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The Study of Icelandic Place-Names

CHRIS CALLOW

This topic seems highly appropriate given Duncan's interests and my own. A few years apart he and I completed the same undergraduate degree programme, the BA in Medieval Studies at the University of Birmingham, and we both took the same course on the social history of medieval Iceland taught by Chris Wickham. We first met, albeit briefly, when I was doing my PhD and Duncan was taking the Iceland course because Chris Wickham had procured a copy of the Icelandic film *Útlaginn* (*The Outlaw*) which we watched in the late lamented Senior Common Room of the Arts Building. It now seems a rather sad coincidence that the last time I heard Duncan give a paper was in that same room. This article would have benefited greatly from Duncan's input, given perhaps as part of a lively discussion in the university's Bratby bar.

As with many other aspects of the history of medieval Icelandic society, its place-names have been studied seriously for almost as long as those of other regions of north-western Europe, just by far fewer people, most of them Icelanders. As we shall see, the pioneers took their inspiration from scholars in Scandinavia but debates on Icelandic place-names have often had a local twist to them. There is no recent single-volume work on Icelandic place-names, an equivalent to Margaret Gelling's *Signposts to the Past*,[1] nor – yet – a dictionary of place-names, but they have continued to be studied by a small number of paid onomasts. Among the wider public place-names are now discussed in dedicated Facebook groups, their origins have been presented on the sides of milk cartons, and at times they have been so significant as to be discussed in national newspapers and attract large audiences at public lectures. Perhaps the nearest there has been to a single work on the subject was *Nefningar*, a paperback collection of 35 articles by the leading place-names scholar in Iceland of the last few decades, Svavar Sigmundsson. He was Director of Örnefnastofnun Íslands, the Icelandic Place-Names Institute, from 1998 until it merged with other institutions in 2006.[2] His work looms large in what follows, not least because he has written numerous historiographical articles which have been drawn on here.[3]

1 M. Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, 3rd edn (Chichester: Phillimore, 1997).

2 S. Sigmundsson, *Nefningar* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, 2009) [hereafter *Nefningar*]. This volume provides full details of the original place of publication of each article; I will note only its date of publication.

3 S. Sigmundsson, 'Ortnamsforskning på Island' [1968], *Nefningar*, 1–21; S. Sigmundsson, 'Um örnefnaskýringar', *Orð og tunga*, 12 (2010), 55–67. B. Lárusdóttir, 'Bæjanöfn brotin til mergjar', *Árbók Hins íslenzka fornleifafélags*, 98 for 2004–2005 (2007), 85–100, is another significant overview of early scholarship.

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This chapter cannot be comprehensive, but it aims to point out some of the main features of the evidence and to trace some of the major ideas that have surfaced in the scholarship, particularly the ways in which these ideas relate not only to farm names of medieval origin but also to more modern names. A few points about Iceland's history, demography and language will also need to be made by way of context.

Iceland was first settled permanently from the late ninth century, with much of the inhabitable lowlands being occupied fairly rapidly, perhaps at least as quickly as the 60 years famously suggested by the twelfth-century writer Ari Þorgilsson.[4] The settlement pattern in Iceland seems to have crystallised by the twelfth or thirteenth century with relatively little evidence of farms being abandoned in those centuries. We do have archaeological evidence of farms that were abandoned in the tenth and eleventh centuries, however.[5] A typical early farm might consist of a longhouse which served as a dwelling, with a byre and sometimes other outbuildings which might have served as weaving sheds, smithies or even latrines. Sometimes two or more longhouses have been found within a few metres of each other, but it has rarely been possible to determine whether they were occupied simultaneously or whether a single household had simply rebuilt their home – all of these buildings were constructed largely of turf and so required regular maintenance or rebuilding. It was settlements like these, usually consisting of one or two households, which acquired place-names. Pastoral farming was the mainstay of their domestic economy. Different forms of pasture, mostly adjacent or very close to the farm buildings, fed the farm's cattle, sheep, horses and, in this early period, goats and pigs. Aside from the *tún* 'enclosed field' within which the farm buildings sat, most of the lowland grasslands were not intensively exploited. Notionally, however, the place-name associated with the dwelling is likely to have referred to the whole farm, whose boundaries with adjacent farms were probably marked by some sort of turf-built wall.[6]

There were, though, some shifts in settlement patterns as people adjusted their farming practices to a landscape that was new to them. Both the archaeology and medieval written evidence seem to confirm that the majority of those farms which survived into the twentieth century had been given their name by when we first have written records in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This written evidence, mostly in the form of sagas and charters of various kinds,

[4] O. Vésteinsson & T. H. McGovern, 'The peopling of Iceland', *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 45 (2012), 206–18.

[5] A succinct and largely still valid overview is O. Vésteinsson, 'Patterns of settlement in Iceland: a study in prehistory', *Saga-Book*, 25 (1998), 1–29.

[6] Á. Einarsson, O. Hansson & O. Vésteinsson, 'An extensive system of medieval earthworks in northeast Iceland', *Archaeologia Islandica*, 2 (2002), 61–73.

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relates to a relatively small percentage of the *c.* 5000-7000 farms which are likely to have existed at that point, and most of which survived into the twentieth century.[7] Poorer farms, which were more likely to have been abandoned either temporarily or permanently, are those of which we less frequently have an early record of the name. Not surprisingly, the same sagas and documents suggest that people had established names for the physical landscape by this stage too, but again our knowledge usually only extends to the parts of the landscape which were important to a saga's narrative. It is rarely the case that documents produced by this pastoral society recorded property boundaries, and thereby place-names, in the way that charters did in some early medieval western societies. Documents in Iceland do sometimes record local topographical features, but they rarely record place-names along property boundaries in the way that, say, Anglo-Saxon charters usually did. It has, however, been suggested that place-names might sometimes record property boundaries.[8]

A second point is perhaps well known but still needs to be made. It concerns Iceland's small population and the stability of its settlement patterns in low-lying coastal districts and valleys. The population of Iceland was probably no more than 50,000 in the medieval period, to judge by the few thousand farms. The population only reached 100,000 in the 1920s, when Iceland's capital Reykjavík was becoming urban. Modern immigration and natural population growth have resulted in the country's population reaching 350,000, with two-thirds of that population living in Reykjavík and adjacent suburbs. As far as place-name study goes, even though there has been significant emigration from the countryside in the last hundred years, most rural districts have remained occupied, albeit with some of the most remote areas being completely abandoned or others occupied mainly with second homes. Nonetheless knowledge of place-names of all kinds has been preserved, if sometimes only because of twentieth-century recording in place-name registers (*örnefnalýsingar*).

Iceland's natural vegetation and its landscape have been subject to some important changes – significant soil erosion in the interior and the disappearance of natural birch woodlands in many places – but this has not affected settlement patterns in many regions. Only in recent decades have the flattening and draining of pastureland, the building of new roads and road tunnels, and the construction of dams had a notable impact. Natural processes such as coastal erosion, changes to river courses, landslides and the occasional volcanic eruption have done as much damage to the places recorded in historic texts as have man's activities. As a result, Iceland's archaeology and human topography are mostly well preserved compared with regions in north-western Europe.

