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Environmental Scarcity and Abundance in Medieval Icelandic Literature

Can medieval literary texts tell us anything about the environmental conditions and the availability of natural resources in premodern times? In the case of archaeological finds or written laws and charters, it is quite clear that these deliver insights into past societies' relationships to their natural environments, their strategies for using and conserving natural resources, and how they dealt with environmental risks and sudden or longer-term environmental change. Yet medieval literature is not an obvious source material when it comes to environmental questions. Literary texts from medieval Europe are not usually interested in describing the natural environment as such. Also, they normally follow genre conventions that heavily influence the narratives presented and tend to make overabundant use of literary devices such as symbolism, metaphor, and allegory.

It may therefore not be surprising that the most copied book about nature during the Middle Ages was the *Physiologus*. This work, dating back to the second century CE and translated into many vernacular languages, describes a huge variety of animals, plants, stones, and mythical creatures such as sirens and centaurs. The typically rather short descriptions all follow the same model: they first report on each creature's characteristics and behavior, and then give an allegorical, Christian interpretation. The description of the whale can serve as an example. According to the *Physiologus*, the whale's back rising of the water looks like an island. When seamen discover it, they disembark onto it and light a fire in order to prepare food. Yet the whale feels the heat, submerges into the sea, and thus drowns all the seamen. As the *Physiologus* explains, this demonstrates how all men who build their hopes on the devil and take pleasure in his doings are betrayed: they are drowned in the eternal torments of Hell. The description of the whale thus exemplifies how nature is of interest because it can teach humans religious truths. The much-used metaphor of the "book of nature" refers precisely to this view that, like the Bible, nature has to be "read" so that humans can discern God's messages contained in creation. What really counts is the spiritual and moral dimension, and not that descriptions of nature conform to actual natural phenomena.



Whale illustration
from a twelfth-
century Icelandic
translation of
Physiologus.
Image courtesy of
the Árni Magnússon
Institute for
Icelandic Studies.

While descriptions such as those from the *Physiologus* may be entertaining to read, they certainly do not tell us much about environmental conditions in the past. And this holds true for representations of nature in most medieval literature. Yet there are a few exceptions, such as a body of texts known as the Sagas of Icelanders. These texts were written in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iceland, but focus on the time between Iceland's first settlement and the country's Christianization, and thus the period from the middle of the ninth to the middle of the eleventh century. In doing so, they describe not only the society of the Viking age, but also the environmental conditions encountered in Iceland by the first settlers, who came mainly from Norway and the British Isles.

The Island of Plenty

According to many of the sagas, these conditions were extremely favorable. The *Saga of Egil Skalla-Grímsson*, for example, tells in detail how a migrant called Skalla-Grímr took into possession a huge area in the Borgarfjörður region in western Iceland. Skalla-Grímr's livestock grazed freely every winter in the then-abundant woodlands. There was no lack of driftwood, which could be used for ships and house-building, and there were plenty of food resources to make use of, such as fish, seals, and birds' eggs. Whales came often there and were easy to hunt since, like all other animals in Iceland, they were not used to humans. The saga also mentions that Skalla-Grímr set up not only one, but three farms in the area and that at one of them he had fields for crops.

These large woodlands and arable fields may seem surprising considering Iceland's present appearance, but pollen analysis has confirmed that indeed about a quarter of

the island's surface (mainly in the low-lying parts where people settled) was covered by birch woods before the arrival of humans. In addition, a favorable climate during the first centuries of settlement allowed the cultivation of barley, which, however, diminished from the twelfth century on and had stopped altogether by the sixteenth century. At any rate, the description of Viking-age Iceland in this saga shows the country as a place of abundant natural resources that could be exploited without much effort and enabled the settlers to amass considerable wealth within a very short time.

Similar descriptions can be found in other sagas, such as *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, which is about Ingimundr, the first settler in the valley Vatnsdalur in northern Iceland. After his arrival in the new country, some of his sheep ran away; they were found well-nourished in the woods in the following year. According to the saga, Ingimundr also lost some pigs, and when they were discovered again in the autumn of the following year, there were one hundred of them altogether. When Ingimundr gathered men to catch the pigs, he realized that they had “two heads”—by which is meant that each one of them was fat enough to yield as much pork as two pigs.

That the pigs brought by the settlers multiplied and fattened enormously within a short time is also emphasized in other texts. This may be no coincidence, since pork was the favored meat of medieval European nobility. Pig husbandry relied heavily on woodlands, in which the pigs were fattened during autumn by feeding on acorns and beechnuts from the trees. Slaughtering usually took place in late autumn or early winter, when the pigs were fattest—as is also indicated in the passage from the saga. What the Sagas of Icelanders “forget” to tell us, however, are the sorts of trees that the abundant Icelandic woodlands consisted of: only birch and some dwarf willows, both not nearly as good for fattening pigs as oaks and beeches. Another detail not explicitly mentioned in these sagas is that these primeval woodlands had largely disappeared within the two hundred years since settlement. Correspondingly, excavations of middens at Viking-age farm sites have shown that, while pigs made up an important part of the species mix brought to Iceland by the settlers, pig bones had already become extremely seldom by the eleventh century. This means that by the thirteenth century, when the sagas cited above were written, pork was probably a very scarce foodstuff in Iceland. From the saga writers' perspective, a herd of a hundred fat pigs must have seemed even more paradisiacal than it did to the original settlers.

Oral Tradition or Literary Influences?

