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“All the Foundation of the Earth becomes Desolate”

Tracing Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon connections through a Shared Literary Frontier

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Masters of Arts in English

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by

Adam Timbs

May 2018

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Keywords: Anglo-Saxon Literature, Icelandic Literature, Medieval Literature, Ecocriticism

## ABSTRACT

“All the Foundation of the Earth becomes Desolate”

Tracing Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon connections through a Shared Literary Frontier

by

Adam Timbs

The mythology of migration is deeply integral to the medieval Germanic societies peopling Northern Europe and the island nations of the North Sea. Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic society construct their identities through a memory of migration that takes place within a frontier that is mythic and historical in scope. By surveying eco-critical components of Anglo-Saxon poems such as “The Wife’s Lament” and “The Husband’s Message” alongside the Icelandic sagas *Egil’s saga* and *The Vinland sagas*, a shared tradition of the frontier ideal is revealed.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

One of the great delights of studying any literary tradition is interpreting the significance of interconnectivity. In the context of the medieval Germanic north, literary and poetic lineage is defined by rich relationships of myth, history, and genealogy maintained throughout centuries of oral and written tradition. In the Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic literary spheres, inter-connectivity within the form and function of the literature is the poetic, tribal imperative. Both literary fields have been subject to concentrated scholarship over many fruitful decades, but studies specifically addressing textual and cultural similarities have been scattered and incomplete. While notable work has been accomplished, a concentrated approach has yet to be codified through a critical theory flexible enough to accommodate varying degrees of literary inter-relatedness between the two traditions. This thesis suggests a need to re-evaluate literary interconnectivity across cultural, as well as physical borders in Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic literature. This re-evaluation ascribes importance to both literary bodies as significant constituents of a diverse and interactive medieval Northern Atlantic diaspora. It is both helpful and rewarding for the scholar and general audience alike to consider how the literatures of the Northern Atlantic peoples co-habitated and informed one another. As modern scholars contend with the weight of traditional scholarship and new critical practices, it is crucial to consider the fertile grounds of cross-literary studies of these two neighboring, prolific literary cultures.

However, a cross-literary study can become unwieldy due to the broad nature of the subjects, and further, may become unconstructive due to wishful or unfounded speculation. Therefore, this thesis is grounded in a dual concept that lies deeply rooted at the hearts of both Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic literature; the duality of migration and the physical realm of the frontier. Both cultures derive from exploring and hardy Germanic peoples, who, already

dwelling at the dark end of the iron age world, chose to migrate even further north from their continental homelands. As a result of these migrations, both the Icelanders and the various tribes of the Anglo-Saxons would find themselves entrenched at the edge of a northern frontier landscape, brimming with physical, environmental, and spiritual hardships. The Anglo-Saxons came to Britain as a disparate, conquering people, restless for new lands to stake as their own. Hundreds of years later, many of the first Icelanders were fleeing a Norwegian civil conflict that heralded Harald Fair-Hair as first king of a unified Norway, and consequently, the end of their independence as solitary landsmen and chieftains (Oskarsdottir ix). They sought refuge in Anglo-Saxon England, Ireland, Scotland, the Orkneys and Hebrides, until many settled finally in broad and uninhabited Iceland; where fjords and wide pasturage recalled the landscape of their forsaken Norwegian farmsteads. Both cultures, already related through a common linguistic and mythic heritage, engaged their migratory landscapes in poetry and prose. It is the poetic preoccupation with the physical landscape itself that unifies these peoples within a shared cultural reality that binds not only their literary tracks, but also their regional activity with one another.

Furthermore, this thesis seeks to demonstrate how the North Atlantic environment itself figures as a constant factor in the characterization of literary activity. The frontier landscape possesses a multi-functionality for Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic poets. At times it is framed aesthetically, conveying a sense of historical or mythical geography. The frontier is also expressed didactically, as a ground of contention between Christian law and the Pagan past. Exile and exploration are presented as divergent paths on the migratory spectrum of frontier activity. Whether by death or obscurity, the exile is doomed to lose him or herself to the otherness of the borderlands. The explorer, however, traverses that same otherness and inevitably

alters it; the frontier land is gradually transformed, given shape by naming and human activity. Traditional textual studies present gaps that must necessarily exist due to ambiguities presented by manuscript lineages and conflicting historical information, amongst other issues latent within the field. However, careful and focused interpretation of landscape writing contemporary within the text offers a potential for productive research unhindered by longstanding vacancies within existing scholarship. The aim of this thesis then, is to construct a critical survey of frontier literature in Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic literature in order to read them together in unity as a meaningful literary representative of the medieval Northern Atlantic diaspora. In order to accomplish this, a definition of ecocriticism will be clarified for use throughout the thesis.

Recent scholarship of Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic studies has included ecocriticism and literary geographical studies amongst its contributions. Ecocriticism has flourished into an interdisciplinary methodology since its mid-20<sup>th</sup> century inception and has expanded from its beginnings as the poetic, ecological diction of naturalists and conservationists to include the geographically and environmentally concerned literary scholar. The ecocritical approach is beneficial to Northern Germanic literary studies in many ways, not least for its capacity to dredge up pragmatic elements of landscape and setting from a text and allot them their own literary foundation. Ecocriticism seeks out the jagged, intimate possibilities of physical reality within a text; expression of natural activity is sometimes thematically overt or functionally stock, but however significant the expression, the implications hold heavy sway over the characters and narratives of a text. Certainly, Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon literature is not lacking in environmental dramatism. Dark forests and hill country, arid wastelands, burgeoning marshes, and perhaps most dependably of all, the wide, freezing mouth of the North Atlantic ocean, all prefigure the circumstances and dispositions of the people dwelling therein.

Though Ecocritical studies in the medieval North Atlantic literary sphere have begun to swell in recent years, greater ground has yet to be broken open. Eleanor Barraclough asserts that in the Icelandic sagas, “The importance of landscape as a narrative device...has a been largely neglected area of research, and little detailed analysis of it has been attempted in the context of traditional saga scholarship” (Barraclough 368). Her assertion is indicative of the cumulative effects of longstanding scholarly practices within the saga tradition, as well as medieval Germanic scholarship in general. The well-run tracks of philology, historicism, and textual criticism account for much of the of study in the discipline, and the sheer volume of foundational scholarship has inevitably resisted newer critical approaches. However, I charge that ecocriticism and other related extant critical studies are not so disconnected from the established scholarly methods, and should be seriously considered as a new avenue of serious study for the literature.

To demonstrate the inherent inter-relatedness of ecocriticism to existing critical methods in Germanic studies, a comparison to textual criticism will suffice. Ecocriticism is specialized from the framework of Ecology, which emphasizes the importance of connectivity between organisms with one another as well as their environments. Ecocriticism applied to literary texts, then, strives to study the significance of relationships that occur within and without the body of a text. Textual Criticism maintains a similar imperative over within the study of manuscripts and folios, viewing a specific text as a product of not only its contemporary moment, but also its literary lineage. The study of the transmission of one MS to the next is itself a vital ecology; the aberrations and deletions, transition of longhand to shorthand, absence and presence of punctuation are all intrinsic relationships that expand the definition of a text’s possibility. Both figuratively and physically then, a text is more than the sum of its parts. Textual criticism, which



is so deeply integrated within the structure and tradition of medieval literary scholarship, shares much in common with modern literary ecocriticism, both in its method and aim.

The poetry of an oral culture serves the imperative of memory as much as the cultural function of art; the practice of poetry and the transmission of history and myth become a shared aesthetic, a selfsame means and end. The scribe or poet transmitting an existing poem does so under the conditions of his own moment, and is thus subject to his own experience, biases, and pre-existing knowledge. An obvious Anglo-Saxon example of this is *Beowulf*, with its anomalous Christian discrepancies in a thoroughly pagan lay. The saga scribes of Iceland are no different, as many sagas are laced with contemporary attitudes and political observation derived from the societal upheaval of the late 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries which concluded with the end of the Icelandic commonwealth. The texts surveyed in this thesis are products of their author's contemporary experience of the physical environment, just as they are likewise products of contemporary literary and cultural experience. Both Anglo Saxon and Icelandic authors contend with the currency of their own cultural and environmental moments while they also confront and adapt the past. These societies inhabited much of the same landscape which belonged to the heroes, forbears, and monsters of history and myth. The sagas are interspersed with specific place names, landmarks, and exceptional natural formations that create a significant cohesion of place and realism within the context of the tradition. Landscape serves a more overtly symbolic or thematic role in Anglo-Saxon literature, manifesting as the visceral possibility of isolation, exile, and obscurity outside the bounds of hearth and hall. All of these environmental aspects serve an aesthetic apart from their formal function as setting, which creates tangible, inter-textual connections between the two societies. The ways in which the Anglo-Saxons and Icelanders read

and wrote themselves within their textual landscapes offer meaningful congruencies pertinent to a total literary study of the medieval North Atlantic diaspora.

*Groenlendinga saga* (Saga of the Greenlanders) and *Eiriks saga rautha* (Eirik the Red's saga) are commonly presented as "the Vinland sagas." Each saga tells a variation of the discovery of Vinland (Wineland) and the voyages and colonization attempts that subsequently occurred in the very early years of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. *Eiriks saga rautha* is preserved in the manuscripts *Hauksbok* (early 14<sup>th</sup> century) and *Skalholtsbok* (early 15<sup>th</sup> century), and these texts in turn are believed to be based on an original text written sometime in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century (Jakobsson 501). *Groenlendinga saga* is derived from the manuscript *Flateyjarbok*, which dates to about 1387. Like the former saga, it also appears to date from an original which spans back to the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Jakobsson 502). Between the two sagas, we learn of Eirik the Red's founding of Greenland and its initial colonization. His son Leif is tasked with converting Greenland to Christianity by the Norwegian king Olaf Tryggvason, and while fulfilling this charge, he discovers a new land rich in grapevines, pasturage, valuable timber, and self-sowing wheat. As news of the discovery reaches Greenland, others attempt to venture in Leif's tracks, and these attempts are one by one overcome by illness, violent natives, and internecine treachery. Of all the characters who enter and exit The Vinland Sagas, the woman Gudrid possesses the most enduring presence. She is present during the first expedition to Vinland, where she gives birth to her first child, Snorri (the first Vinlander). Much of the experience of these sagas is characterized through Gudrid. She weathers a ship wreck, loses her first husband to illness (only to experience his temporary reanimation), and lives long enough to become a nun in old age. Gudrid bears witness to the weird hazards of the northern frontier, both natural and supernatural, and follows her fate through uninhabited wastelands and stark, bountiful wilderness.

The similarities between *Groenlendinga saga* and *Eiriks saga rautha* are significant when considering the possibilities of an oral tradition containing the story of Vinland, or the rich archaeology of L'anse aux meadows; both of these factors offer a physical and philological link with the content of the sagas, verifying at least the fact a voyage to Vinland was made and sung about. However, various textual and thematic aspects of the sagas differ greatly, in terms of both function and intent. Much of this aesthetic discrepancy is mediated through the portrayal of landscape, and further, how certain characters and ideals are contained within the landscape. Christianity is a prominent theme throughout the Vinland Sagas, and each author engages with the Christian imperative in a strange, positively un-Christian wilderness. Christian and pagan interaction within the frontier context becomes a formal aesthetic itself, and through this concept, I suggest that the author of *Eiriks saga rautha* is operating within a more overt, stylized Christian imperative than the *Groenlendingas saga* author. In *Eiriks saga rautha*, the frontier landscape is more profoundly wondrous and its characters more verbose. There is often a need to interpret this dynamism within an ever-expanding Christian space. Pagan characters are often depicted as crude and wild, antique oddities that compliment a strange and hostile wilderness. *Groenlendingas sagas* appears in some respects more 'pragmatic,' and its flourishes of landscape and character activity speaks more towards the geographical utility of travel writing.

The ecocritical contrast realized in The Vinland Sagas will extend towards the Anglo-Saxon tradition, specifically the poems *The Wife's Lament* and *The Husband's Message*. The significance of these poems to the thesis derives from a conconvocation of landscape and narrative contingent within the structural unity of the poems. Somewhat like The Vinland Sagas, these poems share certain commonalities that arise from a common source. In this case, the source is not a defined story, but rather the motif of exile. Each poem presents a woman isolated both

geographically and culturally. Due to the loss and prolonged absence of their lovers, they are subject to the certainty of exile in vacant and hostile surroundings. The poets working through these poems express a deep understanding of a landscape's capability to convey powerful gravitas as both setting and symbol. The speaker of "The Wife's Lament" mourns her situation from an earthen hovel beneath an oak tree. She has been exiled due to her husband's banishment and the cruel scheming of her in-laws. The poem is immersed in the physicality of the liminal frontier, and due to her exile, the speaker is relegated to the social space of outlaws and monsters. The motif of the female outsider or subterranean female beast is prevalent in many Icelandic sagas, and the "The Wife's Lament" is an Anglo-Saxon analogue framed within the poetics of elegiac realism. "The Husband's Message" bears likeness to "The Wife's Lament" with its yearning female figure and absent lover, but differs in terms of speaker and setting. The speaker of the poem is not the husband himself, but rather the container of his message; a piece of wood bearing a runic inscription meant for the wife. This 'rune stave' offers good news to the poem's treasured woman; though her husband has been long driven away from their home country by feud, he has found new wealth and standing in another land across the sea. The stave beckons the woman to seek out her husband by following the directions of the runes, and thus recover her social position and joy in a new land.

"The Husband's Message" and "The Wife's Lament" have often been speculated as textual correlatives, however loosely. While not adjacent texts, they both appear in the Exeter book and display similar themes. Notably, "The Wife's Lament" terminates in sorrow and continued exclusion, whereas "The Husband's Message" concludes with the possibility of a return to unity and fulfilment. However, these poems illustrate interactions with the reality of the North Atlantic medieval landscape that develop beyond the texts themselves into the reality of

the wider diaspora. While many secular and spiritual interpretations of these poems exist, I will focus on transposing the literal realities presented in the poems onto the larger cultural and historical realities contemporary to the region. Further, I suggest in this thesis that the driving factor in these poems are migration and displacement. “The Wife’s Lament” amongst other interpretations, is also a refugee poem. Conversely, “The Husband’s Message” conveys the ideal result of migratory activity, with the husband surviving a feud situation and successfully investing in the possibility wealth and standing in a land unmarred by failed relationships and treachery. These poems, however limited in explanation of these concepts, can be informed by the prose of the Icelandic sagas, which feature recurring exposition about such people movements and migratory activity through specific types of landscape.

