

## Land-spirits and Iceland's Fantastic Pre-conversion Landscape

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The Icelandic coat-of-arms depicts a shield emblazoned with the country's blue, white and red flag resting on a piece of lava. Supporting the shield are four creatures, a bull, a vulture, a winged dragon and a giant carrying a staff. This coat of arms was designed in 1944 as Iceland became once more a republic, but was based on an earlier design made in 1919 to celebrate the formation of a separate Icelandic state (the obvious differences between the two designs is the introduction of the lava on which the figures stand in the later design and the removal of the Danish crown from the centre top position where it stood in the earlier crest). These four creatures, the bull, the bird, the dragon and the giant are based on a story in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in Heimskringla* (Snorri Sturluson 1941, ch. 33, p. 271) that tells how King Harald Gormsson of Denmark pays a wizard to go to Iceland to spy. The wizard transforms himself into a whale, but finds himself contending with a much more powerful mystical force. He is forced back by a series of frightful land-spirits, or *landvættir* as they are called in Snorri's account, in the form of a dragon (*dreki*), a bird, a bull and a hill giant (*bergrisi*). It seems that faced with a hostile intruder the very land itself rises up in defence of its people. My paper looks at a number of supernatural creatures, spirits and sprites who create a bond between the land and the earliest Icelanders living there. For the first settlers the Icelandic landscape, with its lava, hot-springs, waterfalls, glaciers and areas of hostile interior must have seemed unfamiliar, even supernatural. This fantastic landscape manifests itself in saga literature as beings, as if pre-settlement Iceland is already inhabited (in addition to the *papar*) by creatures living in hills, rocks and waterfalls. In many cases the success of early Icelandic farms was due in no small part to the land-spirits' acceptance of the new inhabitants. Scholarship on the land-spirits has concentrated on Snorri's account, suggesting links between the four beings that the wizard encounters and symbolic representations of the four apostles.<sup>1</sup> I am going to look at some of the other anecdotes from the sagas and *Landnámabók* which I believe shed some light on the tradition which the *Heimskringla* episode adopts and adapts, suggesting a tradition which flourished from the days of the settlement through well into the Christian period, finding its most complex incarnation in Snorri's account.

I would like to start, however, not in Iceland but in Norway and Orkney. *Orkneyinga saga* tells of how Earl Rögnvaldr Eysteinnsson, with King Haraldr's approval, gives the earldom of Orkney and Shetland to his brother Sigurör. Sigurör does not enjoy his prize long as he has the misfortune to die from a wound caused

<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'land-spirits' as a catch-all to refer to the *landvættir*, *landdísir* and other supernatural beings not given a specific designation. On the relationship between the *landvættir*, the four apostles and the cherubs in *Ezekiel* see Sveinsson (1976, 122-123); and Turville-Petre (1964, 232-233). In contrast Briem (1985, 81-83) stresses the similarity to fetches. In an interesting paper given at the previous saga conference, Tatjana Jackson and Alexander Podossinov (2004) draw parallels between the four creatures, the four compass points and the three spheres (i.e. air, land and sea). Also see Turville-Petre (1963) and Solheim (1981).

when his beheaded enemy's tooth snags his thigh. When Sigurðr's son Guttormr dies childless and an attempt to restore order by Rognvaldr's son Hallaðr ends in ignominy it seems control of the islands may be lost to the family. Rognvaldr calls his sons to him and asks which of them is willing to go west and restore order in Orkney. Þórir, his legitimate son, volunteers, whereupon a bastard son Hrollaugr asks his father what course of action seems best for him to follow. Rognvaldr replies somewhat enigmatically (*Orkneyinga saga* 1965, ch. 6, p. 10):

'Eigi mun þér jarldóms auðit, ok liggja fylgjur þínar til Íslands, þar muntu auka ætt þína ok mun gofug verða í því landi.'

'It's not your lot to get the earldom, your fate belongs to Iceland, there you will raise a great family and become famous in that land.'

