, nema sjálfst gengi í brott. Þat fjall kallaði hann Helgafell [...] þar var ok svá mikill helgistaðr, at hann vildi með engu móti láta saurga vǫllinn, hvarki í heiptarblóði, ok eigi skyldi þar álfrek ganga, ok var haft til þess sker eitt, er Dritsker var kallat. (pp. 9–10)

the headland is in the form of a mountain, and Thorolf invested so much reverence in it that no one was allowed to look towards it without having washed and nothing was allowed to be killed on the mountain, neither man nor animal unless it died of natural causes. He named this mountain Helgafell [...] He considered the ground so sacred that he would not allow it to be defiled in any way, either by blood spilt in rage, or by anybody doing their elf-frighteners there — there was a skerry named Dritsker (Shit-Skerry) for that purpose. (p. 77)

This passage employs the language of pollution: human waste (though in this case an entirely natural product) will desecrate and defile (*saurga*) the mountain — as well as scare the elves.<sup>33</sup> The episode also illustrates a point to which I shall return towards the end of this essay: for medieval Icelanders, the non-human environment extended beyond what we would refer to as nature to encompass also the supernatural — here, both elves and the god Þórr.

Þórólfr Mostrarskegg is spared the experience of Helgafell's pollution, but his son Þorsteinn þorskabítr (cod-biter) faces the possibility of its desecration by the Kjallekling family, who think of themselves as above others in the area (ch. 9). The saga describes Þorsteinn as determined to defend the land rather than see it defiled: 'vildi hann eigi þola, at þeir saurgaði þann vǫll, er Þórólfr, faðir hans, hafði tignat umfram aðra staði í sinni landeign' (p. 15) ('he was in no mind to allow them to defile the ground that his father Þórólfr had worshipped above all other parts of his estate', p. 80). Unfortunately, in the attempt to prevent desecration by defecation blood is shed which itself pollutes the mountain. Þórðr gellir (bellow) brokers a truce: 'en vǫllinn kallar hann spilltan af heiptarblóði, er niðr hafði komit, ok kallar þá jorð nú eigi helgari en aðra' (p. 17) ('he argued that since the ground had been defiled by blood spilt in rage, the earth could no longer be considered more sacred there than anywhere else', p. 82). As a consequence, legal assemblies are no longer to be held there, a revealing indication of the close connection between community building and cultural meanings of landscape: sacred earth is where social and legal structures attain validity. This remains the case when the *þing* is moved to a new site, described as 'inn mesti helgistaðr, en eigi var mǫnnum þar bannat at ganga ørna sinna' (p. 18) ('the holiest of places, but it was not forbidden to relieve oneself there', p. 82).<sup>34</sup>

Helgafell, like Hlíðarendi in *Njáls saga*, is a part of the landscape that is endowed with meaning in a way that blurs the distinction between human life and the physical environment, between nature and culture. The mountain is both a geological feature and a meaning-bearing

<sup>33</sup> In a learned and stimulating reading of this episode Kevin Wanner suggests that the elves referred to here probably correspond to land-spirits or *landvættir*: see Kevin J. Wanner, 'Purity and Danger in Earliest Iceland: Excrement, Blood, Sacred Space, and Society in *Eyrbyggja saga*', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 5 (2009), 213–50 (p. 216).

<sup>34</sup> For discussion of the immunity of the new *þing* site from the conditions attached to the old one, see Wanner, 'Purity and Danger', pp. 225–26. Helgafell stimulated renewed geopiety when it became the site of a Christian (Augustinian) monastery from 1184 onwards. It has often been suggested that *Eyrbyggja saga* may have been written at the monastery (see the extensive list of references in Wanner, 'Purity and Danger', p. 232 n. 9) and Wanner explores the ways in which that milieu may be reflected in the saga, including possible biblical sources for the saga's interest in pollution ('Purity and Danger', pp. 234–46).

part of human culture: a naturecultural, rather than purely natural or cultural, phenomenon. In a similar manner, the distinction between human and animal life in the saga also turns out to be less than clear-cut.