The final text I will focus is the Icelandic saga *Egils saga Skallagrimssonar*. Egil’s life contains a broad swathe of traditional saga activity; feuds, viking expeditions, political intrigue, and monster slaying all permeate extended bouts of travel on both land and sea, through places historical and mythological, natural and supernatural. Egil is an outlaw, and as such, exercises a unique position in Northern Germanic society. He is a *skogarmathr* (literally ‘forest man’) and is driven out of society, away from its laws and protections into the environmental and spiritual ambiguity of the wilderness. While marked for death, they are also free of duty and responsibility to society at large. Within the context of this lethal freedom, they wander a variety of landscapes, pursuing personal goals while encountering creatures, kings, and common folk while they struggle for survival.

Egil Skallagrimsson of *Egils saga* is violent, emotional man, as industrious a poet as he is a warrior. Known in his youth for his wit and murderous temper, he spends much of formative years in viking raids around Norway and Denmark, increasing his wealth through the capital of

plunder and alliances. During this time, Egil begins his long running enmity with Norwegian king Eirik Bloodaxe and the sorcerous queen Gudrun. Egil eventually travels to Anglo-Saxon England, where he serves as a mercenary commander for King Aethelstan against a confederation of rebellious Scots, Welsh, and Norsemen in the North of England. He achieves much fame and wealth from the English campaign but finds little repose afterwards. Much of Egil's subsequent activity revolves around constant legal and martial conflict over inheritance and property, much of which is instigated by his toxic relationship with the Norwegian aristocracy. Egil is characterized by his inherent contradictions. He is a killer of men, and prone to bouts of dark, bestial fury; yet he is also sensitive to others and emotionally dynamic. He feels great pain for the loss of his brother and son, composes expressive love poetry about his wife, Asgerd, and is prone to assisting individuals weaker than himself who are oppressed by sorcery or the predations of those who possess villainous strength or power.

Mitigating political and mythical structures within saga landscapes is a labor of memory, poetics, and geography. For the saga authors, so much of the landscape and topography detailed in the sagas is contemporary to them. The currency of their own experience matters within the context of inter textuality, not only amongst the sagas themselves, but also in the wider world in which the sagas are contained. Within that conception of authorship vs. material, certain questions become evident. Why is *Egils saga* so political? How do the saga's conception of Norway, an interloping, non-native power by the time of written transmission, compare? What significance about Anglo-Saxon England (an extinct concept by the time of these manuscripts) does the *Egils saga* author wish to impart through his interpretation of it? Re-examining the very landscape that is contained within these questions offers much possibility in constructing a workable, literary ecology within the inter-related world of the texts.

All of these texts acknowledge the tangible otherness that is ever present in the darkened borders of northern medieval consciousness. The landscapes and frontier boundaries experienced in these texts do not represent otherness as it *might* be experienced, but how it *is* experienced; both equally in the psyches of genealogical heroes as well as in the everyday circumstances of common folk. It is impossible to draw hard, empirical conclusions about the depth of relatedness between the medieval North Atlantic peoples due to ever-present textual inconsistency and sheer lack of evidence. However, constructing a sense of continuity through landscape, which is arguably the most consistently present motif in the entire corpus of literature, is a pragmatic, logical goal of scholarship. For though landscape and the environment in this literature is suited for literary, moral, and thematic restructuring at the whim of the author and poet, they are still by nature, natural objects. The human experience of stone, water, trees, bogs, and mountains generates activity and cognition that is first ignited by the basic, singular presence of *being* in a place; despite whatever mythical, tribal, and historical implications ingrained within the intent and formal structure of a text, its foundations are constructed upon the simple, yet infinite complexities of an individual's awareness of the elements. The Anglo-Saxons and Icelanders demonstrate a keen awareness of their environment, as well as the way in which it imprints its likeness upon them. The environmental concourses between the two literary bodies should not be viewed as merely 'coincidence' or commonplace,' but rather as significant specimens of regional unity.

## CHAPTER 2 THE DISENTIGRATION OF SOCIETY ON THE FRONTIER IN THE VINLAND SAGAS

*Groenlendingas saga* and *Eiriks saga rautha*, collectively known as the Vinland sagas, are exceptional within Icelandic saga tradition because they illustrate a colonization narrative within a colonization narrative; the expeditions to (and subsequent failed colonization of) Vinland are framed within the successful colonization of Greenland. Sverrir Jakkobson observes that the Vinland sagas “are primarily approached in connection with American history, rather than as sources of evidence for the history of the culture of [Norse] seafarers themselves and/or those who told stories of their journeys (502). In the interest of understanding the unity of Northern Atlantic medieval culture through its frontiers, I propose that the idea of Vinland be turned inwards towards its origins in medieval literary experience, away from the contemporary geographical consciousness of North America. While the Vinland sagas are exceptional for demonstrating multiple perspectives of a well-remembered migratory event, they are just as important for illustrating the textual contrast of aesthetics in terms of saga transmission and construction. Each saga exhibits its own unique understanding of the effects of human incursion into a frontier space; the re-shaping, naming, spiritual and physical interactions that accompany such activity factor as their own aesthetics unique to the experience of 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century North Atlantic migratory activity. The Vinland sagas are anchored in the physicality and anxiety of exploration and settlement, but thematically speaking, *Groenlendinga saga* and *Eiriks saga rautha* emphasize two unique aspects of the migratory Germanic frontier; realism and exotica.

Accounts of migration and colonization are prevalent in the medieval corpus of the North Atlantic Diaspora, but no single tradition produces these accounts more consistently and systematically as the Icelandic Saga tradition. Both the genealogical and geographical bedrock of many Icelandic sagas is constituted from migratory accounts contained within *Landnamabok* and



*Iselendingabok* alone; these works detail the exploits and acquired properties of a collection of exiles, political refugees, defeated confederates, and embittered tradesmen fleeing the newly imposed authority of Harald Fair-Hair, first king over a unified Norway. These accounts typically serve to establish a saga's relevant genealogy, a concept defined equally by place and blood relation. Certain prominent ancestors such as Aud the Deep-Minded or Ketil Flatnose are subject to extensive exposition in a saga's introduction due to the way their deeds thread through the tradition, character traits, children, and place of Icelandic settlement; such individuals contribute a sense of historical continuity to a saga's main setting. Functionally, the migration/colonization narrative serves to alert a contemporary and ecclesiastical Icelandic audience to a specific cultural topography, both familial and geographical, with which they can relate the currency of their own lineage and modern landscape.

Each saga introduces Eirik the Red, the man who eventually founds the country of Greenland. Eirik is a Norwegian by birth, and according to *Groenlendinga saga* he and his father Thorvald flee to Iceland "because they had been involved with slayings" (Kunz 26). Eirik farms in Western Iceland, first in the Hornstrandir area and then in Haukadal, where he founds his own farm, Eiriksstadir (Eirik's Farm). Eirik becomes embroiled in conflicts around the area which earns him outlawry from Iceland at the Thorsnes Assembly. He gathers a crew and declares his intention to sail for "the land that Gunnbjorn, the son of Ulf Crow, had seen when he was driven off course westward Gunnbjarnarsker (Gunnbjorn's skerry)" (*Groenlendina saga*, Kunz 27). Eirik and his followers run this westward course and eventually sight land covered by a massive glacier. They follow the glacial tract south until they discover fair, inhabitable land and islands. For three years, Eirik and his expedition explore the habitable areas of Greenland, wintering in various settlements while using the fair winds and weather of the summer seasons to their

navigational advantage. After much exploration and “giving names to a number of sites,” Eirik returns to Iceland in the fourth summer of his exile. He puts in at Breidafjord and settles his affairs and outlawry over the first winter and spring of his return. Eirik does not remain still for long, however, and the author tells us “In the summer Eirik left to settle in the country he had found, which he called Greenland, as he said people would be attracted there if it had a favorable name” (*Groenlendinga saga*, Kunz 28).

Both sagas establish Greenland as the utmost frontier of Norse geography, and by the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Greenland became the first European settlement in the Western hemisphere (Sigurdsson xv). Groups of Icelanders pursue the paths of Eirik the Red’s journeys, as well as the allure of the name ‘Greenland’, and colonize areas near the eastern settlement at Brattahlid and the western settlement of Lyusfjord. It is significant that Greenland is only just being peopled around the time of the Vinland expeditions, and the text suggests a fluid, believable picture of human activity in the area at the time of the saga’s historical setting in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century. Individual families from Iceland are dwelling in established farmsteads supported by the grazing culture of Iceland and *Groenlendingas saga* mentions men organizing hunting parties for northward excursions, likely to search for walrus. Greenlanders and Icelanders alike repeatedly demonstrate their aptitude for sailing in both the frequency and manner of their travels. Seafarers often travel loaded with heavy cargo, especially timber and livestock, and make their way in the new waters using landmarks and bearings learned by word of mouth. Though the Norsemen are adept navigators and the sea lanes between Greenland and Iceland are expressed as relatively stable, several voyages suffer navigational difficulties. The details of these errors, compiled with the general geographical obscurity faced by the Vinland expeditioners, provides a possible framework in which to consider the reality shared by all sea-

farers of the medieval North Atlantic. While sea travel is a common motif in many other sagas, it acquires a tangible immediacy in The Vinland Sagas; there is a sense of acute uncertainty depiction of the seas. The duality of an unfathomable sea and an alien wilderness enacts discernable changes on the actions and personalities of the saga's characters, and implies a dark, tumultuous environment ever-present outside the text.

It should be said that in a modern context, The Vinland Sagas have been studied and debated significantly in conjunction with the archaeological findings at L'Anse Aux Meadows in the Northern tip of Newfoundland. The excavation of a small Norse settlement dated to the early 11<sup>th</sup> century has led to lengthy research and speculation concerned with linking archaeological data with the account of the Vinland Sagas (Sigurdsson xiii). This interest in the Vinland Sagas as an anthropological utility has in effect created two Vinlands. One such possibility is the modern interpretation informed by the contemporary geographical context of North America. The other is the literary Vinland as recorded in the sagas, which is itself a vibrant, fathomless wilderness that exists vaguely on the fringes of human possibility. Archaeological and literary studies have attempted to corroborate nautical and geographical details in the sagas with North American settlement evidence to pinpoint the true 'Vinland' accounted for in the texts. It is difficult to resist gravitating towards narrative similarities shared by *Groenlendinga saga* and *Eiriks saga rautha*, as the modern revelation of Norse Settlement in North America adds a layer of significance. However, in terms of assembling a collective literary framework for the medieval North Atlantic Diaspora, the narrative disparities are more pervasive than the similarities. The divergence of characters, setting, and narrative progression is due to more than a curiosity of source ambiguities; it is resultant of each author's unique consciousness of Vinland,

which is not only informed by a longstanding poetic tradition, but also by a rationale that Vinland, though distant and treacherous, is a real location.

### The Discovery Episodes

The discovery accounts of Vinland and the surrounding Islands Helluland and Markland differ significantly between *Groenlendingas saga* and *Eiriks saga rautha*, and the divergent narratives suggest factors both obvious and subtle. It appears that while the sagas draw from a common tradition, either oral, textual, or possibly both, they do not reference one another in any meaningful way. Haukr Erlendsson compiled the oldest source of *Eiriks saga rautha* in the Hauksbok manuscript sometime between 1302-1310 with other materials and writings concerning the Greenland settlement. GS appears in the *Flateyjarbok* manuscript written between 1387 and 1394 and is included in the biography of King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway. Sverrir Jakobsson observes that Erlendsson likely did not know of *Groenlendingas saga* while compiling the Hauksbok, as he does not utilize it as a source of material or reference (Jakobsson 496). Both sagas contain a similar sequence of events, while expressing specific degrees of textual and narrative variance. Generally, the sagas impart that Eirik the Red explores and settles Greenland. A few years hence, Leif Eiriksson finds and explores the rumored lands west of Greenland, and names the chiefest among them Vinland. Eiriksson returns to Greenland, whereby subsequent colonization efforts are attempted and failed. For convenience, each saga's name will be abbreviated to these respective initials GS (*Groenlendinga saga*) and ESR (*Eiriks saga rautha*).

While the differences of the sagas are inherent in the textual variance of the physical manuscripts, formal and functional differences are just as significant. GS operates within a theme of environmental awareness and specificity, whereas ESR is framed within a strong Christian

imperative that is highlighted by elements of medieval phantasm. The contrast of each saga's discovery episode establishes the asymmetry of aesthetics that make one saga unique to the other. The author of *GS* begins in a mild state of *in media res*; much of the traditional saga genealogical exposition is brief and concluded. Greenland has been recently founded by Eirik the Red and the narrative focus is on Bjarni, an Icelandic merchant who returns to Iceland from Norway only to learn that his father, Herjolf, has departed with Eirik the Red to settle in Greenland. Upon learning the news of his father's departure, Bjarni "was greatly moved... and would not have his cargo unloaded" (Kunz 4). He asks his crew to accompany him to Greenland, and they all accept. Bjarni states "Our journey will be thought an ill-considered one, since none of us has sailed the Greenland Sea (Kunz 4)" and this omen proves true as soon as Iceland vanishes in the horizon behind them. The author tells us that "the wind dropped and they were beset by winds from the north and fog; for many days they did not know where they were sailing" (Kunz 4).

