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Landscape in the sagas of Icelanders: The concepts of land and landslag

EDDA R.H. WAAGE


This article presents a study of the Icelandic landscape concept, and its meaning and embedded connotations. The present-day understanding of the concept provides the point of departure to some of the oldest preserved examples of the term. The analysis thus centres upon the sagas of Icelanders that were written in the Middle Ages. The paper reveals that in the 14th century the concept referred to morphological qualities of land, and was often associated with an aesthetic appreciation thereof. The meaning of landscape as natural scenery has been explained as the outcome of artistic articulations of social relations in the wake of the Renaissance and Romanticism. Such accounts, however, do not explain the aesthetic connotations associated with the Icelandic landscape concept in the Middle Ages, described in this article. The results of the study thus indicate that there may be more to the landscape concept within the cultural domain defined by the Germanic languages than hitherto revealed, particularly in terms of aesthetic experiences of the natural environment. Subsequently, this article emphasises the importance of identifying the culturally embedded meaning of landscape as a concept in the Icelandic context, for successful implementation of the concept in planning practices.

Keywords: aesthetic appreciation, Iceland, land, landscape, sagas of Icelanders

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Introduction

One prominent line of enquiry in landscape studies has been the historical trajectory of landscape as a concept in the West. Denis Cosgrove’s (1984) exploration of the idea of landscape, which he theorises as a ‘way of seeing’, was a landmark, and has prompted different researchers to engage in conceptual analyses of landscape. One such researcher is Kenneth Olwig, whose etymological approach has led him to argue for a more substantive meaning of the concept than generally envisaged by its modern English usage (Olwig 1996), namely a conception of landscape grounded in law and custom, sometimes referred to as ‘Nordic’ (Olwig 2003, 2007).

Some of the conceptual explorations of the English landscape concept and its Germanic cognates seek to account for cultural differences, while at the same time the discourse is somewhat unified and legitimised on grounds of etymological reasoning, either implicitly or explicitly. For example, the Germanic origin of the term is often recounted, together with an explanation of how ‘landscape’, ‘Landschaft’, ‘landschap’, ‘landskab’, and ‘landslag’ are related (e.g. Tress & Tress 2001; Mels 2005; Spiri 2005; Antrop 2006; Jones 2006). Growing interest in cultural differences has also been directed towards parallel concepts in linguistic communities other than those of Germanic origin (e.g. Keisteri 1990; Gehring & Kohsaka 2007; Shaw & Oldfield 2007).

The research presented here focuses on the Icelandic landscape concept landslag. Icelandic is a North Germanic language, together with the Scandinavian languages and Faroese, and is thus Nordic. As such, it is part of the cultural world defined by the Germanic languages. Yet, as the analysis will show, the Icelandic landscape concept only to a limited extent shares the etymological origin of its Germanic counterparts and their historical evolution.

The Icelandic concept has its own history. Interestingly, it shares to a large extent the most common meaning of the English landscape concept today, which is aesthetic appreciation of natural scenery, whereas it appears to have no connections to the ‘Nordic’ landscape conception, as might be expected.

This study seeks to explore the deep-rooted meaning of the Icelandic landscape concept and to investigate its origin. It takes as its point of departure the present-day lexical meaning of landslag and traces it to some of the oldest preserved occurrences of the term, found in the sagas of Icelanders that date back as far as the early 1300s.

The article first outlines some of the main characteristics of the English landscape concept that are of relevance for this study, as presented in the work of geographers Cosgrove and Olwig. Thereafter, the Icelandic landscape concept is introduced. The article proceeds with a presentation of the sagas of Icelanders and the methodology applied in the study. This is followed by a conceptual analysis, focusing on the Icelandic landscape concept as it appears in the sagas. For this purpose, special attention is given to the different conceptions of land, and then examples of the Icelandic landscape concept are thoroughly explored. This is followed by a discussion of the relations between the Icelandic concept and the English concept, and the suggestion that accounts of the origins of the aesthetic element of landscape may need to be reconsidered. The article concludes by stressing the importance of acknowledging the cultural meaning of landslag for successful implementation of the concept in planning.

Landscape – landskapr – landslag/landsleg

The dual meaning of the term landscape, either as ‘a picture representing natural inland scenery, as distinguished from a sea picture, a portrait, etc.’, or ‘a view or prospect of natural
inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view; a piece of country scenery’ (Oxford English Dictionary 1989: landscape), has been the cause of much contemplation among geographers and has served as a platform for divergent argumentation.

Cosgrove (1984) noted that the former meaning dates back to the early 1600s, while the oldest example of the latter meaning is found in a text from 1725. Accordingly, he argued that its meaning as pictorial representation preceded its meaning as natural scenery. The term was adopted in the 16th century from Dutch painters who had used it to denote empirical representations of rural life. The art form, however, was to a great extent inspired by ideas and techniques from Renaissance Italy, especially innovations in vision and artistic representations of land, such as the linear perspective. Cosgrove reasoned that the landscape idea represents ‘a way of seeing’ the world, a way that is socially constructed and historically embedded in the modernisation of Europe. The critical focus of Cosgrove’s thesis is that whereas the landscape idea denotes a view of land, one of its characteristics is a separation and distance between the viewer and what is being viewed. The landscape idea thus ‘separates subject and object, giving lordship to the eye of a single observer’ (Cosgrove 1984, 262).

By contrast, Olwig (2002; 2007), who has sought to recover the original understanding of landscape (Mels 2003; Wylie 2007), rejected the reasoning that the primary meaning of landscape was a pictorial representation, because it fails to take into account that the term had been used for a long time before landscape painting emerged in the 16th century. Olwig referred to the Germanic languages in Northern Europe and their various spellings of the word; in German it is Landschaft, and in Danish landslag. As widely recognised, Landschaft referred to an area or region, but with reference to selected texts Olwig (2002) showed that the areal understanding does not do justice to the concept. Rather, in Renaissance Europe landscape had much the same meaning as ‘country’ today. He consequently argued that the ‘the primary meaning of Landschaft appears to have been a judicially defined polity, not a spatially defined area’ (Olwig 2002, 19). Hence, landscape was not defined by physical features of the land or by territorial rule, but by social characteristics from within. The ‘landscape law’ was a customary law that had evolved over time in a particular context and in a way that reflected the cultural identity of the landscape. However, the polity also found physical expression in the very place of the polity and its environment, which in turn bore witness to its customary practices. The physical environment may thus be regarded as a material reflection of the landscape. Hence, this landscape, according to Olwig, was the subject of the Dutch painters in the 16th century.

Although Cosgrove and Olwig differ strongly on some fundamental premises, they both emphasise how societal characteristics have given rise to and influenced the landscape concept. In their articulation, landscape is descriptive of social, historical, economic, and political processes that are reflected in the materiality of landscape and landscape representations, as well as their entwinement (Mitchell 2005). This aspect of the landscape concept has been elaborated on by Mels (2005; 2006) in his study of the northern Low Countries around the year 1600.