Rognvaldr's prediction proves true as Hrollaugr settles a large area in the East of Iceland and among his descendants are Síðu-Hallr (one of the pre-eminent chieftains of tenth century Iceland and a key figure in the Conversion of the country to Christianity), Jón Ögmundarson first Bishop of Hólar (1106-1121) and Magnúss Einarsson, Bishop of Skálholt (1134-1148). The phrase *liggja fylgjur þínar til Íslands*, here paraphrased as 'your fate belongs to Iceland', has a more complex and anachronistic meaning. *Fylgjur* (singular *fylgja*) were guardian spirits associated either with individuals or family groups.<sup>2</sup> These spirits sometimes seem to have taken female form (see for example *Hallfreðar saga* 1939, ch. 11, p. 198), though the word is also used of fetches in animal form (e.g. *Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, ch. 23, pp. 64-65). The phrase taken literally might mean would seem to mean 'your spirits belong to Iceland'. Turville-Petre (1972, 52), objects to this translation as too vague or curious, suggesting that the author of *Orkneyinga saga* here uses *fylgjur* in an abstract sense to mean 'destiny' or 'fortune' (in a similar way that *hamingja* can refer to both 'luck' in an abstract sense but also 'a guardian spirit' more specifically). Undoubtedly the general sense of Rognvaldr's words is to tell his son that his future lies in Iceland rather than Orkney. Nonetheless, we must note that (like so many saga characters) Rognvaldr is making a supernatural prophecy. It seems in this case, that Hrollaugr's future is preordained and little he might choose to do will affect this. Given that the prophecy is of a supernatural nature, I believe (despite Turville-Petre's objections) that Rognvaldr's words have an underlying implication that Hrollaugr's guardian spirits have associated themselves with Iceland, as if some irresistible force were impelling Hrollaugr there. Even if Hrollaugr could defy his guardians, why should he try to? To do so would leave him vulnerable and unlikely to succeed. It would be wrong to equate *fylgjur* with land-spirits, but Rognvaldr's speech links Hrollaugr's guardians with Iceland and in turn with the future success of his family.

Choosing the location of one's farmstead in Iceland was a careful process and *Landnámabók* records a number of stories about settlers choosing their land.<sup>3</sup> In one case a horse actually selects the location. Grímr Ingjaldsson, a recent settler from

<sup>2</sup> On female *fylgjur* see Rieger (1898, 277-290); de Vries (1956-1957, I, §163, 226-227); Ström (1956-1978, 38-39); Turville-Petre (1964, 227-230); and Else Mundal (1974, 72-142; and 1993, 624-625).

<sup>3</sup> One method seems to have been by throwing the pillars of the high-seat from their former home overboard and settling at the location at which they are eventually found (see for example *Landnámabók* 1986, I, 42-45 and 124-125).

Norway, is fishing one day when he catches a *marmennill* ('sea-goblin' or 'sea-manikin')<sup>4</sup> (*Landnámabók* 1986, I, 96-98). Grímr asks the sea-goblin to tell his future (suggesting a tradition by which encounters with such creatures could be used for ascertain the future<sup>5</sup>). The sea-goblin's words are slightly different in each of the two main manuscripts for the passage, however, in both he indicates that Grímr's future does not look promising, but his son currently residing in a seal-skin in the boat's prow will settle at that place where Skálm, Grímr's mare, lies down under her load. The goblin's words prove true when Grímr and his men are lost at sea (*Hauksbók* merely indicates he dies). His widow and son Þórir move to the west of Iceland and when they arrive in Borgarfjörðr the horse Skálm lies down near the smaller of two sand-hills. Þórir settles this land and eventually becomes a prominent chieftain.

One could scarcely describe either the sea-goblin or the horse as land-spirits. The former is certainly supernatural but clearly not related to land in general or Iceland in particular and there is no real indication that the horse Skálm is a particularly magical beast. Nonetheless the story is relevant for our discussion here. It makes a connection between a supernatural prophecy, a settler, his livestock and his subsequent success both as a farmer and chieftain and the physical geography of Iceland itself. Although Skálm is not portrayed as being a supernatural horse, the sea-goblin's prophecy endows the horse's chance decision to pause near the sand-hills with a supernatural air. The prophecy together with Þórir's death and the horse's decision to pause at a certain point turn co-incidence into the miraculous. The story has the function of giving Þórir and his descendants an unassailable right to hold land and power in Borgarfjörðr as if the very land were welcoming him. Grímr's role in the story is that of comparison. Although it is he who decides to move the family to Iceland, it will not fall to Grímr's lot to be successful there, unlike his son who is immediately accepted into the supernatural and natural landscape.

