

The Grave Mound of a Saga Hero

A Case Study in Context and 'Continuity' between *Grettis saga* and Modern Folklore

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ABSTRACT: *The article presents a case study within the recent renaissance of folkloristic approaches to Old Norse-Icelandic religious history and saga literature. It undertakes a comparative analysis of medieval literary and recent local traditions about the burial of Qnundr Wooden-Foot, who was the great-grandfather of Grettir the Strong and an important character in the introductory chapters of Grettis saga. First, the article lays out the different accounts of Qnundr's burial in medieval literature. Second, it contrasts the literary accounts with a broad range of more recent local traditions. Furthermore, it brings the physical topography of Qnundr's alleged burial site into the discussion. The article then uses this ensemble of data to problematise issues such as the relative importance of chronological vs. geographical distance between a narrative and its alleged object, throwing new light on the relevance of recent local traditions for understanding medieval saga accounts.*

RESUME: *Denne artikel præsenterer en case study inden for den folkloristiske tilgang til studiet af oldnordisk og oldislandsk religionshistorie og sagalitteratur. Den byder på en komparativ analyse af litterære middelalderkilder samt nyere, lokale traditioner om begravelsen af Qnundr Træfod, som var oldefar til Grettir den Stærke og en vigtig figur i de indledende kapitler af Grettis saga. Først fremstiller artiklen forskellige beretninger om Qnundrs begravelse ifølge middelalderlitteraturen. Derpå kontrasteres disse beretninger med en bred vifte af nyere, lokale traditioner. I tillæg diskuteres den konkrete topografi omkring Qnundrs påståede gravsted. Derpå bruger artiklen denne samling af data til at problematisere aspekter såsom den kronologiske kontra den geografiske afstand mellem fortællingen og dens genstand. Herved kastes der nyt lys på lokale traditioners relevans i forhold til vores forståelse af sagaberetninger fra middelalderen.*

KEYWORDS: *Saga topography; Kaldbaksdalur; Qnundr tréfótr; narrative distance; local traditions; comparative analysis*

The present paper takes up the recent renaissance of folkloristic approaches to Norse religious history and medieval saga literature, which in the last years has been spearheaded by a number of scholars including Karen Bek-Pedersen, Terry Gunnell, Merrill Kaplan, Frog, Daniel Sävborg, and Ülo Valk, to mention just a few.¹ From a specifically theoretical perspective, folkloristic approaches to the medieval North have been defended particularly by Jens Peter Schjødt and Steve Mitchell.² In this contribution, I will tackle the topic by studying some traditions about the grave mound of a saga hero connected with the valley of Kaldbaksdalur in the Strandir region of the Icelandic Westfjords. My study will take its starting point from the medieval literary accounts of the death and burial of Qnundr Wooden-Foot in *Landnámabók* and *Grettis saga*. After introducing the medieval testimonies, I will present the ways in which the burial of this saga hero appears in modern folklore, and I will ask what contexts this modern form of the tradition is embedded into and how the details of the physical topography of Kaldbaksdalur are important for understanding this storytelling complex. The final part of the article will then discuss the findings of this investigation with a view to what light they can throw on the use of modern folklore for approaching medieval narratives, and how they can elucidate some of the fundamental mechanisms of landscape-related storytelling.

The Burial of Qnundr Wooden-Foot in Medieval Literature and Modern Scholarship

The history of Qnundr Wooden-Foot's presence in Iceland begins with his arrival from Norway, or rather with the depiction of this arrival in *Landnámabók*. This text gives the following account of how Qnundr came to and settled in the Icelandic Westfjords (ch. S161=H130):³

Qnundr tréfótr son Ófeigs burlufótar, Ívarssonar beytils, Qnundr var í móti Haraldi konungi í Hafrsfirði ok lét þar fót sinn. Eptir þat fór hann til Íslands ok nam land frá Kleifum til Ófæru, Kaldbaksvík, Kolbeinsvík, Byrgisvík, ok bjó í Kaldbak til elli.

Qnundr Wooden-Foot son of Ófeigr *burlufótr*, son of Ívarr Scouring-Rush. Qnundr stood against King Harald in Hafrsfjörðr and lost his foot there. After that he went to Iceland and took land from Kleifar as far as Ófæra, Kaldbaksvík, Kolbeinsvík, Byrgisvík, and lived in Kaldbakr until old age.

¹ For instance, Gunnell 2020; 2014; Valk and Sävborg 2018; Sävborg and Bek-Pedersen 2014; Frog 2014; Kaplan 2011. For a more exhaustive bibliography, see Gunnell 2020, 202. My article also contributes to the growing research on saga grave mounds and related phenomena, such as Laidoner 2020; Gunnell 2019, 2014; Bennett 2018, 2014; Mayburd 2014.

² Schjødt 2014; Mitchell 2014.

³ Ed. Jakob Benediktsson 1968. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

This is all that *Landnámabók* tells us about him. The chapter nonetheless continues for another few lines, giving a long list of relatives and descendants that culminates in the name of one of the great heroes of Icelandic saga literature: Grettir the Strong. Qnundr is linked to him through one his four sons: “Þorgrímr hærufollr, faðir Ásmundar, fǫður Grettis ens sterka” (“Þorgrímr Hoary-Head, the father of Ásmundr, the father of Grettir the Strong”: ch. S161=H130).