The meaning of land plays also an important role in Cosgrove’s and Olwig’s argumentation, albeit differently: Cosgrove highlights the altering and alienating human-land relationship entailed by the introduction of capitalism, stressing the importance of land tenure among the European elite for the emergence of the landscape concept. Olwig similarly emphasises land boundaries, but his reasoning relies somewhat more on the idea of free farmers as representatives of their own lands. Moreover, one of the core premises in Olwig’s thesis relates to the meaning of land in the term landscape. Land, he argues, refers first and foremost to a socially defined area, but not to physical characteristics of the earth (Olwig 1996; 2002).

Lastly, as noted also by Mels (2003), both Cosgrove and Olwig seem to share the idea that an aesthetic appreciation of landscape is rooted in the Renaissance, and that the linear perspective played a particularly important role in that context. In the 17th and 18th centuries the boundaries between landscape painting and what it represented gradually became blurred, as ‘the educated classes learned to see the world as a scenic resource’ (Olwig 2002, 117). Hence, the countryside was turned into a landscape, an object of aesthetic appreciation. Romantic influences in the 19th century further induced changes to the conception of landscape, which resulted in landscape and nature becoming almost interchangeable categories (Cosgrove 1984). Aesthetic appreciation is thus integral to the socio-historical and material processes landscape describes. Setten (2003) gives a coherent description of these ‘landscapes of gaze’, as represented by Cosgrove and Olwig, in her critique of the dualism embedded in the visual and scenic approach taken to landscape.

The above-mentioned topics have informed my research on the Icelandic landscape concept. They have given rise to the following questions: What kind of land is being referred to in the term landslag? What kind of human-land relationship does the landslag concept describe? To what extent does the concept depend on societal features and landownership? Does the aesthetic appreciation of land that appears to be embedded in the Icelandic landscape concept stem from influence of the English landscape concept, and can this be fully explained by artistic development in the wake of Renaissance and Romanticism?

Landscape in Iceland

The Icelandic term for landscape, landslag, is defined in the Icelandic dictionary as the ‘total appearance of an area of land, the form of nature in a particular place’ (M. Árnason 2007: landslag). According to the Íslensk samheitaorðabók (Thesaurus of Icelandic), the synonym of landslag is nattvira (nature) (Sigmundsson 1985: landslag). The archaic spelling of landslag is landsleg, and the oldest preserved example of the term identified so far dates back to the late 1200s (Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog n.d.). Apparently, the change from landsleg to landslag occurred during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries (Ritmálssafn Orðabókar...
Landscape in the sagas of Icelanders

Háskólan n.d.: landslag, landsleg). Despite this change and slight modifications made in lexical definitions, its meaning appears to have remained the same from medieval times to the present day (Möbius 1866; Blöndal 1920–1924; Böðvarsson 1963; 1983; Fritzen 1973 [1867]; Cleasby & Vigfusson 1975 [1874]; Zoëga 1975 [1910]; B. Halldórsson 1992 [1814]). Unfortunately, landslag is not an entry in the Íslensk orðsifjabók (Etymological Dictionary of Icelandic) (Magnússon 1989), but clearly it is a compound noun, consisting of the nouns land and leg. The lexical entry of landslag does not mention aesthetic appreciation, but according to the Orðastadhur: Orðabók um íslenska málnokkun (Dictionary of the Use of Icelandic) the term is most often accompanied by qualifying adjectives such as: ‘beautiful, scenic, impressive, magnificent, effective, spectacular, majestic, expressive, grand, tremendous, unimpressive, monotonous, bland, insignificant’ (J.H. Jónsson 1994: landslag). Aesthetic appreciation is therefore arguably entwined with the concept (Waage 2010; Waage & Benediktsson 2010).

Old Norse, which developed into the North Germanic languages, featured the term landskap. The Danish landskab, and the Norwegian and Swedish landskap are etymological derivatives of landskap. Also the Icelandic language has featured the term. It appears in ecclesiastical texts written originally in the 14th century, possibly owing to influences from Norway via the church. The term seems to have gained some prevalence in the 16th and 17th centuries (Ritmálasaun Orðabókar Háskólans n.d.: landskapur), but later became obsolete.

An electronic search through digital versions of the sagas of Icelanders, as well as the Landnámabók (The Book of Settlements), reveals the absence of the term landskap. These works discuss extensively the settlement of Iceland, land tenure, and related issues. Both the terms landskap and landsleg are absent from the major law books from the 12th to 14th centuries: Grágás, Jónsóra, and Jónsbók. Grágás is mostly a collection of customary laws that developed in Iceland (G. Karlsson et al. 2001), while the other two had a Norwegian origin (Bernhardsson et al. 2005; M. Jónsson 2004). The absence of landskap in these major texts suggests that the term was not part of the Icelandic vocabulary by the time these texts were written.

The study

The sagas of Icelanders, often referred to simply as the sagas, are doubtless the most prominent genre of Iceland’s literary heritage (Lönnroth 2008). They are set primarily in Iceland in the first two decades after settlement occurred in the late 9th and early 10th centuries. Accordingly, the main characters are the first settlers in Iceland and their descendants. The sagas were most probably written over a span of two centuries, from the early 13th century until the early 15th century (G. Nordal 2008). Their authors remain unknown and their historical accuracy has been debated. Today, the predominant view is that the sagas are original compositions based on oral history (Ólason 2002). Despite the ambiguity in that regard, they certainly bear witness to the language of the times when they were written, which makes them valuable for exploring the conceptual meaning of terms used at the time.

None of the original manuscripts has been preserved, only copies found in diverse parchments, the oldest of which date back to the 13th century. Scribes copied and sometimes edited the manuscripts. Hence, a particular saga may exist in two or more versions. Some are in one piece whereas others are fragment, and thus some of the sagas exist only as an aggregate of fragments from diverse parchments. Some have then been preserved in paper copies from the 17th century. Often, there is one version that is more concise and therefore shorter than the other. In most cases, the longer versions are believed to be older and closer to the original text (Kristjánsson 1978). Different versions apart, c.40 different narratives have been preserved in total.

The sagas were written in Old Icelandic, a dialect of Old Norse. According to historical sources, the settlers in Iceland came mainly from Norway, but on the way a few had stopped temporarily in the British Isles, thus contributing to the multicultural background of the settlements (Sigurðsson 2008). Genetic research shows that the first settlers were primarily of Scandinavian and Gaelic origin (Helgason et al. 2000a; 2000b). As Old Norse was spoken in Scandinavia, it was the main language of the first settlers in Iceland. In view of the cultural interaction, there is no doubt that some of the first settlers spoke Gaelic too (Ólason 2002; Barnes 2008). After the conversion to Christianity took place in Iceland around the year 1000, the language was subject to influences from English missionary bishops who resided in the country for a while (Hjálmarsson 1993; Börnöfsson 2004 [1950]). Nonetheless, texts that date back to 1200 show hardly any difference between the languages spoken in Norway and Iceland at the time. The languages began to diverge during the 13th century, however, and by the 14th century the difference was significant (Ordbog over det normone prosasprog 1989; K. Arnason & Pind 2005). By this time, the people of Iceland defined themselves as Icelanders (Hastrup 1982; 1985), and their language is now referred to as Old Icelandic.