Bjarni demonstrates an eco-consciousness that qualifies the realism in *GS*. Bjarni is a skilled sailor and determined to sail to his father, yet he exhibits an ominous caution at facing unfamiliar sea lanes to a newly discovered land. The extreme weather that Bjarni and his crew endure is part of the nautical reality of the seafaring North. They survive the displacement of the stormwinds and fog and eventually sail along three islands, none of which Bjarni wishes to explore. Bjarni proves a shrewd and unadventurous seaman. As he encounters each island, he compares its natural geography with descriptions of what he has heard of Greenland. He rightly decides each time that they have not found Greenland, but he turns against his men's natural desire to go ashore and explore the lands. When the ship arrives at the second island that is "flat and wooded," the crew is anxious to go ashore, claiming "they needed both timber and water"

(Kunz 5). Bjarni maintains his caution and rebukes his crew, stating “You’ve no shortage of those provisions” and he begins to be openly criticized by his crew for conservative behavior (Kunz 5). Eventually, after many days of continuous sailing, Bjarni and his crew arrive at “a third land... this land had high mountains, capped by a glacier” at which Bjarni remarks “this land seems to me to offer nothing of use.” (Kunz 5). After many days of careful sailing, they come upon “a fourth land” which turns out to be Greenland.

Bjarni’s episode in *GS* is rich with an ecology of navigational and psychological awareness and bears no mention of Christianity. The saga author is committed to juxtaposing Bjarni’s cautious sailing with the systematic observation of new territory. The islands are first described solely from Bjarni’s perspective; they are unnamed and distant, and though his crew remarks on potential resources, Bjarni determines they are inconsequential. His refusal to go ashore on the islands derives from his incessant desire to reach Greenland, but it is also tempered from the experience of surviving the catastrophic gale and fog that initially placed them in strange waters. The landscape he discovers only becomes remarkable in a narrative context after he has made landfall and recounts his voyage to others, who “find him short on curiosity, since he had nothing to tell of these lands, and he was much criticized for this” (Kunz 5). Bjarni is a character who reacts rationally when faced with the frontier, though it does him little service for his reputation as a sea-farer.

The obscurity of Bjarni’s experience, while very un-viking in itself, inspires wanderlust throughout the settlement of Greenland. We are told that “there was now much talk of looking for new lands,” and as Bjarni departs the narrative of *GS*, Leif Eiriksson enters (Kunz 6). He is responsible for leading the first dedicated expedition to the uncharted territory which he will eventually name ‘Vinland.’ However, the representation of Eiriksson in *GS* differs significantly

from ESR. In GS, Leif's psychology converges with the revelations of his exploration of the frontier that Bjarni only glimpses. Tracing Bjarni's sea route, Leif and his crew "found first the land which Bjarni and his companions had seen last" (Kunz 6). While Bjarni took a steady course past this island, Leif immediately goes ashore and casts anchor. Like Bjarni, they observe "the land seemed of little use," but because of their arrival on shore, the audience is allowed their first tactile glimpse of the mysterious, rumored lands; a rather barren place with "no grass, but large glaciers [that] covered the highlands, and the land was like a single flat slab of rock from the glaciers to the sea" (Kunz 6). Leif declares "As far as this land is concerned it can't be said of us as of Bjarni, that we did not set foot on shore. I am now going to name this land and call it Helluland" (Kunz 6).

With this scene, the GS author presents Leif as the narrative foil to Bjarni in the saga's discovery episode. Leif acknowledges Helluland's lack of resources, but determines another value inherent in the landscape through naming. Helluland translates literally to 'stone-slab land', and by clarifying the landscape through geography, Leif pushes back the northern frontier. Chris manes infers that "landscape is no mere scenery, no flimsy stage set, but rather the energizing *medium* from which lives emerge and by which those lives are bounded and measured" and indeed the first step onto Helluland clarifies the purely explorative purpose of Leif's voyage (183). He is driven further in his voyage by the exultant energy of discovery and naming. The crew does this once more at Markland (Forest land) until he reaches the land mass of North America. In GS, Leif proves a capable and zealous explorer; he directs the crew in organized explorations of the land, and they decide to build 'large houses' for spending the winter. This frame of time allows the author textual space to define for the reader a landscape that is not mythical, but vast in the scope of its possibility. The waters teem with "salmon larger

than they had ever seen before” and the headlands offer such vegetation and good temperatures that Leif and company speculate that “livestock would need no food during the winter” (Kunz 7). The frontier is often depicted as a space of natural wealth and wonder in saga tradition and is sometimes semi-mythical in nature. The frontier land in GS is catalogued soberly with the care of a naturalist, and Eiriksson’s expedition acts methodically as they survey their surroundings.

The discovery episode in GS concludes with a scene featuring Tyrkir, a man who is named apart from the other members of the expedition as “a man from a more southernly country,” likely thought to be Germany (Kunz 7). Tyrkir receives no other mention until he goes missing from the camp, which greatly distresses Leif, as we are told Tyrkir “had spent many years with him and his father and had treated Leif as a child very affectionately” (Kunz 8). Shortly after setting out to find Tyrkir with twelve men, Leif discovers him walking towards the camp, “apparently pleased about something” (Kunz 8). Leif asks Tyrkir how he had become separated from the party, and in an odd response, “Tyrkir spoke only in German, with his eyes darting in all directions and his face contorted” (Kunz 8). Jakobsson suggests that Tyrkir’s mannerisms imply that he is inebriated (for possible reasons soon revealed), though this does not seem apparent to the bewildered Norsemen, “who understood nothing of what he was saying” (Kunz 8). Tyrkir eventually begins speaking in Norse and manages to tell Leif and the party that he has found wild grapes. Leif is somewhat skeptical of this claim, and Tyrkir states that he is “absolutely sure” of the fruit’s identity, as “where he was born, there was no lack of grapevines and grapes” (Kunz 8).

There is much authorial subtlety embedded within the Tyrkir scene, and it further demonstrates The GS poet’s naturalist aptitude. He reveals the natural fermentative properties of the grapes through Tyrkir’s physical and verbal reactions, but also attests to their identity



through Tyrkir's ethnic origin. Leif and the other (presumably) Greenlanders are skeptical of Tyrkir because of their foreknowledge of the rarity of grapes, which in Greenland and Iceland would be exclusively available as wine through trade with southern countries. There is a sense that Tyrkir becomes somewhat alien through his language modulation, brought on either by the excitement of finding the grapes, or by the drunkenness brought on by eating of fermented bunches. Tyrkir babbles in German because he has encountered something in this unfamiliar landscape that draws him into his native identity and language. This nativist disarray expressed Tyrkir in his odd mania is unsettling to the Norsemen, some of whom may not even be aware of the properties of wild, fermented grapes due to their rarity. The grapes become the territory's namesake, as soon after their discovery, Leif names the country Vinland (Wine-land). The scene with Tyrkir is crucial not only for emphasizing the discovery of the grapes, but also for establishing that this landscape possesses the ability to evoke dynamic behavior from the Norse explorers, whether by its natural resources or its frontier otherness.

Leif Eiriksson and the discovery episode are depicted more briefly and within a ratified Christian context in ESR. Bjarni's account is absent, and there is no narrative setup for the rumored lands west of Greenland. Instead, Leif Eiriksson and his crew are simply blown off course when sailing to Greenland from Norway. Importantly, Leif does not begin his expedition as an intrepid Viking adventurer, but rather as a conscripted missionary. While spending time in the court of Norway, Leif is charged by the Norwegian king Olaf Trygvason to convert Greenland to Christianity. The king suggests the order to Leif after he inquires if Leif will be journeying to Greenland in the summer. After confirming his travel plans, Leif tactfully shows his deference to Trygvason, offering that "the king should decide" whether he undertake this mission trip, and "that he feared this message would meet with a harsh reception in Greenland"

(Kunz 34). Trygvason confirms his wishes and simply states that no matter the circumstances, Leif “will have the good fortune that’s needed” to undertake the task (Kunz 34). Similar to Bjarni and his crew, Leif’s ship is “tossed about at sea for a long time,” and he and his people survive and find “land where he had not expected any to be found” (Kunz 35). This progression occurs in a very short passage, devoid of any of the geographical or weather descriptions included in GS. We learn that Leif and his crew explore the land, finding “fields of self-sown wheat and vines...also, there were trees known as burl, and they took specimens of all of them” (Kunz 35). There is no suggestion of a timeframe for the expedition, nor any specific mention of the geography, animal life, or shelter building. This land is not yet named Vinland, and if Leif traversed Markland and Helluland, it is not mentioned. Certainly, he is not credited with exploring and naming them as he does in GS.

Navigational details and the characterization of Leif and his crew are utterly passed over in ESR, though we are told that on the return to Greenland, Leif happens upon the survivors of a ship wreck. While significant, this event is greatly abbreviated in ESR, and appears to only function as means of demonstrating Leif’s good morality and dedication to his Christian mission. The entire scene is depicted as thus:

Leif also chanced upon men clinging to a ship’s wreck, whom he brought home and found shelter for the winter. In so doing he showed his strong character and kindness. He converted the country to Christianity. Afterwards he became known as Leif the Lucky.  
Kunz 35

This scene is paralleled in GS, but with significantly more emphasis on the psychological and environmental implications. In GS, the scene begins with Leif being questioned by his crew as to why he is steering “a course so close to the wind” (Kunz 8). He demonstrates his keen eyesight and navigational awareness when he returns the question to them, saying “I’m watching my course, but there is more to it than that: do you see anything of note?” (Kunz 9). The crew sees

“nothing worthy of note,” but Leif declares that he sees “a ship or a skerry” (Kunz 9). The GS author adds that “Leif saw so much better than they did, that he could make out men on the skerry,” further adding to the characterization of Leif’s skills as a developed sea-farer. Leif steers closer to the skerry, but not before he organizes a response scenario with his crew. He declares to them that “if these men should be in need of our help, we have to try and give it to them. If they should prove hostile, we have all the advantages on our side and they have none” (Kunz 9). In contrast with ESR’s general definition on Leif’s “Strong character and kindness,” GS adds an element of ruthless pragmatism to Leif’s persona. He understands that he cannot trust the appearance of the survivors’ helplessness, and that if a slaughter must ensue, his crew will be on the right side of it. Leif and his crew rescue the survivors and much of their cargo, and like in ESR, he returns to Greenland earns his name Leif the Lucky.

The depictions of Eiriksson in GS and ESR are dependent on landscape aesthetic and Christian imperative respectively. In the dynamic environment of GS, Leif is the explorer and namer of Vinland; the individual responsible for clarifying the possibility of settlement beyond the boundaries of Greenland. However in ESR, Leif’s Vinland expedition is diminished to emphasize his role as Christian missionary. He is less the first explorer of mysterious lands in the west and more the necessary pioneer that unchristian Greenland requires; instead of exploring the potential new land, Leif’s purpose seems restricted to increasing Trygvasson’s Norwegian influence to Greenland through his Christian edicts. Leif is a more realized character in GS due to his presence within the Vinland frontier. The geography and ecology of Vinland form the central point of interest for the GS author, and the activity of Leif and his crew are fashioned to emphasize the natural wonder of the frontier space. The GS author is seemingly unmotivated by a religious and or ecclesiastical imperative; there is no description of Leif as missionary and the

state of Greenland's Christianity is not explored within his thematic role in the saga. The episode with Leif in GS establishes the author's aesthetics of ecology over ideology; the landscape of Vinland functions as a rational, natural source of migratory memory that possesses a contemporary currency based in its realism. The religious framing of Leif's journey in ESR centers migratory activity and the frontier firmly within Christian terms. What both discovery episodes share is a foreshadowing of more substantial voyages to Vinland, where each saga author's aesthetics bloom more fully into function.

### Supernatural Occurrences and the Heathen Element

Greenland is the primary population center in the Vinland sagas, and due to its recent colonization, it is a society in flux. Icelandic settlers bring not only their families and agriculture, but also their folklore and religion, and the wild landscape of Greenland is not immune to supernatural disturbance. Pagans and Christians also mingle in the colony, and their interactions demonstrate a Northern culture in transition in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century. GS and ESR continue their aesthetic inversions through their specific treatment of the supernatural/pagan elements present within Greenland. Hauntings within GS take on a more secular bent; they appear as a natural result of Greenland's isolated geography. However in ESR, the supernatural is heavily derived from the island's lack of Christianity. Each saga reflects a perceived spiritual ecology flowing through Greenland's landscape, defined by either unknowable nature itself or by the conflict of ideals maintained by those dwelling there. Each saga author integrates the supernatural into his aesthetic principle to reorder the historic, pseudo mythic past of Greenland into a form that fulfills the contemporary expectations of his audience. Though the supernatural/pagan elements are common motifs and tropes saga tradition, they are also documented occurrences in the natural

history of the migratory landscape of the past and are factors by which the authors/poets confront “the separate realm of nature, by becoming aware of its otherness” (Slovic 352).

Women are notable conduits of the supernatural within the Vinland sagas, either as enablers or receptacles of haunted activity (Borovsky 11). Gudrid is given noticeably more space within ESR, where she is first presented as an early settler to Greenland. She is wintering with others at the house of Thorkel, a prominent farmer living at Herjolfsness. We learn that a seeress named Thorbjorg comes visiting, as it is her custom to visit households around the district each winter to offer her prophecies to the proprietors. Thorbjorg emerges as a physical representation of the pagan outlands that reside in the pre-Christian Greenland. This scene takes place before Leif Eriksson’s missionary efforts are detailed in ESR, and demonstrates the religious disparity of a sparse, de-centralized landscape that is disconnected from the cultural unity of the Christian North Atlantic region. Thorbjorg makes her prophetic intent known to Thorkel, who gladly accepts her spiritual guidance in “a lean time” of famine and disease in Herjolfsness (Kunz 29).

To emphasize her otherness, the ESR describes Thorbjorg’s garments with antiquarian curiosity:

When she arrived one evening, along with the man who had been sent to fetch her, she was wearing a black mantle with a strap, which was adorned with precious stones right down to the hem. About her neck she wore a string of glass beads and on her head a hood of black lambskin lined with white catskin. She bore a staff with a knob at the top, adorned with a brass set with stones on top. About her waist she had a linked charm belt with a large purse. In it she kept the charms which she needed for predictions. She wore calfskin boots lined with fur, with long, sturdy laces and large pewter knobs on the ends. On her hands she wore gloves of catskin, white and lined with fur.

Kunz 31

Thorbjorg is a figure of heathen exotica, and her appearance is meant to make a fantastic impression upon her host audience as well as the Icelandic of the saga text. Thorbjorg manifests as an object commensurate with the uncertain social geography of Greenland’s frontier community. Unlike sorcerous individuals in the sagas who inhabit Iceland at the singularity of

Christian conversion, Thorbjorg is neither pariah nor remnant; she represents the obscure and wild pagan wastelands thriving on the edge of Christian society.