7 O. Vésteinsson, 'A divided society', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 3 (2007), 117–39, at 124–5.

8 S. Sigmundsson, 'Place-names at boundaries in Iceland' [2002], *Nefningar*, 283–94.

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The third contextual point concerns the language of place-names in Iceland. It is a matter of continuing debate where the earliest settlers to Iceland came from and what languages they spoke. By the time we have written records, however, there was only one language, Old Norse-Icelandic. The dominant myth was that most colonists had come from Norway but that some also came from the British Isles, although particular writers were keen to stress Icelanders' other, more 'exotic' ancestors, including those with Irish names. Various forms of evidence have been used to argue for a higher or lower element of Irish- / Gaelic-speaking people in early Iceland; among these are place-names themselves, archaeological evidence, the content and form of saga literature, and studies of modern Icelanders' blood groups and DNA.[9] Most recently and significantly isotope analysis of skeletal remains in early burials has demonstrated the diverse origins of Iceland's early population.[10] Nevertheless, it is very difficult to assess how many people arrived, and how quickly people came to Iceland from the British Isles. That they did so is not in doubt, although probably in far lower numbers than speakers of Old Norse-Icelandic, the only language for which we have reliable evidence of its being spoken.

To all intents and purposes, then, the language of place-names in Iceland is Icelandic. Over the centuries the pronunciation and spelling conventions of Icelandic have changed but not significantly.[11] Where all or part of a place-name's meaning is obscure the assumption is that usually we have to look for it in the vast vocabulary of Icelandic rather than turn to another language. Aside from some changes in vocabulary, Old Icelandic [OIc] and modern Icelandic vary little in most respects, with the result that the interpretation of place-names has often seemed easy. This pattern, along with a few very obscure place-names, is probably a reason for wider public interest in place-names and the willingness of scholars of varied backgrounds to write about them: a full bibliography of Icelandic place-name study reads like a *Who's Who* of Icelandic medievalists across the various historical and linguistic disciplines.[12]

9 G. Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland. Historical and Literary Contacts. A Survey*, 2nd edn (Reykjavík: Univ. of Iceland Press, 2000).

10 T. D. Price & H. Gestsdóttir, 'The peopling of the North Atlantic: isotopic results from Iceland', in *Viking Settlers of the North Atlantic: An Isotopic Approach* (*Jnl of the North Atlantic*, Special Volume 7, 2014–2018), 146–63; O. Vésteinsson & H. Gestsdóttir, 'The colonization of Iceland in the light of isotope analysis', in *ibid*., 137–45.

11 S. Karlsson, *The Icelandic Language*, transl. by Rory McTurk (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2004).

12 Svavar Sigmundsson's definitive bibliography with additions by Aðalsteinn Hákonarson is accessible as *Ritaskrá um nafnfræði* via the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar website: <https://arnastofnun.is/is/ritaskra-um-islenska-nafnfraedi> (accessed 5 May 2019).

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If the language of Icelandic place-names is usually self-evident, it is worth briefly noting that the physical geography of Iceland means that its stock of topographical features is partly different from those found elsewhere in Scandinavia. Nevertheless, the most common topographical terms in surviving farm names look fairly typical of those for Norway and the Scandinavian-influenced place-name vocabulary of the North Atlantic region. Beginning with the most common, we find, according to Finnur Jónsson (1858-1934), *hóll/hvoll* 'hillock', then *nes* 'promontory', *dalur* 'valley', *holt* 'wood' (but later 'low hill'), *fell* 'mountain', *vík* 'bay', and *eyri* 'spit'.[13] On the other hand words found in Norway or the British Isles, like *vin* 'pasture' and *þveit* 'clearing', are almost entirely absent from Iceland because they were inappropriate in a landscape without these respective features.[14] That said, even well documented and commonly used terms like *engi* 'pasture, wetland pasture' occur very rarely in Icelandic place-names, even though they do so quite frequently in Scandinavia and the British Isles. By contrast novel features of Iceland's volcanic landscape required a specific set of terms such as *gígur* 'crater', *hver* 'hot spring' and – among those words that actually make it into place-names and are quite common – *laug* 'hot spring or pool' (plural *laugar*) and *reykur* 'smoke' (usually as plural *reykir* or a first element *reykja-*). As we shall see, there is also some slight evidence that the same place-name elements could be used differently in Iceland from the way in which they were used in other regions in the North Atlantic where Old Norse-Icelandic was spoken.

With modern Icelandic being virtually identical to the language of medieval Icelanders, it is rare to find place-names which do not at least look like they have an obvious explanation. When they do occur they have occasionally attracted a lot of attention. In the 1920s, for example, three scholars offered opinions on the origins of the farm now called Íbishóll in Skagafjörður in northern Iceland. The name's latter element (*hóll*) is a common word for a hill, but *Íbis-* (with many variant spellings) makes no obvious sense.[15] Finnur Jónsson was inventive,

[13] S. Sigmundsson, 'Namnmönster i isländska gårdsnamn' [1996], *Nefningar*, 177–90, at 177.

[14] There is one example of Þveit in Hornafjörður (Birna Lárusdóttir, pers. comm.). Otherwise see Sigmundsson, 'Ortnamsforskning på Island', 20; M. Stefánsson, 'Vínland or Vinland?', *Scandinavian Jnl of History*, 23 (1998), 139–52, at 145–7; J. Hafsteinsdóttir, 'Þveit', *Orð og tunga*, 16 (2014), 141–7.

[15] The variant spellings reflect real differences in pronunciation, even if there was the possibility of a writer forgetting to use an accent on a vowel, particularly on a capital letter. While i and y [ ] are the same, í and ý both denote a second sound, [i], equivalent to the 'ee' sound in modern English. B and p might have denoted slightly different sounds, [p] and [p]. Thus the early eighteenth-century Ypishóll suggests a different pronunciation from the Íbýshóll recorded in 1839: P. Hannesson & J. Benediktsson (eds), *Sýslu- og Sóknalýsingar 1839–1873. Hins íslenzka bókmenntafélags. II. Skagarfjarðarsýsla*. (Akureyri: Bókaútgáfan Norðri, 1954), 62.

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postulating a 'foreign' personal name, *Ípir*, as the origin of the first element. Hannes Þorsteinsson suggested, with no supporting argument, that the farm's original name was **Ýbeygishóll* and that *ýr* 'bow' and *beygja* 'to bend' somehow lay behind it. Finally, Margeir Jónsson speculated that the name included an unattested word *íbeit*, perhaps equating to *beitarítak*, 'a right to use pasture on another farm', and just about analogous with the very common but less specific *ítak* 'a right to use resources on another farm'. Although very many Icelandic place-names appear to have so transparent an origin, the unusual ones like Íbishóll are very hard to fathom.[16]