The influence of the Church proved to be crucial for the development of Iceland’s cultural heritage through the introduction of the art of writing. The two bishoprics in Iceland became centres of learning, and along with monasteries produced a large proportion of the parchment manuscripts (S. Óskarsdóttir 2002). At the outset the written language was Latin and the texts were ecclesiastical. However, equipped with and inspired by the art of writing, Icelanders started to write in their mother tongue around the year 1100, and consequently they were able to record their laws, genealogy, and history. This gave rise to the writing of narrative prose of diverse kinds, including the sagas.

Method

The analysis presented here is threefold, and is primarily based on an in-depth reading of the sagas’ texts. The first step consisted of conducting an electronic search for all instances where the term land appears in the complete set of the sagas. An open coding of the respective excerpts, in line with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998), helped to
reveal conceptual differences of the term. This entailed an empirical approach to the data, rather than reliance on preconceived ideas.

In order to explore how the different conceptions of land constitute compound words, such as landsleg, all compounds that shared land as their first component were subsequently identified within the sagas by electronic search. These were related to the different conceptions of land in accordance with the previous step of the analysis. Furthermore, this enabled comparison between landsleg and the other compounds, giving an insight into how landsleg is entwined in the discourse on land.

The first two steps of the analysis were carried out using an electronic version of the sagas in modern Icelandic (Netu’tgafán n.d.) as the main database, using the analytical software Atlas.ti (Version 4.2). While this greatly facilitated the analysis, the decision to use a modern Icelandic edition of the sagas may be open to debate.

The biggest obstacle for a present-day Icelander when reading the manuscripts of the sagas involves handwriting, as most of the preserved medieval manuscripts were written in Pseudo-Gothic script (Gunnlaugsson 2002). When the texts of the manuscripts are transcribed, this obstacle is removed. There are different reproductions of the sagas’ texts, which are more accessible than the original manuscripts. Ideally, diplomatic editions of the sagas should be used for carrying out analyses. However, only a few of the sagas have been published in such editions. The choice between a diplomatic edition and a normalised one also depends on what kind of analysis the texts are to be used for. Normalising the texts of the medieval manuscripts entails that variations in the original spelling are lost. Editing the texts in accordance with the modern language may furthermore blur some nuances of the language as it was used at the time of writing (Gunnlaugsson 2003; Bernhardsson 2005). Although the modern Icelandic editions feature normalised spelling in accordance with the modern language, it is important to note that they still remain faithful to the exact wording of the old manuscripts. No words have been changed, substituted, or translated, nor has their syntactic arrangement been modified. Therefore, for the purpose of my study, a modern Icelandic edition was sufficient and would not be modified. Therefore, for the purpose of my study, a modern Icelandic edition was sufficient and would not undermine the results of the analytical outcome.

The third step of the analysis consisted of isolating the excerpts containing the term landsleg for close and careful reading and comparison, taking into consideration the wider text in order to explore embedded connotations of the concept. A scholarly edition of the sagas was used (the standard edition), featuring normalised spelling in Old Icelandic (Islensk fornrit 1933–2011). Each occurrence of the term landsleg, as well as the wording of the excerpts, was furthermore verified in facsimiles of the respective manuscripts (Fig. 1) (Reeves 1890; Sagnanet: Icelandic medieval literature n.d.; The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies n.d.; The Scaldic Project Academic Body 2001–2012). In using an edited version of the sagas, the analysis was inevitably based on the manuscripts that the respective editors chose for their publications. As noted earlier (in the section headed ‘The study’), some of the sagas have been preserved in different manuscripts, sometimes in multiple versions.

Hence, although all the examples of landsleg were verified in the respective manuscripts, the possibility remains that the concept was used more widely, and could be found in manuscripts that have not been used for publication.

To help the reader, all quotations from the sagas are given in English. Although the texts have been previously translated into English (e.g. The Faroe Islanders’ Saga 1975; Creer 1997), all translations presented here are my own. Although existing translations may feature better language, I have made a conscious effort to keep my own translations as literal as possible, for transparency. For every quotation, the original text is given in an endnote.

Conceptions of ‘land’

The term land has different meanings and is found in all Germanic languages. As one of the constituents of the term landscape, the meaning of land is central to the meaning of the landscape concept (Olwig 1996; Plumwood 2006; Barry & Smith 2008). The concept of land has received less attention among geographers than other concepts that relate to landscape, such as nature, place, and environment (e.g. Setten 2005). An exception, however, is Elden’s (2010) investigation of the relations between land, terrain, and territory. The Dictionary of Human Geography (Gregory et al. 2009) does not even contain an entry for the term land.

In both Old Icelandic (Cleasby & Vigfusson 1975 [1874]) and modern Icelandic (M. Arnason 2007), the primary meaning of land is ‘dry land’ as opposed to sea. Etymologically, land is probably linked with the terms lend and lund, both of which can mean hip or loins (Magnússon 1989: land, lend, lund). The original meaning of land may have been a curve, or rise and fall in the topography. The term lend may in early times have referred to shared characteristics of landscape and the body of humans and/or animals, just as the terms hals (neck), oxl (shoulder), and as (shoulder) are all used to describe particular landforms.

Land is the eighth most frequently occurring noun in the sagas (Rögnvaldsson 1990), appearing as a separate term.
almost 1300 times in all. Examination of all these instances revealed three main conceptions of land, each characterised by natural, economic, or social emphases respectively (Fig. 2). The empirical approach of the analysis took into account the historical setting of the sagas as narratives of the first settlers in Iceland and their descendants. Although only some of the sagas directly discuss the settlement, it was commonly accepted by the time they were written that prior to the settlement Iceland had been uninhabited and belonged to no one. This knowledge may facilitate a certain level of understanding of the correlation between the different conceptions of land.

**Natural aspects**

Referring to land as natural is by far the most common usage of the term. This conception is not homogeneous, however, but varies in the texts.

Land, in the meaning of dry land, is prominent in most of the sagas. This is land that is sighted after days at sea, or disappears below the horizon, appearing to submerge into the sea behind when one is heading for the open ocean. Sometimes this land is known, and at other times it is unknown, unrecognised, or even unsettled. Land in these terms is contrasted with sea, as the phrase landa í milli (in between lands) captures when referring to navigation over the ocean. It relates to the common understanding that the surface of the earth is all either dry or wet. Examples of the comparison between land and sea are recurrent in the texts, especially when the scene of the narratives draws closer to the shoreline. In some cases, this is apparent when the narrator wants to clarify the position of different characters, i.e. whether they are situated on land or sea. For the same purpose, land and ship are sometimes contrasted, as in the following example: ‘And when Gísli has embarked on ship, Þorkell stands on land’ (Gísla saga Súrssonar 1943, 78). Also there are several phrases that describe the movement from sea or ship to and from land.