This raises questions concerning the accuracy of the medieval sagas' descriptions of Viking-age environmental conditions. It is possible that there was indeed an oral tradition reaching several hundred years back to the time of settlement. That certain environmental details, for example concerning the primeval woodlands, have turned out to be true, might be an indication of such a tradition. Yet archaeologists today doubt that the general picture of settlement given in the sagas conforms to what actually happened. The colonization of Iceland was, according to our current state of knowledge, a far more difficult, troublesome, and protracted process than what the sagas try to make us believe. It took probably several decades before a working economy was established, and even then, Icelanders had a considerably lower standard of living than comparable social groups in Norway.

Another likely influence on descriptions of nature in the sagas comes from other literary texts. After the country's Christianization around the year 1000, religious texts such as the Bible and lives of the saints were the first literary works that became available in Iceland. And while there was certainly a lively tradition of oral storytelling in the country, it was this kind of literature that taught Icelanders how to compose narratives in written form. In these texts they found a very frequent literary motif that in ancient rhetoric was called the *locus amoenus*, or "pleasant place." It means a place characterized by natural beauty and typical elements such as trees, meadows, and springs or creeks. Medieval writers often added attractive resources to these places, while at the same time connecting them to Christian concepts of holiness. Therefore the *locus amoenus* is frequently found in saints' lives, especially in descriptions of the places where holy men or women establish themselves. These places are usually characterized both by natural beauty and by an abundance of natural resources, and both elements indicate God's benevolence towards these saints: it is His will that they should settle precisely there. And while most of the migrants coming to Iceland were pagan, the natural abundance described in the Sagas of Icelanders seems to perform the same function as the motif of the *locus amoenus* in saints' lives, i.e., upgrading the image of both the place itself and of those who came to settle there.

This points to a third likely influence on the environmental descriptions in these sagas, for there was a reason why Icelandic chieftains in the thirteenth century started financ-

ing the writing of texts about the Viking age. Both parchment and scribes were expensive. Entertainment was likely one of the purposes the sagas served, but certainly not the only one. Considerable evidence indicates that the past was portrayed in the sagas in ways that served the interests of distinct social groups at the time of writing. For example, material claims of people in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries may be a reason for the divergent information in different written sources about the size of the land some of the first settlers took into possession. It is also clear from the sources that privileged segments of Icelandic society during the Middle Ages tried to construct as noble an ancestry for themselves as possible. Like other “civilized” peoples, they tried to trace back their ancestry to the ancient Trojans. It was probably for this same reason that they attempted to euphemize environmental conditions in their accounts of historic Iceland.

A Place Like Hell

Foreigners, on the other hand, had a rather negative view of these conditions. According to the eleventh-century German chronicler Adam of Bremen, there were no crops and very little wood in Iceland, and people lived in caves underground that they shared with their animals. The Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus wrote around the year 1200 that Icelanders lacked all that could foster luxury, since their soil was so naturally barren. And the Norwegian *King’s Mirror* from around 1260 even equated Iceland with Hell because of its volcanoes, glaciers, boiling springs, and ice-cold streams. From an external perspective, Iceland appeared as a place of extreme resource scarcity and environmental conditions hostile to human life. This may be one reason why privileged Icelanders tried to create a different picture of their past: one in which the settlers were not poor people migrating into an environment of even worse material conditions, but instead wealthy chieftains who came to a place of abundant natural resources. By constructing a noble and wealthy ancestry, one’s own social status could also be enhanced.

This becomes even clearer when descriptions of the environment in the Sagas of Icelanders are compared to those in other texts written in Iceland during the same period. Some of the so-called Bishops’ Sagas are especially revealing in this respect. Three medieval Icelandic bishops were considered saints, and several versions of their lives

were composed during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These texts contain a surprising number of environmental details, concerning for example weather conditions and the availability of natural resources. The most extensive medieval description of Iceland's environment stems from the youngest version of a saga about Bishop Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237), which was written around 1350. With Guðmundr's canonization its goal, and thus originally intended for a foreign audience, this text describes Iceland as a place surrounded by sea ice and covered by enormous glaciers. Volcanic gases endanger the lives of both humans and animals. The saga emphasizes that there are no trees other than small birches, no grain except for some barley, and that people mostly live off saltwater fish and dairy products. In contradistinction to the Sagas of Icelanders, the island appears here as a place of extremely scarce resources, providing only low-status food, and with an environment actually hostile to all life.

Even this view may be rooted to some extent in an environmental reality. In the middle of the fourteenth century—when this version of the saga was written—a climatic anomaly caused a series of extraordinarily cold years, bringing huge amounts of sea ice and expanding glaciers. Yet in the saga about Guðmundr, the description of nature also fulfills a certain narrative function; the extremely unfavorable conditions highlight the achievements of the holy bishop, who during his lifetime not only suffered conflicts with stubborn worldly chieftains, but also had to deal with a harsh natural environment. Moreover, such an environment gave the Icelandic saints plenty of opportunity to prove their sainthood through helping people in crisis situations. A considerable proportion of the hundreds of miracle stories narrated in the Bishops' Sagas take nature as their point of departure: people who are starving for want of food, at danger of shipwreck in stormy seas, or freezing to death in terrible snowstorms call upon one of the saints and receive immediate help. The holy bishops send stranded whales and seals as provisions, cause waters to recede, and improve the weather. Unfavorable environmental conditions thus serve in these texts to demonstrate the bishops' sanctity.

Environmental scarcity and abundance play thus an important role in both the Sagas of Icelanders and the Bishops' Sagas. They are described in a way which is neither purely fictional nor historically trustworthy. Yet these descriptions are connected to Viking-age and medieval environmental reality in complex and creative ways and strongly influenced by social functions of the literary works in the time they were composed. When these many-faceted relations between works of literature and the extra-literary

world are taken into consideration, texts such as the sagas can indeed provide valuable insights into how humans in the premodern past perceived their natural environments and how they dealt with issues such as resource scarcity and environmental change.

Suggested Reading

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