The name of a small island in Breiðafjörður, Vaðstakksey, is another good example of one that seems almost meaningless in its current form. Its earlier spellings suggest that people have rarely understood it, nor necessarily known how to pronounce this very unusual place-name. The current spelling has been settled upon only since the mid nineteenth century. It was first recorded as *Vallsaxey* in 1378 when it belonged to a monastery, and then listed as *Valdzsögsey* in 1397 and as *Vagstagsey* and *Vagstaxey* in early modern records. It then became *Vaxtarey* in a tax register of 1702, but *Vaxtaxey* the following year in Iceland's famous census, and then both *Vogstakksey* and *Vallstakksey* before the present Vaðstakksey was first recorded in 1861.[17] None of these spellings appears to be the result of scribal error. As to the name's meaning, should anyone have given its meaning any thought, the last syllable is the least uncertain, the first the most. While *-ey* clearly refers to its being an island, and the second element could refer to a *stakkur* 'cliff or stack', the first, most garbled element could conceivably have referred to a 'ford'*vað*, or 'bay' *vogur*, but more likely to the flatness of the island *völlur* 'plain' or its use as pasture in the same sense as *tún* 'enclosed hayfield'. It is unlikely, but possible, that the island could derive its name from the small, mainland farm called Vaðstakksheiði, known as such in 1842, which was finally abandoned during the twentieth century. Vaðstakksheiði's name suffered at the hands of scribes almost as much as the island's did, with a similarly varied set of spellings over the centuries. In this case, however, it included the variations *Vagls-* and *Vatsstakksheiði*, which might allude to words for 'beam' or 'log' *vagl* and 'water' *vatn* respectively. We even have a record of contested spellings (and possibly origins) when in 1711 the tax register gives two spellings, *Vagstackseide* and *Vallstacksheide*. As with Ibishóll,

[16] Sigmundsson, 'Um örnefnaskýringar', 60; Lárusdóttir, 'Bæjanöfn brotin til mergjar', 89–98.

[17] *Diplomatarium Islandicum. Íslenzkt Fornbréfasafn, 834–1600*, 16 vols (Copenhagen & Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Bókmenntafélag, 1858–1972), III, 328; IV, 167; XV, 709–10; Hannes Þorsteinsson, 'Rannsókn og leiðrjettingar á nokkrum bæjarnöfnum á Íslandi', *Árbók Hins íslenzka fornleifafélags*, 37 (1923), 1–96, at 42; <https://www.nat.is/travelguide/br_eyjar_vadstakksey.htm> (accessed 5 May 2019).

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the two *Vaðstakks-* place-names have probably never been properly understood by anyone, and might even derive from words lost from Old Norse-Icelandic.

Aside from scholarly consideration of these isolated, complex place-names, there have generally been high levels of popular interest in local history which has ensured the publication of all manner of books and journals. Books range from memoirs to pictorial histories to institutional histories, as well as ones on place-names. The cliché about one in 10 Icelanders writing a book at some stage in their life almost holds true, fuelled as it has been by a strong tradition of giving books as Christmas gifts. Several regional journals cover local history of all kinds; and since 1928 *Ferðafélag Íslands*, the travellers' association, has published an annual yearbook (*Árbók*) that covers a different district each year, with each volume including landscape, geology and local history of all kinds for that year's chosen area. More geographically restricted publications on particular districts' place-names continue to be produced, such as a volume on place-names and walks in the district between Reykjavík and Keflavík (which has had a second edition), or that about the nearly deserted fjord Mjóafjörður in the East Fjords.[18] The former, for example, takes the reader along particular paths and explains the place-names of landscape features, ruins and farms along the route. It is informed by the obvious, if limited, written sources for the area, as well as over 30 local *heimildarmenn*, oral sources – i.e. people born between 1904 and 1933, who were interviewed in the early 1990s. Such gazetteers do not necessarily attempt to offer a critical contribution to the scholarship, but they can provide valuable data in recording the forms of the names themselves, and points of comparison between older, written tradition and surviving (if often rapidly dying) oral tradition. Anyone curious about place-names can also draw on the increasingly large collection of online articles on particular names or classes of names on the website of the Place-Name Institute, Örnefnastofnun Íslands.[19]

This brings us to the raw data used by scholars in researching place-names. The written material for Iceland's earlier history can be neatly summed up: 16 volumes of standard editions of *Sagas of Icelanders*;[20] 16 volumes of documents in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* (*Íslenzkt Fornbréfasafn*); 17 volumes of *Alþingisbækur*, records from the 'national' court, the Althing, for 1570–1800; 13 volumes of the tax register of Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín, written on

[18] S. G. Guðmundsdóttir, *Örnefni og gönguleiðir í Vatnsleysustrandarhreppi*, 2nd edn (Vogar: Líonsklúbburinn Keilir Vatnsleysuströnd, 2007); V. Hjálmarsson, *Örnefni í Mjóafirði* (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Hólar, 2014).

[19] <https://www.arnastofnun.is/is/utgafa-og-gagnasofn/pistlar> (accessed 2 January 2019). The articles are written by researchers employed by the Institute or by others with place-names expertise.

[20] Supplemented now by Emily Lethbridge's Saga Map website <http://sagamap.hi.is/is/> (accessed 5 May 2019).

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behalf of the Danish crown from 1702 to 1714; 15 volumes of county and parish descriptions (*sýslulýsingar* and *sóknalýsingar*); editions of the contemporary sagas (mostly *Sturlunga saga*, thirteenth-century texts brought together and reworked in the early fourteenth century); and printed editions of annals and folk stories. The spellings in most of these texts have been normalised in different ways, and so looking at the manuscript(s) is still necessary in those instances. Beyond these printed sources there are also numerous documents and letter collections, often from the early modern period, which have never been explored systematically. Last, but not necessarily least, the statutory Örnefnastofnun houses files of modern correspondence and surveys relating to individual farms, the *örnefnalýsingar* mentioned above. These files are naturally of varying size and detail but often provide either etymologies or details about the precise locations of place-names not recorded elsewhere. They amount to the largest single resource for Iceland's equivalent of field names. As highlighted by Svavar Sigmundsson,[21] the need for something like an equivalent to the English Place-Name Society's volumes that systematically records farm or settlement names is starting to be addressed by Dr Emily Lethbridge of Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, within which Örnefnastofnun now sits, through funding from the Icelandic Research Council (*Rannís*).

It is also worth mentioning the valuable contribution of the archaeological surveys which have been undertaken in Iceland in the last few decades. A law of 1989 deemed that all physical remains of human activity in Iceland over 100 years old, including everything from the ruins of farms to 'landmarks related to habits, customs, legend or folklore'[22] constituted archaeology and were now legally protected. Since the early 1990s a large amount of survey work has been done so as to record that archaeology, following only sporadic work over the preceding decades. One valuable part of it has been the recording of the names of structures or archaeological features by much the same means as adopted in some popular works, i.e. by consulting *örnefnalýsingar*, written records and historical maps, and – when a farm is still occupied by people with a good knowledge of its buildings and land – by interviewing them. While many ruins of turf structures still remain nameless, where someone does know the farm they can add the names of man-made features to the record. It is a salutary lesson about the sheer quantity of place-names in Iceland to see just how many individual buildings someone can remember as having been in the enclosed field that constituted a farm's *tún*, and which ones are recorded by the archaeological survey as a result. Equally salutary is the fact that the location of a particular farm or cottage recorded in the eighteenth or nineteenth century in a printed

21 Sigmundsson, 'Um örnefnaskýringar', 63.
22 <http://en.minjastofnun.is/cultural-heritage/archaeological-heritage/> (accessed 5 May 2019).

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source, or in the survey of Örnefnastofnun Íslands, can be completely unknown to the resident, who might or might not actively work the land or have lived there for a long time.

