

Pedestrian Research or Walking as Method

Matthias Egeler

Institut für Skandinavistik, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

Abstract

In the history of religions, both places and stories play a central role: places are where human religious life plays itself out – ‘takes place’ –, while telling stories is one of the main ways how human beings communicate about the invisible others that are gods, saints, spirits, and magic powers. This article will discuss how fieldwork-based research can bring both places and stories together. A substantial category of supernatural storytelling consists in narratives that are connected to specific locations in the physical landscape, such as narratives about manifestations of supernatural entities or foundation legends. The article explains how it can be a fruitful approach to such narratives to systematically walk both the sites and the connecting routes between the sites that these stories are associated with. In analogy to the technique of a ‘close reading’ in the study of literature, a ‘close walking’ of story places can help to establish their contexts in everyday life, including aspects such as land use, economy, social frames of reference, or topography. Sometimes it can even shed light on the composition of narratives, as lines of sight in the physical topography can interrelate with the motifs used in a story.

Keywords

Walking; landscape; storytelling; case study Iceland.

Stories – myths, legends, saints’ lives, gospels, and many others – have formed one of the central topics of the study of religions right from its emergence as a field of research in the nineteenth century, and continue to be important to this day. There have of course been major shifts in emphasis. While Max Müller was interested in the origins of mythology through etymology, for instance, Tanya M. Luhrmann now studies narratives as a way how belief in ‘invisible others’ is created and affirmed (Luhrmann 2020, esp. pp. 25–57). Yet the importance of narratives remains, and this article will highlight one way how certain kinds of narratives can be approached in fieldwork. A prominent class of narratives in the study of religions are stories that are directly tied to specific, clearly identified places: *here* Apollo slew Python; *here* Heracles killed the Stymphalian Birds; *here* the Buddha was born; *here* the Virgin Mary appeared to three children; *here* the local patron saint blessed a dangerous road, and no accidents have happened there ever since. Based on my ongoing research in Iceland, more specifically in the Strandir district of the Icelandic Westfjords, on the following pages I will try to highlight how systematically walking story places can be a tool to contextualise and better understand the workings of narratives about ‘invisible others’ (to use Luhrmann’s

term). In order to do this, I will first present three concrete examples in which walking stories has added new facets to my understanding of tales of the supernatural. After this, I will present some general thoughts on how field research can profit from using a ‘close walking’ just as literary scholarship would use a ‘close reading’, and on how walking story places can create points of contact with both historic stories and present-day local inhabitants.

Example 1: Magic fish

During a long fieldwork stay in Iceland, one day I ran out of things to do and decided to go for a walk. The destination of this walk was the lake of Gedduvatn, whose name means ‘Pike Lake’. Gedduvatn is a small body of water on the uplands of Bæjardalsheiði in the Icelandic Westfjords, and at the time I had been thinking about it a lot. The reason why it occupied my mind was that it is connected with an anecdote about the sorcerer Þormóður from the Gvendareyjar islands, who is a well-established figure of local supernatural storytelling. In this storytelling tradition, Þormóður tends to appear as a kind and helpful character who defends people in need against evil supernatural beings. The story about Gedduvatn, however, treats different themes. In the 1930s, the lake was owned by the farmer Stefán Pálsson, who noted down the following little tale (Stefán Pálsson 1934, 1; my translation):

The sources of the Mjóadalsá river are in a lake that is called Gedduvatn (‘Pike Lake’), that is a lake in the middle of the mountains. I have heard that traditional story that a certain Þormóður, who is said to have lived on the Gvendareyjar islands and was both a poet and a sorcerer, on one occasion caught a pike (*gedda*) in this lake, and he then gave the lake this name.

As the story stands in this written account, its punchline is the naming of the lake: a poet-sorcerer pulls a pike out of a mountain lake and then names it ‘Pike Lake’. Stories explaining place-names are very common in Iceland, so having a story that explains the name of ‘Pike Lake’ was not in and by itself surprising. Explaining names is just what much of Icelandic storytelling does. There were a couple of aspects, however, that puzzled me. One was that there actually are no pike in Iceland: so why is the lake named from a fish that locally does not occur? And the other was: why this lake? If you look at Gedduvatn on the modern published maps of Iceland, you will note that different maps allocate the name ‘Gedduvatn’ to different lakes, raising the question of which lake actually is Gedduvatn. Yet all candidates seem to be located in the middle of nowhere: the upland of Bæjardalsheiði forms part of the uninhabited mountainous spine of the Westfjords, and Gedduvatn is located right in the middle of it, about halfway between the coasts to the north-east and south-west and about as far from the next settlements as you can get in that part of the country.