After taking dinner and spending the night with Thorkel's household, Thorbjorg is provided with resources to carry out her 'magic rites.' She requires women who know 'warlock songs,' magical chants that will assist her divination rituals. We are told no woman in the household knows these specific, incantatory chants; however, Gudrid admits that she has "neither magical powers nor the gift of prophecy, but in Iceland my foster-mother, Halldis, taught me chants she called warlock songs" (Kunz 32). Gudrid does not initially wish to participate on the grounds of her Christian faith, but Thorbjorg suggests that Gudrid would "be no worse a woman" for helping the people of the household. After being convinced by Thorkel, Gudrid consents to the ritual, and the scene digresses with "the women forming a warding ring around the platform raised for sorcery, with Thorbjorg perched atop it. Gudrid spoke the chant so well and so beautifully that people there said they had never heard anyone recite in a fairer voice" (Kunz 32).

This scene is significant for many reasons. Textually, it brings the heathen exotica introduced by Thorbjorg to a literal ritual climax. There is a voyeuristic dynamic in the ritual relationship of Thorbjorg and Gudrid, the former who leads rites from atop the scaffolding and the latter who sings enchantingly below. The divination ritual exemplifies ESR's exotica aesthetic, and it is only more realized within the context of Gudrid's Christianity. Gudrid is a newcomer to this frontier, and within its bounds, she engages with the antiquated landscape of the pagan north. It is significant that the ERS author, who is constructing the saga with clear Christian motivation, is not critical of Gudrid's ritual participation. Indeed, the ritual is a success; Thorbjorg prophesies good health and good weather which soon come to fruition. Further she

dictates Gudrid's fate, which holds that she "will make the most honourable of matches here in Greenland" and that from her "will be descended a long and worthy line" in Iceland (Kunz 33). Marion Polivez defines the rites of passage as being "connected to any change of place, state, social status and age. Each rite of passage is made of preliminal rites (separation), liminal rites (transition), and post liminal rites (incorporation)" (4). Gudrid participates in a liminal landscape that is wrought in the transitory spiritual nature of its inhabitants. The saga author views her in terms "Gudrid and the successes prophesied for her function then as a Christian monument erected in good faith in an ambiguous, pagan setting. The ritual scene is appropriated like an artist's rendering of a bygone circumstance, a literary still life meant to convey a landscape that is not so far removed from the consciousness of a contemporary Christian audience.

The exotica aesthetic extends to Gudrid's next and final supernatural scene in ESR. She becomes married to her husband, Thorstein Eiriksson, one of the sons of Eirik the Red. Thorstein and Gudrid live at a farm in Lyusfjord, which they share another man named Thorstein and his wife Sigrid. We learn that an illness strikes Lyusfjord that winter and that its first victim is a man named Gardi, who is described as simply "the foreman" and "an unpopular man" (Kunz 36). We learn that many others, including Thorstein Eiriksson and Sigrid also fall ill. Gudrid again bears witness to the supernatural when, while accompanying Sigrid to the latrine, Sigrid claims that she sees all of the recent dead, including herself and Thorstein Eiriksson, outside the main door. Sigrid refuses to go outside until the vision has passed. By the next day, Sigrid is dead. Her corpse reanimates however, and is dispatched with an axe by the bed-ridden Thorstein Eiriksson, who dies himself soon afterwards. Sigrid's vision of the dead, and her subsequent reanimation, is a common supernatural trope in saga tradition. The cause of these hauntings typically merit a

discernible explanation, which is actually revealed to Gudrid by the reanimated corpse of her husband who asks to speak to her.

The hauntings at Lyusfjord feature extensively in ESR, and the words of the risen Thorstein Eiriksson bear a unique Christian distinction that takes on the characteristics of a miracle. The undead Thorstein addresses Gudrid “in a low voice, so that she alone heard, and said that those men rejoiced who kept their faith well and it brought mercy and salvation. Yet he said many kept their faith poorly” (Kunz 38). He prefaces himself with purely Christian intent, and Gudrid notes that while speaking, “he seemed to her to shed tears” (Kunz 38). Thorstein, though active in a decidedly pagan undead state, exhibits the countenance and piety of a sainted figure. He explains to Gudrid that the cause of the hauntings is due to the Greenlander’s pre-Christian habit of burying their dead in unconsecrated farmland, but also the foreman Gardi, who Thorstein declares “should be burned on a pyre straight away, as he has caused all the hauntings which have occurred here this winter” (Kunz 38). He also offers Gudrid a benevolent prophecy similar to that of the Thorbjorg the witch, but includes that she should “avoid marrying a Greenlander” (Kunz 39). In Christian fashion, Thorstein asks that his money be donated to the poor and the nearby church before he sinks down into his second death.

Thorstein’s reanimation is paradoxical. It bears the pagan/folk traditions of other saga hauntings, yet its purpose is functionally Christian. The culmination of Thorstein’s dialogue is perhaps one of the most curious passages in the Vinland Sagas:

It had been common practice in Greenland, since Christianity had been adopted, to bury people in unconsecrated ground on the farms where they died. A pole was set up on the breast of each corpse until a priest came, then the pole was pulled out and consecrated water poured through into the hole and a burial service performed, even though this was only done much later. The bodies were taken to the church in Eiriksfjord, and priests held burial services for them.

Kunz 38



Even though Greenland is ‘officially’ Christian by proclamation, its landscape remains susceptible to hauntings and undead, which in this context are symptoms of pre-Christian burial practices. Gardi’s death forming causation of the hauntings also stems from pre-Christian saga tradition, and brings to mind the *draugr* and other revenant dead found in such sagas as *Grettis saga* and *Erybyggjas saga*. The malevolent dead possess the potential to disturb other spirits or corpses interred in the land they haunt, and when they are exorcised or extinguished, the hauntings which they propagate often cease. Thorstein’s charge to commit Gardi’s remains to a pyre, a longstanding pre-Christian funerary practice, is in essence a pagan solution to a pagan problem; Gardi’s malicious spirit behaves in the mold of wicked pagan undead, and unlike Thorstein, is incompatible with Christian burial practice. He must be burned in the old way, while the others are purified and interred within the churchyard.

The purification ritual described is an extreme measure. While Greenland has been fundamentally Christianized in law and custom, the physical ground itself remains an unsanctified pagan wilderness. By staking the dead with poles, the priests enact a tradition in the lineage of beheading or nailing the belligerent dead, both prominent practices in saga tradition as well as other European traditions. In terms of the text, however, they are functionally transforming the physical landscape of Greenland from frontier waste into inhabited Christian territory. The unhallowed corpses staked with upright poles evoke cross imagery; as the poles are removed and the exposed chest cavities cleansed with holy water, so is wicked ignorance washed away and the ground beneath made safe by proper procedure. The bodies interred within the graveyard Eiriksfjord church present a stark reality in juxtaposition to Gardi’s pyre. The consecrated graves confirm the developing Christian landscape of Greenland, while the unclean,

heathenish ashes of Gardi quickly disperse into non-existence and in so doing, push back the unchristian frontier.

Women of Vinland Women in the sagas are inextricably bound to the liminality of the frontier, and are generally presented as figures who are latently connected to the isolationist weirdness of dwelling within the frontier borderlands. The principal women in each saga are Gudrid Thorbjorndottir and Freydis Eiriksdottir, who each play significant roles within the migratory contexts of Greenland and Vinland. Each woman represents various aspects of the expanded spiritual and psychological possibilities of dwelling with the frontier reality of border country. Gudrid, who is beautiful, intelligent, and even tempered, is a focal point for supernatural activity attributed to the unchristian landscape of both Greenland and Vinland. Freydis is in many ways Gudrid's opposite. Each saga offers a differing perspective on Freydis' character and activity, but she is by large an abrasive, calculating woman, who is prone to acts of visceral violence. The duality of Gudrid and Freydis embodies the theme of environmental extremes threaded throughout the Vinland narrative, specifically isolation versus community and Christianity versus lawlessness.

Freydis is introduced in GS as a child of Eirik the Red who is married to a farmer named Thorvard. The saga immediately establishes her contentious nature, stating "She was a domineering woman, but Thorvard was a man of no consequence. She had been married to him mainly for his money" (Kunz 4). The saga foregrounds her abusive behavior to follow, and the destruction that she will reap for material gain. It is also significant that the GS author declares immediately after the description of Freydis that "Heathen were the people of Greenland at that time," as Freydis' name is derived from the Norse Goddess Freya (Kunz 4). Freydis does not

appear until much later in the saga, but her name and character emphasize the pagan scope of the pre-Christian colony of Greenland. In GS, she agrees to fund and participate in a joint expedition to Vinland with the brothers Helgi and Finnbogi, which ultimately leads to horrible consequences for them.

The saga imparts that Freydis immediately breaks terms with the brothers before the journey even begins. They all agree to take only thirty fighting men with them along with the women but Freydis treacherously conceals five extra men in the hold of her ships (Kunz 18). Once the parties arrive in Vinland at Eiriksson's old camp, Freydis refuses to share the houses of the encampment with the brothers. She further breaks their oath of cooperation by forcing the brothers out, saying "Leif lent me the houses, not you" (Kunz 18). Helgi acknowledges her double handed nature and asserts rather ominously "We brothers will never be a match for your ill-will" (Kunz 18). He and Finnbogi's party are forced to build new longhouses on the other side of the encampment, while Freydis immediately sets to gathering timber for her cargo. Relations continue to break down over the winter, and Freydis remains cold in her treatment of the brothers.

The saga casts a dreadful pall over the landscape of Vinland during the Freydis episode. Where before the landscape is one of wonder and bounty prior in the saga, now it is a cold land of tribal discord and cultural disintegration; the saga states forebodingly that "The ill-feelings split the party...and each group kept to its own houses. This continued for much of the winter," foregrounding a disastrous climax that must result from such tension (Kunz 18). Freydis breaks the stalemate by meeting with Helbogi in secret one morning. She leaves her husband's bed, "but did not put on any footwear", and the saga observes that "The weather had left a thick dew on the grass" (Kunz 18). She goes to the brothers' longhouse, where she "opened the door and stood

silently in the doorway awhile,” and this images casts Freydis in a position of watchful deceit, not unlike Grendel in *Beowulf* perhaps, who surveys his sleeping victims before he devours them. Finnbogi is lying awake and he speaks to Freydis only to learn that she wishes to leave Vinland and further desires to trade him for his larger ship. He agrees to this arrangement and Freydis departs back across the wet morning ground to Thorvard in bed, where “her cold feet woke him”. (Kunz 20). Upon asking her where she has been, she weaves her ultimate treachery, telling an ignorant Thorvard:

I went to the brothers, to ask to purchase their ship, as I wanted a larger ship. They reacted so angrily; they struck me and treated me very badly , but you’re such a coward that you will repay neither dishonor done to me nor yourself. I am now paying the price of being so far from home in Greenland, and unless you avenge this, I will divorce you!

Kunz 19

Freydis leverages her deception to take advantage of Thorvard’s poor character and the Germanic demand for vengeance and compensation. She places him within an impossible dilemma, and with no kin to advise him or laws to guide him in the frontier, he is obliged to defend himself with force of action.

Thorvard marshals his men and they assault Helgi and Finboggi’s longhouse. Most within are still sleeping, so they capture and bind each man without significant struggle. Though Thorvard makes hostages of the other party, Freydis quickly reassumes control. She orders each man be led out of the house and executed, and this is done until only the five women that accompanied them remain. The saga attests that the men are reluctant to kill the women, and Freydis responds with the request “Hand me an axe” (Kunz 19). The saga states simply that “This was done, and she then attacked the five women there and killed them all” (Kunz 19). Freydis is “highly pleased with what she had accomplished” and claims all the brothers’ possessions for herself. She pays buys her party’s silence with promises of wealth and returns to

Greenland, hoping to conceal her deeds. The treachery and wrath of Freydis in GS represents the impossibility of lawful settlement in Vinland. Her crimes are the result of removal from established Norse society into a lawless, vast frontier. The ever-present Icelandic law system is absent in Vinland, and thus she engages in her treachery openly, without fear of reprisal. Likewise, she corrupts the Germanic honor system to her advantage, further disrupting the possibility of stable settlement.

Freydis is depicted differently in ESR, though no less viciously. Her appearance is reduced to a specific scene in which the Vinland settlers are defending against an assault from the *skraelingas*, the natives of Vinland. The Greenlanders are greatly outnumbered by the skraelings, and are further disoriented in battle by their apparent use of catapults and “ a large round object, about the size of a sheep’s gut and black in color which came flying up on land and made threatening noise when it landed” (Kunz 46). The Greenlanders decide to flee up river towards a group of cliffs in order to gain a better vantage, but as they begin their retreat, a very angry and visibly pregnant Freydis appears and the following scene ensues:

Freydis came out of the camp as they were fleeing. She called, “Why do you flee such miserable opponents, men like you who look to me be capable of killing them like sheep? Had I a weapon I’m sure I would fight better than any of you.” They paid no attention to what she said. Freydis wanted to go with them, but moved somewhat slowly, as she was with child. She followed them into the forest, but the natives reached her. She came across a slain man...His sword lay beside him, and this she snatched up and prepared to defend herself with it as the natives approached her. Freeing one of her breasts from her shift, she smacked it with the sword. This frightened the natives, who turned and ran back to their boats and rowed away...

Kunz 46

In this moment, Freydis embodies the exotica of ESR. Her pregnancy does not render her vulnerable, but rather exacerbates her brash, war-like nature, and her femininity appears terrifying and mesmerizing to both the natives and the saga audience. Women have wielded weapons and have openly defied armed men in other sagas of the tradition, but Freydis is unique

amongst these due to her pregnancy. She weaponizes her maternity by beating her exposed breast with the sword, and the natives, already enamored and estranged with the white settlers, cannot comprehend Freydis' display of violent femininity. The behavior and image of Freydis intersects with the otherness of the skraelings, and thus the exotica of the familiar and the foreign within Vinland is achieved in a climactic scene near the conclusion of ESR.