Early work

The study of Icelandic place-names began in earnest in the late nineteenth century as part of the wider development of academic studies of Iceland's past by Icelanders. The scholars who published on place-names tended to be those who had an interest in other disciplines – the first academic study of any note was produced in 1881 by Björn M. Ólsen, who published on many aspects of medieval Icelandic literature and was later to become professor of Icelandic language and cultural history at the University of Iceland.[23] Finnur Jónsson, a professor of philology at the University of Copenhagen, made a significant contribution in the early twentieth century with a 172-page essay which included a typology of place-names.[24] It is also notable that many pioneers wanted to identify places named in *Sagas of Icelanders* so as to prove the sagas' veracity: archaeology and toponymy were seen to work together in this regard.[25]

In the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries scholars were having the kinds of debates about the chronology of topographical names and habitative names that we see for other regions of north-west Europe. Both Eggert Ó. Brím and Finnur Jónsson, for example, believed that place-names with personal names as a first element were of an earlier date than those that derived from topography, with both researchers apparently desperate to invent unlikely personal names so as to make their point. Brím, for example, proposed that the unheard of male personal name *Krauni* lay behind the farm name Hraunastaðir when *hraun* 'lava field' is the obvious origin of the first element. Jónsson could assert that the rare – and possibly otherwise unattested – male personal name (or nickname) Galti formed the first element of Galtagerði rather than the genitive plural of *göltur* 'boar' which one might expect for a small or dependent farm.[26]

Other men besides academics in Reykjavík and Copenhagen were publishing gazetteers of place-names. The oldest surviving surveys held by Örnefnastofnun are from 1910 and 1913, while in 1914 Gísli Lárusson recorded the place-names of the Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Islands).[27] Other enthusiasts

[23] B. M. Ólsen, 'Et islandsk stedsnavn', *Aarbagerfor nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* (1881), 38–45; Sigmundsson, 'Um örnefnaskýringar', 58.

[24] F. Jónsson, 'Bæjanöfn á Íslandi', *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenskra bókmennta að – ornu og nýju*, IV (Reykjavík & Copenhagen: Hið Íslenzka Bókmenntafélag, 1907–15), 412–584.

[25] Lárusdóttir, 'Bæjanöfn brotin til mergjar', 87.

[26] Sigmundsson, 'Um örnefnaskýringar', 59; Lárusdóttir, 'Bæjarnöfn brotin', 88, 96–7.

[27] <https://www.arnastofnun.is/is/ornefnasafn> (accessed 5 May 2019); G. Lárusson, *Örnefni í Vestmannaeyjum*, manuscript held at Örnefnastofnun Íslands.

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recorded place-names' many forms and analysed their evolution. Notably, Margeir Jónsson, a farmer in the north of Iceland, published four short volumes on place-names in the north of the country from 1921 to 1933. He drew on all the available sources that one might have hoped for and, despite the odd fanciful idea, produced a creditable attempt at deciphering farm names' roots. Like Finnur Jónsson, Margeir Jónsson noted things like contractions, such as when he traced the evolution of modern Þórustaðir (apparently including a woman's personal name, Þóra) from the earlier Þóroddsstaðir and Þórissstaðir.[28] But, whereas Finnur Jónsson merely presented the varied and conflicting forms of names, Margeir Jónsson was keen to tell his readers which was the *correct* form. For Vaglar/Vaglir in Skagafjörður, for example, Finnur Jónsson listed the variants which suggested that although the origin of the name was unclear, it might indicate a noun recorded in both a masculine and a feminine plural form. Margeir Jónsson, having read Finnur's brief account, argued for the existence of an unrecorded noun **vagall*, expressing certainty that the correct farm name was Vaglar and that 'nobody should write it otherwise'.[29] Margeir's attitude seems to have been part of a wider contemporary concern for standardisation of farm names.[30]

Another 1920s contribution has enjoyed greater longevity as an analysis of farm names and settlement history. Ólafur Lárusson's nearly 50-page article 'Úr byggðasögu Íslands', 'Of the settlement history of Iceland', examines the long-term history of Icelandic settlement with a particular focus on Iceland's earlier centuries.[31] Famously Lárusson tried to read one of the fullest accounts of a valley's settlement in a saga, that of Laxárdalur in *Laxdæla saga*, for what it could say about early settlement patterns. In his view the colonists were *stórbændur*, 'wealthy farmers', who gradually gave up parts of their farms so that their sons could establish their own independent farms. This was a practice that he saw as finishing by the mid eleventh century, a slower process than is sometimes imagined now.[32] Lárusson's main contribution was to set out regional

[28] Jónsson, 'Bæjanöfn á Íslandi', 415–16; M. Jónsson, *Bæjanöfn á Norðurlandi. Rannsókn og leiðrjettingar III. Eyjafjarðarsýsla* (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja, 1929), 44–5.

[29] M. Jónsson, *Torskilin Bæjanöfn í Skagafjarðarsýslu* (Akureyri: Prentsmiðja Odds Björnssonar, 1921), 37–9. Lárusdóttir, 'Bæjanöfn brotin', 91–4, gives a broader overview of Jónsson's work.

[30] Birna Lárusdóttir, pers. comm.

[31] Ó. Lárusson, 'Úr byggðasögu Íslands', *Vaka*, 3 (1929), 319–69, reprinted in Ó. Lárusson, *Byggð og saga* (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja, 1944), 9–58, which is cited in what follows.

[32] *Ibid.*, 23-32; Vésteinsson & McGovern, 'The peopling of Iceland'; O. Vésteinsson., M. J. Church, A. J. Dugmore, T. H. McGovern & A. J. Newton, 'Expensive errors or rational choices: the pioneer fringe in Late Viking Age Iceland', *European Journal of Post-Classical Archaeologies*, 4 (2014), 39–68.

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variations in particular habitative farm names. He proposed that the 1165 names in *staðir* (below, 000) and the 174 in *bær* antedated those with suffixes such as *kot*, *gerði*, *hús*, *sel*, and *búð* which were from an undoubtedly later phase of Iceland's settlement history.[33] In particular Lárusson added to Finnur Jónsson's account an analysis of farms that included *kot* in their name. These were farms which often seemed to derive their name from another farm, e.g. Hvammsdalskot, the *hjáleiga* 'dependent cottage' on the farm called Hvammsdalur.[34] Lárusson showed that the element *kot* appeared no earlier than the fourteenth century, and that this was indicative of a significant rise in the number of such properties, which were rented.[35] Farms of this sort could be renamed, either acquiring or losing the *kot* element. A farm called Hvammur in the south-west became Hvammkot and then Fífuhvammur, in this case probably owing to its coming in and out of occupation over the centuries. Here and in other instances farms could also go from being independent to dependent cottages or vice versa, and be renamed entirely in some cases.[36] Lárusson usefully problematized the link between farms' origins, status and names.

Perhaps the next significant development in Icelandic place-name study was their more systematic collection. Ari Gíslason (1907-1995), a prolific publisher of books on genealogy, did much of this initial recording work, apparently from as early as 1940 until 1964.[37] At the AGM of the Archaeology Society (Hið íslenzka fornleifafræðifélag) in 1948 the historian Jón Jóhannesson suggested that there was a pressing need to record place-names, and, as he saw it, there was no shortage of scholars who could do this work, should the money become available.[38] Ultimately the institutional support base came with the founding of a division of the national museum in 1969 and the significant figure of Þórhallur Vilmundarson being appointed as its director.[39]

Þórhallur Vilmundarson

Þórhallur Vilmundarson was an interesting appointment to the new Örnefnastofnun in that he took a far more critical approach to place-name study. His views were supported by other scholars, including Kristján Eldjárn, the

33 *Ibid*., 49.