## Humans and animals

Recent years have seen the development of several related and overlapping academic fields which may be regarded as broadly ecocritical in their concern with aspects of the relationship between humans and the non-human, but which focus specifically on animals, their interactions with human beings, and their cultural roles and meanings. Within the broader discipline of animal studies, critical animal theory has an explicitly emancipatory agenda (comparable in some ways to that of feminist, queer, or postcolonial scholarship) and is directed to the abolition of animal exploitation, subjugation, and cruelty.<sup>35</sup> Such critical work has blurred or even erased the conventional sharp distinction made between humans and (other) animals. Influential texts include Jacques Derrida's delightful *The Animal That Therefore I Am* and Giorgio Agamben's *The Open: Man and Animal*, both of which interrogate limits and boundaries in ways that resonate with the present reading of *Eyrbyggja saga*.<sup>36</sup> Erica Fudge and Donna Haraway have also focused attention on the difficulties of defining human/animal difference and on the variety of ways in which humans relate to animals as wild or domestic.<sup>37</sup> The work of these and other theorists has shown how animals, the concept of 'animal', and the opposition between humans and (other) animals are socially constructed and so historically contingent, so that Greg Garrard writes that 'the most startling and significant insight of ecocriticism and animal studies is that the supposedly distinct realms of culture and nature are naturecultural throughout'.<sup>38</sup> While animal studies have in recent years become increasingly prominent in the study of medieval English literature, they have as yet made little impact on the study of Old Norse-Icelandic texts. Lena Rohrbach's *Der tierische Blick: Mensch-Tier Relationen in der Sagaliteratur* (2009) is a rich and pioneering study of animals in the Icelandic sagas, but although she is aware of the development of critical animal studies in the English-speaking world she distances herself somewhat from that discipline and adopts a different, less explicitly theorised approach.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Margo DeMello, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) is an eye-opening textbook covering the whole range of human-animal studies, historically informed but with a focus on the contemporary USA.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. by Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 2–3, 29–31; Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), esp. pp. 13–16.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern Culture* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000); *Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2002); *Pets* (Stocksfield: Acumen Press, 2008); Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); *When Species Meet* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p. 205.

<sup>39</sup> Lena Rohrbach, *Der tierische Blick: Mensch-Tier Relationen in der Sagaliteratur* (Tübingen and Basel: Francke, 2009), p. 14. For a recent survey of animals in Norse religion and archaeology see Kristina Jennbert, *Animals and Humans: Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2011); studies of animals in medieval Europe more generally include Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2011); Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013) provides an erudite and theoretically aware study of human-animal relations in medieval texts from Britain and Ireland.

Most of the animals we encounter in *Eyrbyggja saga* are used by humans in some way, and most are domesticated farm animals. Some are unlucky enough to be sacrificed in Þórr's temple, as we are told in chapter 4: 'þat var þess konar blóð, er svæfð váru þau kvikendi, er goðunum var fórnat' (p. 9) ('this blood, which was called sacrificial blood, was the blood of live animals offered to the gods', p. 76).

Several incidents in the saga illustrate the importance of owning livestock. In chapter 14 Snorri goði surprises Þorkr by being able to afford to buy his land. Þorkr offers to stay on since Snorri has so little livestock, but Snorri refuses and tells him to enjoy his livestock away from Helgafell. In the next chapter Snorri's uncle Már Hallvarðsson comes to live with Snorri at the farm and brings lots of livestock with him (ch. 15). Livestock later becomes a source of conflict when people gather to sort the sheep at Tunga between the Lax rivers in ch. 23.

The farmer Úlfarr is introduced in chapter 30 with a relatively rare recognition of the extreme climatic conditions in which Icelandic society was established and, perhaps, of the perils associated with the introduction of non-native species into an alien physical environment: 'hann var ok svá fésæll, at fé hans dó aldri af megri eða drephríðum' (p. 81) ('he was so lucky with his livestock that none of his animals ever died from starvation or in blizzards', p. 125).<sup>40</sup>

Horses are particularly prominent animals in the saga. There is a reference in chapter 13 to characters riding horses. In chapter 18 we are told that Þórarinn svartí of Mávahlíð has a 'víghest góðan á fjalli' (p. 33) ('good fighting stallion which he grazed up on the mountain', p. 92).<sup>41</sup> Þorbjörn inn digri also grazes many horses on the mountain pastures, killing a few each autumn (for meat, presumably).<sup>42</sup> The disappearance of Þorbjörn's horses and suspicions of the people of Mávahlíð leads to a violent encounter, in the confusion of which Oddr Kǫtluson cuts off the hand of Þórarinn's wife Auðr. Oddr seeks magical assistance from his mother Katla to prevent Þórarinn's men catching him, and the witch chooses to disguise Oddr by transforming him into farm animals: a goat which she plays with and grooms, and then a domestic boar that lies under a pile of waste or refuse.<sup>43</sup> It turns out later that Þorbjörn's horses have died in the mountains; they had been unable to hold the pasture against Þórarinn's fighting stallion (ch. 23).