Once the ‘scene’ moves towards the shoreline, the conception of land as natural takes on a new guise. Land is no longer just dry land as opposed to sea, but a land mass occupying space. This conceptual variation is revealed in instances where islands and skerries are differentiated from land, whereas they are otherwise referred to as land in the meaning of dry land. When land is conceptualised as land mass, seafarers sail along the land, most often in a specific direction that is identified. The spatial sensation is then heightened with the phrases á land upp (up on the land), and ofan af landi (from the land above), sometimes used to describe the movement between land and shore, indicating

![Fig. 2. The three main conceptions of the term land, as they appear in the sagas of Icelanders, and their subcategories, surrounded by compound words identified in the sagas that have land as their first component](image-url)
the morphological rise of the land above sea level. These phrases are limited to accounts of events taking place on or close to the shore. As a land mass occupying space, the land acquires form. Being positioned within this space, whether on sea or land, gives a new perspective from where the shape of the land may now be described. The land may thus be portrayed as mountainous, hilly, or flat, for example. When referring to the coastline, the land may be depicted as jagged, or fjords may be said to be cut into the land. Descriptions of the land’s surface also fall into this category, e.g. barren land, wooded land, swampy land, grassy land, and watery land. In addition, various instances show that land may be identified by its natural features.

Being positioned on land brings out another perspective: the land itself becomes a space through which one can travel back and forth, irrespective of its natural features. Thus, people simply walk or ride across the land, from east to west, and so forth, also people are located in some particular parts of the land, whether northern, southern, eastern, or western. In accounts where this usage of the term appears, the focus is not on the land itself, but on location, distances, movement, and relocation, for which the natural land serves as an essential backdrop.

Conceiving of land as natural refers to land that is independent of human existence, but the conceptual variations may only be explained by differing human perceptions. This relates directly to the bodily position of humans in the world (Merleau-Ponty 2004 [1948]), the diverse relations each position brings about, and how the world is thus revealed in different ways.

Economic aspects

*Að nema land* (to take land, i.e. to take possession of land as a settler) is a recurrent phrase found in most of the sagas, and is used to describe the conduct of the first settlers when they arrived in Iceland, e.g. how they appropriated land that hitherto belonged to no one by defining its boundaries and claiming rightful ownership. The Icelandic term for settlement is *landnám*, which translates literally as the *taking of land*. Arguably, the process of taking land involves the creation of a different conception of land, namely land as *property*, which relates to its economic value rather than its natural features. It is important here to note that land tenure in Iceland was never feudal; on the contrary, from early on land was privately owned and alodial (Hastrup 1985; A.V. Óskarsdóttir 2007). However, land tenure at that time may have differed from our present-day understanding of the concept and included not only the land itself, but also rights to use other people’s land (A.V. Óskarsdóttir 2007).

Land as property is land that one owns and names. It is the place where one makes one’s living, builds houses, cultivates the soil, and grazes one’s livestock. As property, land can be inherited, divided, gifted, controlled, and defended. The quality of the land in the sagas was mostly evaluated in terms of farming and fishing.

Many of the first settlers took large lands, but as the settlement progressed, the lands that were taken became smaller. At some point in time there was no land left to take. New settlers had to buy land and a slightly different conception of land emerges: land as a *commodity* that is priced, bought and sold, exchanged for other land, or rented. Thus, land conceived of in economic terms was not only the source for daily living in terms of food and clothes, but could also become a source of financial income.

The economic aspect of land is heightened where land is equated with money. *Land og lausir aurar* (land and loose coins) and similar phrases that appear in some of the sagas indicate that land was not just any commodity but one of the prime *assets* of the time, together with money and livestock, and as such it could be used for bartering.

An economic conception of land has very dissimilar connotations from a conception of land as natural, although it is arguably based on land as land mass. Underlying values are utilitarian, and these explain the conceptual variations, because land can be put to different uses.

Social aspects

The conception of land that highlights its societal features is the most heterogeneous of the three aspects of land. In most of the sagas there are instances where the term land is used to signify what today might be referred to as a *country*, i.e. a distinct area inhabited by a group of people, or a nation. The phrase *að byggja land* (to build a land) denotes that land is brought to existence by settlement, suggesting the inseparability of an area and its people. Therefore, when the term land is used in terms of a country, reference is made not only to the area it covers, but also simultaneously to the people who inhabit it. The renowned saying ‘with law shall our land be built, but not with lawlessness wasted’ (Brennu-Njáls saga 1954, 172) offers a deeper understanding, because it unveils the contextual dependency of culture and society, suggesting even that land can cease to exist. With reference to the first part of the saying, Olwig (2002) has argued that land in the sense of a country (and hence landscape) was created by abiding by the law, which might be understood as if the creation of land and landscape was conditional upon the law. The meaning of the saying, however, partially relies on how the verb *skulu* (shall) is interpreted (Cleasby & Vigfusson 1975 [1874]); rather than denoting law as a condition for creating land, the verb implies a moral duty to follow the law of the land. Hence, land without law is possible, but not desirable.

Arguably, the social aspect of land as a country gives it a cultural identity, and thus it becomes possible to speak of different lands: ‘And on the eighth day of Yule Earl Eiríkr made payment to his men, as is the custom of rulers in other lands’ (Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa 1938, 117).

The conception of land as a country in the sagas is complicated, as there are differences according to whether the land under discussion is Iceland or a foreign country. For example, when situated in Iceland, any given character who inhabit it. The renowned saying ‘with law shall our land be built, but not with lawlessness wasted’ (Brennu-Njáls saga 1954, 172) offers a deeper understanding, because it unveils the contextual dependency of culture and society, suggesting even that land can cease to exist. With reference to the first part of the saying, Olwig (2002) has argued that land in the sense of a country (and hence landscape) was created by abiding by the law, which might be understood as if the creation of land and landscape was conditional upon the law. The meaning of the saying, however, partially relies on how the verb *skulu* (shall) is interpreted (Cleasby & Vigfusson 1975 [1874]); rather than denoting law as a condition for creating land, the verb implies a moral duty to follow the law of the land. Hence, land without law is possible, but not desirable.

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The conception of land as a country in the sagas is complicated, as there are differences according to whether the land under discussion is Iceland or a foreign country. For example, when situated in Iceland, any given character would say *hér á landi* (here on land, but when situated abroad they would say *hér í landi* (here in land). Similarly, with reference to leaving the country one goes of land (of the land) when in Iceland, whereas one goes *úr landi* (out of the land) when abroad. By comparison, one goes *frá landi*
Iceland land connotes the association of a society with referring to countries other than Iceland. Whereas within the realm of a society with a land, the land as a country, but the islands are excluded from the conception of land in terms of a land mass. Why is reference thus implicitly made to natural features of the land, while still conceiving of land as a country? The answer to this question may offer a glimpse of what it meant to be an Icelander in the Middle Ages (Hastrup 2008).