34 *Jarðabók Árna Magnússonar og Páls Vídalíns. Sjötta bindi. Dala- og Barðastrandarsýsla* (Copenhagen: S.L. Möller, 1938), 158–9.

35 *Ibid*., 55.

36 *Ibid*., 51–3.

37 Sigmundsson, 'Ortnamsforskning på Island', 13; H. Hjartarson, 'Ari Gíslason', *Morgunblaðið,* 17 May 1995: <https://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/200372/> (accessed 28 January 2019).

38 'Aðalfundur 1948', *Árbók Hins íslenzka fornleifafélags*, 49 (1943–8), 145–6, at 146; Sigmundsson, 'Ortnamsforskning på Island', 13.

39 H. S. Kjartansson, 'Upprifjun um náttúrunafnakenningu' (forthcoming).

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Þjóðminjarvörður (head or national curator) at the National Museum.[40] Seen from outside Iceland and decades later, the controversy surrounding the ideas that Þórhallur had put forward in the years just before his appointment seems staggering. What he had done, in two public lectures but not in writing, was to propose what was called *náttúrunafnakenning*, 'nature-name theory'. His key idea was that the personal names seemingly recorded in place-names, and elaborated on in the *Sagas of Icelanders*, could not be read at face value as people's names but instead could represent reinterpretations of topographical features. Sometimes this was where there had been an unrecorded loss of a syllable, but often was where the grammatical ending of the first element of a name had been changed.

Vilmundarson's 1966 and 1968 lectures were controversial, with the scheduling of the second one even making front page news: it had to be moved to the largest lecture theatre that the University of Iceland had access to, such was the public interest.[41] In essence Vilmundarson was challenging people's cherished beliefs about the veracity of the *Sagas of Icelanders*, one of the fundamental elements of Icelandic culture, by suggesting that their explanation of the origins of the names of Iceland's farms and topographical features could not be trusted. That this was the case perhaps shows a lag in popular understanding of the sagas despite several decades of scholars' scepticism. Scholars too had probably thought that the names of the *people* in the sagas might have been those of real people, even if the narratives about them were not credible.

Vilmundarson put his views in very strong terms, arguably overstating his case. Even in 1968 a famous story was still circulating whereby he is said to have visited a farm called Þórunnarstaðir and proclaimed that its name was very old and had nothing to do with anyone called Þórunn. At this point the farmer revealed that he had named the farm after his wife, Þórunn.[42] While Vilmundarson undoubtedly had a tendency to overstate his case, he had provided a strong logic for at least exploring place-names more fully. He finally began publishing his ideas, at first in two short papers in 1969, and then in many further articles until 2008.[43] Perhaps most famously Vilmundarson discussed the

40 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

41 He still had not published anything, simply giving spoken public lectures, as reported by K. B. Ólafsson, 'Er Halldórsstaðir náttúrunafn?', *Alþýðublaðið*, 26 March 1968, 3, 14. It was later reported that he had filled the lecture theatre in Háskólabíó: 'Hann fyllti Háskólabíó', *Alþýðublaðið*, 2 April 1968, 3.

42 *Alþýðublaðið*, 31 March 1968, 1, 2. The joke about Vilmundarson was seemingly good enough to be reported in the weekly newspaper, *Vikan*, 18 April 1968, 3. It has since had a life of its own, with the story being retold with Ingunn and Ingunnarstaðir being the names involved (Birna Lárusdóttir, pers. comm.).

43 The first were Þ. Vilmundarson, 'Kennd er við Hálfdan hurðin rauð', in J. Benediktsson (ed.), *Afmælisrit Jóns Helgasonar 30. júní 1969* (Reykjavík:

origins of place-names as part of the apparatus for the last volume of *Sagas of Icelanders* in the 'Íslenzk fornrit' series, a project that he had started in the 1950s.[44]

Since Vilmundarson first aired his ideas popular understanding has probably not shifted to any great extent, although scholars have continued to examine place-names critically. Most recently Helgi Skúli Kjartansson has come up with a characteristically interesting idea which sits in the divide between topographical and personal place-names. He takes as his starting point the idea that we should try to explain apparent personal names as topographical terms. Whenever we cannot do so, however, he proposes that those personal names might be the names of *vættir*, supernatural beings – the spirits that some modern Icelanders supposedly still believe in. Such names, Kjartansson suggests, might have developed in the Middle Ages through people's misunderstandings of topographical terms.[45] Given the survival of so many later folk stories involving supernatural beings in Iceland, Kjartansson's hypothesis seems plausible, even if it is ultimately difficult to prove.

There are still some tendencies to analyse Icelandic names without first considering topography. It has been suggested that names for mountains in Iceland are reapplications of names for specific Norwegian mountains, e.g. Esja, Glóðafeykir and, as also attested in the Hebrides, Hekla.[46] Whatever these rare names mean, it is surely possible that they have an origin which relates to their perceived form as expressed in Old Norse-Icelandic rather than that people in Iceland were naming a mountain after one they knew in Norway.

Names in *staðir*

We can turn now to look at how particular parts of the stock of Icelandic place-names have been studied. Of all the settlement place-name types in Iceland those ending in *staðir* have been studied the most. Reasons for this include that they

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Heimskringla, 1969), 431–56, and a photocopied five-page unpublished article which several libraries in Iceland still hold: 'Um sagnfræði: þróun sagnaritunar, heimspekikenningar um sögu, heimildafræði' (Reykjavík: 1969). The last was Þ. Vilmundarson, 'Skáney og Skandinavien', in G. Kvaran, H. J. Ámundason, J. Hafsteinsdóttir & S. Sigmundsson (eds), *Norræn nöfn – Nöfn á Norðurlöndum. Hefðir og endurnýjun. Nordiska namn – Namn i Norden. Tradition och förnyelse. Handlingar från Den fjortonde nordiska namnforskarkongressen i Borgarnes 11–14 augusti 2007*. NORNA-rapporter 84 (Uppsala: NORNA-förlaget, 2008), 507–23.

[44] Þ. Vilmundarson & B. Vilhjálmsson (eds), *Harðar saga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1991).

[45] H. S. Kjartansson, 'Náttúrunafnakenning, vættatrú og ímyndaður uppruni', an unpublished paper given at the 18th Saga Conference, 14 August 2018, Reykholt.

[46] S. Sigmundsson, 'Icelandic place-names in a North Atlantic light' [2005], *Nefningar*, 357–64, at 361–2.