Fig. 1: Lake Gedduvatn with one of the cairns marking the old bridle path across Bæjardalsheiði. Photo © M. Egeler.

The question of the location of Gedduvatn was resolved by Unnar Ragnarsson, a lively old man who in his youth had worked on the farm that Gedduvatn belongs to and who could pinpoint the lake and its relationship to the watershed: not only on the map, but also in terms of hydrology the lake is located right in the middle between the coasts, as the water from this lake drains towards the north-east, while the next lake (less than 100 m further on) drains towards the south-west.

At this point I had reached an impasse: I knew where the lake was and I knew its story as it was told in the 1930s, but it did not seem to be anything more than a run-of-the-mill place-name tale as they are so common in the region. I had no idea why this remote lake had a story and why the sorcerer should have gone there. Yet there was no obvious way of tackling these questions, so for the time being I gave them up as a lost cause.

When a while later I found myself with some time on my hands, I decided to have a look at the lake – not in the hope of finding anything, but just because I wanted to see this elusive little place. While Gedduvatn is located in an upland area a couple of kilometres from the next road, it is not particularly difficult to access: getting there from the valley of Arnkötludalur and the closest modern road really is a walk, not a climb. So walk there I did, and when I got there, I found that many people had done so before me, albeit from a different direction. For arriving at Gedduvatn, I found that a row of massive drystone cairns runs along its shoreline, and from there continues both to the north-east and to the south-west until it disappears behind the horizon (Fig. 1). Relying on modern maps and satellite images, I had entirely missed that Gedduvatn is a waypoint on the historic bridle path that connects the two fjords of Steingrímsfjörður in the north and Króksfjörður in the south, and which was marked with cairns at some point around 1900. This of course now explained why the sorcerer Þormóður in the story came past this lake: if you cross the mountain range, Gedduvatn simply is one of the places that you pass. On this historic route, Gedduvatn marks

the half-way point between the shores as well as – being at the watershed – the end of the ascent and the beginning of the descent to the next fjord on the other side of the mountains. In other words, it is a natural place to take a break, as the sorcerer does in the story.

Returning from this excursion to the offices of my host institution, the Folklore Centre in nearby Hólmavík, none of my colleagues there were at all surprised. The local researchers of course all knew the old route; to them it was so obvious a piece of information that nobody had ever thought to mention it. Yet the resulting conversation did yield another piece of the puzzle for understanding the story about Gedduvatn: for it turned out that a curious local farmer had a while back put out nets in Gedduvatn to find out what kind of fish it contained, if any; and he found that the lake contains a variety of trout, which had an unusually loamy and earthy taste.

The loamy taste of the fish in Gedduvatn, however, is more than just a quaint detail: it is a direct inversion of what is happening in the story. In the story, the sorcerer pulls a pike out of the lake, which is a particularly good and rare food fish. The actual fish in the lake, in contrast, is both a much more common species and of unusually bad taste. The story and the place-name of Gedduvatn thus directly play on the local topography, land use, and local wildlife, but not by simply depicting them, but by inverting important aspects of them: the story is a roadside story that is based on the historical use of Gedduvatn as a waypoint on the bridle path across Bæjardalsheiði, but while Gedduvatn in reality is a lake of funny-tasting fish, the story and the place-name turn it into a lake of particularly tasty fish. This both plays on the miracle-working power of the sorcerer Þormóður and makes an ironic commentary on the less-than-desirable realities of Gedduvatn as a resting spot. Gedduvatn for me thus held an important lesson for fieldwork methodology: if I had not walked to the story place, I would never have understood what the story is all about.