As described in Landnámabók (1968), Iceland was named after its natural features prior to the settlement, and not after a nation or a group of people who lived in the area, as was often the case in other countries in Europe (Olwig 1994; Brink 2008). The land in Island (Iceland) thus corresponds to natural features of the land, rather than to its social aspect; it is the land of ice. Although Iceland became a country once it had been settled, that does not account for its naming. Iceland differs fundamentally from other European countries in that its settlement is recorded and accounted for, and hence also its emergence as a country, whereas most other regions of Europe have been inhabited since prehistoric times. The case of Iceland is also unusual for other reasons. From the settlement in the 9th century until 1262, there was no head of state, neither a king nor any other type of ruler. Instead, the Icelandic Commonwealth was formed in 930 AD with the establishment of Alþingi (the national parliament), composed of representatives from all parts of the country. What both defined and united Icelanders was the island they all inhabited. The boundaries of Iceland as a country were never negotiated or fought over, but coincided with the natural boundaries marked by sea. Hence, it is not always clear in accounts relating to Iceland whether a reference is made to land as land mass or land as a country. Although this represents an analytical problem more than anything else, one of the sagas contains an example of a misdetection between these two conceptual variations, which underpins this analysis:

And this have men said that Ingjaldr gave the most to Gisli which was of greatest gain to him; and it is said that when Óðrærir Nose worked his sorcery and said that it would not be of assistance to Gisli though men sheltered him here on land; but the thought did not occur to him to stipulate the outlying islands, and therefore this lasted a little longer although it could not last forever.15 (Gísla saga Súrssonar 1943, 84)

Arguably, the small islands surrounding Iceland pertain to the land in terms of a country, but the islands are excluded from the conception of land in terms of a land mass.

In a few instances the term land is used as a synonym for realm, to emphasise the domain of a monarch over a defined territory or a country. A king may thus be said to rule his land or defend his land, i.e. a reference is made to the land as belonging to the king. This usage is limited to accounts describing events abroad.

Clearly, there is an interrelation between the conception of land as a realm and the conception of land as a country when referring to countries other than Iceland. Whereas within Iceland land connotes the association of a society with dry land, in reference to other countries it indicates the association of a society with a realm.

Lastly, there are a few examples where the term land is used to refer to the people of a distinct area. These examples concern behaviour or belief that supposedly applies to all inhabitants of the country. In these terms, the land referred to can be heathen, just as the land can become Christian.

The analysis presented above, with its historical approach, suggests that the primordial conception of land appears to refer to its natural features. Before the settlement of Iceland the land there was unrelated to social and/or economic features. Accordingly, the land was essentially natural, and as such formed the basis for land to be comprehended either economically or socially. This conclusion, however, should not be read as absolute, as it should be kept in mind that the texts of the sagas first and foremost reflect the conceptual world of the people who wrote them in the 13th and 14th centuries. The texts do not necessarily correspond to the way people thought during and immediately after the settlement. The analysis therefore does not show the original meaning of the term land in Icelandic, or how the conception of land became altered in the mind of the settlers. However, the analysis does show that in 13th and 14th centuries in Iceland land could be visualised as purely natural, unrelated to social and/or economic features.

Examples of landsleg

Landsleg is one of several compounds in the sagas that have land as their first component (Fig. 2; Table 1). Landsleg appears eight times in six distinct sagas. Comparison of frequency of use between these compounds reveals that landsleg is not particularly rare in the texts. It is used more often than the majority of the terms: of 61 only 5 are more frequent. The different meanings of the concept of land accompany the element ‘land’ as part of compound words. In the following sections I examine all the examples of landsleg in standard editions of the sagas.

Færeyinga saga

The term landsleg appears in Færeyinga saga (the Saga of the Faroe Islanders), which, despite describing events in the Faroe Islands in the 10th and 11th centuries, was written in Iceland. Furthermore, as it shares some characteristics with the sagas of Icelanders it is sometimes classified as such.

Færeyinga saga has not been preserved as an individual saga but in disconnected sections interpolated in the sagas of Ólafr Tryggvason and Ólafr helgi Haraldsson. Different parts of the saga are thus preserved in different manuscripts, sometimes in dissimilar versions. The term landsleg is found in one version of the saga, which is preserved in the Flateyjarbók manuscript (GKS 1005 fol). The part of Flateyjarbók that contains the various sections of Færeyinga saga is thought to have been written in 1387 (S. Nordal 1944). Parts of this version, including the one where landsleg
appears, are taken from an older manuscript of Færeyinga saga that has since perished, but was most likely originally written between 1210 and 1215 (Ö. Halldórsson 1987).
describes the arrival of Sigmundr and his men to the islands, after a stay in Norway:

Now to tell of Sigmundr and the others, a fair wind comes their way and they sail towards the islands, and see then that they are approaching the islands from the east, and Sigmundr and his men recognise the landsleg, and they have come near to Eysturoy.16 (Færeyinga saga 2006, 52; my italics)

Being positioned on sea and approaching land that arises from sea level, Sigmundr and his men identify the land in front of them as Eysturoy. The experience is clearly visual and according to the circumstances it most probably relates to the natural features of the land – how the land is shaped, and its position and location in space.

Vatnsdæla saga

The term landsleg appears three times in Vatnsdæla saga (the Saga of the Vatnsdælir), written in the 13th century, probably no later than 1270 (Sveinsson 1939). This saga was one of many that were found in Vatnshyrna, a parchment manuscript from the late 14th century (S. Karlsson 1970), which unfortunately perished in the fire of Copenhagen in 1728. If it were not for paper copies made of parts of Vatnshyrna in the 17th century, the content of this saga would now be a mystery, as it has not been preserved as a whole in any other medieval manuscript. Of the few copies that exist, two are more prominent than the others (AM 138 fol, 1640, and AM 559 4r, 1686-1699), as they were most probably copied directly from Vatnshyrna. In places, these two manuscripts differ in their wording. The standard edition is primarily based on the latter manuscript, with some regard to the former (Olsen 1937–1939; Sveinsson 1939).

Vatnsdæla saga is set mainly in Northwest Iceland, in the years between c.900 and the early 11th century. It is fundamentally a family saga as it describes Ingimundr gamli, who settled in the valley Vatnshalar, and his descendants. The story commences in Norway, and early on there is a description of Ingimundr reflecting on a possible relocation to Iceland. In order to examine the setting beforehand he decides to send for three Finns.17

Ingimundr says he wants to make a deal with them ‘and I will give you butter and tin, but you shall do my errand to Iceland and search for my amulet and report back to me about the landsleg’.18 (Vatnsdæla saga 1939, 34; my italics)

The three Finns comply with his wish and depart for Iceland, albeit not in the flesh but in spirit, while they are shut indoors for three days and nights. Afterwards they describe their journey to Ingimundr. Their description of the landsleg is in terms of morphological features of the land:

We came to a land where three fjords opened up to the north-east, and beyond one of the fjords there were great waters. Then we came to a long valley and there at the foot of a mountain were some hills, there was a habitat hillside, and there in one of the hills was the amulet.19 (Vatnsdæla saga 1939, 35)

Later, the story describes Ingimundr – who was by then already in Iceland – seeking land on which to settle. His journey brings him to Vatnshalar and, as he approaches the valley to the north-east, he gazes over it and says:

The Finns’ prophecy must be coming true, for I now recognise the landsleg from their account of it, hither we are being directed, and things are now getting much better; I see now extensive land and if it is accompanied by resources, then perhaps this is a good site to build.20 (Vatnsdæla saga 1939, 41; my italics)

Like Sigmundr in Færeyinga saga, Ingimundr recognises the land that lies in front of him, although not by former experience, but based on the Finns’ description of diverse landforms. Arguably, this example shows that the term landsleg not only refers to the landforms per se, but also to their relative positions and the total appearance resulting from them. The story continues and describes the settlement of Ingimundr and his people:

Then the team moved up the valley and saw that there were good resources from the land with regard to grass and wood; there was beautiful to look around; people then felt in a much better mood. … Ingimundr chose his dwelling in a very beautiful hollow and established a farm.21 (Vatnsdæla saga 1939, 41–42)

In the above quotation, the aesthetic appreciation of the land under discussion, previously referred to as landsleg, is noteworthy.