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are of a type found in other Scandinavian-speaking regions; that some include personal names, if not necessarily common ones; and that *staðr* was a term for a specific type of ecclesiastical property.[47]

One place-name element, *bólstaðr*, has long been recognised in the countries around the north Atlantic: Norway, Scotland, the Faroes and Iceland. In Scotland *bólstaðr* has often been recognised in some contracted form, e.g. *bister*, *buster*, *bist*, *bust*, *bster*. In Iceland, however, Bólstaður on its own is used for only four medieval Icelandic farms.[48] The name is used in the thirteenth-century Icelandic laws in the generic sense of 'farm' or 'estate', but the rarity of *bólstaðr* names in Iceland has still not been explained. The term might have had the same meaning as *staðr*.[49]

As far as Iceland itself is concerned the classic statement that *staðir* was characteristically used for farms of lower monetary value or status was made by Ólafur Lárusson, as touched on above.[50] There seems no reason to question this basic conclusion. Some scholars from outside Iceland have been content to see the name as meaning simply 'farm', implying that when farms with this name were established they were legally independent. This fits with the interpretation of *staðir* names in Norway, Sweden and Denmark.[51] Amongst Icelandic scholars, however, the consensus would seem to be that these farms were likely to have originated as dependent cottages on larger estates which were given their names while they were still part of that estate, even if many were independent farms by the time their names were first recorded.[52] The fact that dependent cottages, *hjáleigur*, also sometimes have *staðir* names arguably confirms it. They can certainly be defined as 'secondary' farms in most cases,[53] because of their modest values and size as seen in earlier records or, as becomes clear on a map, their access to a more restricted range of natural resources than more valuable farms had. Only in a few cases are there some larger farms with the element *staðr* or

47 M. Stefánsson, *Staðir og staðamál*, Studier i islandske egenkirkelige og beneficialrettslige forhold i middelalderen, I (Bergen: Historisk institutt, Universitetet i Bergen, 2000).

48 S. Sigmundsson, 'Icelandic and Scottish place-names' [1998], *Nefningar*, 219–29, at 221–3.

49 P. Gammeltoft, *The place-name element bólstaðr in the North Atlantic area*, Navnestudier udgivet af Institutit for Navneforskning, 38 (Copenhagen, C.A. Reitzels Forlag A/S, 2001), 271.

50 Ó. Lárusson, 'Úr byggðarsögu Íslands', *Byggð og saga* (1944), 9–58.

51 S. Sigmundsson, 'Om staðir-navne på Island' [2004], *Nefningar*, 399–410, at 399.

52 S. Sigmundsson, 'Íslensku staða-nöfnin' [1979], *Nefningar*, 57–67.

53 B. Lárusdóttir, 'Settlement organisation and farm abandonment: the curious landscape of Reykjahverfi, north-east Iceland', in W. Davies, G. Halsall & A. Reynolds (eds), *People and Space in the Middle Ages, 300–1300* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 45–63, at 59.

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staðir in their name. These functioned as ecclesiastical *staðir*, farms on which a large share of the property had been donated to the church.

The origins of a few farms with *staðir* names have also recently been investigated archaeologically in an effort to determine whether they might have been established later than ones with topographical names. In two regional projects that investigated very different areas (Skagafjörður in the north and Mosfellsdalur just outside Reykjavík), published work on core-sample analysis has not produced precise dates for settlement patterns, but what has been found does not contradict the idea that *staðir* farms were later.[54]

Meanwhile the archaeology of the large tenth- to eleventh-century longhouse at Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit has also inspired a detailed study of the significant place-name element *hof*, a term understood since the twelfth century to mean a temple or non-Christian religious building. When the longhouse at Hofstaðir was excavated very early in the twentieth century the excavators interpreted their discovery of a large longhouse accompanied by a supposed feasting pit as proof that it was indeed a temple. From the mid 1990s Orri Vésteinsson and colleagues spent several seasons excavating the site far more thoroughly. While at first the new excavations seemed to disprove the idea that the building had had any ritual function, other features emerged which suggested that it was an unusual settlement, including the remains of apparently ritually slaughtered cattle. Vésteinsson subsequently evaluated the Icelandic place-names that include the word *hof*. He examined the names of 42 such farms, including 12 called Hofstaðir, in the light of settlement patterns and farm values. He concluded that in the earliest decades of colonisation *hof* had a non-religious meaning, referring to a large 'feasting hall' of a type which was established by existing local leaders in an effort to bolster their power. He proposed that a second process occurred whereby '[a] religious, pagan, connotation of the term is seen to be a late 10th century development when such feasting halls became the centres of resistance to Christianity.'[55] This theory worked for all farms with *hof* in their name, including farms called Hofstaðir. It probably still remains to be seen how well this particular idea will be received and, indeed, whether any

[54] D. J. Bolender, J. M. Steinberg, & E. P. Durrenberger, 'Unsettled landscapes: settlement patterns and the development of social inequality in northern Iceland', in C. A. Pool & L. Cliggett (eds), *Economies and the Transformation of Landscape* (Lanham, MD: Soc. for Economic Anthropology, 2008), 217–38; D. Zori, 'Interdisciplinary modelling of Viking Age and medieval settlement in the Mosfell valley', in D. D. Zori & J. Byock (eds), *Viking Archaeology in Iceland. Mosfell Archaeological Project* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 55–79.

[55] O. Vésteinsson, '"Hann reisti hof mikið hundrað fóta langt …" Um uppruna *hof*-örnefna og stjórnmál á Íslandi á 10. öld', *Saga*, 45 (2007), 53–91, quotation from the English abstract at 91.

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subsequent investigations of early settlements at farms with *hof* names will support this picture.

Other recent studies have looked at more specific issues. Helgi Þorláksson has suggested a more sophisticated understanding of the origin of the first element of the farm name Breiðabólstaðir, the most common sub-type of names in *bólstaðr*, of which there are still only a maximum of 12. Most of the few surviving examples of this name are associated with farms of average value or greater, and are found in the west of Iceland. Rather than viewing the first element being derived from the adjective *breiðr*, which has been the common assumption, Þorláksson has proposed that it comes from *breið*, a noun with the meaning a flat, wet meadow, often one where sedge grows. This would fit with other farm names with the first element *breið* or *breiða*.[56] The idea makes further sense if we assume, as most scholars do, that cattle were seen as the most valuable asset of a medieval farm right through from the period of colonisation, and therefore that pasture for cattle underpinned the economy of larger farms.[57]

By contrast, Svavar Sigmundsson has discussed particular names formed with *staðir* which were first recorded much later – in the 1702-14 tax register – and which related either to more marginal farms, or to abandoned buildings or, mistakenly, to topographical features. For these places the first elements of the *staðir* names sometimes contain a personal name, sometimes a topographical feature, and sometimes a term that implies a specific farming function.[58] These probably include 'farm' names that were formed later, but which mostly relate to very short-lived cottages; their first elements look unusual but their origins are probably less so.

If there is any way to sum up these diverse studies, it is to say that '*staðir* names' represent an amorphous category but that research has continued to examine different sub-groupings of these names productively.

'Celtic' names in Icelandic place-names

Icelandic place-name scholarship's only major interest in non-Icelandic influence is with regard to possible Gaelic names because of the supposed presence of people from Ireland and Scotland among Iceland's earliest population. Discussions of place-names with supposedly 'Celtic' or 'Gaelic' origins, most

[56] H. Þorláksson, 'A seat of a settler? – a centre of a magnate: Breiðabólstaðr and Reykholt', in S. Sigmundsson (ed.), *Viking Settlements and Viking Society. Papers from the Proceedings of the Sixteenth Viking Congress, Reykjavík and Reykholt, 16–23 August 2009* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornleifafélag & Univ. of Iceland Press, 2011), 209–24. Svavar Sigmundsson has favoured 'broad' as the meaning together with an ethnic association: below, 000.