Example 2: A crying ghost

A few kilometres to the north-east of Gedduvatn, and on the same mountain, is Ýluskarð. A *skarð* is a notch in the edge of a mountain ridge that provides a more or less convenient point to cross it; and *Ýluskarð* is the ‘Notch/Pass of Howling’. In a variety of local sources from throughout the twentieth century, the ‘Pass of Howling’ is described as a place haunted by the ghost of one or more dead children that had been exposed there and left to die. In a number of stories, this haunting is described as manifesting itself through sounds of crying as well as through phantom lights, and the origin of the haunting is sought in the evil deeds of a certain Keralín. This Keralín was a notoriously unpopular and deeply mistrusted person of local legend. He was said to have lived at Kerasteinn in Tungudalur valley, two valleys south of Ýluskarð, and to have exposed his children at Ýluskarð; and the ghosts of these



Map 1: Some of the story places of Bæjardalsheiði: 1: Ýluskarð, which is haunted by the ghosts of Keralín’s children. 2: Kerasteinn, where Keralín had his farm. 3: Gedduvatn, the ‘Pike Lake’ where the sorcerer Þormóður caught a pike. Base map: section of Generalstabens Topografiske Kort, sheet Tröllatunga – 33 Óspakseyri N.V. (published 1914), based on the digitized copies of the Icelandic National and University Library (Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn), used with permission (Jökull Sævarsson).

infants have haunted the pass forever after (Jón Kr. Guðmundsson 1989, 15; Gísli Jónatansson 1985, 128).

Today, Ýluskarð is visited only occasionally. As it had been the case with my visit to Gedduvatn, my plan to walk up to Ýluskarð proved a conversation starter. For asking for directions to the pass, I got much more than just its location. Hafdís Sturlaugsdóttir, a local colleague who is also involved in sheep farming, filled me in about the use of the pass in the context of herding sheep and the occasionally exasperating behaviour of individual ewes. There is no road to or through the pass, but sheep, which during the summer months freely roam through the mountains, use it with such frequency that their hoofs have formed a clearly visible track that passes through Ýluskarð. Consequently, when the sheep are collected in autumn, this often involves chasing them down from or through the pass. So in

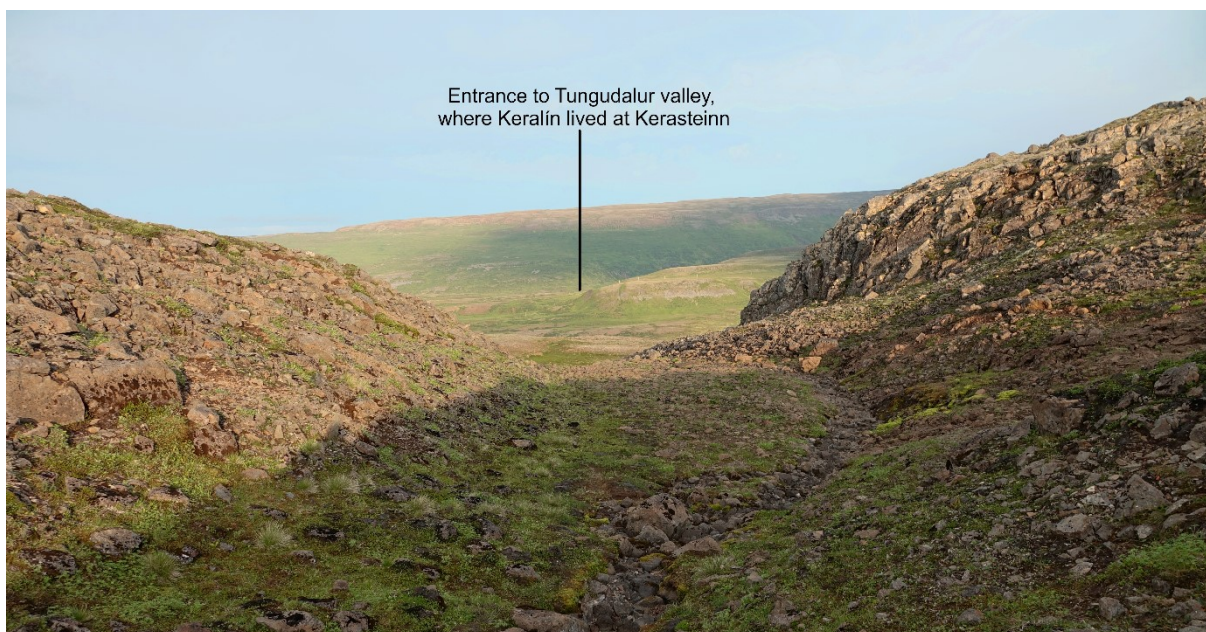


Fig. 2: Descending from Ýluskarð, the lay of the land guides the walker's gaze towards the entrance of Tungudalur valley, where the infanticide Keralín is said to have lived on his farm Kerasteinn. Photo © M. Egeler.

the context of annual agricultural tasks Ýluskarð was and is visited infrequently but regularly.