The third occurrence of the term is found later in the story. The narrative is now centred on the sons of Ingimundr, Þorstein, and Jókkull, who at this point in the story are fighting with an old hag named Ljót and her son named Hrolleifr. After Jókkull had killed Hrolleifr and thus prevented Ljót from carrying out her plot, Ljót informs them of the fate she had planned for them:

She said she had intended to turn the whole landslag22 upside down, ‘and then you would have run mad with terror out among the wild beasts, and that is what would have happened had you not seen me before I saw you’23. (Vatnsdæla saga 1939, 70; my italics)

What landsleg refers to in this particular case is hard to say, except that it seems to imply the surface of the land. The metaphoric description calls to mind a natural disaster of some kind.

Laxdæla saga

Laxdæla saga (the Saga of the Laxdælir), written originally in the mid-13th century, has been preserved as a whole in Módruvallabók (AM 132 fol), a parchment manuscript written in the period between 1330 and 1370, and on which the standard edition is mostly based (Sveinsson 1934).

Laxdæla saga spans two centuries, from c.860 to c.1060. The saga takes place primarily in western Iceland, although parts of the story are set in Norway and the British Isles. The saga gives an account of settlers in the region Dalir and their descendants, many of whom lived in the valley Laxárdalur. Laxdæla saga is not least a story of the love and fate of Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir and her four husbands.
Guðrún’s second husband was Bóðr Ingunnarson, who had been drowned at sea as a result of sorcery. One of the perpetrators was Stígandi, who was also responsible for other evil acts, for which he had to pay with his life. His execution is narrated in the saga. At the particular point in time quoted below, a bag has been pulled over his head in order to avoid the evil look in his eyes:

Stígandi awoke at this and offers no resistance, for now there were many men against one. A slit was in the bag and Stígandi can see the hillside on one side; there was beautiful landslag and grassy; but it was as if a whirlwind came; turned the earth upside down so that never again did grass come up there. 24 (Laxdela saga 1934, 109; my italics)

What the word landslag refers to in this particular example is not clear, except that a reference is made to form (hillside), and texture (grassy), both visual features of the land’s surface. Unlike other mentions of the term landslag in the sagas, here landslag has no function for what is happening in the story. Stígandi certainly does not take the opportunity to admire the beauty of the land at this particular moment in his life, and neither does he have the opportunity to describe his experience of it, as he is stoned to death just few moments later. The remark on the beautiful landslag is in complete contrast to the bloody account. This is clearly a rhetorical device which the author uses to emphasise the complete contrast to the bloody account. This is not clear, except that a reference is made to form (hillside), exactly, although it apparently concerns some features of the land that were appealing. The same passage in the Skálholtsbók manuscript, however, gives an unexpected insight into the meaning of the term:

They headed up the fjord and called it Straumsfjörðr and carried the cargo from the ships and prepared to stay. They had with them all kinds of livestock. There were mountains and beautiful to look around. They paid no attention to things other than exploring the land. There the grass grew tall. 26 (Eiríks saga rauða – Texti Skálholtsbókar AM 557 4to 1985, 424–425; my italics)

The Skálholtsbók manuscript is believed to be closer to the original text, despite being more recent. The wording of the text in the Hauksbók manuscript is believed to have been amended; it is more concise, particularly the sections written by Haukr Erlandsson (c.1260–1334), after whom the manuscript is named (Jansson 1945). The above quotation from the Hauksbók manuscript was written by Haukr Erlandsson himself (Reeves 1890; S. Karlsson 1964; Ö. Halldórsson 1985). Thus, presumably in the first decade of the 14th century, Haukr Erlandsson rephrased the text from ‘there were mountains and beautiful to look around’, to ‘there was beautiful landslag’.

In Eiríks saga rauða the word landslag clearly refers to the total appearance of the land, and particularly mountains in that context, and thus corresponds to the modern lexical definition. The landslag is described as beautiful, as in the example from Laxdela saga.

Eiríks saga rauða

A far better example of the meaning lying behind the term landslag is found in Eiríks saga rauða (the Saga of Erik the Red). This saga has been preserved in two parchment manuscripts: Skálholtsbók (AM 557 4º, 1420–1450), and Hauksbók (AM 544 4º, 1302–1310), both of which are compilations of diverse narratives. Both manuscripts copied the saga from an older manuscript that has since perished. The saga must have been first written before the turn of the 13th to 14th century, and probably in the early 13th century (Ö. Halldórsson 1985). The two manuscripts differ strikingly in their wording, although the storyline is the same, and therefore there are two standard editions of the saga.

The saga tells of the settlement of Erik the Red in Greenland and the discovery of new lands in the west. It centres on an expedition from Greenland to Vinland (Wineland, probably Newfoundland). Both the journey and lands that the expedition encountered are described. The following quotation describes the time when the expedition reached a fjord, where they decided to stay:

They called it Straumsfjördr. They carried the cargo from their ships and prepared to stay. They had with them all kinds of livestock. There was beautiful landslag. They paid attention to nothing other than exploring the land. 25 (Eiríks saga rauða 1935, 224; my italics)

From this quotation alone, taken from the Hauksbók manuscript, it is not clear what the word landslag refers to exactly, although it apparently concerns some features of the land that were appealing. The same passage in the Skálholtsbók manuscript, however, gives an unexpected insight into the meaning of the term:

They headed up the fjord and called it Straumsfjördr and carried the cargo from the ships and prepared to stay. They had with them all kinds of livestock and searched for resources from the land. There were mountains and beautiful to look around. They paid no attention to things other than exploring the land. There the grass grew tall. 26 (Eiríks saga rauða – Texti Skálholtsbókar AM 557 4to 1985, 424–425; my italics)

The Skálholtsbók manuscript is believed to be closer to the original text, despite being more recent. The wording of the text in the Hauksbók manuscript is believed to have been amended; it is more concise, particularly the sections written by Haukr Erlandsson (c.1260–1334), after whom the manuscript is named (Jansson 1945). The above quotation from the Hauksbók manuscript was written by Haukr Erlandsson himself (Reeves 1890; S. Karlsson 1964; Ö. Halldórsson 1985). Thus, presumably in the first decade of the 14th century, Haukr Erlandsson rephrased the text from ‘there were mountains and beautiful to look around’, to ‘there was beautiful landslag’.

In Eiríks saga rauða the word landslag clearly refers to the total appearance of the land, and particularly mountains in that context, and thus corresponds to the modern lexical definition. The landslag is described as beautiful, as in the example from Laxdela saga.

Reykdela saga ok Viga-Skútu

In Reykdela saga ok Viga-Skútu (the Saga of Reykdælir and Killer-Skúta), the term landslag is used in a less lucid context. Part of this saga, including the section where the term landslag appears, has been preserved in a parchment manuscript (AM 561 4º) that dates back to c.1400. It is thought that this saga was originally written in the mid-13th century (Sigfússon 1940).