This episode of conflict centred around horses depends upon various kinds of blurring of the distinction between human and animal: Þórarinn's stallion is trained to fight; the verses commemorating the human fight figure human violence in terms of animals; Katla transforms the fugitive Oddr into a goat and a boar; the conflict between human groups siding with Þorbjörn or Þórarinn, is paralleled by the death of Þorbjörn's horses caused by Þórarinn's stallion.

There are, then, numerous domesticated animals in the saga: sheep, horses, and other livestock. On the one hand, these farm animals are treated as non-human: they are sacrificed alive to the gods, trained to take part in horse fights, and used as beasts of burden. But this apparently straightforward distinction between humans and animals is somewhat undermined by the way in which both inhabit the same spaces (as occasionally happened quite literally in

<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere the saga makes another brief allusion to the hazards of the Icelandic climate when it states in ch. 37 that 'there was a big freeze and all the fjords iced over' (p. 138) and there is a further allusion to icing over in ch. 45.

<sup>41</sup> On horse-fighting as a 'sport' in the sagas see Rohrbach, *Der tierische Blick*, pp. 54, 73–76, 184–88.

<sup>42</sup> Ari Þorgilsson famously records that the eating of horse meat was allowed to continue after Iceland's conversion, but was banned a few years later (*Íslendingabók*, p. 19).

<sup>43</sup> The remedy for Katla's magic is to put her head in a seal-skin bag.

early Iceland, where farm animals sometimes lived in the family home).<sup>44</sup> Together humans and animals form human-animal communities, not purely human communities separated from non-human nature. Though the relation is a very unequal one, humans and animals are dependent on each other.

This point is underlined by the clear contrast in *Eyrbyggja saga* between farm animals who feature in the prose narrative of the human-animal communities of which they are part, and wild animals, most of which appear not in the prose, but in skaldic verses quoted in the saga. Whereas we meet sheep, horses, and cows in the prose, it is in the verse that we encounter swallows, ravens, adders, a she-wolf, geese, hawks, gulls, and eagles (sea creatures form the major exception to this division, with fish, a mysterious seal, and a whale all appearing in the saga prose).<sup>45</sup> Table 1 lists the animal references that occur in the skaldic verses in *Eyrbyggja saga*. It is striking that many of these wild animals figure *human* violence: the animal/human boundary is disturbed when animals appear in kennings for blood, sword, and hand, and as beasts of battle who will feed on the human dead in a reversal of the relationship between farmers and their livestock.<sup>46</sup>

## **Berserks and revenants: the physical supernatural**

In *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* Robert Bartlett shows that the thirteenth century was a period during which scholastic theologians and philosophers began to draw a sharper distinction between the natural and the miraculous than patristic tradition had done; it is the period when the word supernatural (*supernaturalis*) first becomes an important tool for organising thought.<sup>47</sup> As Bartlett notes,

marking off the natural from other things had always been a major concern of Western thinkers, for if nature is not to be regarded, somewhat vacuously, as a synonym for 'everything', it obviously has things it is defined against.<sup>48</sup>

In the thirteenth century the supernatural emerges more prominently as a category against which to define the natural. The thirteenth-century *Eyrbyggja saga* is similarly (though independently) concerned with boundaries, not only between the human and the natural, but also between the natural and the supernatural. For the medieval scholastic tradition, rationality constituted what Bartlett calls the 'indispensable conceptual boundary between human and

<sup>44</sup> Although animal sheds were normally separate from the farmhouse (though within the farm enclosure), a Viking-period house excavated near the beginning of this century at Aðalstræti 14–16 in Reykjavík had stalls for animals (goats or sheep) inside the house, as was more commonly the case in early Norwegian longhouses: see William R. Short, *Icelanders in the Viking Age: The People of the Sagas* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), p. 89. The archaeological report *Excavations at Aðalstræti, 2003*, ed. H. M. Roberts, with contributions by Mjöll Snæsadóttir, Natascha Mehler, Oscar Aldred, Garðar Guðmundsson, Árný E. Sveinbjörnsdóttir, Jan Heinemeier, Karen Milek and Alex Chepstow Lusty (Fornleifastofnun Íslands: Reykjavík, 2004) is available at <[http://www.nabohome.org/uploads/fsi/FS243-00162\\_Adalstraeti\\_2003.pdf](http://www.nabohome.org/uploads/fsi/FS243-00162_Adalstraeti_2003.pdf)> [accessed 12 May 2014]: see p. 97 for a plan of the house.