On this basis, my working hypothesis about the origin of the name and story of Ýluskarð was that maybe the pass has its name 'Pass of Howling' from how the wind howls through it, which would be experienced by visitors during shepherding; this would be in line with typical patterns of Icelandic place-storytelling, which often plays with the names and physical properties of places. Walking up to Ýluskarð on an almost windless day to test this hypothesis, it turned out that Ýluskarð indeed forms a remarkable local wind channel even when further down the mountain there is hardly any wind to speak of. From the howling of the wind in the pass, the idea of the howling of a tormented ghost did not seem far off even on a sunny summer's day.

Another question, however, as yet remained unanswered: why the connection with Keralín, who was said to have lived two valleys away? If one looks at the map (Map 1), there is no obvious reason why Ýluskarð should be connected with the person of Keralín, nor do the different versions of the story of Ýluskarð give a reason for why Keralín reputedly chose this pass to expose his newborn children. So I stood in the gap between the rocks inside the pass, listened to the howling of the wind, wondered about what leads from here to Keralín, and ultimately turned back.

Walking back down into the valley provided the key. Walking down the mountain, the view of the walker is automatically turned directly towards the opening of Tungudalur valley, where the story locates Keralín's farm (Fig. 2). Not only is there a clear line of sight, but due to the specific orientation of the landscape features involved, the entrance to Tungudalur is directly in the centre of the view of a walker making his or her way down the mountain. Thus, walking the route taken in herding sheep creates an immediate visual connection between

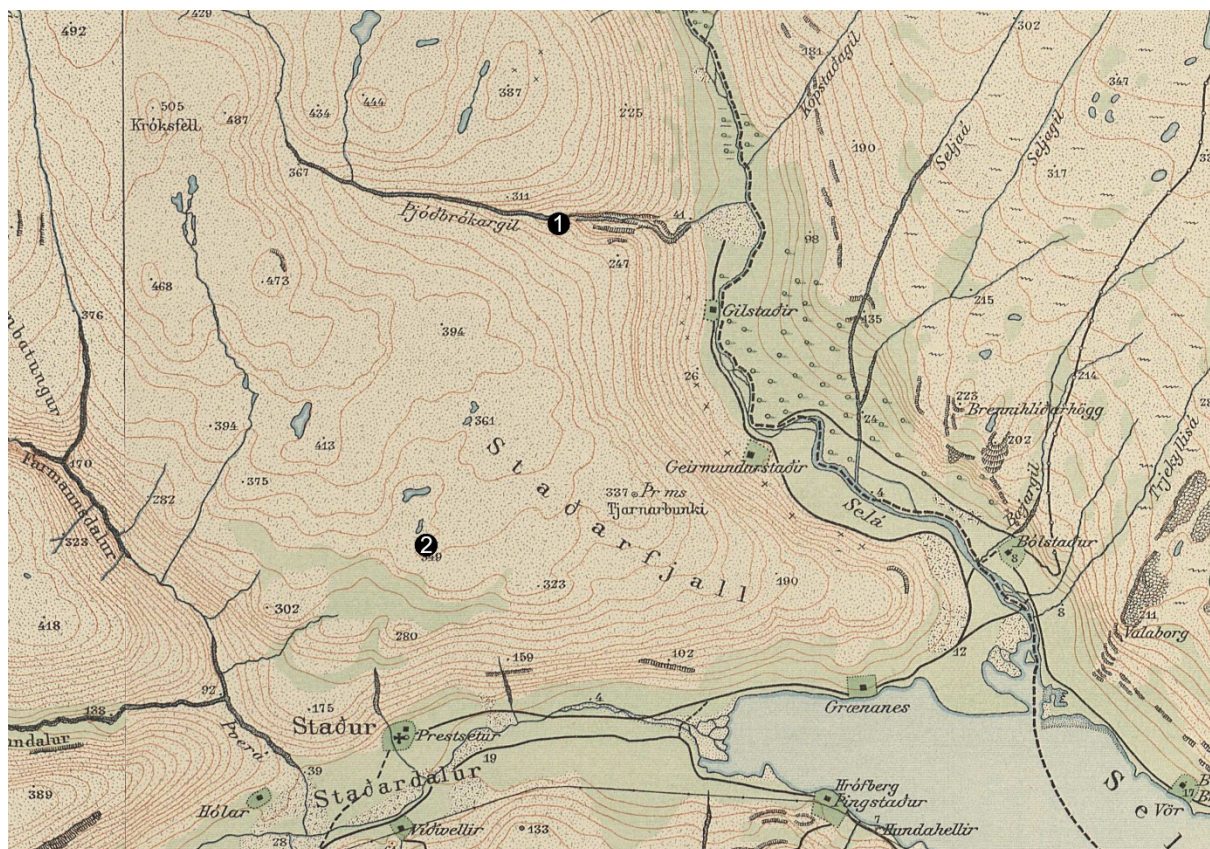
the sheep trail through Ýluskarð and Keralín's valley: on the map, this relationship is inconspicuous, but physically re-walking the shepherding route makes it blatantly obvious. Keralín comes into the story of Ýluskarð because everybody walking the route over Ýluskarð has him – or at least his home – essentially in front of his or her eyes. So again, walking the story place and the traditional route that leads to it had provided the decisive clue for why the elements of this story had been fitted together in the way they are.