For Qnundr, this illustrious descendant means that he will later make another much bigger appearance in saga literature in the saga of his great-grandson, the first chapters of *Grettis saga* giving an account of Qnundr’s life (chs. 1-11).⁴ The saga describes him, among other things, as a mighty warrior who plundered in Scotland (ch. 1), and as one of the leaders who in the Battle of Hafrsfjörðr opposed the rise of a centralised Norwegian kingship, and this is where he lost his leg and acquired his sobriquet ‘Wooden-Foot’ (ch. 2). Having to leave Norway after Hafrsfjörðr, Qnundr first moves to Ireland and Scotland, where he further establishes himself as a great man and hero (chs. 3-6), before he reaches Iceland (chs. 8-11).

Having arrived in Iceland, he finds the land already largely settled, but a rich Icelander grants him the same huge settlement area that is described in the quotation from *Landnámabók* above, and to which he later adds two more fjords to the north (ch. 9). Considering how tiny, poor, and indeed on the brink of starvation many farms in this part of Strandir were in later centuries,⁵ this huge wealth in land has the air of an escapist fantasy of paradisiacal abundance projected onto the *illud tempus* of the Settlement Period. Over and above the mere size of Qnundr’s lands, one should note the claim of the saga that no agreement was made about the distribution of flotsam and jetsam, as this allegedly was so plentiful that such an agreement was unnecessary (ch. 9). At the time of the first settlement, of course driftwood would indeed have been plentiful, as it would have had accumulated for centuries (even millennia) without ever having been harvested. Yet in later centuries, and already during the time of the sagas, the rights to flotsam and jetsam were often a major bone of contention, so this detail too makes the saga account sound a little like a utopian Land of Cockayne.⁶ However that may be, having arrived in Iceland and secured land there, Qnundr is said to settle down in Kaldbakur, where he henceforth has his home until his death (ch. 11):

Qnundr bjó í Kaldbak til elli; hann varð sótt dauðr ok liggir í Tréfótshaugi; hann hefir fræknastr verit ok fimastr einfættr maðr á Íslandi.

Qnundr lived at Kaldbakr into his old age. He died of illness and is buried in

⁴ Ed. Guðni Jónsson 1936. *Grettis saga* is thought to have been written about one generation after the oldest extant recension of *Landnámabók* at the earliest; Simek and Hermann Pálsson (2007, p. 126) date it to 1320-30 or later, whereas the oldest extant recension of *Landnámabók* is dated c. 1275-1280 (Simek and Hermann Pálsson 2007, p. 241). For a complete translation of the saga see, for instance, Scudder 1997.

⁵ Cf. Jóhannes Jónsson 1968.

⁶ Cf. *Landnámabók* ch. H63 for an example of an argument about flotsam and jetsam that was so fierce that it led to a feud with a considerable death toll.

Tréfótshaugr, “Wooden-Foot’s Burial Mound”. He was the bravest and nimblest one-legged man ever to live in Iceland. 7

The biography thus concludes with Qnundr’s burial in a mound named after him. Here ends the account of his life and begins his presence in the local landscape of Kaldbaksdalur.

The burial mound Tréfótshaugr mentioned in the saga has potentially weighty consequences for our understanding of the genesis of this section of *Grettis saga*. As Rudolf Simek has shown, Tréfótshaugr plays a possibly central role in the interpretation of the first eleven chapters of the saga. Simek has made the very plausible suggestion that the literary elaboration of chapters 1-11 of *Grettis saga* is actually based on a very limited number of fixed points of information, which it merely elaborates: the sobriquet “Wooden-Foot”; Qnundr’s identity as a first-generation settler; his being an ancestor of Grettir the Strong; certain other literary and genealogical texts; and the place-name Tréfótshaugur in Kaldbaksdalur.⁸ Thus, in Simek’s interpretation, the mound becomes the basis of the person – or at least the person’s literary persona – rather than the other way round.⁹

The potential of the modern Tréfótshaugur to contribute to the interpretation of the saga passage makes it worthwhile investigating this mound in a little more detail. It has left a clear trail through the scholarly literature, although on closer scrutiny it becomes apparent that most of this literature only gets within a certain distance of the mound. Guðni Jónsson in his commentary on *Grettis saga* mentions that Tréfótshaugur is a “very big hill” (“allstór hóll”) in the uppermost part of Kaldbaksdalur above Kaldbaksvík.¹⁰ He gives no further information on this, but it seems a reasonable guess that he drew this information from P. E. Kristian Kålund’s historical topography of Iceland (1877-1882). Kålund mentions “Træfodshøj (Tréfótshaugur)” as a mound in the uppermost part of Kaldbaksdalur above Kaldbaksvík, although he notes that it seems quite big for a man-made mound (“temlig stor til at være menneskeværk”). Kålund also reports that it was fenced in by a stone wall.¹¹

Kålund too had not personally seen the mound, but refers to written accounts, the oldest one of which was composed by Jón Ólafsson from Grunnavík (b. 1705, d. 1779).¹² Jón was an Icelandic scholar who spent much of his life in Copenhagen and whose writings to this day have only been published in part. In a treatise on burial mounds

7 Translation adapted after Scudder 1997, p. 59.

8 Simek 2000, p. 260.

9 Simek thus takes an approach which differs from more widespread approaches based on the concept of ‘memory’ as, for instance, exemplified by Pierre Nora’s concept of the ‘memory place’/*lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1984-1992; for a detailed survey of ‘memory’ approaches in medieval Nordic contexts, see Glauser *et al.* 2018): instead of viewing the mound as a site of *remembrance*, he treats it as the basis for the *invention* of a tradition.