Gudrid is the antecedent of Freydis down to the prefix of her name ('Gud' translates to 'God'). As discussed earlier, Gudrid undergoes supernatural rigors that test her Christian faith, but she remains true. Her quality in the saga is bound within the prophecies given to her by both the undead Thorstein and the seeress, the latter who prophecies to Gudrid in ESR "You will make the most honorable matches here in Greenland, though you won't be putting down roots here, as your path leads to Iceland" (Kunz 33). Likewise in GS, the reanimated Thorstein assures her with great detail that "...you will leave Greenland to go to Norway and from there to Iceland and set up house in Iceland. There you will live a long time, outliving your husband. You will travel abroad, go south on a pilgrimage and return to Iceland...There you will take holy orders and there you will die" (Kunz 14). Gudrid's purpose in the frontiers of Greenland and Vinland is not to prosper in them, but to endure them. Gudrid survives her voyages in Vinland and through the success of her husband Karlsefni, is able to return back to stable society in Iceland, where she fulfills her fate and becomes an exemplar of the Christian ideal. Gudrid's presence in the saga is a qualifier for authenticity in the Vinland narrative, as the lineage which descends from her includes several bishops, who are notable individuals bound up within the early ecclesiastical history of Christian Iceland in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

While they are functionally antecedents in the Vinland sagas, Gudrid and Freydis do converge at one truth; Vinland, and the frontier itself, are not spaces where society can be

sustained. Gudrid transitions to her rightful path in life through her frontier experiences, while Freydis is undone by her decadent and unchecked behavior that expresses itself beyond the boundaries of Icelandic law and society. The sagas demonstrate through the experiences of the women, as well as through other factors, that Vinland is not a location that is suitable for habitation, regardless of its resource value. Surviving in the frontier becomes impossible because it means dwelling in a landscape that is inherently transitory; and in the Germanic mind, to be disconnected from the support and laws of the tribe means certain death or obscurity. The realism and exotica that permeates the Vinland sagas demonstrates the literary experience of a frontier that still existed beyond the Greenland settlement. Though Greenland remained a Norse colony until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a permanent settlement in Vinland was never established. Though the sagas are steeped in traditional motifs and in the case of ESR, hyperbolic late medieval imaginings, the core lesson of Vinland remains intact within the texts.

CHAPTER 3  
A CONVERGENCE OF THE GERMANIC FRONTIER THROUGH REMEMBERED  
EXILE LANDSCAPES IN “THE WIFE’S LAMENT”

A long migratory frontier extends throughout Anglo-Saxon literature. From pre-literate oral tradition through the flowering of the Christian era there is an intense preoccupation with the outlands of exile. The gray North Sea, blustering crags, foreboding fenlands and forests are time and again the habitations of both the outcast and the traveler, the outlaw and the refugee. In the wilderness, people movements occur, troops are broken, and men and women are driven forth as beleaguered survivors of violent conflict. The Anglo Saxon frontierscape forms the geography that establishes continuity between the heroic past and an uncertain present. The elegaic mood of Anglo Saxon poetry converges with the Germanic feud system, which assures the destruction of communal boundaries and tribal identity. If the feud cannot be abated, then great loss is all but certain for at least one of the parties involved; a loss of warriors, kin, and most devastatingly, the loss of both lord and hall. In the wake of such grievous annihilation, the survivors are left with only wilderness, vast and nameless. While the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes conquered and settled their own migratory frontier in Britain, the psychological frontier entrenched within their tribal consciousness remained, pathless and omnipresent. The frontier environment as it exists within the poetry is at once a conduit of memory and social possibility, a liminal juncture between existence and oblivion. The marginalized persona of the wife in “The Wife’s Lament” encapsulates the refugee experience in the mythic Germanic frontier and also suggests a cultural trope in the figure of the isolated woman.

The concept of migration takes many shapes in the Anglo-Saxon mind. On one hand, it forms the theme for the historical framework that Bede understood as the cultural unity that would come to define the English people (Collins McClure xxvii). Nearly three centuries later,



Wulfstan of York demonstrates this same understanding near the chaotic terminus of the Anglo-Saxon period in “Sermon ad Lupio Anglicorum” in which the Anglo-Saxons are both conquerors and refugees bound within an inexorable cycle of struggle and loss. Nicholas Howe suggests that “Through the memory of migration, Anglo-England found its myth of the past and the future. Those myths may be thought of as a map of the imagination, as an ordering of experience into an evocative image by which the culture could sustain itself” (6). The figure of the exile is as integral to the migratory imagination of the Anglo-Saxon as is a conquering hero; a hero such as Beowulf achieves unity and security for the tribe by self-imposed separation from the home territory, whereas the exile gains only obscurity through that same separation. The exile endures spiritual and physical separation from tribal identity, which plays out in a limboic, ancestral wilderness. Within this wilderness state, identity is stripped away and security is impossible to achieve; the human spirit, bereft of its material and cultural trappings, is exposed to the vacuous isolation of banishment. The frontier in Anglo Saxon poetry should not simply be relegated to an allegorical space; to engage with the physicality of landscapes in Anglo Saxon poetry is to glimpse the aesthetic force of ecological metaphor. The physical landscape becomes the literal manifestation of the societal otherness that the refugee or exile inhabits. The frontier is aesthetic, but is also the elegaic geography of English history; it forms a living literary ecology within a dual concept of remembered history and present reality as experienced by a contemporary audience.

The isolation depicted in “The Wife’s Lament” is stark in its realism. To a modern audience, the poem has gained a certain mystique for its ambiguity. We learn immediately from a female speaker that she is preparing to speak from her “sorrowful lot” and that she is “tortured from the anguish of exile” (Holland 2, 5). She then presents a story of deceit, separation, and

banishment. She lives with her husband in the land of his kin until he is forced to leave because of his secret involvement in a feud. The wife is then exiled to the wilderness, where she dwells in a cave and contemplates the loss of her husband and the sorrowful lot of exile. Many questions have arisen concerning the nature of both the speaker and the circumstances of her exile, and as such, multiple readings of the poem exist. Examples of the textual ambiguities in “The Wife’s Lament” include syntactic issues within the text which bring into question the number of men the woman is referring to, or the use of neutral gender pronouns in certain sections of the poem have allowed some to call into question the speaker’s gender, or infer multiple speakers within the poem. Whatever the various difficulties within the scholarship, the poem contains two certainties which are themselves correlatives; the poignancy of the wife’s grief and the lonesome environment in which she bears out her lamentations. While significant context is obviously lost on modern readers, we can cling to the wife’s connection to the land as its own useful context.

I will not diverge significantly from commonly held interpretations of “The Wife’s Lament,” but I will emphasize the implications of the word *folgath* early in the poem to strengthen the poem’s connection with the frontier of the exile. The wife prefaces her husband’s first absence and her intent to find him, and in line 9 states “*tha ic me feran gewat folgath secan,*” *I set out on a journey to seek my service.* ‘Service’ is translated from *folgath* in this context because of its derivative origin in *folgian*, a verb meaning ‘to follow, to be in service of’. Karl Wentersdorf categorizes a definition and general semantic possibilities for *folgath*, stating “[*folgath*] denotes basically the relationship between a king or nobleman and the members of his retinue. Other possible meanings of *folgath*... by way of semantic expansion are: ‘a body of retainers, retinue’; ‘dignity, office, rule’; ‘condition of life, destiny’; and ‘protection, security’” (Wentersdorf 496). Many translations treat *folgath* with ‘man’ or ‘lord’ due to its assumed

metaphor in reference to the wife's relationship with her husband. However, Wentersdorf suggests through Klaeber and Kershaw that it could also mean 'exile,' demonstrating that "the concept of exile as a place of refuge from a dangerous situation rather than as a place of punishment is not so far removed from that of 'security, protection...'" (Wentersdorf 497).

*Folgath* as 'exile' transforms the wife into a proper refugee, who is attempting to flee a dangerous situation into exile with her husband. With this interpretation, the wife is literally 'seeking exile,' which at least offers security in the unity with her husband (who is already in exile on the sea). The loss of context, perhaps both cultural and syntactic, prevents us from fully confirming a consistent meaning for *folgath*, but the Anglo Saxon tendency to *litotes* strengthens the case for an 'exile' translation. As exile is the worst possible state achieve in society, it is truly grim that the wife's final option is to seek exile with her husband, who also possesses neither security nor status. Unable to reach her *folgath* over the sea, the wife states that she is "...forced to live in a forest grove,/ under an oak tree in the earth-cave" by her in-laws (Holland 26-27). She now must contend alone in a wild frontier that differs little from her prior social situation. She laments of her time amongst the husband's tribe that she "had few loved ones, loyal friends/ in this country; that is reason for grief" (Holland 16-18). These lines tell us in fact that she has no kinsmen or accountable friends who will support her in her husband's absence, and that her in-laws are in fact the source of her woe. The *litotes* is prominent here, as the social ostracization from her husband's tribe is swift and total. Of the two possible exiles the wife must endure, she has been dealt the worst: utter estrangement in a foreign wilderness.

The aesthetics of the terrain in "The Wife's Lament" reflect the gravity of the wife's emotional situation, while also placing her in a reality that is tangible to a Germanic audience. The wife describes her environmental surroundings, in poetic, but acute geophysical detail:

Under an oak tree in the earth-cave.  
This cavern is age old; I am choked with longings.  
Gloomy are the valleys, too high the hills,  
Harsh strongholds overgrown with briars:  
A joyless abode...

Holland 27-31

The wife, as refugee, has been committed to the ruinous frontier of the Germanic world. She views the landscape from her dwelling in the *eordscraefe*, 'earth cave,' which places her directly within the liminal terrain between the mythic and the real, past and the present. The orientation of the cave structure beneath an *actreow* (oak tree) underscores the wife's presence with heathen associations. The oak bears crucial significance in the pre-Christian Germanic and Celtic mythscapes, and this was not unknown (or perhaps, not forgotten) in the burgeoning Christianity of Anglo Saxon England. Throughout the Anglo Saxon age, Christian laws were implemented in various kingdoms and bishoprics to maintain vigilance over any return to old heathen practices. The "Law of the Northumbrian Priests," a law code established around the turn of the millennium, dictates "If there be a pagan sanctuary on anyone's land, around a stone, a tree a spring, or any such superstition, then anyone who practices at it shall pay a fine" (Thorpe 296). This law, and such others like it, imply that the pre-Christian memory of the significance of sacred pagan landforms was not only intact, but thriving in certain conditions. The poet's true intentions for the *eordscraefe* under the *actreow* remain obscure, but Chris Manes suggests that for all landscape or environmental writing "The aesthetic experience...lies in the relationship between the individual and the environment, not simply in the object viewed, nor in the mind of the viewer" (97). The combination of the cave and the oak would have evoked a broad variety of imaginative responses from an audience who would have recognized in various degrees the metaphorical and mythical implications of such a landscape. The mythic ecology of the

*eorthscrafe* and *actreow* in the poem suggests a deep metaphorical resonance that goes well beyond any concrete intent meant by the poet into the wider consciousness of the Anglo Saxon audience.

Though modern scholarship possesses conclusive hindsight about the religious and mythic qualities of sacred geography, the poem itself appears inconclusive about the exact nature of the wife's abode. Richard Marsden suggests a possible interpretation of line 15 as "My lord commanded me to take up residence in the grove" based on a literal interpretation of the unknown compound *herheard* which occurs in the manuscript (390). When broken up, *herh* can translate to 'grove', or more specifically, 'sanctuary,' which contains latent pagan connotations. '*Eard*' in this interpretation would account for 'residence' or 'dwelling-place.' Marsden's interpretation lends credence to the specificity of the *eordscrafe* under the oak as a place of specific pagan resonance, though many translations treat the compound as *her heard*, which shapes line 15 into the more general statement "My lord commanded me to take up residence here" (390). This is one of many instances of the poem's textual ambiguities. However, the poem comments that the wife's cave is *eald*. The OE for 'cave' in this context is *eorthsele*, which literally means 'earth-dwelling.' Wentersdorf suggests that *eald* describing *eorthsele* is significant, as it is "applied to man-made objects such as ancient weapons and treasure and thus is more likely to be said of a tomb or vault than a natural cave (501). He adds further that due to "...its functions in compounds such as *ealdland* 'ancient property' ... and *ealdgewinn* 'ancient conflict,' it must have also had the meaning 'formerly used or done by man' (501).

The wife's *eordscrafe* evokes the imagery of the burial mound, both the Norse *Haugr* and Anglo Saxon barrows such as the dragon hoard in *Beowulf*. Such burial structures are not simply

fantastic literary motifs, but physical places embedded within the contemporary landscape of Anglo-Saxon England. Simon Schama asserts that

Tree cults were everywhere in barbarian Europe, from the Celtic shores of the Atlantic in Ireland and Brittany, and Nordic Scandinavia, all the way through to the Balkans in the southeast and Lithuania on the Baltic. And since the latter province was thoroughly converted only in the fourteenth century, it is still possible to find startling “graveyards” where, instead of conventional wooden crosses, wooden totems, their forms unaltered from paganism, crowd together in antic disorder.

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The continental memory of tree cults and burial mounds associated with or around them certainly persists in the migratory Anglo-Saxon imagination. Neolithic long barrows such as the Uley and West Kennet barrows are spread throughout England, and many are estimated to have been visible and accessible in the late Roman period (Darvill). These structures are obviously *eald*; openings in earth mounds are bordered with meticulous stonework, and inner passages, though narrow, are clearly intended to facilitate human activity. Standing stones and ancient earthwork announce these burial hollows on the surface, and the early English would have recognized them as old beyond reckoning upon discovery. Another Exeter elegy, “The Ruin,” demonstrates this sentiment amongst the Roman ruins of Bath, which the poet elegizes as the noble remains of precursor race of giants on the island. It is possible that the early English tribes, who raised mounds and laid burial chambers in keeping with continental customs, would have acknowledged these existing Neolithic structures as distantly connected to their own culture.