Reykdela saga ok Viga-Skútu is mainly set in the region of the valley of Reykjadalur and Lake Mývatn in northern Iceland during the second half of the 10th century. The story features three main characters, one of which is Æskell, a chieftain of great wisdom who lived in Reykjadalur. The story tells of a journey he made from his home to a neighbouring region. The beginning of his journey is described as follows:

And now they go, until they come to a place called Leyningsbakki. And then Æskell said that he wanted to be buried there, when he died, and thought there was a good landslag, and said, he did not want to have money with him. 27 (Reykdela saga ok Viga-Skútu 1940, 198; my italics)
The narrative contains no further information on what Áskell was referring to, or on what landsleg is, what makes it good, or why it was a desirable place in which to be buried. A more thorough reading, however, may offer some insight.

The toponym Leyningsbakki can no longer be found, but if it ever existed it may arguably have referred to an elevated bank of gravel situated within Áskell’s farmland, from where there is a picturesque view of the canyon of the Laxá river upstream, and its grassy riverbanks downstream (Björn Sigfússon’s explanatory footnote in Reykøla saga ok Viga-Skúta 1940, 198). This may be relevant if this statement of Áskell’s is to be read literally. Then again, it might also be seen as a portent of his fate, and the toponym Leyningsbakki a work of fiction for that purpose; unbeknowingly, Áskell was referring to, or on what landsleg is, to a fjord that cuts deep into the land. Within it he found another fjord, cutting even deeper into the land, where he later hid. The natural features of this area are described as follows:

The hillsides were grown with forest and the slopes green. Glaciers enclosed all on both sides.28 1959, 132

This natural setting is what the narrative later refers to as landsleg. As some of the previous examples, different landforms are significant in the context, and aesthetic appreciation is involved once again.

On the meaning and embedded connotations of landsleg

The results of the analysis presented thus far in this article can now be summarised on the basis of the eight instances where the term landsleg is used in standard editions of the sagas. In most, if not all, of these instances, there are either direct or indirect indications that landsleg is morphological. The term refers to mountains, hills, valleys, and other landforms in combination and/or mutual interaction. Where particular landforms are not indicated, the term appears to refer to the land’s surface in general and/or local conditions with regard to natural features of the land. There is also a strong indication that landsleg is visual; in four sagas (Vatnsdæla saga, Laxdæla saga, and Eiriks saga rauða) landsleg is clearly something one looks at, regardless of whether one is situated on sea or land. Other perceptions are not mentioned. The implication that landsleg is independent of human actions appears twice (Vatnsdæla saga and Laxdæla saga), and none of the other instances suggests the contrary. Furthermore, none of the instances suggests an economic or a social connotation regarding the land under discussion. Conversely, in the cases of Vatnsdæla saga, Eiriks saga rauða, and Króka-Refs saga, the term landsleg refers to land that is uninhabited and belongs to no one. As for the other cases, land tenure is irrelevant.

Based on the analysis above I argue that the first component of landsleg refers to natural features of the land, or to land as land mass, and its morphological character in particular. This contrasts with Olwig’s account of the meaning of ‘land’ in the term landscape. The second component, leg, refers to its spatial arrangement; hence, it emphasises the relative location of different landforms towards each other and their interplay. Leg translates into lie, as in how and where something or someone lies. Accordingly, landsleg translates into lie of the land.
Relations to aesthetic appreciation

The association of beauty with landsleg cannot be left unmentioned. An aesthetic appreciation of landsleg is specifically referred to in two sagas (Laxdæla saga and Eiríks saga rauða), while two others (Vatnsdæla saga and Króka-Refs saga) reveal an aesthetic appreciation of land that is also referred to as landsleg, and possibly one other (Reykdæla saga ok Viga-Skíatts) hints at the same.

It has been claimed elsewhere (Laxness 1950; Björnsson 1964) that an aesthetic appreciation of nature does not appear in the sagas, although in some instances the wording might suggest otherwise; where natural forms and features are described as visually appealing, the underlying premise is putatively utilitarian. Thus, when green slopes are described as beautiful, it is said to be indicative of a farmer’s way of thinking, rather than an aesthetic judgement. Supposedly, it was not until Romanticism gained ground in poetry in the 19th century that Icelanders first learned to appreciate mountains aesthetically, leading to a change in views of nature complemented by the first Icelandic landscape painters in the 20th century. Claims of this kind, which evidently echo historical accounts from the European mainland, have nurtured the somewhat widespread belief that an aesthetic appreciation of nature is a rather recent experience among Icelanders, and therefore does not need to be taken seriously. Not everyone, however, agrees. Harðarson (1990) has argued that an aesthetic appreciation of nature must have been a shared experience in the Middle Ages as skaldic poetry partly relies on such perception. Þ. Árnason (1994) argues that appreciation of the beauty of nature is a collective faculty shared by all humans, which can either be nurtured or suppressed by culture. The cultural environment in Iceland may have held back an aesthetic appreciation of nature to some extent, but since such experience was not unknown, according to Icelandic medieval texts, then perhaps recent changes in views of nature may partly be regarded as reviving the sense of enchantment Icelanders used to feel for nature in the Middle Ages (Þ. Árnason 2005).

The analysis presented here shows that an aesthetic appreciation of nature was embedded in the consciousness of Icelanders at the time. Moreover, it shows that such experience, with regard to nature’s morphology and the interplay of diverse landforms, was expressed with the aid of the term landsleg. Green grass is mentioned in four of the sagas in relation to landsleg (Vatnsdæla saga, Laxdæla saga, Eiríks saga rauða, and Króka-Refs saga), although not as a quality of the landsleg as such, but of the land under discussion. Grass is one of the resources the land has to offer, but it is not the reason for the aesthetic judgement being made in these particular examples. The examples show that when the term landsleg is used it is the morphological quality of the land rather than its textual quality that induces an aesthetic response within the onlooker.

Although Iceland was a subsistence society at the time the sagas were written, it is an oversimplification to state that a description of green slopes or grassy land as beautiful necessarily indicates a utilitarian point of view. One might ask whether it would not be tantamount to saying that modern Icelanders are incapable of appreciating the beauty of waterfalls or geothermal areas, given that they harness these natural resources for economic prosperity. Everybody in Iceland makes use of these resources daily, whether in the form of electricity or hot water. Kantian aesthetic theory (Kant 2000 [1790]) emphasises that aesthetic judgements are disinterested, which implies that when something is said to be beautiful it is because it pleases the senses, not that it might be of use to someone. This does not entail that aesthetic judgements cannot be made of useful things, as some have wrongly presumed (for further discussion, see Brady 2003). Describing grassy land as beautiful does not necessarily indicate a utilitarian point of view, even if one is a farmer.

In all but one of the examples from the sagas where the term landsleg is used, it refers to land that is not one’s home area. Assuming this is not a coincidence, one may question the implications. Taking into account that landsleg is also used to denote aesthetic appreciation evoked by morphological qualities of land, this perhaps shows that it is more likely to occur where utilitarian relations are not at the forefront. Although there may be some truth in the claim that green grass hinders farmers in making aesthetic judgements of land, this fails to notice the heterogeneity of past societies and human-land relations.