10 Guðni Jónsson 1936, p. 25, note 4.

11 Kålund 1877-1882, vol. 1, p. 627.

12 Góðvinir Grunnavíkur-Jóns s.a.

of “people of old times” (“Forn-mænd”), Jón gave the following description of the mound:¹³

I Strandesyssel i den Fjord kaldet Vejdelejsefjord, heller end i det Fjæld, som hedder Kaldbak, siger man at skulle være Ønunder Træfoeds Høj, om hvilken Grettis Historie foran formelder. Samme Ønunder Træfoed var fordum en Særøver, om hvilken de andre Røvere qvade saaledes:

Trolden annamme den ganske Træfoed,

Troldene styrte dem (Eder) alle.

Den Høj siger man at skal stande paa en Aebred eller en sandagtig Aabakke, og haver jeg hørt sige, at Jorden skal være der saa forblæst, og Gruus og Sand derpaa saaledes frafalden, at man for omtrent 17 Aar skal have seet et Kjedeløre, saa at man ikke havde meer Umage fornøden den at kunde naae, end at støde den med Foden frem ud af samme Bakke; men det vovede Ingen at gjøre af Frygt og indgroen Overtroe for forventede Missyn og Fataliteter.

In the Strandir district in the fjord called *Veðileysufjörður*, rather than on the mountain that is called *Kaldbakur*, is said to be the Mound of *Önundur Tréfótur*, about whom *Grettis saga* tells early on. That same *Önundur Tréfótur* was in the past a pirate, about whom the other pirates spoke thus:

The troll take the whole *Tréfótur*,

The trolls may overthrow them (you) all.

People say that the mound stands on a riverside or on the sandy bank of a river, and I have it heard said that the ground is so eroded by the wind there, and gravel and sand on it thus loosened that some 17 years ago people are said to have seen the handle of a cauldron, so that one would not have had to make more of an effort to be able to get it, than to push it with the foot out of the same bank. But nobody dared to do that out of fear and deeply rooted superstition of expected dreadful visions and misfortunes.

Kålund sees this eighteenth-century report as being quite inaccurate.¹⁴ The location it gives for the burial site of the saga hero certainly tallies neither with the saga account nor with later folkloristic material that will be discussed below. If one does not want to be quite as sceptical as *Kålund*, then it would be possible to argue that *Jón's* account could represent a genuine variant account of the localisation of the burial mound: possibly both the people of *Kaldbaksdalur* and the inhabitants of *Veðileysufjörður* claimed possession of the grave of their founding hero in oral tradition. This would not be unprecedented, as double localisations of a founder's burial mound are attested elsewhere in the region.¹⁵ Yet to the best of my knowledge, the localisation of the grave mound in *Veðileysufjörður* occurs only in this testimony and I have not been able to

¹³ *Jón Ólafsson* 1815, pp. 167-168. For the original of the poetry of which *Jón* gives a translation, see *Grettis saga* ch. 4.

¹⁴ *Kålund* 1877-1882, vol. 1, p. 627.

¹⁵ *Þorsteinn Erlingsson* 1954, pp. 347-348; *Jón Árnason* 1954-1961, vol. 4, p. 36. For a discussion and analysis of the multiple localisations of the burial mound of *Steingrímur tröllli*, the eponymous first settler of *Steingrímsfjörður*, see *Egeler* (forthcoming).

find any parallels to this idiosyncratic account. Therefore, also a more critical assessment is possible: the discrepancies may be due to Jón's distance from the object of his writing, as he was working maybe from memory in distant Copenhagen. Also, his account is explicitly based on hearsay (note his use of the phrases "siger man"/"people say" and "haver jeg hørt sige"/"I have heard it said"), and without first-hand knowledge of the place it would have been easy for him to get things wrong.

However that may be, the localisation of the burial mounds in Kaldbaksdalur is well-attested by 1817 at the latest. In that year, the Danish government instigated a first survey of Icelandic antiquities by launching an appeal to the incumbent priests of the Icelandic parishes to write reports about their local antiquities. In his response, Hjalti Jónsson, who at the time was the priest of the local church as well as being a local man from Strandir, gave an account of the two "Önundar Tréfóts háugar í Kaldbaksdal".¹⁶ He noted that Önundur was said to be buried in the smaller mound, while his ship and wealth were buried in the larger ("segist hann byggi þann minni enn Skip og Fie í þeim stærri"), and that one of the mounds had at some point been dug into, but not thoroughly ("Grafid hefur verid í annan háuginn, þó ei til hlítar"). Beyond that, Hjalti does not record any further legend traditions, but he gives an extremely detailed description of the topography of the part of the valley in which the mounds are situated; he even mentions a rock arch that bridges the river at the foot of the mounds and which can still be seen today. While the topographical details he includes are not as such important for the interpretation of the mounds, they are significant because they indicate personal acquaintance with the location: Hjalti's report reads as if he might even have drafted his description on site. This may make his report the oldest extant source that is clearly based on first-hand familiarity with the mounds.