[57] O. Vésteinsson, 'Patterns of settlement in Iceland'.

[58] Sigmundsson, 'Om staðir-navne på Island'.

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often those formed with supposed Gaelic personal names, have created a fair amount of heat but perhaps less light. The desire to see evidence of 'exotic' origins for place-names seems to have existed in medieval Iceland, just as it does now, both among scholars and among those without onomastic training.[59] Thirty or so names with Gaelic personal names and 36 place-names featuring the element *Íra* 'Irish' were identified by Hermann Pálsson in the 1950s.[60]

Many medieval Icelandic texts preserve the names of supposed settlers from Ireland and Scotland. Much other circumstantial evidence seems to confirm that a significant population from Britain and Ireland formed a component of the first few generations who lived in Iceland, such as evidence of vikings' slave-taking preserved in the Irish annals, and studies of modern DNA and isotope analysis that suggest that many women came to Iceland from Britain and Ireland but fewer men.[61] Similarly, stories that early colonists were from Britain and Ireland both in *Sagas of Icelanders* and in the great genealogical catalogue of the supposed colonists, *Landnámabók*. Literary motifs in *Sagas of Icelanders* have parallels in medieval Irish literature, particularly for texts set in regions such as the west of Iceland where 'Scandinavian' style burials with gravegoods are rare; and it has even been suggested that a corbelled, Irish house-type can be detected in the south-east.[62] All of these forms of evidence have their problems, but it seems sensible to conclude that people from Britain and Ireland made up a significant minority in Iceland before *c.* 1000.

Some of these place-names have been called into question. Vilmundarson considered the Irish-sounding Brjánslækur (which includes the name Brian) to have been Brandslækur originally, which would thereby include *brandr* as is also found in Surtarbrandsgil, the source of the *lækur* or 'brook' concerned. Both Brjánslækur and Brandslækur survive as pre-1500 spellings of modern Brjánslækur. The name Brján would have made sense to Icelanders because of a general knowledge of Irish history; this would probably be especially true on a major farm like Brjánslækur.[63] Such inclinations towards exoticism might also seem appropriate for marginal or liminal locations. Gunnar Karlsson, no doubt taking inspiration from Vilmundarson, has suggested that Melkorkustaðir, the name of the farm famously associated with the female Irish slave Melkorka in *Laxdæla saga*, might actually include the word *kyrkingur*, indicating poor grass growth, rather than be derived from the Irish personal name Mael-Curcaich.[64]

59 Sigmundsson, 'Um örnefnaskýringar', 61–2.
60 H. Pálsson, 'Keltnesk mannanöfn í íslenzkum örnefnum', *Skírnir*, 126 (1952), 195–203; H. Pálsson, 'Um Íra-örnefni', *Skírnir*, 127 (1953), 105–11.
61 Above, fn. 7 for references.
62 Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland*, 27.
63 Kjartansson, 'Upprifjun um náttúrunafnakenningu' (forthcoming), including references to recent objections to Vilmundarson's ideas.

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Names containing *Íra* have been given thoughtful consideration by Helgi Þorláksson as part of his research into Breiðafjörður, the large bay in the west of Iceland where 24 of Hermann Pálsson's 36 such names are found. Þorláksson suggests that some of them are derived from words describing landscape features, and that in cases where some of them supposedly record the activities of Irish people in later centuries the Irish element *írska* may have been confused in people's minds with the more credible activities of *þýska* (German) merchants and fishermen. Furthermore the lack of signs of Irish people visiting Iceland might also suggest that 'real' places associated with Irishmen were actually places which were visited by Bristol merchants, i.e. those from the Irish Sea.[65]

Regional patterns

Regional variations of many aspects of place-names are the bread and butter of their study in the UK, and not just at the basic level of their original language. This is largely true in Iceland as well, despite its arguably being more linguistically homogenous, having few dialectic words and almost no regional accents. Superficially at least the issue looks like a similar one to that which scholars face in trying to understand the relative uniformity of English place-names, certainly with regard to the study of topographical names in both countries.[66]

For particular place-name elements Svavar Sigmundsson has detected some patterns.[67] The word for mountain peak, *hnjúkur*, exists in place-names in the north and east but is the simpler *hnúkur* in the south and west. *Skeið* seems to denote slightly different forms of flat land: a terrace in the north, but any flat piece of land in the flatter south. Other elements are rare simply because the features they relate to are rare. Sigmundsson has also associated the farm name Breiðabólstaðr with a Gaelic presence since examples are found largely in the south and west of Iceland. In his view those who eventually settled in the south

[64] G. Karlsson, *Laxdæla saga. Stutt og endursögð af Gunnari Karlssyni. Kennarahandbók* (Reykjavík: Námsútgáfan, 1996), 9. Helgi Guðmundsson has also suggested that the character Melkorka is most likely to be derived from the place-name: *Um haf innan. Vestrænir menn og íslenzk menning á miðöldum* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997), 307. Cf. S. Sigmundsson, 'Personnamn som ortnamn på Island' [2002], *Nefningar*, 275–82, at 279.

[65] H. Þorláksson, 'Frá Byrstofu til Breiðafjarðar. Voru írskir kaupmenn við Breiðafjörð undir lok miðalda?', in K. H. Björnsson (ed.), *4. íslenska söguþingið 7.–10. júni 2012. Ráðstefnurit* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2013), 177–92.

[66] P. Cullen, 'Place-names and landscape terminology', in J. Carroll & D. N. Parsons (eds), *Perceptions of Place. Twenty-First-Century Interpretations of English Place-Name Studies* (Nottingham: English Place-Name Soc., 2013), 161–79, at 174–6.

[67] S. Sigmundsson, 'Regionala drag i isländska ortnamn' [2001], *Nefninga*r, 239–51, for what follows.

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and west of Iceland had brought with them a name originally derived from Scotland (and, most notably, one not found in Norway).[68]

Perhaps one might expect differences in physical geography or social structures to create other kinds of patterns but, if so, these are not particularly noticeable. There may be signs of economic specialisation of a kind which is not yet sufficiently clear in archaeology; for instance, *bú* 'farm' is a second element found solely in farm names in Skagafjörður, where the first element records a form of livestock (e.g. Nautabú, Geitabú). Why such names appear in Skagafjörður and not, for example, the other big valley system in the north, Eyjafjörður, is unclear. Another regional pattern is the record of many *verbúðir*, seasonal fishing stations, each with its own name, such as those listed in the tax register of Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín for the Snæfellsnes peninsula in the early eighteenth century.[69] The cause of some other, marked regional variations are less clear, such as when new farms with a habitative element were established in and after the fourteenth century. At this point some farms gave their names to newly created cottages (or perhaps to renamed cottages) hived off from their land, such as Hvammsdalskot which, as we saw above, derived its name from neighbouring Hvammsdalur. There are some variations in regional distributions for the particular element denoting the status of these farms, e.g. *kot* 'cottage', *gerði* 'enclosure', *sel* 'shieling' and *tún* 'enclosed hayfield'. As Ólafur Lárusson noted, among these elements *hús* and *gerði* have the strongest regional distributions: *hús* is concentrated in two separate districts in the south-west and west, and *gerði* in three adjacent regions in the north.[70] In a country where farming practices were relatively uniform, where the population was very mobile, and where dialect and accent barely existed within the language, it is hard to see an immediate cause of these regional differences. Further work might still identify regional cultures of naming at different times and places and suggest reasons for them.