Example 3: A mountain troll

Why is a natural hill interpreted as the burial mound of a founding hero? And why is the area near this alleged burial mound haunted by a troll? That were two of the questions that puzzled me about the plateau on top of the mountain of Staðarfjall, above the church of Staður at the head of Steingrímsfjörður fjord. In sources from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this plateau is connected with a range of stories. Some have to do with Steingrímur *tröllli*, the traditional founding hero and name-giver of 'Steingrímur's Fjord' Steingrímsfjörður; others have to do with the troll woman Þjóðbrók. Both groups of stories made me wonder why they are located on Staðarfjall.

In local traditional storytelling, Steingrímur is said to have been the first settler in Steingrímsfjörður (e.g., Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1983, 438; Magnús Steingrímsson 1929, 9–10; Magnús Steingrímsson and Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 1953, 5): he arrived there during the first settlement of Iceland during the Viking Age in the ninth and tenth centuries, took land at the fjord, and named it after himself. After his death, he was buried in Steingrímshaugur, 'Steingrímur's Burial Mound', which is identified with a rocky hill on Staðarfjall, the mountain that rises above the church of Staður; from there, he is said to protect all ships on the fjord that sail within sight of his gravemound. One of the remarkable aspects of this alleged burial mound is that from the earliest extant testimonies onwards, local inhabitants again and again highlight that the traditional burial mound does not look like a burial mound, but clearly is a natural rock outcrop. So why is this hill identified as the burial site of the local founding hero? I went to Staður and from there walked up to Steingrímshaugur, found Steingrímshaugur (unsurprisingly) indeed to look utterly natural, and went down again none the wiser. It clearly is a natural hill, and why it should be connected with the burial of the local founder is not in the least obvious. Or at least it is not if you approach it from Staður.

Another set of tales centres on the troll woman Þjóðbrók (e.g., Magnús Steingrímsson and Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 1953, 7–8). On one occasion, the story goes, this troll got enamoured with one of the shepherds of the parsonage farm of Staður. When this shepherd



Map 2: The way to church in Staður from the valley of Selárdalur. 1: Þjóðbrók. 2: Steingrímshaugur, where the brook has its source that from there flows directly to the church. Selárdalur ('Valley of the Selá River') is the valley that runs vertically through the map section; its inhabitants were part of the congregation of the church in Staður and attended it by crossing Staðarfjall. The location of the church is marked on the southern foot of the mountain. Sections of *Generalstabens Topografiske Kort*, sheets *Steingrímsfjarðarheiði - 22 Langadalströnd S.A.* (published 1915) and *Hrófberg - 32 Kúvíkur S.V.* (published 1915). Composite version based on the digitized copies of the Icelandic National and University Library (Landsbókasafn Íslands - Háskólabókasafn), used with permission (Jökull Sævarsson).

was minding his flock on the northern part of the plateau of Staðarfjall, the troll grabbed him and abducted him to her cave, where she kept him prisoner. To escape his captivity, the young man thought up a plan. He told the troll that he had fallen ill and lost all his appetite, and if anything the only thing he could possibly eat would be fermented shark that should be at least twelve years old. Þjóðbrók, who in her own way felt very protective of the shepherd, thought that she would be able to procure this kind of food, and went off to the seashore to find some. During her absence, the shepherd managed to escape from the troll cave and started to make his way towards Staður. Yet Þjóðbrók returned before the shepherd was able to reach the parsonage, spotted him, and took up pursuit. The chase led them down the mountain and to the church, where the shepherd reached the church building just ahead of the troll. With metres to spare, he managed to grab the rope of the bell that was suspended in the church's porch, and the ringing of the bell chased away the troll, as no troll can bear the sound of church bells. Thus, the troll had to return to her lair without her prey, and later she was caught out by the morning sun and turned to stone. The rock pillar that she was



Fig. 3: The petrified troll Þjóðbrók on the rim of ‘Þjóðbrók’s Canyon’ Þjóðbrókargil. Photo © M. Egeler.

transformed into can be seen to this day, and bears the name of the troll it had once been: Þjóðbrók.