Önundur's Mounds in their Local Context

With the published material increasing the confusion about Tréfótshaugur more than elucidating it, I propose a lateral approach to the topic: to consider both the detailed lay of the land and the local folklore of the part of Kaldbaksdalur where *Grettis saga*, Kálund, and Hjalti Jónsson locate the grave mound of Önundur Wooden-Foot.

In twentieth-century folklore, the alleged burial place of Önundur Wooden-Foot was still well known and clearly located: it was said to be found at the top of Kaldbaksdalur valley, an hour's walk from the farms down by the shore. If one approaches the site along the northern slope of the valley, the legendary burial comes into view only when one already is comparatively close: two striking mounds on the bank of the river, each the shape and size of a large Viking ship turned keel-upwards. Dark stepped cliffs surround them like a titanic amphitheatre, while the main tributary of the Kaldbaksá River falls down the mountainside behind the mounds in a sequence

¹⁶ Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1983, p. 441.

of foaming cataracts and waterfalls and above them rises the steam of the hot springs of Hveratunga (Fig. 1; Map 1).



Figure 1: Önundur's Mounds with the cataracts of the Kaldbaksá River in the background.



Map 1: The location of Önundur's Mounds in modern folklore, at the top of the valley Kaldbaksdalur. While this article is restricted to a discussion of the mounds (1), they are not the only supernatural story-place in the valley. Marked in grey are sites which will

not be discussed in the following but illustrate the wealth of material that modern folklore can bring to bear on the research discourse: (2) the gully Svansgjá in the cliffs of Kaldbakshorn, which can be entered by supernatural means (Egeler 2020); (3) Gullhóll, an *álagablettur* or “place of enchantments” that may not be violated (approximate former location, now levelled; on this type of sites cf. Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson 2019 and 2021; Gunnell 2018); (4) Stekkjarklettur, an elf-inhabited rock formation; (5) Torfholt, another *álagablettur*; (6) a site of an elf-encounter (Jón Árnason 1954-1961, vol. 3, pp. 21-22); (7) area with several sites, not all of which can be located exactly today: the holy well Heilsubót, Grýlubás (“Rock Basin of [the troll woman] Grýla”), and the rock pillar Kerling (whose name suggests a petrified troll). Based on the maps of the *Uppdráttur Íslands* (1:100 000), Sheet 32: Kúvíkur, 2nd edition 1944 (first drawn in 1914). Reproduction not to scale. Reproduced from the digitised edition published by the Icelandic National Library and University Library in Reykjavík (Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn) with kind permission of the library (Jökull Sævarsson, 03/05/2019).

In both local tradition and in the physical topography of Kaldbaksdalur, and in exact correspondence with Hjalti Jónsson’s description from 1817, there is not just one mound called Tréfótshaugar, but rather two mounds variously known as Önundarhaugar, Tréfótshaugar, or simply and most commonly Haugar:¹⁷ “Önundur’s Mounds”, “Wooden-Foot’s Mounds”, or just “Mounds”. Páll Guðjónsson, who was born at Kaldbakur in 1891 and lived there for the first 25 years of his life,¹⁸ described them in the following way:¹⁹

Fremst í dalnum við ána eru Önundarhaugar eða Haugar, tveir. [...] Sagt er, að Önundur tréfótur, landnámsmaður, sé grafinn í fremri haugnum, en skip hans í hinum. Hvergi er betra útsýni yfir dalinn en frá þessum stað. Sú sögn var, að ekki mætti grafa í haugana, en Gísli ríki á Bæ á Selströnd (f. 1793, d. 1862, *Strandamenn*, bls. 386), sem átti Kleifar, hefði átt að láta gera það. Þá átti þeim, sem grófu, að sýnast Kleifabær loga, svo að þeir hættu. Á neðri haugnum sést rask.

Uppermost in the valley by the river are the Önundarhaugar (“Önundur’s Mounds”) or Haugar (“Mounds”), two. [...] It is said that Önundur Wooden-Foot, the first settler, is buried in the mound to the front, and his ship in the other. Nowhere is there a better view over the valley than from this place. There was a legend that no one was allowed to dig into the mounds, but Gísli the Rich at Bær in Selströnd (b. 1793, d. 1862, *Strandamenn*, p. 386), who owned Kleifar, had that done. Then it is said that it seemed to those who were digging that the farm building of Kleifar was in flames, so they stopped. One can still see the disturbance on the lower mound.

¹⁷ Önundarhaugar: Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 19/11/1975, pp. 2, 6 (informant: Páll Guðjónsson, 1891-1992, from Kaldbakur in Strandir). Tréfótshaugar: Símon Jón. Ágústsson 1964, p. 1 (informant: Guðjón Guðjónsson, from Kaldbakur in Strandir). Haugar: Símon Jón. Ágústsson 1964, p. 1; Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 19/11/1975, p. 2; Matthías Helgason s.a. [Kleifar], p. 1 (roughly mid-twentieth century source; author dates: 1878-1966, farmer at Kaldrananes in Strandir; no information about informants given); Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 22/09/1975, p. 6 (informant: Páll Guðjónsson, on whom see above).

¹⁸ Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 22/09/1975, p. 1.

¹⁹ Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 19/11/1975, p. 2.