Origins of the concept of landsleg

The manuscripts of the sagas reveal conclusively that the term landsleg was in use in the 14th and 15th centuries in Iceland. Conversely, the term appears not to be found at the time in other languages spoken around the North Atlantic or in modern Germanic languages, apart from Faroese. The oldest mention of landsleg in the sagas is in Eiríks saga rauða in the Hauksbók manuscript, written between 1302 and 1310. None of the sagas mentioned here has been preserved in its original version; all but one were probably first written in the 13th century. Whether the older versions contained the term landsleg cannot be known. Comparison of manuscripts shows that wording of the text was often altered; the example of landsleg in Eiríks saga rauða is a case in point.

However, the term landsleg is not limited to the sagas of Icelanders, but is also found in a few other Icelandic medieval manuscripts (Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog n.d.). The oldest preserved example identified to date is found in the Morkinskímma manuscript (GKS 1009), which is an Icelandic chronicle of Norwegian kings in the 11th and 12th centuries, and in all likelihood written in 1275 (Jakobsson & Kristjánsson 2011).

Landnámabók features the term once, in connection with the description of Ingimundr gamli (the same as in Vatnsdæla saga) and the Finns’ journey to Iceland:

The Finns came back and had found the amulet but could not lay hold of it; they guided Ingimundr in a valley between two hills and told Ingimundr how the whole landsleg was fashioned where he should build. (Landnámabók 1968, 218; my italics)

The similarity with Vatnsdæla saga is clear and the two texts are undoubtedly related. The question is, which came first?
It is has been argued elsewhere that when *Landnámabók* was written the author used an early version of *Vatnsdæla saga* as a source for this section (Sveinsson 1939; Benediktsson 1968). If this is correct, it confirms that the use of the term *landsleg* in *Vatnsdæla saga* is original and not a modification made by scribes later. A first version of *Landnámabók* probably existed in the early 12th century, based on various sources, both oral and written, from different parts of the country (Benediktsson 1968; Rafnsson 2001). In the early 13th century the work was subjected to considerable changes, turning its format into a story (Rafnsson 2001). It is hard to say at what stage *Vatnsdæla saga* became a source in the making of *Landnámabók*, although it was no later than the 13th century.

*Landnámabók* has been preserved in five versions, three of which date back to the Middle Ages.\(^3\) One is preserved in the *Haukr* manuscript (AM 371 4\(^\text{r}\)) and was written by Haukr Erlendsson himself between 1302 and 1310, most probably before *Eiríks saga rauða* was written (S. Karlsson 1964). Some of the manuscript’s pages have not been preserved, and unfortunately the page on which this excerpt was written has been lost. However, a copy of *Hauksbók* made in the 17th century (AM 105 fol) shows the term being used.

Haukr Erlendsson declares in his version of *Landnámabók* that he relied on two older versions: one that has since perished, and another that was written by Sturla Bóðarson (1214–1284), preserved in a 17th century copy (AM 107 fol). This copy uses the term *landsleg*. All copies of the different versions of *Landnámabók* support the presumption that *landsleg* was in the original text.

The relation between the above-mentioned manuscripts is also noteworthy. After first appearing in *Vatnsdæla saga*, the concept then appeared in the *Landnámabók* of Sturla Bóðarson. Haukr Erlendsson copied it from Sturla’s text in his version of *Landnámabók*, and used it later to paraphrase the text in his version of *Eiríks saga rauða*. The last version, however, remains the only one that can be verified. It may reasonably be argued that the term *landsleg* emerged in Iceland at some time during the Commonwealth period.

The relations (and non-relations) between *landslag* and *landscape*

The concept of *landsleg*, as it appears in the sagas, describes a human-land relationship that is grounded in surface features of the land. The visual perception of such morphological features is often associated with an aesthetic appreciation. This medieval conception corresponds to the lexical definition of *landsleg* in the modern language. Today, the Icelandic *landslag* and the English *landscape* are treated as interchangeable concepts. However, the terms do not share the same history, but originated at different times and in different societies.

The oldest examples of the Icelandic landscape concept date back to when Icelanders still formed a young nation, but had already differentiated themselves from other people around the North Atlantic. Although the settlement in a pristine land can be expected to have produced human-land relations different from those that prevailed in the long-inhabited regions of Europe (Hastrup 1985), it is nonetheless highly unlikely that Icelanders alone possessed the faculty of appreciating land aesthetically.

The fact that the English *landscape* and the Icelandic *landslag* have come to signify much the same thing is intriguing. The current meaning of the English concept has been explained by way of art history and social theory (Cosgrove 1984; Olwig 2002). Its emergence and development in meaning is tightly intertwined with social, economic, and political changes in Europe from the Middle Ages until the 19th century, a history that Icelandic society only shares to a limited extent. There appear to be no societal connotations embedded in the concept *landsleg* that are similar to the ones described in Cosgrove’s and Olwig’s accounts of landscape. Moreover, at the heart of the English concept lies landscape painting, which dates back only to the turn of the 19th to 20th century in Iceland. As this analysis covers only a limited phase in the history of the Icelandic landscape concept, further examination is needed. Nevertheless, it shows that the aesthetic connotations embedded in the Icelandic landscape concept (i.e. experiencing the natural land aesthetically) emerged much earlier than in the English one. Cosgrove’s and Olwig’s accounts do not explain why Icelanders perceived and described natural land as beautiful in the early 14th century, and referred to it as *landsleg*. While I do not question their theses, the results of my analysis indicate that landscape, regarded as natural inland scenery, was an object of aesthetic experience long before the artistic works of the Renaissance and Romanticism.

However, the meaning of the Icelandic landscape concept is of most significance for Icelanders themselves. For example, it is important for researchers and environmental planners in Iceland to realise that connotations embedded in the English concept are not necessarily relevant in Icelandic circumstances, and vice versa. The lack of attention to the culturally embedded meaning of the Icelandic landscape concept has considerably affected planning practices in Iceland, notably in the field of conservation planning (Waage & Benediktsson 2010). The present study may therefore contribute to more successful implementation of the concept in environmental planning and landscape management.

Concluding remarks

This exploration of the Icelandic landscape concept does not support a societal description of the emergence of Icelandic landscape polities as might have been expected in the Northern European context. The Icelandic landscape concept is not descriptive of such processes and realities. Nonetheless, the relation between *landskap* and *landsleg* is worthy of further examination, both within the Icelandic context and in comparison between Scandinavia and Iceland. In exploring *landsleg* and *landslag*, I have pointed out that the landscape concept within the cultural domain defined by the Germanic languages is not solely expressed by the terms landscape, *Landschaft*, *landskab* or other cognates. This article is thus intended to broaden the debate.
In Iceland, medieval texts the term Finns refers to the Sami but not to the people of Finland. The Finns were notorious for sorcery.

In the sagas, with very few exceptions.

The analysis presented here does not include these tales.

The book was taken apart. The three sections are: AM 371 4 (including Eiríks saga rauða and Vatnsdæla saga), AM 544 4 (including Eiríks saga rauða), and AM 675 4 (including Eiríks saga rauða and Vatnsdæla saga).
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