<sup>45</sup> In addition, an eagle appears in the prose to carry off Egill sterki's fox hound to Þórólfr bægifótr's cairn in chapter 43. On the place of fish and other sea creatures in Icelandic culture see Gísli Pálsson, 'The Idea of Fish: Land and Sea in the Icelandic World-View', in *Signifying Animals: Human Meaning in the Natural World*, ed. by Roy Willis (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 119–33.

<sup>46</sup> The field of skaldic diction is a potentially rich one for future ecocritical analysis, as Abram shows in his unpublished discussion of tree kennings in skaldic verse.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 12–13.

<sup>48</sup> Bartlett, *Natural and Supernatural*, p. 17.

ch. 17, st. 1	dolg-svölu	battle-swallows (= ravens)
ch. 18, st. 3	örn	eagle
	valnaðrs	slay-adders (= swords)
ch. 18 st. 5	Hugins nið	raven
ch. 18 st. 8	hrein	raven
ch. 18 st. 10	kunnfáka [...] borða	horse of planks (= ship)
	síks [...] sælingr	fish of armour (= sword)
	hrafn	raven
ch. 18 st. 11	ylgteiti	she-wolf's joy (= battle)
ch. 18 st. 12	Nágöglum	corpse-geese (= ravens)
ch. 18 st. 15	hrafn-víns	ravens' wine (= blood)
ch. 18 st. 16	haukaness	hawk's spur (= hand)
ch. 18 st. 17	hrafn	raven
	haukr [...] hræva	hawk of corpses
ch. 26 st. 20	benskárar	wound-mews (= ravens)
ch. 37 st. 26	sár-orra	bird (heathcock) of wounds (= raven)
	Leifa máreifir	Leifi's gull (= raven)
ch. 40 st. 27	fenris brunni	wolf's well (= pool of blood)
	hesta [...] rastar [...]	current's horse (= ship)
	hlunns	
ch. 40 st. 29	hafviggs	sea's steed (= ship)
ch. 40 st. 30	svanna fold	earth of swans (= sea)
ch. 44 st. 33	svangreddir [...] sára	feeder of the swan of blood (= raven > warrior)
	dynbǫru	
	örn	eagle
	ulfs	wolf

Table 1: Animal references in the skaldic verse of *Eyrbyggja saga*.

animal'.<sup>49</sup> The writer and audience of *Eyrbyggja saga* are likely to have made a similarly clear-cut conscious distinction between humans and animals, but as we have seen, the narrative inadvertently blurs that boundary, or perhaps suggests that the significant distinction is not between humans and animals but between humans and domesticated animals on the one side and wild animals on the other.

The boundary between human and animal in the saga is further blurred in an episode involving two Swedish berserks (chapters 25 to 28). As the shape-changing implications of the likely etymology 'bear-shirt' imply, berserks inhabit a liminal space on the porous borders between human and animal, but they also inhabit the border between natural and supernatural.<sup>50</sup> The Swedish berserks in *Eyrbyggja saga* are bigger and stronger than other men, and 'váru þá eigi í mannligu eðli, er þeir váru reiðir, ok fóru galnir sem hundar' (p. 61) ('once they had worked themselves up into a frenzy they were not like human beings. They went mad like dogs', pp. 110–11). The way in which the Swedish berserks are passed as possessions from Earl Hákon to Vermundr inn mjóvi ('the slender') Þorgrímsson, and then to his brother Styrr as if they were livestock perhaps underlines this bestial aspect (they complain that Vermundr had no right to give them away to his brother like slaves, a further category of living being that blurs the simple human/animal distinction). When Vermundr delays finding a wife for the berserk Halli, another animal comparison is made: 'en er Halli fann þat, sló hann á sik úlfúð ok illsku' (p. 63) ('when Halli realized this, his wolf mind took over and he became ill-tempered', p. 112).