Several twentieth-century testimonies mention these mounds,²⁰ but Páll's is the most comprehensive single account. The other mentions of the mounds add the aforementioned variation in the forms of the mounds' names of Önundarhaugar, Tréfótshaugar, and Haugar, but contribute nothing about the mythology of the mounds, even though they are good evidence of the semi-lexicalised nature that Icelandic microtoponyms can have: 'Önundarhaugar' and 'Tréfótshaugar' are interchangeable because their meaning never became separated from their geographical referent. These terms are as much miniature-descriptions as they are fixed names and function equally as both.

The Haugar are a very good example of their kind, showing the close congruence that typically exists between local storytelling about places, the local topography, and the wider regional storytelling tradition. Their embeddedness in the storytelling tradition of Strandir begins with their interpretation as grave mounds. Indeed, the Mounds are actually two natural hills (Fig. 2),²¹ shaped by the forces of the water where a number of tributaries of the river Kaldbaksá meet at the top of the valley, and they form an elevated island at the valley bottom that is enclosed by riverbeds on both sides. The Mounds themselves are composed of gravel and stones, and the distinctive way in which the material is sorted – small stones towards the bottom, bigger stones on top – confirms that, in spite of their grave mound-like first appearance, they are natural landscape formations. Grave mounds of first settlers and founders of farms are a very common feature of Strandir folklore, and it is likewise common for such grave mounds that they are actually natural landscape features which are narratively reinterpreted as being burial mounds. Good examples are Steingrímshaugur on the mountain Staðarfjall above Staður, Mókollshaugur in Mókollsdalur, Ljúfuholt at Ljúfustaðir, Gestur at Gestsstaðir, Gullhóll at Tröllatunga, Skiphóll in Brunngil, or Goði in Goðdalur. Local storytelling interprets all of these mounds as being burial mounds from the Icelandic primordial *illud tempus* of the first settlement, but they all are natural hills.²²

²⁰ I am aware of the following in written form (for information on the informants, see note 17 above): Matthías Helgason s.a. [Kleifar], p. 1; Símon Jóh. Ágústsson 1964, p. 1; Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 22/09/1975, p. 6; Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 19/11/1975, pp. 2, 6. Furthermore, see pertinent audio recordings of interviews on <<https://www.ismus.is/>> (accessed 23/03/2020): an interview with Guðmundur Ragnar Guðmundsson dated 08/07/1970 (SÁM 91/2358 EF - 7) and an interview with Sigurður Guðjónsson dated 09/07/1970 (SÁM 91/2360 EF - 9).

²¹ Cf. also Ragnar Edvardsson 2002, pp. 90-91.

²² Steingrímshaugur: Jón Árnason 1954-1961, vol. 4, p. 36; Magnús Steingrímsson 1929, pp. 9-10. Mókollshaugur: Jón Árnason 1954-1961, vol. 2, p. 91; interview with Þorvaldur Jónsson recorded on 13/12/1973 (SÁM 91/2573 EF - 24, <<https://www.ismus.is/i/audio/id-1014865/>, 05/07/2020). Ljúfuholt: Þórður Bjarnason s.a., p. 6 (author dates: 1908-1983, from Ljúfustaðir in Strandir). Gestur: Þorsteinn Erlingsson 1954, pp. 348-349. Gullhóll: Þorsteinn Erlingsson 1954, p. 348. Skiphóll: Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 28/01/1977, p. 6 (informant: Sigríður Gísladóttir, 1898-1990, from Brunngil in Strandir). Goði: Guðrún Nielsdóttir 1976, p. 67. (The references are exemplary and do not aspire to completeness.)



Figure 2. Önundur's Mounds seen from the north-west.

Also very typical is the idea that such grave mounds contain treasure, that people once tried to break into the mounds to retrieve this treasure, and that this act of vandalism had consequences. The various versions of this legend all follow more or less the same pattern. Generally, the story goes that person X decided to break into the mound, but when people started digging, they saw the next farm / the nearby church burning, and therefore abandoned their enterprise; but they did not backfill the hole they had already dug, so this hole can still be seen and constitutes proof of the occurrence. A good and representative example is the following tale about the hill Gullhóll ("Gold Hill") on the farm Tröllatunga on Steingrímsfjörður, which was published in the 1950s on the basis of a manuscript written by Halldór Jónsson (1871-1912), who farmed on the neighbouring farmstead of Miðdalsgröf:²³

Framanvert við túnið í Tröllatúngu er hóll einn hár og brattur, sem Gullhóll heitir. Væri ekkert ólíklegra að þar væri haugur Steingríms, og að nafnið hefði breyst í seinni tíð. Sagt er, að í honum sje fólgið fje, og að oftar en einu sinni hafi átt að grafa í hann, en þá sýndist þeim, sem að greftrinum voru, bærinn eða kirkjan í Tröllatúngu standa í ljósum loga, svo hætt var við gröftinn. Auðsjeð er það að grafið hefur verið í hólinn að austnórðanverðu og það allmikið fyrir laung síðan.

Towards the front of the home field at Tröllatunga is a high and broad hill, which is called Gullhóll ("Gold Hill"). It is not unlikely that there was the grave mound of Steingrímur [the legendary first settler of Steingrímsfjörður, where Tröllatunga is located], and that the name has changed in later times. It is said that treasure is hidden in it, and that people supposedly dug into it more than once, but then it seemed to those who were digging

²³ Þorsteinn Erlingsson 1954, p. 348.

that the farm or the church at Tröllatunga was engulfed in bright flames, so the digging was aborted. It is easy to see that someone has dug into the hill in the northeast a very long time ago.