Hallfreðr, the father of the eponymous hero of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, almost has as short a stay in Iceland as Grímr, but his demise is averted by the intervention of a land-spirit. Hallfreðr moves to Iceland during the time of King Haraldr hárfagri and settles in Fljótsdalr, but later decides to move his farmstead on the advice of a mysterious dream-man (*Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* 1950 ch. 1, p. 97-98):

En um várit færði Hallfreðr bú sitt norðr yfir heiði ok gerði bú þar, sem heitir í Geitdal. Ok eina nótt dreymði hann, at maðr kom at honum ok mælti: 'Þar liggir þú, Hallfreðr, ok heldr óvarliga. Fær þú á brott bú þitt ok vestr yfir Lagarfjót. Þar er heill þín öll.' Eptir þat vaknar hann ok færir bú sitt út yfir Rangá í Tungu, þar sem síðan heitir á Hallfreðarstöðum, ok bjó þar til eili. En honum varð þar eptir góltr ok haftr. Ok inn sama dag, sem Hallfreðr var í brott, hljóp skriða á húsin, ok týndusk þar þessir gripir, ok því heitir þat síðan í Geitdal.

<sup>4</sup> *Sturlubók* reads *marmennill*, whereas *Hauksbók* has *marmelli*, a corresponding later form is also *marbendill*.

<sup>5</sup> Evidence that the *marmennill* had second sight can also be found in the fantastic *Hálfs saga ok Hálfrækka* (1944, ch. 7, p. 164-166) and such stories persist into folklore (see Jón Árnason 1954, I, 125-128).

'During the spring Hallfreðr moved his farm north, across the heath and made a farm at that place which is named Geitdalr. And one night he dreamed, that a man came to him and spoke: "You lie there, Hallfreðr, somewhat unwarily. Move your farm away, west over Lagarfljót. All your luck is there." After that he woke up and moved his farm over Rangá to Tunga, to that place which was later named Hallfreðarstaðir, and lived there until he was old. But a boar and a buck-goat were left behind by him and that same day which Hallfreðr left a landslide fell onto the buildings and these assets were lost and that place was later named Geitdalr.'

The same story is told in *Landnámabók*, though some details differ (*Landnámabók* 1986, II, 299):

Hrafnkell hét maðr Hrafnsson; hann kom út síð landnámatíðar. Hann var enn fyrsta vetr í Breiðdal, en um várit fór hann upp um fjall. Hann áði í Skriðudal ok sofnaði; þá dreyndi hann, at maðr kom at honum ok bað hann upp standa ok fara braut sem skjótast; hann vaknaði ok fór brutt. En er hann var skammt kominn, þá hljóp ofan fjallit allt, ok varð undir góltr ok griðungr, er hann átti. Síðan nam Hrafnkell Hrafnkelsdal ok bjó á Steinrøðarstöðum.

'There was a man named Hrafnkell Hrafnsson. He came to Iceland late in the settlement age. He spent the first winter in Breiðdalr and during the spring went up a mountain. He rested in Skriðudalr and slept. Then he dreamed that a man came to him and told him to stand up and go away as quickly as possible. He woke up and went away. And when he had gone a short way, then the whole mountain fell down and a boar and bull, which he owned, were buried. Then Hrafnkell settled Hrafnkelsdalr and lived at Steinrøðarstaðir.'

The same story also occurs in *Brandkrossa þáttur* (1950, ch. 1, p. 183), though this probably stems directly from the *Landnámabók* account and therefore has no independent value. The historical value of *Hrafnkels saga* in comparison to the *Landnámabók* account of Hrafnkell's ancestors, and the dream-warning of the landslide in particular, has been discussed by scholars (see for example Nordal 1958, 7-26; Hofmann 1976, 19-36). For my part, I believe *Landnámabók* and *Hrafnkels saga* to stem separately from the same oral story. The similarity between the names and proximity of the locations make it unlikely that the stories are unrelated, but the differences are too great for scribal error or a badly remembered written account. The explanation of the name *Geitdalr* in *Hrafnkels saga*, regardless of whether it contains any truth or not, has the feel of a locally preserved oral legend (the *Landnámabók* scribe might have made a similar claim for the name Skriðudalr, though he does not do so). Elsewhere, however, the *Hrafnkels saga* episode has a more literary feel and exhibits a tendency towards dramatisation rather than the strict preservation of the facts. Whereas in *Landnámabók* the dream-man's words are reported summarily, in *Hrafnkels saga* they are given in direct speech. In so doing the author unwittingly betrays influence from written texts. For example a close parallel to the phrase *Þar liggur þú, Hallfreðr, ok heldr óvarliga* is found in a dream in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* in which a man named Gautr is told of the location of a boat that will help in