In their new home Halli falls in love with Styrr's daughter Ásdís and this threat to an ontological boundary cannot be tolerated; Styrr seeks the advice of Snorri goði on how to get rid of the berserks: ambiguously human berserks have to be purged from the human community for society to be secure. As part of Snorri's plan, the berserks are set to making a path across a lava field between pastures. The situation here is a paradoxical one in which the wild landscape is to be mastered and brought under human control by ambiguously human beings, wild or animal-men, one might say. This task exhausts the berserks 'sem hátr er þeira manna, sem eigi eru einhama' (p. 74) ('as is the way with those men who are not always in human shape', p. 120). In this exhausted state the berserks can be killed when they try to escape from the excessive heat of Styrr's bathhouse; Snorri goði then gets the girl and becomes a safely human son-in-law for Styrr.

There is further evidence later in the saga for the contingent nature of the dividing line between human and animal. In chapter 61 it is said of Þrándr Ingjaldsson that '[hann] var kallaðr eigi einhamr, meðan hann var heiðinn, en þá tók af flestum trollskap, er skírðir váru' (p. 165) ('when he was a heathen he was known as a shape-shifter, but most people gave up magic when they were baptized', p. 186). As with the berserks, the boundary between human and animal here becomes associated with that between nature and the supernatural. Baptism brings an end to such boundary crossing as the conversion to Christianity is an essential stage on the way to the establishment of a stable Icelandic nation.<sup>51</sup>

The conversion does not, however, bring about an immediate end to hauntings. In chapter 51 a portentous shower of blood foretells the death of Þórgunna, the Hebridean guest of

<sup>49</sup> Bartlett, *Natural and Supernatural*, p. 91.

<sup>50</sup> For an up-to-date account of research on the etymology of *berserkr* see Vincent Samson, *Les berserks: Les guerriers-fauves dans la Scandinavie ancienne, de l'Âge de Vendel aux Vikings (VIe–XIe siècle)* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2011), ch. 2.

<sup>51</sup> The brief account of the conversion in chapter 49 notes that Snorri goði built a church at Helgafell.

Þuríðr and Þóroddr at Fróðá. Þuríðr prevents her husband carrying out his promise to burn Þórgunna's bed and bedclothes after her death, as Þuríðr has had her covetous eye on them since Þórgunna first unpacked them. En route to Þórgunna's requested burial at Skálholt (a focus for Christian geopiety mirroring that of pagans towards Helgafell earlier in the saga), the party of corpse bearers is refused food at a farm where they lodge and the undead Þuríðr arises in the night to cook a meal naked. It takes a (naturally) naked (supernatural) revenant to enforce the cultural norms of hospitality.

The shower of blood that presaged Þórgunna's death is just one of several examples in the saga of the non-human environment correlating with human fate. Another is the 'weird-moon' (*urðar máni*, p. 146) that appears each evening for a week in chapter 52, portending further hauntings at the farm of Þóroddr and Þuríðr. In the following chapter a shepherd is bewitched, dies, and walks as undead, killing Þórir víðlegg (woodleg), who then joins him in revenant evening rambles. A mysterious seal's head also appears in the fireplace until hammered into the ground by Kjartan (ch. 53).

We saw above that Þórólfr bægifótr's return as a revenant was a kind of supernatural revenge for deforestation. Þóroddr and his men are drowned while depleting another natural resource, fish (ch. 54), and their deaths are prefigured by the tearing and mysterious consumption of dried fish at the farm.

The hauntings at Fróðá are eventually ended, on Snorri goði's advice to Kjartan, when the twin forms of human social regulation, the law and the Christian religion, are deployed against the non-human (or no longer human) supernatural: Þórgunna's bedding is finally burned, the undead Þóroddr and his men are prosecuted, and a priest says mass and hears confessions. Order is re-established through a combination of law and Christianity.

The distinctive quality of Norse revenants is what William Sayers calls their 'intense corporality'.<sup>52</sup> This physicality troubles and problematizes a simple opposition between the natural and the supernatural: in the sagas the supernatural can be manifested in very solidly physical form. Nor is this the only distinction undermined by the revenants of the sagas: Sayers writes of their 'crossing of the boundary back into life':

Ignoring the boundary between death and life as set in natural law, *draugr* predation on the community also ignores the laws of property and social hierarchy and violates the norms of reciprocity by being one-sided and wholly destructive.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, Sayers argues that the ghosts at Fróðá are open to legal arguments because of 'their nostalgia for communal life'.<sup>54</sup> The supernatural and the naturecultural do not exist in isolation from one another.