Very much the same story is told about Steingrímshaugur on Staðarfjall, about Skiphóll in Brunngil, about Ljufuholt, and about Mókollshaugur.²⁴ Indeed, the narrative of how the vision of a fire stops grave robbers from breaking into the mound of the founding hero is so fixed that there are even instances where such narratives are attached to grave mounds from which one cannot actually see the farmsteads that are supposed to have been burning, because there is no open sightline between the two.²⁵

Thus, Önundur's Mounds in Kaldbaksdalur exemplify a wider regional set of repeating patterns: they are not 'unique', but they repeat a recurring pattern of storytelling that is also found with other founders' graves throughout Strandir. Such a repetitive character does not appear to be a typical characteristic only of the storytelling landscape of Strandir, but is a recurrent trait of the makeup of mythological landscapes even in an intercultural perspective. Diana L. Eck in her study of the sacred geography of India again and again highlights that the 'grammar of sanctification' of Indian sacred geography is based on a systematic repetition and duplication of sacred features:²⁶ time and again, the same mythological motifs recur and give meaning to the landscape through this very act of repetition. The descent of the holy river Ganges is repeated in countless places,²⁷ just as a plethora of mountains are identified as the mountain on which Shiva dwells, the divine mountain ascetic par excellence.²⁸ Structurally, much the same appears to be happening in Kaldbaksdalur: the supernatural is not individual, but repetitive, and also Önundur's Mounds follow this rule and are a variation of a common motif rather than a unique feature of the valley.

The importance of the repetition of stock motifs and stock features even goes beyond those already mentioned (Table 1). Another typical, recurring element is the

²⁴ Steingrímshaugur: Magnús Steingrímsson 1929, p. 10; Helgi Guðmundsson 1933-1937, vol. 1, pp. 352-353. Skiphóll: pers. comm. by Óla Friðmey Kjartansdóttir and Ingþór Ólafsson, who farm in this valley. Ljufuholt: Þórður Bjarnason s.a., p. 6 (author dates: 1908-1983, from Ljufustaðir in Strandir). Mókollshaugur: audio recording of an interview with Þorvaldur Jónsson, dated 13/12/1973 (SÁM 91/2573 EF - 24) at <<https://www.ismus.is/>> (accessed 24/03/2020). Cf. also the Norwegian migratory legend type ML 8010: Christiansen notes that stories of hidden treasure are told in basically every Norwegian parish, recurrently containing the motif that the treasure-hunters see strange apparitions (Christiansen 1958, p. 215).

²⁵ Cf. Egeler (forthcoming). Two examples are Steingrímshaugur (Magnús Steingrímsson 1929, p. 10, where the story is adapted by claiming that the fire at the parsonage farm was seen when one of the would-be mound-breakers went back to fetch a tool) and Skiphóll (Óla Friðmey Kjartansdóttir and Ingþór Ólafsson, pers. comm., where the story is adapted by explaining that the illusionary blaze was of such size that its red glow could be seen even beyond the mountain that interrupts the sightline between mound and farm).

²⁶ Eck 2012, especially pp. 17-18.

²⁷ For example Eck 2012, pp. 38, 131-188.

²⁸ For example Eck 2012, pp. 198-199.

connection between a ship-shaped mound and the story of a ship burial. In Strandir, there are at least two more instances where a ship-shaped mound is associated with the burial of a founding hero in his ship. On the land of Goðdalur, the hill Goði is said to be the place where Goði – who in this story is the eponymous founding hero of Goðdalur – was buried in his ship;²⁹ and if one visits the place, there turns out to be a remarkably ship-shaped mound some 45 metres in length. Similarly in Skiphóll (“Ship Mound”) on the land of Þórustaðir, a certain Gull-Bárður is said to have been buried with his ship and his gold; his grave mound Skiphóll is “a big hill, similar to a big ship turned keel-upwards” (“stór hóll, líkur stóru skipi á hvolfi”).³⁰ This natural hill looks like a ship and is placed in such a way that it can be seen from all across – and indeed dominates – a very large part of the valley in which it is located.

Mound Motif	Önundar- haugar, Kaldbaks- dalur	Ljúfuholt, Ljúfustaðir	Steingríms- haugur, Staður	Mókolls- haugur, Mókolls- dalur	Skiphóll, Brunngil	Goði, Goðdalur	Gullhóll, Tröllatunga
Founder's burial	X	X	X	X	X	X	X occasionally
Treasure	X	X	X	X	X	hidden in nearby waterfall	X
Fire illusion protects treasure	X	X	X	X	X		X
Hole proves attempted grave robbery	X		X			(X) hole is given different explanation	X
Ship burial in ship- shaped mound	X				X	X	

Table 1: Some regional parallels to elements of the twentieth-century storytelling tradition about Önundur's Mounds. The table does not aim at being comprehensive. All founders' mounds included here are located in Strandir.