Leslie suggests a precedent of interaction with these ancient structure, relating the wife’s dwelling to “...the site of St. Guthlac’s cell in Crowland, and the *hoga* of Cutteslove, north of Oxford” (55). These are both instances of Anglo Saxon activity and habitation occurring on or near existing ancient sites. In relation to “The Wife’s Lament” he asserts further that “It is possible, therefore, that the woman’s habitation is a chambered barrow. Her use of the definitive

*tham* suggests that the *eordscrafe* is an outstanding feature of the landscape” (Leslie 56). Leslie’s syntactic suggestion not only strengthens the case for a barrow-dwelling precedent in Anglo-Saxon literature, but also qualifies the Anglo-Saxon relationship with the ancient character of their landscape. Throughout the pagan and Christian eras, the Anglo-Saxons likely recognized the permanence these burial structures represented. They are heathen in an antiquarian sense; like the structures in “The Ruin,” they are signifiers of a gone race and a gone time, and have thus become sequestered in the historical/mythic fringes of the geographical consciousness of the migratory Anglo-Saxon. When the wife is confined to the *eordscrafe*, she is confined to the wastes of Anglo-Saxon memory and experience. She endures a fading existence on the periphery of English memory, in stonework that is *eald*, though it is not hallowed or significant for that face.

The heathen ambiguity of the wife’s habitation in the *eordscrafe* in “The Wife’s Lament” forms a conjunction with greater Germanic myth, in which the outcast female figure is monstrous and subterranean. The wife is a refugee of a feud, she is made to live as an outlaw, whose plight in Germanic society is exile without hope of protection or redress. A frequent Old Norse word for outlaw is *skogarmathr*, ‘forest man.’ The outlaw, doomed to wander the forests or wastes, becomes compounded with the terrain of his exile. Conversely, the Old English term *wulfesheafod* (Wolf’s head) is a label for outlawry dating from the law codes of Edward the Confessor and presumes that the outlaw in question, who must already be fleeing or dwelling in the lawless frontier of wolves and other beasts, should be killed on sight (O’Brien 6.2). Both of these terms suggest an anthropomorphic quality to those in outlawry or exile, as their human identity is subsumed within the abhorred image of the wilderness or the murderous beast. Outlaws come to embody this concept in their activity; as they are no longer protected by laws,

and are no longer beholden to them. In the Icelandic sagas outlaws are often depicted as wandering thieves and murderers, stalking on farmsteads and roadways from tracts of wilderness to victimize innocent people. While many of these outlaws are normal men, some are linked directly with the supernatural or paganism. An example of this are the berserkers, pre-Christian cult warriors historically known for their battle furor as well as their place amongst the retinues of certain prominent pagan Norse kings. The Icelandic sagas depict them as heathenish delinquents tormenting a Christian society. They are outlaws by definition for their outmoded pagan identity, and their rage acquires an otherness that places it in a bygone era without the peace of Christ.

There is great precedent for the male exiled in outlawry, but does the wife's subterranean internment allude to a female aspect of outlawry and exile present within the Germanic sphere? This specific type of female exclusion in pre-Christian Germanic culture appears to be only detailed in the mythic space. Grendel's Mother in *Beowulf* is perhaps the most notable example. Unlike Grendel, whose monstrous physical form is largely ambiguous, his mother appears more fundamentally human. She is described as "a monster of a woman" while her physical strength is compared to that of a classical Amazon. She employs a dagger against Beowulf and curiously it is not her blood, but Grendel's, which melts the giant's sword. While these are physical traits, she is also described in relation to the social dynamic of the feud. When Grendel returns to the lake den and dies, we are told "...and then Grendel's mother, / mournful and ravenous, resolved to go / on a grievous journey to avenge her son's death" (Holland 106). She participates in the retaliation expected for the uncompensated death of a kinsmen. Grendel is alien to the law, a 'heath stalker', a *skogarmathr*; he is incapable of compensating by means of wergild or



following social protocol whatsoever. Being offered no compensation for Grendel's death, his mother enacts her right of tribal vengeance, for which Aeschere loses his life.

While her physical appearance and psychology lend her a degree of humanity, her bondage to her geographical and social environment define her monstrous nature. Grendel's mother is confined to the frontier wastes. Beowulf and his troop track her lair to a mired fen, a set-piece which foregrounds her monstrous habitation. Linda Brady notes that "Islands in the fens were well known in Anglo- Saxon England as isolated locations beyond the boundaries of human society, to which one might retreat out of wither spiritual or worldly concerns" (673). She is referencing a precedent for the Christian hermit tradition, and Grendel's mother's fen habitation appears in relation as an unholy inversion of the solitary qualities of isolated fenlands. Her dwelling beneath the water is subterranean, and the interior is bedecked with treasures and weapons from the pagan heroic age. However, she is not merely a set-piece monster guarding an ancient barrow-hoard. The poet states that "...she mourned her fate/ she who had to live in the terrible lake,/ the cold water streams, after Cain slew/ his own brother, his father's son,/ with a sword; he was outlawed after that" (Holland 105). She did not choose to dwell in the lake or the barrow on principle; she was forced there due to the feud of Cain against Abel, as well as his resultant outlawry. Bound to this lineage of exile, she mourns her circumstances in an abandoned dwelling on the frontier of the inhabited world. The monstrosity of Grendel's mother is not due to her crimes against humanity, so far as we know in the poem. There is no suggestion that like Grendel, she leaves the lake at all for raids upon humanity. Rather, her monstrous nature is inherited from a feud she did not instigate, and one that she cannot hope to resolve. Therefore, her existence is abhorred and obscured and she must dwell within a sanctuary that was once sacred to men, which is now abandoned and profaned. Rather than be destroyed or plundered by

men, it is consumed by the frontier wilderness as human society progresses within the bounds of civilized borders.

When considering the basic context of feud and frontier, considerable continuity is established between Grendel's mother and the wife of "The Wife's Lament." The wife is on the wrong end of a feud instigated by a kinsman (her husband) to which she is not party; yet she must still endure its result in exile. The feud makes her incompatible and alien within her husband's tribe, but although she does not merit death from this, neither is she allowed union with the one who makes her identity and social existence possible. When the Wife is forced into *eordscraefe*, she is made monstrous by the definition of her isolation. The frontier, much like it does for a *skogarmathr* or *wulfsheafod*, becomes both her identity and her reality; she becomes monstrous not for a particular crime, but for her association with the forbidding terrain of the exile. The wilderness of the poem is not possible until the wife, as a real woman experiencing the worst social possibility an individual can hope to avoid, comes to dwell there. She attains an aberrant intensity in her mournful activity, and the wild landscape becomes a haunted, foreboding image as she passes "through this earth-cave alone/ and out under the oak tree at dawn" where she proclaims "There I must sit through the long summer's day/ and there mourn my miseries" (Holland 34-37). Like Grendel's mother, the wife's aberrant potential is centered within her subterranean activity; she moves between worlds, between realities, and all while nursing the bitterness of her fate. Both the wife and Grendel's mother illustrate the taboo potential for the socially isolated female, obfuscated on the fringes of her society.

An Icelandic analogue to the wife and Grendel's mother is found in *Grettis saga* in the form of a half-troll woman who dwells in a cave with her mysterious father, Hallmund. Hallmund first appears in the saga as a horseman named Lopt, an enigmatic, oddinic figure who

outvies Grettir in a match of strength and wit as Grettir attempts to rob him. Loft reveals himself as Hallmund later in the saga, after he aids Grettir against a large posse of men who are trying to kill him. Grettir follows Hallmund to his cave at *Baljokul* ‘Ball Glacier,’ where he meets Hallmund’s “large, but impressive daughter” (Byock 153). The exact natures of Hallmund and his daughter are unclear. But for their large physical size, they appear more human than monstrous. However, their subterranean habitation in the glacial wastes places them in the supernatural geography of Icelandic imagination. It is worth noting that later in the saga, Grettir faces a male and female troll who are the cause of winter hauntings. They dwell in a waterfall cave in a chasm, and are cannibal monsters in the mode of Grendel. Hallmund’s daughter is helpful to Grettir, as she heals his and Hallmund’s wounds after their harrowing battle.

*Grettis saga* later tells of Hallmund’s death at the hands of another outlaw named Grim, who wandering in his own exile, takes up an abandoned fishing camp once used by Grettir. Hallmund, who is loyal to Grettir, has no love for Grim benefiting from the good fishing in Grettir’s absence and begins stealing Grim’s fish each night. Grim eventually catches Hallmund in the act, who is weighed down with so much fish in his basket that Grim “guessed that a horse could not have carried more” (Byock 167). Grim rushes Hallmund under the cover of darkness “and struck at the man’s neck, using two hands” (Byock 167). Hallmund is grievously wounded, as “the axe sank up to the hammer end,” and he flees to *Baljokul* with Grim in pursuit (Byock 168). Grim sees Hallmund’s daughter sitting beside a fire in the cave, and observes her as “a large, but good-looking” woman (Byock 168). Hallmund, who is succumbing to his wound, declares to his daughter “I will recount my deeds in a poem which you shall carve in runes on a staff” and dies once the poem is complete (Byock 169). The daughter becomes more innately human after Hallmund dies, as she becomes “overcome with emotion”, and “broke down and

wept” (Byock 169). Grim enters the cave and comforts her, explaining “Everyone must die when his time is up, and this end was largely caused by his own actions. I could scarcely sit by and watch him rob me,” and she rationalizes his logic in spite of her sorrow (Byock 170). Grim remains in the cave many nights and learns Hallmund’s poem from the daughter, and we are told their interaction was “a gentle exchange” (Byock 170). Like the wife and Grendel’s mother, Hallmund’s daughter reaps loss from a feud. She is more relatable to the wife in that the crux of her loss derives from the separation of a man; as the wife is parted from her husband due to his hidden schemes, so is Hallmund’s daughter parted from Hallmund in death due because of his thievery. The daughter is not exiled to the cave, but her presence there defines her as taboo or wondrous because the cave itself resides in the mythic landscape of the Northern terrain.

Hallmund’s Daughter and Grendel’s mother belong entirely to myth, but the landscape they inhabit is grounded within the social reality of the Germanic North. The wife, who is entirely human and sympathetic, occupies this same interior. Through her isolation, her humanity is obscured amongst dangerous and socially inaccessible ruins of the past. The wife becomes analogous with the monstrous women by association with their liminal space, which in turn belongs to the collective Germanic mythscape of feud/migratory activity. The wife exists as a component of Anglo-Saxon migratory memory in a poetically reconstructed tribal landscape; however, her experience within the poem is co-dependent upon the greater narrative of the mythic Germanic frontier. Billie Melman observes that mythic landscapes in literature intersect at “The reconstitution of continuities, of a suitable history which links present to past, characterizes societies in moments of transition” (575). The wife’s lamentation and subterranean sequestration is an heir to headier northern Germanic myths that imply the gravity of the feud. The geography of “The Wife’s Lament” functions as an access point for Anglo-Saxon audiences

to experience an interpretive myth and geographical history of their migratory past, which is long behind them at the time of the poem's record in the Exeter book in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century.

CHAPTER 4  
CONSOLIDATING THE CONTINUITY OF THE FEUD CYCLE IN “THE HUSBAND’S  
MESSAGE” AND *EGILS SAGA SKALLAGRIMSSONAR*

Anglo Saxon England and Iceland are joined through a frontier that is in part defined by the activity of the feud. The Germanic feud cycle is a primary driver in people movements occurring in the medieval North, and each literary tradition treats the experience of individuals who survive on the losing end of a feud. Just as myth, tribal identity, and migration color the frontier space in the literature, the movement of the feud comes to define its geographical possibilities. A critical motif of the feud cycle is sea-faring; the North Sea dictates the fates of exiles and adventurers alike who have been displaced by conflict. This transmarine activity becomes a landscape in itself, and Anglo-Saxons and Icelanders alike identify a heroic past within the context of the memories of feud movement. The Anglo-Saxon poem “The Husband’s Message” and The Icelandic saga *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* form a continuity around sea-faring and the Germanic feud dynamic that in turn reveals the interrelatedness of a shared geo-mythical landscape present in both the Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic literary traditions.

“The Wife’s Lament” as analyzed in chapter two presents a bleak circumstance of exile in the wake of a feud. The speaker of the poem experiences the totality of social repercussions, with no hope of redemption or reunification with her estranged husband. The poem concludes as the wife contemplates the whereabouts of her husband and his emotional state while yearning for his companionship. She is beleaguered by her condition, and her only solace lies within the possibility that he reciprocates a similar yearning for her in his own exile, wherever that has led him. However, “The Husband’s Message” features a woman who experiences the diametric

opposite result of her feud situation. Instead of exile and separation, she experiences kinship and unity with her husband (and her lord), and thus achieves the ultimate social hope of the Germanic individual. John Niles's contextualizes "The Husband's Message" in terms of Anglo-Saxon cultural memory as other "OE poems with which it has affinity with which it has some affinities , including Beowulf and the Exeter book poems, the poem is set in a world that seems like an Anglo-Saxon authors dream of his people's pre-Christian past. This is a fabulous northern world of lords and retainer, gifts and scops, wars and feuds, dynastic rivalries, arranged marriages, intrigues, and exiled victims of circumstance (Niles 1111). It is significant that these poems are hinged respectively around land and sea; The speaker in "The Wife's Lament" engages with a specific type of frontier geography, while the wife in "The Husband's Message" possesses social potential that is correlative to the sea. The sea has dictated her separation but will also determine the concourse of her future social identity.

In the "The Husband's Message" the speaker of the poem is the rune stave on which the man's runic message to his estranged wife is inscribed. The woman is a passive listener as the stave implores her to "recall the oaths that you two [she and her husband] swore in former days," before a feud necessitated his exile across the sea into another country (Holland 9). The stave then imparts specific directions for her to "...cross the sea/ as soon as you hear the cuckoo's song,/ that mournful sound in the mountain woods" and that she should "let no man delay you,/ stop you from sailing over the waves" (Holland 14-17). We learn that the husband has defied the odds of his exile and has attained great wealth in a country south across the sea, and that "he nurses no greater wish in the world/ than that, thereafter, Almighty God should grant/ that you both give treasure together, studded bracelets,/ to companions and warriors... (Holland 24-27). The poem concludes with the runes born out on the stave, which form both a directive and an

oath for the wife to acknowledge that “He [the husband] is waiting for you in that country,/ and would keep faith for as long as he lives,/ as you two often swore in former days... (Holland 30-33).