crossing a river (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta II* 1961, ch. 283, p. 341). (it should be noted, however, that the words seem slightly out of context in *Óláfs saga* and a common source may influence both this text and *Hrafnkels saga*). It seems that, although this motif may have some origin in a pre-conversion oral tale, its telling, particularly in the *Hrafnkels saga* version has been influenced by the motif in which a dreamer is given instruction or advice from a saint or divine being (examples in the sagas of Icelanders include Hallfreðr Vandræðaskáld's dream of King Óláfr, *Hallfreðar saga* ch. 9, p. 178; and Kolskeggr's dream of the shining man, *Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954 ch. 81, p. 197). Hermann Pálsson demonstrated the similarity between Hallfreðr/Hrafnkell's dream and Joshua's dream in the *Bible* in which God appears to him and promises to the people of Israel all the land 'From the desert and the Lebanon to the great river, the river Euphrates, and across all the Hittite country westwards to the Great Sea ...' (*Joshua* 1:4). Regardless of whether Hallfreðr/Hrafnkell's dream is directly inspired by the Biblical story, it clearly represents a similar story type and therefore one can assume has been told with a similar underlying motive, to demonstrate the rights of a particular group to have dominion over an area of land. Perhaps the key fact is the apparently incidental mention in *Landnámabók* that Hrafnkell Hrafnsson arrives in the district late in the settlement age. This detail may account for the existence of the whole story itself. In any dispute over land Hallfreðr/Hrafnkell and his descendents may have found themselves disadvantaged by the fact that they were not among the first settlers in the district. To counteract this a story evolved, perhaps spread by Hallfreðr/Hrafnkell himself, perhaps by his descendents, which showed that the family had an innate right over the area which they had been allotted by a mysterious land-spirit. We can note the similarity in sense between *Þar er heill þin öll* (the exact translation is problematic but the general meaning must be 'all your good luck is there') of *Hrafnkels saga* and *liggja fylgjur þinir til Íslands* in *Orkneyinga saga*. As with Hrollaugr, Hallfreðr's fortunes are particularly associated with a geographic area, in this case specifically the other side of Lagarfljót, rather than Iceland in general. By extension, if Hallfreðr's fortunes belonged to the land, so must the land surely belong to him.

The relationship between Icclander and land-spirit was a reciprocal one as demonstrated by the following example from *Landnámabók*. Björn Molda-Gnúpsson and his brothers Þorsteinn and Þórðr live on one of the poorer settlements. One night Björn has a dream which changes his fortunes (*Landnámabók* 1986, II, 330):<sup>6</sup>

Björn dreymsði um nótt, at bergbúi kæmi at honum ok bauð at gera félag við hann, en hann þóttisk játa því. Eptir þat kom hafr til geita hans, ok tímgaðisk þá svá skjótt fé hans, at hann varð skjótt vellauðigr; síðan var hann Hafr-Björn kallaðr. Þat sá ófreskir menn, at landvættir allar fylgðu Hafr-Birni til þings, en þeim Þorsteini ok Þórði til veiða ok fiskjar. 'Björn dreamed one night that a rock-dweller came to him and invited him to go into partnership with him and he thought that he agreed to this. After that a ram came to his goats and then his flock multiplied so quickly that he quickly became rich, then he was called Hafr-Björn. Men with

<sup>6</sup> Here I have followed *Sturlubók* (ch. 329); *Hauksbók* (ch. 284, *Landnámabók* 1986, II, 331) is slightly different.

second sight saw that all the land-spirits accompanied Hafr-Björn to the assembly and accompanied Þorsteinn and Þórðr hunting and fishing.'