The last point – the dominant location of the mound – is yet another recurrent feature of many of these stories. It is prominent also in storytelling about the earlier-noted founder's burial mound Steingrímshaugur on the mountain of Staðarfjall above Steingrímsfjörður, two fjords south of Kaldbaksdalur. There, the extent of the view from the mound corresponds to the extent of the protection that the buried hero extends to ships in the area: he allegedly promised before his death that no ship would

²⁹ Guðrún Nielsdóttir 1976, p. 67.

³⁰ Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 28/01/1977, p. 6 (informant: Sigríður Gísladóttir, 1898-1990, from Brunngil in Strandir).

founder in the area that can be seen from his mound³¹ – which means that he promised to protect a vast stretch of sea, as the mound offers a wide, sweeping view over a good part of the fjord. The view one has from Önundur’s Mounds is a similarly striking feature of their location. If one stands at Önundur’s Mounds, one can see down the valley all the way to Kleifar and Kaldbakshorn – at least on days when the latter is not hidden by clouds (Fig. 3). Páll Guðjónsson even claimed that: “Nowhere is there a better view over the valley than from this place” (“Hvergi er betra útsýni yfir dalinn en frá þessum stað”). Páll’s statement, made in distant Keflavík in the 1970s,³² is particularly interesting, because it is actually not quite true.³³ If one stands on Önundur’s Mounds, the slight curvature of the valley means that its northern half is hidden from view; one has an even better, and indeed comprehensive, view of the valley from a few dozen metres south of the mounds. The way Páll remembered it, however, it was the mounds which had the comprehensive view. Exactly because this is not quite true, the statement shows how large the Mounds loomed in his mind and memory: while physically, the northern slope of the valley may block the view of the Mounds from part of the valley, *conceptually* the Mounds are the dominant feature, as they should be as the burial mounds of the valley’s founding hero.

This dominance has also left its traces in the microtoponymy of the top of the valley, a whole range of nearby landscape features deriving their names from the Mounds. Cut deeply into the steep northern slope of the valley is Haugagil, the “Ravine of the Mounds”, in front of which is Haugamýri, the “Marsh of the Mounds”. Above that is Haugahlíð, the “Slope of the Mounds”, and immediately downriver from the Mounds is Haugafljót, the “Stream of the Mounds”, a small section of the river below a waterfall, in which the water is particularly deep.³⁴ Another name is connected to the mounds not by a direct etymological reference, but by a story: the brook of Brúnslækur, “Brook of the Brown One”, on the southern side of the valley a bit east of the mounds. In a manner which is no longer evident, this brook was somehow connected with the earlier-noted legend of the failed attempt to break into the mounds, because a brown horse that belonged to Gísli the Rich died in it, giving it its name.³⁵

³¹ Cf. Magnús Steingrímsson 1929, p. 9; Þorsteinn Erlingsson 1954, pp. 347-348.

³² Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 22/09/1975, p. 1 (informant: Páll Guðjónsson, 1891-1992, from Kaldbakur in Strandir).

³³ A second, but less significant, instance where Páll’s memory seems to have slightly misled him is the information about the location of the hole left by the grave robbers: he locates this on the lower mound, whereas only the upper mound has a hollow that could have served as the topographical peg onto which the story was fastened.

³⁴ Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 22/09/1975, pp. 6, 8.

³⁵ Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 19/11/1975, p. 2 (informant: Páll Guðjónsson, 1891-1992, from Kaldbakur in Strandir).



Figure 3: The view over Öundur's Mounds towards Kleifar and Kaldbakshorn. Kaldbakshorn is hidden by clouds.

The Mounds were clearly a centre and a reference point not only for Páll's memory but also for those who named the surrounding land.

Sagas, Folklore – and Continuity?

In a study like this, which approaches a site that is connected with stories not only in modern folklore but also in medieval saga literature, the elephant in the room is of course always the question of continuities.³⁶ At the top of the valley, Öundur's Mounds are *the* dominant feature of the landscape of the valley. Even from the mouth of the valley at Kleifar, several kilometres away, one has a clear view of the Mounds rising up in the distance: the farm and the founder's grave are connected by an unbroken sightline. Christopher Tilley has remarked on the importance of such sightlines in the interpretation of landscapes,³⁷ and in fact, Icelandic folk storytelling has explicitly addressed the impact of sightlines long before Tilley formulated his theoretical approach to landscape.³⁸ This is where Páll Guðjónsson's remark in his account of Öundur's Mounds belongs: "Nowhere is a better view over the valley than

³⁶ Cf. Mitchell 2014.

³⁷ For instance, Tilley 1994, pp. 142, 204.

³⁸ One of the most famous examples probably is the story of the elf-church in Tungustapi, which revolves around a sightline that connects a human and an elf-church and ends with the relocation of the human church to break this sightline: Jón Árnason 1954-1961, vol. 1, pp. 32-35. Cf. Maurer 1860, p. 5.

from this place.” The importance of the Mounds correlates with the striking visual presence that they have in the valley. As soon as one knows which hills the Mounds are, their presence is much greater than their mere physical size would lead one to expect. Even though they are an hour’s walk away from the farms, the Mounds dominate most of the valley by being only a turn of the head away from the farm-life that plays itself out at its mouth.