The landmarks that this story is connected with span the whole breadth of Staðarfjall mountain. The shepherd was abducted by the troll woman somewhere on the northern part of the mountain plateau; the troll herself is a rock pillar in the side of the canyon Þjóðbrókargil (‘Þjóðbrók’s Canyon’) on the northern edge of Staðarfjall; and the church of Staður is located directly south of the mountain at its foot (Map 2). Furthermore, the movements described in the story seem to represent something like the way to and from the church. On one level at least, this is a story about how a young labourer came to the church to partake of its salvific power, which, in the form of the power of the church bells, saved him from evil. Yet if this is so, I thought, it might be interesting that the way across Staðarfjall was the normal route to church for the part of the congregation that lived in Selárdalur valley.

My earlier walk from Staður to Steingrímshaugur had not really yielded anything interesting. So now I tried to walk the story places of the tale of Þjóðbrók, following the traditional route from Selárdalur valley to the church in Staður. The first part of this route is the way up to the plateau of Staðarfjall, which is accessed with comparative ease by following the southern edge of the canyon Þjóðbrókargil. Following the canyon rim, however, not only gets you up the mountain; it also gets you to the petrified troll (Fig. 3). Þjóðbrók is a remarkably leave-shaped rock tower that juts out of the canyon wall, as if the troll had been

caught by the sun while on the way to or from a cave that may be hidden somewhere in the depths of the gorge.

This petrified troll is not only a story site; it also constitutes a landmark, because here the route to Staður leaves the canyon and turns south towards the interior of Staðarfjall. From this point onwards, the steep sides of the mountain give way to a very gentle slope and an almost-level plateau. If one follows this gentle slope south into the interior of the mountain while keeping Þjóðbrók's canyon at one's back, the near-perpendicular northern rock wall of Þjóðbrókargil canyon stays in view for a long time. I kept half an eye on this cliff while continuing along the old trail to Staður, and finally, at the point when Þjóðbrókargil canyon was about to disappear from view, things got interesting: because just as the canyon was beginning to disappear, Steingrímshaugur became visible in the distance. There is a very small area in the middle between the canyon of the petrified troll and the founder's burial mound where both the canyon wall and the mound are visible. So it turned out one can walk from the one to the other while always having at least one landmark in view. As soon as one has spotted Steingrímshaugur, however, it is virtually impossible to lose one's way: for a small brook runs along the foot of Steingrímshaugur that flows directly down to the church at Staður and passes the church building within tens of metres. So from the mound, one only has to follow the flow of the water to reach the church.

Re-walking the old route from Selárdalur to Staður thus offers an answer to how the stories of the founder's burial mound and of the troll hang together: these stories highlight a network of landmarks which, taken together, unambiguously mark the mountain route from Selárdalur to the church in Staður. This gives a social context to these story places – the way to church across the mountain – and it explains why the obviously natural hill Steingrímshaugur was connected with a story: because it serves as an important waymark. If you have to cross the mountain to attend mass in Staður, Steingrímshaugur is one of the most important reference points for orientation, and in this very concrete and down-to-earth sense it offers protection to travellers – just as it offers protection to the ships that sail the fjord. Importantly, this connection between the stories and the route to church is not mentioned in any of the extant archival materials. The only way to establish this connection is by walking the historic route with an eye on its stories.