The condition and location of the woman in “The Husband’s Message” is apparently obscured by her husband’s narrative, but the context of her circumstances centralize the possibility of the seascape rather than the landscape. She is addressed by the stave as “O Lady adorned with ornaments,” so she may still be in a position of security or standing in her present country (Holland 7). However, the stave’s title for her falls into in a spectrum of epithets that traditionally address women, and so may or may not convey useful context concerning her status in relation to her material wealth. She might yet be recognized within the space of her former prosperity with the husband in a pre-feud state, when they “shared the mead-halls,/ lived in the same land in love together” (Holland 10-11). It is however likely that she has lost a significant amount of tribal reputation when her husband is ousted in the feud, though the poem does not specifically state that she is plotted against or exiled like the wife in “The Wife’s Lament.”

There is an implication of secrecy contained within the husband’s instruction to “...cross the sea/ as soon as you hear the cuckoo’s song,/ that mournful sound in the mountain woods. Holland (Holland 17-19). The specificity of ‘mountain woods’ could imply that the woman is dwelling in or near a wilderness space, where she might be dwelling in isolation or exile. The cuckoo is also recognized widely in medieval literature as a herald of the summer season, and thus its presence might be concluded as an aesthetic image to emphasize when the wife should plan on making her safe journey (Leslie 61). I suggest that the imperative occurring directly after the cuckoo imagery, “After that, let no man delay you,/ stop you from sailing over the waves” strengthens the possibility of the woman dwelling in some type of seclusion away from the



public tribal sphere (Holland 20-21). To modern eyes, this declaration rings with the passion and hyperbole of a lover's exhortation; and well it should, as the lovelorn context of the husband's plea is clear. But there is a suggestion of careful urgency in the husband's words. Men, possibly participants opposing the husband in the feud, may have vengeful reasons for barring her from reuniting with the husband

Though the social standing or living condition of the woman is not conspicuous, she is certainly at risk of becoming a refugee or exile in her current homeland. By taking to the sea to join her husband, she in effect achieves what the wife in "The Wife's Lament" cannot; unity and security in her husband. The husband has achieved success, possessing now "...burnished gold/ enough, although he has his abode/ amongst foreign people, in a fair land" (Holland 27-29). Though he was sundered from his tribe and wife, the husband has accrued even more wealth from his exile. The poem emphasizes this fact, stating "He went over the waves alone, the way/ of the flood, eager to depart and furrow/ the waters. Now that man has overcome/ misfortune. He will lack for nothing..." (Holland 30-33). 'Misfortune' is synonymous with both the natural conditions of the sea and with the social position of the exile. The poem recognizes the husband's exceptional feat of transmigrating the liminality of the physical sea and the figurative exile, which is all the more significant because of tenacity in establishing himself in a foreign clime.

The husband navigates the elegiac gravity of exile and the sea that is omni-present throughout the Anglo Saxon literary corpus; his efforts facilitate a conclusion of joy between he and his wife that is unique amongst the elegies of the Exeter book, and arguably the greater body of Anglo Saxon poetry as a whole. The exceptional positivity of "The Husband's Message" has produced scholarship that concludes the poem must be specifically related to "the Wife's

Lament,” whether in terms of poetics or narrative continuity. Concerning the latter, it is certainly attractive to place the poems within an interrelated narrative context. The plot of one poem can be figured to anticipate or follow the other, and the syntactic ambiguity heavily present within each text only convolutes any possible narrative speculation. While it is ultimately counter-intuitive to attempt a close narrative reading between “The Husband’s Message” and “The Wife’s Lament,” it is beneficial to consider them as analogues; each poem is constructed as a specific outcome that is resultant from the feud cycle, and they parallel one another as diametric opposites. “The Husband’s Message” concludes with a positive resolution that sees vows renewed, security and unity achieved by the wife and husband, and productive emigration prefigured by the sea. “The Wife’s Lament” ends in a bitter terminus that is unresolved; the wife laments her disunity, and exiled somewhere in a landlocked frontier, she has no hope of any foreseeable liberation. Both poems also revolve around the migratory movement to foreign lands and unfamiliar tribes, and these factors form the basis of prosperity gained or lost by the characters.

Nicholas Howe comments “If the knowledge of the sea was inescapable for the Anglo-Saxons, it also provided a setting for...the sea as the lot of the exile, the sea as the scene for the initiation of the hero, the sea as a barrier to be crossed by enemies and friends” (83). The feud analogues contained within “The Husband’s Message” and “The Wife’s Lament” are indicative of Anglo-Saxon reflection on cultural geography in terms of the relationship between the sea and feud movements. Each poem is self-contained within its elegiac terms, but expanding their experience beyond the scope of the Anglo Saxon canon into the broad spectrum of medieval North Atlantic literature reveals a thriving continuity of the feud ideal. This is especially true of the Icelandic sagas, in which much of the narrative drama is centralized around a digression of

feud and migratory sea travel. Egil Skallgrimmssonar of *Egils saga Skallagrimssonar* encapsulates the rigor and vibrancy of the late viking age, a period of great migratory displacement and sociocultural transition across the North Atlantic region. Egil is an overwhelming persona whose life is defined by constant transition and contradiction. He is a tenacious and cunning man, who is as adept at poetry as he is at slaying men. His strengths lie equally in his speechcraft and physical presence, but his failures are often egocentric; Egil is often counseled by others to rein in his ambition or aggression, and he accepts or ignores council by the whims of his own stubborn nature. Much of Egil's narrative is framed around a deep feud with King Eirik Bloodaxe of Norway and his sorcerous wife Gunnhild, which is characterized by a legal struggle over property inheritance in Norway. Egil is initially outlawed from Norway for killing a retainer of the King as young man, but he incessantly returns to contest his legal rights. Egil's complex travels and relationships expand upon the dialogues presented in "The husband's Message" and "The Wife's Lament," illustrating the drama of the ancient feud ideal.

Egil's wife Asgerd plays a critical role in demonstrating the prevalence of the feud movement in Egil's North. She is in many ways the pivot point for Egil's transition from a young, bloody handed raider to a more mature (yet still bloody handed) man concerned with domestic affairs, yet it is her origin that appears early in the saga that sets the thematic tone of the feud. She enters the saga through her birth in Iceland, and her parental origins are bound within the legal and tribal strife so prominent in pre-Christian Scandinavia. Her mother, Thora of the Embroidered Hand, is abducted from her farm at Fjordane in Norway by her father, Bjorn of Aurland. Bjorn encounters Thora at a feast and asks her hand in marriage, but is rejected by Thora's brother, Thorir. Afterwards, Bjorn assembles a troop of men in a ship and rows into Fjordane "and arrived at Thorir's farm when he was not at home" (Scudder 54). He abducts

Thora and brings her back to his father Brynjolf's home in Aurland, where he wishes to conduct a marriage ceremony. Brynjolf is livid with Bjorn's actions and decrees "Rather than your marrying Thora here in my house without the permission of her brother Thorir, she will be treated exactly as if she were my own daughter, and your sister" (Scudder 56). Brynjolf immediately organizes an effort to communicate the situation and arrange compensation to Thorir, who warns that if Thora is not sent home "...there would be no reconciliation" (Scudder 56).

Bjorn abducts Thora again, this time from her father's home, and flees to the Shetland Islands where they are married. After wintering there, he learns that King Harald of Norway has placed a bounty on his head, effectively outlawing him and ordering his death because of his crime. He and his crew eventually sail north and land in Iceland, where he seeks shelter with Egil's father Skallagrim. When Skallagrim learns the truth of Bjorn's presence in Iceland, he is incensed, stating "Why did you have the audacity to come to me? Didn't you know how close my friendship with Thorir was?" (Scudder 59). The situation is diffused by Skallagrim's eldest son Thorolf, who is Egil's older brother (both boys are relatively young at this juncture). Skallagrim and Thorolf decide to attempt to moderate a settlement for Bjorn, and send messages to Thorir in Fjordanes. Brynjolf receives word of this, and coordinates his own attempts to offer compensation. Thorir accepts and Bjorn and Thora make plans to return to Norway once the terms are agreed. Asgerd is born on Skallgrim's farm and remains there as a foster-daughter while Bjorn and Thora return to Norway over the sea.

The drama of Bjorn and Thora is complicated and intense. Thora is twice abducted by her would-be husband, and she is not given a voice in the saga to express her feelings on these events. We may however discern the tribal gravity of her situation as she is taken from

Brynjolf's home as the saga describes the discreet nature of her second abduction. Thora is sitting with Bjorn's mother and a group of women when Bjorn leads her away. Bjorn's mother "asked the women not to be so rash as to let the people know in the other part of the farmhouse, because Brynjolf would react badly if he found out and serious trouble would develop between father and son" (Scudder 57). Thora is not dragged away in a struggle, and her "clothing and belongings were all laid out ready for her, and Bjorn and his men took these with him" (Scudder 57). The party leaves in secret, sailing off "sailing off on their ship at night...out through Sognefjord and to the open sea" (Scudder 57). Indeed, the episode of Thora and Bjorn bears a likeness to "The Wife's Lament" which is reciprocated in various episodes throughout *Egils saga Skallagrimssonar*. Like the wife, Thora is given over to the feud circumstances created by her lover, and she is also subject to a forced habitation with people who are not her kinsmen. Her marriage is not sanctioned by neither her household or Bjorn's, but she must endure the removal as best she can. Thora takes on a material value as an alien in the household, and Bjorn's mother is willing to facilitate her removal, even if it further complicates the tribal legality hanging in the balance. She knows that she cannot alter Bjorn's intent, just as she knows that Brynjolf (justifiably) is no position to back down from negotiations with Thorir over Thora's abduction. Bjorn's mother allows Thora to be whisked away into certain exile, either on the sea or in some other land, to prevent a falling out between Bjorn and Brynjolf. If Brynjolf were to catch Bjorn in the act of directly disobeying his orders, internecine violence or kin-killing is a possible result. In the mind of Bjorn's mother, the looming feud between Thorir and Bjorn is unavoidable, but further disintegration of family bonds cannot be afforded.

This episode occurs early within the saga to emphasize the complicated nature of Asgerd's genealogy, which will become integral to the saga after she marries Egil. It also

presents a pattern of complex maritime movements and communications that drive the characters of the saga, and connects a 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic audience to the feud culture of their pre-Christian continental culture. Before Egil marries Asgerd, she is married to Thorolf. Though Egil travels and raids with Thorolf they maintain a strained relationship, exaggerated all the more by Thorolf's marriage to Asgerd in Norway. Unlike her mother's tumultuous engagements, Asgerd's marriage to Thorolf is supported by all involved. Maggnusson suggests that Egil takes this news badly, as he falls suddenly ill a few days before the wedding. Egil is at this point young and impetuous, and while he misses the boat for the wedding, he finds himself in his first trouble with Eirik Bloodaxe and Gunnhild. Egil becomes besotted with ale at a feast the two nobles are attending, and drunkenly slays the master of the house after he suspects he is being poisoned by Gunnhild for his behavior. He flees under the cover of night and manages to reunite with Thorolf. The two form a raiding party and after successful raids in the Baltic and yet more trouble with Bloodaxe and Gunnhild in Norway, they set out for England.

Egil and Thorolf's journey to England centers them within a pivotal locus of medieval English history, and demonstrates that the saga poet was conscious of an ideal period of Anglo-Saxon national unity. The poet clarifies this by retro-fitting the prominent English history of Alfred the Great, who the poet recognizes as notable for his success in driving away the Danish invaders and in the process, uniting much of tribal England to become "the first of his kinsmen to become sole ruler there" (Scudder 88). Egil and Thorolf travel to England following rumors of war concerning the English King Athelstan (the grandson of Alfred), who's unified rule of England is breaking down due to a Norse/Celtic confederation led by king Olaf of Scotland. The brothers seek out Athelstan, who is openly hiring mercenaries to bolster his beleaguered forces. Athelstan gladly accepts the brothers offer and "in the course of their conversations he invited

them to stay with him, enter his service, and defend his country” (Scudder 89). The saga is invested in portraying a heroic regional landscape that binds Iceland’s early history with the apex of Anglo Saxon England’s pre-Norman history. The poet merges the Christian and the pagan North Atlantic when Athelstan bids Egil, Thorolf, and their troop “take the sign of the cross” to cement their allegiance with his cause. The saga remarks that this “was a common custom when among both merchants and mercenaries who dealt with Christians” and thus implies a diversity of Christian/heathen interaction in the late Viking age sphere (Scudder 89). The saga notably specifies that “Anyone who had taken the sign of the cross could mix freely with both Christians and heathens, while keeping the faith they pleased” demonstrating that Athelstan, king of Christian England, has no qualms with hiring the decidedly pagan troop of 300 vikings that Egil and Thorolf offer as assistance (Scudder 89).

Egil and Thorolf are thrust into the most high stakes violence of the saga at the battle of Wen Heath, the great confrontation between Athelstan and Olaf’s armies. They are given leading positions in the conflict and perform great deeds of slaughter and courage against Olaf’s forces and earls. While the episode creates an accessible, visceral history of a famous historical combat, it also advances the character of Egil. Egil grows into his leadership position and into his relationship with Thorolf; where once he was dismissive of Thorolf, he now demonstrates that he respects him and cares for his well-being. As Athelstan organizes the army for the final confrontation, Egil states “I do not want to be separated from Thorolf in battle, but I think we should be assigned where we are needed the most and the fighting is heaviest” (Scudder 97). Thorolf reprimands him, replying “Let the king decide where he wants to assign us” and offers to trade places with Egil’s position. Egil then declares ominously “you can decide, but this is an arrangement I will live to regret” (Scudder 97). Egil’s portent proves correct, and Thorolf is

killed by the eaves of Wen forest. The battle ends with the complete rout of Olaf's army, and Egil seeks Thorolf's corpse in the aftermath. In another scene that conjoins pagan Iceland and Christian England in geographical harmony, Egil buries Thorolf with traditional pagan grave rites by the forest where he fell. Thorolf's corpse is "dressed according to custom" and buried with his "full weaponry and armor." Egil himself "clasped a gold ring onto each of [Thorolf's] arms before he left him" and a small cairn is raised and "sprinkled with earth" (Scudder 99).