The *bergþúi* of Björn's dream clearly resembles the *berggrisi* in the *Heimskringla* episode. This spirit is not specifically attached to Björn, but instead seems to be linked to the land. To gain the assistance of the land-spirit, Björn has to agree to go into partnership with him (the word *félag* more familiar from the context of voyagers entering into agreements to share the expenses and profits of trading). Although the text does not specifically state that the *bergþúi* and the ram that increases the flock so dramatically are one and the same, the reader assumes this to be case. This demonstrates a further association that the land-spirits undoubtedly had, which is a link with livestock. Not only can the *bergþúi* change his shape to appear as an animal, he can actually become an animal capable of fertilising the nanny goats, furthermore a ram that is more successful in reproducing than one might expect a normal ram to be (this brings to mind the incident in *Snorra Edda* where Loki transforms into a horse and eventually gives birth to the eight legged steed Sleipnir, Sturluson 1988, 34-36). The passage therefore links the Icelander Björn, to the spirit, to the land and in turn to the livestock. This association is made complete by the nickname we are told he acquires – Hafr-Björn or Ram-Björn. This blurs the distinction between Björn and his guardian land-spirit, almost as if it were Björn rather than the land-spirit who has been copulating with his livestock and producing such a successful return. The passage concludes with the observation that land-spirits can be seen accompanying Björn to the assembly, implying that Björn's deal with the *bergþúi* has granted him support from a number of other land-spirits as well. Furthermore his brothers seem to share in his new-found success too. It is not quite clear from the passage what Björn's part of the partnership is, though it seems likely to be some form of sacrifice. *Landnámabók* also tells of a man named Þorsteinn rauðnefr who made sacrifices to a particular waterfall to ensure the success of his flock (*Landnámabók* 1986, 358) and one can see the importance of appropriate and timely sacrifices from the account of the very earliest settlers Ingólfr Arnarson and his brother-in-law Hjørleifr Hróðmarsson. Ingólfr is said to carry out many sacrifices (though exactly to what or whom is not made explicit), in contrast to which Hjørleifr never sacrifices. When Hjørleifr is betrayed and killed by his own slaves, Ingólfr implies that it is his unwillingness to sacrifice that has led to his downfall (*Landnámabók* 1986, II, 44). Furthermore Hjørleifr's death has an ongoing implication for the land he has chosen to settle as no-one dares settle there for fear of the land-spirits, whether this be anger at Hjørleifr's godless ways or at his killing (*Landnámabók* 1986, II, 333).

The relationship between the saga farmer, his livestock and a mysterious spirit that I would suggest is similar, perhaps even identical, to the land-spirits is illustrated in an episode in *Laxdæla saga* (*Laxdæla saga* 1934, ch. 31, p. 84):

Óláfr pái átti marga kostgripi í ganganda fé. Hann átti uxu góðan, er Harri hét, apalgrár at lit, meiri en önnur naut. Hann hafði fjögur horn; váru tvau mikil ok stóðu fagrt, í þriðja stóð í lopt upp, í fjórða stóð ór enni ok niðr fyrir augu honum; þat var brunnvaka hans; hann krapsaði sem hross. Einn fellivetr mikinn gekk hann ór Hjarðarholti ok þangat, sem nú heita Harrastaðir, í Breiðafjarðardali; þar gekk hann um vetrinn með sextán

nautum ok kom þeim öllum á gras; um várit gekk hann heim í haga, þar sem heitir Harraból í Hjarðarholtslandi.

‘Óláfr pái had many valuable animals among his livestock. He had a good ox who was named Harri, dapple-grey in colour and larger than other cattle. He had four horns. Two were large and well presented, the third stood aloft and the fourth stood from his forehead to down below his eyes. That was his Ice-scraper. He scraped away snow like the horses. One particularly hard winter when many cattle died he left Hjarðarholt and went to that place now called Harrastaðir in Breiðarfjarðardalr. He wintered there with sixteen cattle and found grass for all of them. During spring he went home to the pasture, arriving at that place which is called Harraból in Hjarðarholtsland.’

Óláfr, however, does not realise the full value of this treasure and when Harri’s Ice-scraper falls off he has Harri slaughtered like any other beast. Soon after a mysterious woman appears to Óláfr in a dream berating him for mutilating and killing her ‘son’ and threatening or perhaps prophesying the death of Óláfr’s son, *at þér er ófalastr* (‘that one which is to you the most difficult to part with’). This prophecy anticipates the death of Kjartan Ólafsson, the central tragic episode in *Laxdæla saga*.