After the hauntings at Fróðá, the undead Þórólfr bægifótr makes a reappearance in the saga. We are told in chapter 63 that Þórólfr's renewed hauntings have caused the farm of Bólstaðr to be deserted because people and livestock were killed there. Þórólfr's body is removed from his cairn, taken to the liminal foreshore and burned. The ashes are mostly deposited in the sea, but some blow about. Þóroddr returns to his farm and meets a cow that takes fright, breaks her leg, and is later often seen licking the stones on which Þórólfr's ashes had blown. The cow goes missing when Þóroddr intends to have it killed, but returns to her

<sup>52</sup> William Sayers, 'The Alien and Alienated as Unquiet Dead in the Sagas of Icelanders' in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 242–63 (at p. 244).

<sup>53</sup> Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', pp. 243, 258.

<sup>54</sup> Sayers, 'Alien and Alienated', p. 249. On this see also John D. Martin, 'Law and the (Un)dead: Medieval Models for Understanding the Hauntings in *Eyrbyggja saga*', *Saga-Book* 29 (2005), 67–82.



cowshed just before Yule, pregnant. The cow gives birth to a heifer and then a bull calf; the latter is so big that giving birth kills the cow. A blind old woman on the farm, Þóroddr's foster-mother, takes fright at the noise the bull makes and advises that it be killed: 'þetta eru trolls læti, en eigi annars kvikendis' (p. 171) ('that's the sound of a troll, not the sound of a natural beast', p. 191).<sup>55</sup> Þóroddr ignores her advice. When the bull is four years old and has acquired a name, Glæsir, that is indicative of his incorporation in a humananimal community, Þóroddr decides to kill it; the bull seems to understand his speech.<sup>56</sup> The bull is referred to in a verse (p. 192) as 'king of the herd' (*hjarðar vísi*; p. 173), a humanising metaphor, and seems to be a kind of reincarnation of Þóroldr bægifótr engendered by the mother cow's consumption of the revenant's ashes, further blurring the human/animal distinction. When Þóroddr goes to kill the bull it tosses him in the air and impales him on one of its horns: this ultimate vengeance of the natural world over the human farmer is followed by the bull rushing into a bog and sinking.

If ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between the human and the non-human, then in a saga like *Eyrbyggja saga* this must include not only the relationships between humans and the physical environment or humans and animals: it must also embrace the relationship between humans and the *supernatural* non-human. In his introduction to Quinn's translation of *Eyrbyggja saga*, Vésteinn Ólason writes that 'there is no clear line between the natural and supernatural' in the text.<sup>57</sup> With its ready acceptance of the supernatural, medieval literature, including the sagas of Icelanders, may have something to teach ecocritics. When it takes for granted that the non-human is limited to the natural, ecocriticism is an unreflective child of its time. Medieval literature, including a text such as *Eyrbyggja saga*, reminds us that such an assumption is characteristic of a tiny minority of the human beings who have so far existed on earth. The environmentally aware reader might be moved to reflect that it is only in the last couple of hundred years, precisely the period during which the natural environment has come under gravest threat from human beings, that belief in the supernatural has disappeared among sizable parts of the human population. Without necessarily arguing that the answer to our current environmental woes is simply to retreat from Enlightenment rationalism back to belief in the supernatural, one might at least maintain that there may be advantages to fostering a greater awareness of what has been lost as the world has become disenchanted. In his *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Timothy Clark argues that it is a requirement of ecocriticism to take a religious stance, though I take it that this does not mean that an ecocritic is obliged to espouse any particular historical religion.<sup>58</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan similarly maintains that although 'piety' is becoming an obsolete term, 'it can be argued that people would live more in harmony with nature could the sentiment be restored', a restoration which perhaps need not require renewal of actual belief in the supernatural.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Quinn's translation, like that of Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards ('that isn't a natural creature's voice, it's a monster's'; *Eyrbyggja Saga* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 157) exaggerates the distinction between nature and the supernatural; *kvikendi* is more literally simply a 'living creature'.