The pedestrian method: 'close walking'

There is a huge literature on walking as a way of experiencing and understanding places and their cultural overlays. Walking stands in the centre of much of the literature of Romanticism, with William Wordsworth (1770–1850) or Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) as prime examples (cf. Thoreau 2012 [1863]; Pangborn 2017; Gaillet-De Chezelles 2010; Jarvis 1997). When Realism came in vogue, walking was used as a literary form of producing and organizing knowledge by authors like Theodor Fontane (1819–1898) in his *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg* ('Walks through the March of Brandenburg', 1862–1882). In the early decades of the twentieth century, modernity had a paragon of walking in Walter Benjamin

(1892–1940). Benjamin’s work, drawing heavily on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), included a Renaissance of the *flâneur*. This *flâneur* was understood as a figure aimlessly strolling the streets of the city, observing the lives that were playing out there in their manifold details, and – through walking – turning dead data into lived experience (e.g., Benjamin 2011, II, 857–58; cf. Tally 2013, 95–99, 130–32). Later in the twentieth century, W. G. Sebald (1944–2001) employed walking as a practice as well as a literary trope to delve into the history and associations of the English landscape (1995), while Tim Robinson (1935–2020) undertook a decades-long project of walking, mapping, and describing landscapes in the west of Ireland (1985ff.). Authors like Rebecca Solnit or Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) employed the history of and thinking about walking as a lens for, among other things, social critique and analyses of social power structures (de Certeau 1984; Solnit 2014). In the context of the rising interest in environmental issues within the arts and humanities, more recent collections of essays by David Borthwick, Pippa Marland, and Anna Stenning (Borthwick et al. 2020), as well as by Alice Tarbuck and Eleanore Widger (Tarbuck and Widger 2017), have explored walking both as a creative and as an investigative practice that can help to bring the human relationship to the environment into focus.

Until quite recently, most by far of what has been written on walking was highly literary rather than academic. Often, however, such texts are nothing less reflexive for being written for a broader audience. At the moment, we can even observe a trend of making the insights of literary writing on walking fruitful for the academic discourse. Thus, Pippa Marland (2015) and John Wylie (2012) have grappled with Robinson’s concept of ‘the good step’ or ‘the adequate step’: a step which, while covering a stretch of ground, would be fully aware of all the different layers of meaning and associations connected with this piece of ground (esp. Robinson 2008, 19–20). At the same time, anthropological research is highlighting the epistemological importance that walking can have in some cultural contexts. Thus, Alice Legat’s ethnographic research among the Tł̥ch̥q̥ of north-western Canada has explored the importance that the Tł̥ch̥q̥ traditionally ascribe to walking to places of storytelling that are significant for their history and culture: in their traditional understanding, only by walking to the place of a story and by engaging with it in a reverent manner does one fully realise the meaning of the stories and truly experience them (Legat 2008).

What I want to highlight in this article takes up this research trend, but is rather more basic. Cases like that of the lake Gedduvatn by the old bridle path across Bæjardalsheiði, of the haunted pass of Ýluskarð, and of the ensemble of storytelling sites between the valley of Selárdalur and the church in Staður bring to the fore that sometimes walking to and between places can make fundamental contributions to understanding archival material about local storytelling and ‘folk belief’. In Iceland, there are outstandingly rich collections of archival documentation of the last two centuries or so of ‘folk belief’ and ‘folk storytelling’. All stories discussed above were taken from archives, and even though I met some of these tales again in living oral tradition, the archive was the starting point of my research. The archival

character of this research also was the reason why the walks described above were solitary ones: if one were working on contemporary material, by far the best way of taking a walk of course would be in the company of the local people whose landscape one is trying to understand. That I undertook my walks alone was the consequence of the historical nature of my study rather than a point of method in and by itself: studying historical material, I had to use historical documentation as a stand-in for local company, even though having such local company always would be the better option. Yet even in this less than ideal situation, the archival materials still could be supplemented by engaging with the places that they describe. Even though the landscape has changed since the archival materials were created, it is only ‘out there’ in the landscape where the stories are set that important contexts become clear, which help to pinpoint some of the contexts of traditional stories about supernatural and legendary beings. Or in other words: even if one is dealing with historical storytelling and dusty archives, walking the sites connected with these materials still can be an important means of gathering additional data, whether they be concerned with social frameworks, land use, or connections created by lines of sight. Walking to sites of storytelling and ‘folk belief’ can help to understand their contexts.