Modern place-names

Just as the discipline of name studies elsewhere includes the analysis of modern formations, so it is in Iceland. Although Iceland's farms and landscape are filled with many names recorded as early as the twelfth century, it is important to recognise that new names have continued to be employed in the countryside, not

[68] Sigmundsson, 'Icelandic and Scottish place-names', 222–3, 227.

[69] In this case the *búðir* existed well before this date, but there may have been fewer of them in earlier centuries and we do not have many of their individual names: e.g. the nameless *búðir* recorded on Snæfellsnes in 1360: *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, III, 140–1.

[70] Lárusson, 'Úr byggðarsögu Íslands', 45–7; Sigmundsson, 'Namnmönster i isländska gårdsnamn' 183–6; S. Sigmundsson, 'Farm names in Iceland containing the element *tún*' [2006], *Nefningar*, 373–85.

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just in the enormously expanded suburbs of Reykjavík. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century farmers seem to have been both practical and inventive in creating new names on their farms, such as those that record agricultural improvements.[71]

Such invention came – ironically – at a time of growing nationalism and despite the desire of some politicians to preserve Icelandic tradition and the purity of Icelandic language and culture, which often meant looking back to Iceland's supposed independent 'golden age' of the sagas. Indeed, a law passed in 1913 required landowners to apply for permission to change the name of their farm. The national place-name committee, Örnefnanefnd, has existed since 1935. While the role of Örnefnanefnd is nowhere near as controversial as the body that regulates personal names, property owners still have to apply to give their new farm or holiday home a name, and they risk having it rejected. A study made in 2009 of its decisions implies that applicants were conservative in their choice of new names, with the vast majority of applications being accepted on the grounds that the names respected traditional naming practices and were inspired by the local landscape.[72] Rejected names, however, included an attempt to call one new cottage Aðalból 'main farm', and another one Hestahof 'horse('s) temple/farm', on the grounds that they were not connected to local history or settlement patterns.[73] In 2009 names that simply repeated existing ones, such as Vatnsleysa IV, presumably were waved through because Vatnsleysa was an old name and Vatnsleysa II and III had already been approved; the addition of roman numerals to an old name seems to be considered more appealing than a new name. In the early 1950s Örnefnanefnd was concerned that farmers might choose to use the names of the Norse gods in their farm names, since this harked back to that earlier nationalism and educational tradition which associated the gods with Iceland. A decade later, however, it would still be acceptable for a new volcanic island to be named after a mythological feature, but not farms.

Arguably of most interest among studies of newer names has been Birna Lárusdóttir's examination of the process by which the new volcanic island of Surtsey was given its name when it appeared in 1963. She considers what lessons

71 B. Lárusdóttir, 'Þúfnabanar, kjarnorka og netbolir', in G. Kvaran, H. J. Ámundason & S. Sigmundsson (eds), *Fjöruskeljar. Afmælisrit til heiðurs Jónínu Hafsteinsdóttur sjötugri 29. mars 2011*, Rit 81 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, 2011), 19–30.

72 Þ. B. Hjartardóttir, 'Hvað á býlið að heita? Um starfsemi örnefnanefndar', *Nefnir – Vefrit Nafnfræðifélagsins* (2011), <https://www.arnastofnun.is/is/utgafa-og-gagnasofn/pistlar/hvad-bylid-ad-heita-um-starfsemi-ornefnanefndar> (accessed 5 May 2019).

73 One possible explanation of Hestahof is that it is a translation of German *Pferdehof*, 'horse farm', given the strong contacts between German and Icelandic breeders of Icelandic horses (Birna Lárusdóttir pers. comm.).

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this naming process might have for our understanding of newly discovered places such as Iceland once was and other places have been too, such as Australia. The island of Surtsey, together with the crater, Surtr, were named hurriedly by the authorities in Reykjavík, with no account being taken of local opinion in the Westman Islands (Vestmannaeyjar). The latter's inhabitants had suggested naming the new island Ólafsey or Óley after Ólafur G. Vestmann, the appropriately named ship's cook who first spotted the volcanic eruption. A proposal had also entered print that the new island should be named after the French journalists who had first set foot on it. In the end it was Örnefnanefnd's appeal to Iceland's national ancient past that prevailed. Surtsey, with its allusion to the giant Surtr 'black' recorded in the Eddic poem Völuspá and to the well known cave complex Surtshellir on the mainland, won the day despite vocal protests from the people of the Westman Islands. Although these circumstances were different from those of the period of Iceland's colonisation, this episode shows how discoverers and authorities of different kinds tend to compete to name places.

Other foreign visitors have had an impact on place-names in different ways. The British fishing entrepreneur Pike Ward (1856-1937), for instance, had places named after him by the inhabitants of various fishing towns. Of these it appears that only Wardstún 'Ward's enclosure' in the town of Ísafjörður survives in use, while others in more remote areas such as Wardsvík or Vordsstykki were recorded but have disappeared.[74] British and American troops, imposed on Iceland during World War II, wholly or partly renamed some locations in and around Reykjavík in English for their own purposes. It seems that versions of the less alien-sounding Icelandic place-names were used, if partly garbled, by the English-speakers, while other names were completely new.[75] Although these names survive on a wartime map, they disappeared either when the English-speakers themselves did or, in some cases, when the military camps were eventually displaced by housing.

Conclusion

Although only a few authors have been cited here, the study of Icelandic place-names has involved a surprisingly large number of scholars and enthusiasts in the last century or so. I am conscious of the many scholars whose contributions are

[74] K. J. Findlay (ed.), *The Icelandic Adventures of Pike Ward* (Exeter: Amphora Press, 2018), 93; Katherine Findlay, pers. comm.

[75] S. Þ. Jóhannesson, 'Kampanöfn og örnefni tengd hersetu á Íslandi 1940–1945', *Nefnir – Vefrit Nafnfræðifélagsins* (no date), <https://www.arnastofnun.is/is/utgafa-og-gagnasofn/pistlar/kampanofn-og-ornefni-tengd-hersetu-islandi-1940–1945> (accessed 5 May 2019).

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not discussed here but fill the pages of Svavar Sigmundsson's online bibliography.[76]

Beyond those pioneers who gathered data and began to question the nature of farm names, the intervention of Þórhallur Vilmundarson seems to have been the most significant in that he tipped the balance in favour of understanding topography, rather than personal names, as the default explanation for place-names. In that sense 'the sagas', and with them the value of story telling and of nineteenth-century nationalism, have since lost ground to linguistics and archaeology.

The inclusion of place-name analysis in interdisciplinary studies of particular regions will surely continue to enrich our understanding of Iceland's colonisation and the thousand years of its subsequent occupation. Much also remains to be done in terms of cataloguing place-names and making accessible the data already in existence, as well as continuing to gather names from the people who still live in rural Iceland.

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[76] Above, fn. 8.