Given their mound-like shape, dominant location, and visibility, the hills that twentieth-century folklore identified as the burial mounds of Önundur Wooden-Foot are the perfect site for the grave of a founding hero to such an extent that one wonders whether there really ever was a Tréfótshaugr burial mound other than them. For the twentieth century, they tell us something about the importance of location, sightlines, and the congruence between storytelling and landscape; and for the Middle Ages and pre-conversion religion, they raise the question (though they cannot answer it) of whether the founders’ grave-mounds really were grave-mounds, or were the graves of founding heroes conceptual rather than physical creations? Were (some) such graves always reinterpretations of natural landscape features that maybe evoked the real burial mounds of the ancestors which the new Scandinavian settlers had left behind in their old homeland? In a recent study of Norwegian and wider Nordic traditions that involved offerings at grave mounds belonging to farmsteads, Terry Gunnell concluded that, in all likelihood, there existed a deeply-rooted ‘ancestor worship’ at burial mounds in some areas of Norway.³⁹ Physically, such burial mounds would not have been transferable to Iceland when Norse settlers made a new home there from the ninth century onwards. But the *concept* of the founder’s grave mound could have been transferred – and could well have been attached to natural formations that looked like grave mounds and thus could act as stand-ins for the old ritual focus of the farm. While certainty cannot be achieved, the Önundarhaugar in shape and location are so *right* as the burial place of a founding hero that one cannot help but wonder whether such a grave can ever have been located anywhere else. In other words, it may well be that in this particular case, the Settlement Period story landscape of Kaldbaksdalur is represented more accurately by nineteenth and twentieth-century folklore (which talks of two physically identifiable mounds) than by *Grettis saga* (which talks of only one mound). In terms of distance in time, the author of *Grettis saga* was of course much closer to the Settlement Period than more recent folklore; but on the other hand, we know that the modern folklore about Kaldbaksdalur genuinely stems from Kaldbaksdalur, whereas we have no idea how closely acquainted the author of *Grettis saga* really was with the local traditions of this valley. Might it be that in some cases local proximity to the material is more important than temporal proximity?⁴⁰

In his classic study of *Hrafnkels saga*, Sigurður Nordal has presented us with a strong warning against being overly optimistic in taking continuities between

³⁹ Cf. Gunnell 2014, pp. 27-35.

⁴⁰ Cf. Gunnell 2014, pp. 23-24. For an instance of a medieval Icelandic author misrepresenting traditions about an area he appears not to have been directly acquainted with, see Egeler 2016, pp. 302-304.

medieval and modern toponymy at face value. Where we find a medieval place on a modern map, we have to reckon with the possibility that modern names that correspond to medieval ones may be based on antiquarian re-naming, maybe even after long periods of abandonment, rather than representing genuine continuity.⁴¹ For the Tréfótshaugr of *Grettis saga*, this warning is particularly pertinent: *Grettis saga* clearly speaks of one mound whereas nineteenth- and twentieth-century tradition in Kaldbaksdalur identifies two Öundurhaugar. The same applies to Jón Ólafsson's eighteenth-century account which does not at all fit the twentieth-century situation. Indeed, Jón Ólafsson's account does not tally that well with the medieval texts either, for why should the owner of Kaldbakur be buried in Veiðileysufjörður, as Jón claims? What this material suggests is fluidity and transformation at least as much as continuity. By the early twentieth century at the latest, however, there was a congruence between landscape and storytelling which is so perfect that it makes it hard to imagine that there should once have been a 'better' version of the story. But did the author of *Grettis saga* get it wrong, or did the farmers of Kaldbaksdalur simply tell it better? Here, it is important to keep in mind Jens Peter Schjødt's warning that it would be difficult to claim that medieval saga literature and modern folklore are fundamentally different in their nature.⁴² This also affects the issue of which of the two, where they differ, paints the 'truer' picture.

Often we cannot know the answer to this question. If we want to get insights transferable to the study of the Icelandic pre-conversion period, they will not necessarily lie in continuities, which frequently remain elusive. Taking up another idea formulated by Schjødt on a theoretical level,⁴³ I would suggest that for those interested in the pre-Christian past, studying the supernatural landscape of modern Icelandic folklore in connection to topography is primarily of intense typological interest. It illustrates in great detail how a living mythological landscape can work: as a landscape that combines a close congruence between storytelling and physical topography with the recurring repetition of quite fixed patterns of storytelling. Such a landscape squares the narrative-topographical circle by managing to create a seamless welding-together of fixed narrative stock motifs with the specific local lay of the land. Coming from Iceland, the way in which Kaldbaksdalur illustrates this is all the more valuable since (to use Schjødt's term) it is 'genetically' linked to Old Norse tradition, as there is of course a direct historical connection between modern and medieval Iceland.⁴⁴ This example also opens up a perspective on the question of 'historicity' where the 'historically true' might itself be both utterly historical and utterly unhistorical at the same time: for the case of Öundur's Mounds suggests that a founder's burial mound might first and foremost not be a place of burial, but a place of storytelling. Though ultimately we do not know, this might well have applied already to the medieval

⁴¹ Sigurður Nordal 1958, p. 24.

⁴² Schjødt 2014, pp. 42, 50-53, 57. Similarly: Gunnell 2014, pp. 17-18.

⁴³ Schjødt 2014, pp. 42, 54, 56. Similarly: Gunnell 2020, p. 204; Gunnell 2014, p. 36.

⁴⁴ Schjødt 2014, pp. 54-55.

landscape of *Landnámabók* and the sagas in much the same way in which it applied to the landscapes of later folklore.

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