<sup>56</sup> While it is true that inanimate objects (such as weapons) are also occasionally given names in the sagas, the naming of animals blurs the distinction between human and animal, exposing their common membership of a humananimal community, because such names are used when speaking to the animal, whereas named objects are very rarely so addressed. The responsiveness of animals to human address is a thread running through both Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* and Haraway's *When Species Meet*.

<sup>57</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, 'Introduction', p. vii.

<sup>58</sup> Clark, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Tuan 'Geopiety', p. 33.

Indeed, my use of the term 'supernatural' above, though in accord with today's idiom, may be looser than that of scholastic theologians of the thirteenth century. Bartlett notes that a writer such as Gervase of Tilbury, writing in 1215, was careful to distinguish the miraculous, which was supernatural and caused by God, from the marvellous, which was beyond human understanding but nevertheless natural.<sup>60</sup> To understand fully the way in which berserks, shape-shifters, and revenants in *Eyrbyggja saga* call into question the distinction between nature and the supernatural it may be necessary to adopt this scholastic distinction between the marvellous and the miraculous or, perhaps, to invoke the category of the preternatural, that which is outside or beyond nature, but not necessarily 'above' it.<sup>61</sup>

A medieval text such as *Eyrbyggja saga* challenges ecocritics to account or allow for the supernatural (or whatever is or might be beyond what we habitually think of as natural) and to consider its relationship to nature and to culture — or at least to recognise the prevalence and potential value of human belief in the supernatural. The realist presentation of the supernatural in medieval literature, and especially the unusually physical manifestation of the undead in the sagas, is one of the most significant ways in which such literature challenges twenty-first century understandings of the relationship between nature and culture, between humans and the non-human. This exposure of assumptions underlying the distinctions as they are currently made may be one of the most valuable contributions an ecocritical approach to medieval literature, including the sagas, can make to contemporary green studies.

## Conclusion

*Eyrbyggja saga* is, among other things, about establishing a stable human community in a previously uninhabited land. This involves the construction of boundaries, both physical and conceptual. Wild nature must be divided from cultivated farmland, Icelandic society from the realm of the outlaw, human from animal, nature from the supernatural.

Particular features of the landscape are named, endowed with meaning, and sometimes become the objects of geopieté, taking on a sacred significance that is at least as much given them by humans as recognised. The society that is established is not, however, a purely human one. It is a humananimal community in which farm animals and humans depend upon one another, wild animals figure human violence in skaldic verse, and bestial berserks blur the boundaries between human and animal and between natural and supernatural. To create this community the land must be brought under control so that the nation may thrive. It is not only a case of cultivating the wilderness and domesticating animals: it is also about expelling the undesirable supernatural. Þrándr gives up shape-shifting after the conversion; the revenants at Fróðá are evicted by the law and exorcised by a priest.

Insofar as this process is successful, an ordered and stable community is established, as extensive genealogies tracing characters' descendants in the final chapter of the saga bear

<sup>60</sup> Bartlett, *Natural and Supernatural*, pp. 18–19. Bartlett further notes (pp. 20, 23) that for many thirteenth-century writers demons and magic were natural, not supernatural, marvels, and that the canonisation process in this period took pains to distinguish the magical (natural) from the miraculous (supernatural).

<sup>61</sup> Ármann Jakobsson has recently expressed dissatisfaction with the term 'supernatural' and prefers instead to write of the 'paranormal' in Old Icelandic literature since that term 'has its roots in human experience rather than in nature': 'The Taxonomy of the Non-Existent: Some Medieval Icelandic Concepts of the Paranormal', *Fabula*, 54 (2013), 199–213 (p. 199 n. 2). Ármann's use of this term is, however, predicated on the assumption (articulated in the title of his essay) that the phenomena it encompasses are 'Non-Existent'; I am here, however, concerned precisely to allow for the possibility that there may be more to reality than the natural.

*Ecocriticism and Eyrbyggja saga*

witness. The narrative preceding that final chapter shows, nevertheless, on what precarious foundations and by what contingent means this nation is established. The opposition between nature and nation is continually called into question, blurred, or shown to be inadequate. Dividing lines between human and animal, between natural and humanised landscape, and between the natural and the supernatural are continually crossed. Þórólfr Mostrarskegg's carrying of fire across the land to establish the boundaries of his settlement in chapter 4 of the saga is characteristically both an essential and also an ultimately futile attempt to separate the human from the non-human.