Thorolf's death makes it possible for Egil to actualize himself in the context of his full maturity. As the English settle in to celebrate after the battle, the poet places particular importance on Egil's appearance and mannerisms. Athelstan requests that Egil be seated at the high seat, made to face him. As Egil sits, he does not drink or make merry, but instead remains completely silent (something he rarely does throughout the saga). Egil also remains fully armed and sits without removing his helmet with "his sword across his knees, and now and again he would draw it half-way out of the scabbard, then thrust it back in" (Scudder 100). The poet depicts Egil's physical appearance in this moment, with particular emphasis on his grotesque features:

Egil had very distinctive features, with a wide forehead, bushy brows, a nose that was not long but extremely broad. His upper jaw was broad and long, and his chin and jawbones were exceptionally wide. With his thick neck and shoulders, he stood out from other men. When he was angry, his face grew harsh and fierce. He was well built and taller than other men, with thick wolf-grey hair, although he had gone bald at an early age.

Scudder 100

The poet also places special precedence on Egil's peculiar facial mannerisms, and the saga states that "When he was sitting in this particular scene, he wrinkled one eyebrow right down onto his cheek and raised the other up to the roots of his hair...He refused to drink even when served, but just raised and lowered his eyebrows in return" (Scudder 100). In this moment, Egil materializes



in all his liminality and otherness. He sits in opposition to the Christian Athelstan as the battle-clad and wild heathen, who for reasons uncertain, is refusing customs of the hall. Egil behaves similarly to the berzerks of the sagas, who bite the rims of their shields and tremor in fury before they attack. While the eyebrow twitching is unique to Egil's physicality and personality, it reinforces his pagan strangeness in juxtaposition to Athelstan's regal Christianity. Athelstan does not respond immediately to Egil's wild gesturing, but only sits "with his sword laid across his knees too" (Scudder 100). The dramatic tension of the scene is tangible and elicits that Egil, who is behaving darkly and erratically in the wake of murderous battle that caused his brother's death, may turn on the king himself.

Athelstan breaks the stalemate, and "unsheathed his sword, took a fine, large ring from his arm and slipped it over the point of the sword, then stood up and walked across the floor and handed it over the fire to Egil" (Scudder 100). Egil facilitates the climax to the silent drama as he unsheathes his own blade and takes the ring from Athelstan's sword through the flames and draws it onto his arm. After Egil claims the ring "he put down his sword and helmet and took the drinking-horn that was served to him and finished it" and returns to a stable state, even praising Athelstan with several poems. Athelstan perceives that Egil wishes to be recognized for his services in the battle and also compensated for Thorolf's death; by initiating the ring giving, he overcomes the alien tribal barrier implied by Egil's behavior and achieves unity with Egil through the common expectation of shared Germanic custom. The saga poet's dramatic intent with this scene might well derive from his own sense of the divisions in the social landscape of Iceland. Borovsky cites a Scandinavian law motif that implies "...there was another spatial dimension with the farmstead as the center of the world outside as the periphery. Old Scandinavian law made a distinction between two horizontally opposed legal spaces, between

*innangards* (inside the fence) and *utangards* (outside the fence)” (15). Egil and Athelstan, who are both Germanic heroes, must prove themselves within the context of both these spaces. Egil, who abides by the heroism in the *utangards* of the battlefield, challenges Athelstan to uphold his lordly duties within the *innangards* of the mead hall. The ring exchange is the thematic reconciliation of the two spaces, and thus clarifies the heroic qualities of both men to an Icelandic audience.

Egil’s valor is affirmed in England and earns great friendship from Athelstan, who implores him to “stay here permanently and accept anything you care to name” (Scudder 102). Egil declines, citing the business of attending to Thorsteins’s estate in Norway. He is determined to attend to Asgerd and her children “and provide for them if they are alive,” but insists he will “inherit everything if Thorolf has died childless” (Scudder 101). Egil promises he will return to collect on Athelstan’s offer and he departs from an England that has remained unified despite insurrection. Egil marries Asgerd whilst in Norway and inherits her properties, but this also embroils him in property feuds there which will define much of his adult activity. Indeed, Egil returns to England a second time, but must encounter Eirik Bloodaxe, who being driven out of Norway is now king of York. Egil resolves this encounter with his poetry and leaves Eirik’s court with his head intact, but before he can properly meet with Athelstan, he learns by rumor that he has inherited more property in Norway through Asgerd’s father’s death. Once again, Athelstan urges Egil to become one of his retainers, saying “I would greatly prefer it if you stayed with me to defend my kingdom and command my armies. I shall grant you great revenues” (Scudder 134). Egil again waives Athelstan’s immediate offer for retainership, though he insists he will “accept it rather than refuse it...But first I must go to Iceland and collect my wife and the wealth I own there” (Scudder 134). Egil becomes embroiled in vicious feuds across

Norway, and through much conflict, claims his properties and wealth there. He never returns to England to claim Athelstan's offer, and instead becomes bound to Iceland and his farm, which he "runs lavishly" in his deepening age.

Egil's refusal to become Athelstan's retainer signifies his restless transmarine nature, which is ultimately incompatible with the idealistic landscape of Athelstan's unified England (Magnusson 10). Indeed, Egil's participation in the English mythscape links him to the societal success of the husband in "The Husband's Message." Like the husband, Egil flees a feud and goes south across the sea to a foreign country, where he wins renown and wealth amongst its people. By doing this, Egil achieves the positive result of feud and exile, becoming an Icelandic parallel to the Anglo-Saxon narrative of "The Husband's Message." Egil can fulfil the role of the ideal Germanic hero because he survives feud and exile and capitalizes on the social opportunity offered by banishment. Egil cannot remain in this England because thematically, he does not belong to it; he is a restless, pagan hero born out of the transmarine culture of pre-Christian Iceland. Athelstan's England is centralized through kingship and Christianity and is ultimately meant to serve as a foil to Egil's pre-Christian heroic vigor. In effect, the saga author coalesces the mythic histories of Christian Anglo-Saxon England with his own sea-roving, heathen genealogy into an ideal and heroic Northern landscape. (Magnusson 8). The pagan heroism of Egil can be tolerated, even celebrated by a Christian 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic audience because he gains much of his wealth and repute from the beneficence of Athelstan. Though Egil ultimately belongs to Iceland and its pre-Christian geography, his poetic and mythic significance is elevated because of his interactions with Athelstan, who is venerated as a semi-legendary paragon king in a 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic context.

The sequence of Egil's foray into Anglo-Saxon England intersects with "The Husband's Message" within the geographical spectrum of the Northern feud cycle. Their convergence lies within the notion of "Positive exiles," who can "thus be said to be liminal and transitory, by means of social or spiritual progression" (Polivez 5). Though the "The Husband's Message" is an older poem and differs functionally from *Egils saga Skallagrimssonar*, it foregrounds a premise of the Germanic feud which Egil explores in dramatic depth in his own wanderings. Both texts demonstrate the exile/outlaw figure achieving success within the context of transmarine displacement, and likewise acknowledge the possibilities of individual freedom that accompany social alienation. The plight of the sea-going exile is heavily elegized within Anglo-Saxon tradition, while the Icelandic saga tradition venerates the hard-minded individualism of the outlaw and adventurer; the tribal experience of the North Sea imprints upon each culture's literary sensibility. From a current perspective, contemporary scholarship can recognize the continuity between these sensibilities in the landscape of the feud, which defies the time differential between Anglo-Saxon England and 13<sup>th</sup> century Iceland.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

As scholarship in medieval northern Germanic studies move forward, the implications of an ecocritical approach are considerable. This thesis explores the shared landscape motif as an inter-literary unifier between Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic literature but does so in relatively brief terms. The frontier is a substantial space within the consciousness of the medieval Germanic north, and its literary implications are vast. Ecocriticism encourages connectivity and principally derives meaning from the relationships of humanity and the landscapes they experience. In order to achieve successful implementation of ecocriticism in medieval Germanic scholarship, scholars must consider a landscape's unifying qualities beyond the borders of a single text; they must not fear to recognize and pursue how a single landscape can bind multiple texts and multiple traditions. The texts examined in this thesis demonstrate how the terrestrial and nautical aspects of the North Sea region come to define both the physical and figurative space of the frontier, and how environmental experience transitions into cultural and poetic memory.

The North Sea is the great metaphor which draws together the poetic tradition of the medieval North Atlantic in elegaic union. The act of seafaring is the great unifier of the Germanic North in terms of poetic landscape and migratory memory. The North Sea itself, with its cold winds and perilous tumult, is an environmental prime mover for the literary and cultural movements of the region. Navigation of the North Sea is a perilous necessity; its routes portend wealth and loss for travelers, and it is a cold road shared by traders, exiles, raiders, and homesick kinsmen. For the Germanic North, the sea is a broad space of transition; it is undefinable in a vast physical sense, and the possibility of its character shifts ever with the unique fortunes and natures of the individuals who traverse it. "The Husband's Message" and "The Wife's Lament" are analogues in this respect, as the inverse experiences of the characters in these poems

represent the possibilities of the sea and the land as they exist for the exile in the Anglo-Saxon imagination. The Icelandic sagas illustrate the sea as a setting for skillful feats of pathfinding and dramatic ship-to-ship combats; but it is also a landscape ruled by Fate, where well-loved men lose their lives suddenly and violently and wicked men prosper with full crews and cargo. The sea, much like the landscape of the frontier interiors, mediates the outcomes of the feud cycle. Exile is not the sole result of a feud; some individuals persist through conflict and find unity, joy, and success on the sea lanes of the region.

The standoff between Egil and Athelstan also suggests the ecocritical potential of the interior space. Egil arrives in England as an exile looking to prove his worth and further his standing. While he does battle in Wen Heath his mythic viking qualities are enhanced, as combat in the shrouded landscape of semi-mythical locales functions in saga tradition as part of the systematic memory of ancestral activity. The scene with Athelstan at the high table becomes an altogether different environment, as Egil is removed from his element and placed amongst the strange merriment of victorious Christian men. His brother has been slain, and that death, as well as his own efforts, have not been compensated as Heroic Germanic need dictates. The distance between Athelstan and Egil becomes the distance between Christianity and Heathenism. When Athelstan perceives the nature of Egil's aberrant behavior, he is functioning as factor of the saga poet's contemporary need to bridge his Christian reality with the omnipresent weight of past heathen identity. As the two men exchange the ring with their swords across the flame, they intersect above a liminal plane that is defined by its transitory shape and intense power. The mead hall then becomes a self-contained frontier; Egil and Athelstan must navigate both religious/cultural divides and utilize heroic Germanic etiquette to clarify an ambiguous space.

The mead hall episode with Egil and Athelstan is also indicative of the ekphrasis that is implied in many of these sagas' and poems' making. The ES poet is clearly concerned with Egil's physical appearance and how it influences other characters in notable locations and set pieces. By foregrounding the scene of the mead hall confrontation around with a description of Egil's stark and unusual appearance, the poet declares Egil as his own landscape. Egil becomes an object of heathen antiquity that hearkens to a different social system that Athelstan and his Christian English; his role is to divide the mead hall, a universal Germanic motif, into the pagan and Christian constituents of its symbolic identity. The poet, who likely has experienced and inhabited mead halls himself, seems to wonder aloud in the scene about the implications of Christian and pagan interactions in the heroic past when Northern Germanic culture was transitioning into a new Christian identity. His meticulous drama of the mead hall then, is his attempt to interpret an established poetic interaction into a contemporary interior space his audience is surely familiar with.

Similarly implied with ekphrasis is an ecofeminist approach that is embedded in the landscape of the texts. Women play a significant role in this thesis, and that is due to their intimate connections to the transitory landscape of the Northern frontier. The textual relationship of Gudrid and Freydis embodies the ecofeminist possibilities significantly, specifically in terms of the concepts of *innangards* and *utangards* introduced in chapter 4. Gudrid's participation in the magic rite in Greenland addresses what Borovsky terms "a disequilibrium between *innangards* and *utangards* (21). The witch is summoned to mediate between the environmental damage of famine with the human fortunes of those dwelling within the farmstead. Gudrid, though a Christian, performs a social service through the rite that benefits the spiritual and mental well-being of the household, and her performance satisfies the balance. The situation of

Gudrid amongst the frontier could yield much study not only concerning the environmental landscape of the frontier, but also its interior spaces as well.

Freydis disrupts human civilization in Vinland precisely because she initiates disequilibrium of *innangards*. In both sagas, Freydis proves to be an extraordinarily independent and self-willed woman. Unhampered by traditional laws or gender roles that exist within Icelandic societal borders, she operates in traditional masculine roles. Borovsky identifies the precedent for such women in Icelandic society who operate within a cultural space that implies “a single standard of behavior, a system that obviously advantaged the male but at the same time a system in which, because the strong woman was not inhibited by a theoretical ceiling above which she could not rise and the weak man not protected by a theoretical floor which he could not fall, the potential for gender overlap in the social hierarchy was always present” (18). Because Freydis is stated to have a weak husband, her will goes unchecked in Vinland despite traditional gender hierarchies. When she betrays Finnbogi’s party and executes the women in *Groenlendinga saga*, she is able to do so because no masculine institution (in the form of strong husband or law system) is there to check her will. Civilization cannot exist in Vinland because the foundations of society cannot stand, and the gendered subversion instigated by Freydis is a principal example of the The Vinland Saga’s awareness of the implications of dwelling in the frontier.

The frontier is a valuable space to test ecocriticism in the northern Germanic literary space. Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon poets were both inheritors and participants of the sprawling environment situated around the North Sea. They define and remember themselves through the Northern landscape, which serves as a uniting element which persists throughout cultural, social, and textual changes that score the historical divide between both cultures. Neil Evernden



suggests that “The recognition that the establishment of self is impossible without the context of place which casts an entirely different light on the significance of the non-human” and this encapsulates the meaning of the Northern Frontier to the societies that dwelled within its proximity (101). The frontier is a negative space, a void of societal and cultural order. Though it is a place of danger and otherness, it provides environmental values with which The Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon peoples identify in conjunction with man-made laws and morality. Their separation with the Northern frontier is what unifies them across literary and cultural boundaries, and ultimately, is what defines their medieval landscape through the literature that has come down to us today.

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