It is important to emphasize that walking to places of belief and storytelling is not about communing with them in the way a Romantic poet would have done. Walking sometimes still carries cultural associations of deep, existential, even spiritual experiences, and one has to be wary of falling into the trap of letting a walk turn into a Romantic quest (cf. Jamie 2008). While walking to places can be important and enlightening, it should remain a rather pedestrian affair and free of poetic over-emphasis. Walking sites is a technique of gathering contextual information, not of existential experience; its aim is nothing less, but also nothing more than helping us to understand the lived environments of past and present people. In some ways, walking as a fieldwork technique can be compared to the technique of ‘close reading’ that is a basic tool of studying literary texts (see Culler 2010). A close reading is a slow, attentive reading of a literary work that pays scrupulous attention to its most minute details. A crucial characteristic of close reading is a slowing down of the reading. It decelerates the reading process to such an extent that it engenders a certain estrangement from the text, which allows new details to become visible; thus, it focuses the reader’s attention on aspects that he or she had not noticed before. Walking to places can serve as a technique to enforce a slowing down just like the one that characterises a literary close reading. The story of Gedduvatn only is a couple of lines long and can be read in seconds; yet if one walks there, the engagement with the story is stretched from seconds to hours. Walking to sites, like a close reading of texts, is a slow affair, and part of its value lies in enforcing slowness. It creates an attentiveness to details that allows new contexts to become visible. Thus, just like literary texts can be subject to a close reading, archival materials about lived beliefs and lived cultures of storytelling can be subject to a ‘close walking’.

In addition to enforcing a slowing down of the engagement with the material, such a close walking also establishes what Oscar Aldred has called ‘a shared point of contact’ (Aldred

2021, 164). By re-walking the routes used by other people in the present and the recent past, we establish points of contact with those who originally told the tales about these routes that today are found in the archives, and thus we create possibilities of a deeper understanding of these archival materials. It is important to emphasise, however, that re-walking historic routes does not create shared experiences (Aldred 2021, 178): the experience of historical others is irrecoverable. We cannot step into their shoes; but at least we can follow their footsteps, and in doing so, and if we are lucky, we have a chance to gain perspectives that can further our understanding of the historical record and of historical views of the landscape, of storytelling, and of traditional conceptions of the supernatural. Lines of sight play an important role here: what do you see when you are at a place? Do you see other places that are connected with ideas which interrelate with the concepts connected with the place where you are standing? Yet the visual aspect is not the only one. While Western approaches to the landscape have long privileged the sense of sight, the landscape – and indeed any real-world space – is experienced with all senses. In the examples summarised above, this is illustrated by the case of Ýluskarð, where a pass named ‘Pass of Howling’ is the site of the howling of a tormented ghost as well as a place that the wind can be heard howling through even on a seemingly windless day. Similarly, the story of Gedduvatn is not about what the lake looks like, but about what its fish tastes like.

On an even more basic level, re-walking historical routes and locating historical places, especially when we are talking about the recent history of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in my experience is one of the most effective conversation starters that there are. While this is probably not transferable to all cultural contexts and situations, very often asking for permission to go to places, for directions to find them, and generally showing interest in places elicits a plethora of information that one would never have thought to ask for, but which can be highly relevant. Human beings often enjoy talking about places they know, and the locals always know more than a researcher coming in from the outside. It is their knowledge that, by its very nature, ethnographic research takes its starting point from, and showing a genuine and active interest in their places can be one way to establish the rapport that always has to form the basis of such research. Many times, asking for directions will get you to places – both physical and metaphorical – where you would never have expected to end up, and that are very much worth going to.

Recommended reading

A classic non-fiction text on walking is Solnit’s *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2001). With a more strongly literary bend, Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) has been hugely influential. Macfarlane’s books (2007 ff. and others) currently are among the most successful and accessible literary texts on walking, but note the critique by Jamie (2008). Not the easiest, but among the most rewarding literary non-fiction texts on walking are the works of Robinson (1985ff.; it is important to start reading with *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*, which is highly recommended). A dedicated volume on walking from a fieldwork-based ethnographic

perspective has been edited by Ingold and Vergunst (2008), with contributions that present a broad range of angles on the topic. A central and not always unproblematic aspect of walking to places also is the question whether one is allowed to do so; cf. the literature on research ethics recommended in the article by Frog in this special issue. For those interested in Icelandic folk storytelling and folk belief, a good point of entry is offered by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – Projektnummern 453026744; 495416732, and supported by the Folklore Centre of the University of Iceland in Hólmavík (Rannsóknasetur Háskóla Íslands á Ströndum – Þjóðfræðistofa). I owe particular thanks to Jón Jónsson, Hafdís Sturlaugsdóttir, Matthías Sævar Lýðsson, Gaia Alba, Brynja Rós Guðlaugsdóttir, and Unnar Ragnarsson.

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In keeping with Icelandic convention, Icelanders are listed by their first name.

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