Harri’s magnificent and monstrous appearance sets him aside from the other cattle and suggests a supernatural beast. It, perhaps intentionally, calls to mind Daniel’s dream of the ram and the he-goat (*Daniel* 8:1-14). Harri’s name implies power and authority, as it is used as a *heiti* for generals or kings in skaldic verse (Egilsson 1931, 230-231; Sturluson 1998, I, 100). The episode in which Harri finds food and water for his fellow cattle all winter (one imagines by using his *brunnvaka*) suggests a role as a guardian spirit watching over the other livestock. The short text in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* referred to as *Af Þiðranda ok Þisunum* makes mention of a bull called Spámaðr (‘Prophet’), which could be seen as evidence that prophetic properties were occasionally attached to farm animals and that certain animals were seen as guardian spirits (*Af Þiðranda ok Þisunum* 2003, 122). The fact that the ox’s mother appears in human form in Óláfr’s dream suggests the shape-changing motif found in the Hafr-Björn episode in *Landnámabók*. One cannot deny that the mention of Harri and his mother is a carefully constructed literary and artistic episode within *Laxdæla saga*.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, it seems quite plausible that the story of the monstrous ox, his protectorship of his herd and his vengeful mother owe their origins to oral narratives. Such a narrative might have originally explained the unusual place-names Harrastaðir and Harraból. It may also have been used to explain the success of a household in the face of harsh winters and adversity and perhaps even a sudden calamity that befell that household (though not necessarily specifically the death of Kjartan Ólafsson). This oral narrative was later skilfully adjusted and adapted by the *Laxdæla saga* author to his own literary ends. The *Laxdæla saga* episode emphasises the idea that the partnership between the Icelandic farmer and the land-spirits needed to be exactly that, a partnership. Unlike Hafr-Björn who makes a deal with his land-spirit, Óláfr does not seem to be aware of the ox’s special nature and he

<sup>7</sup> It is one of a series of omen’s pointing forward to Kjartan’s death without specifically mentioning it and it’s positioning within the saga (directly before the introduction of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir) highlights the forthcoming tragedy and also suggests the inadvertent cause of it.

has him killed. This breaks the partnership, and what had been a positive relationship immediately becomes a negative one. Thus the connection between the early Icelandic farmer, the land, the livestock and the land-spirits was a tenuous one that needed to be carefully preserved.

One might have expected traditions and stories involving the land-spirits to dwindle with the official conversion of Iceland to Christianity in 999 or 1000. Indeed *Af Þiðrandi ok dísunum* (2003, 125) tells how shortly before the conversion the elderly mystic Þórhallr wakes one morning with a smile on his face and explains to his friend Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson, that he has dreamt that the hills opened up and creatures of all different sizes left. The implication seems to be that Christianity makes the land-spirits redundant and drives them from the land entirely. Yet stories of the land-spirits proved just too tempting, too useful not to be related, adapted and as in the case of the *Heimskringla* episode quite probably invented in the Christian era. Although I have had little time to comment directly on the episode in *Heimskringla*, which is so often associated with land-spirits, I believe that Snorri knew stories and traditions such as those I have mentioned and that these formed at least part of the inspiration for the episode. Each of these anecdotes has linked the early Icelanders, their livestock, their wealth, to the land and the land-spirits. One might divide the protagonists of these tales into two groups; those such as Hafr-Björn, Hallfreðr/Hrafnkell and Selr-Þórir who are successful within their new land and have been adopted by the land-spirits, and those such as Þórir's father, Hjørleifr and Óláfr pái who seem destined to fail (the last being something of an exception in that he is initially accepted, but accidentally loses the protectorship of his guardian). The acceptance of these select few by the land-spirits represents their innate right and rulership over their lands. Furthermore it is the land-spirits who allow the Icelanders to make a success of their brave endeavour to scrape a subsistence in a land which at first must have been alien and hostile and therefore the land-spirits who represent freedom from Norwegian and indeed any foreign rule. I suspect families and descendants of the original protagonists may have had vested interests in telling stories similar to Hafr-Björn's or Hallfreðr/Hrafnkell's encounters with land-spirits, nonetheless the stories support the independence of all Icelanders. I do not deny the possibility that the story of the land-spirits defending the country against the hostile intensions of King Haraldr Gormsson and his wizard may have been influenced by pictorial Christian images of the four apostles, but I believe the real meaning or message behind Snorri's story is one of more universal appeal, that is to show the independence of a people and their right over their land, and it is for this reason that the land-spirits prove such an apt choice to bear the shield in the coat of arms.

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