

**Mythological Accounts of Land-Taking in the Icelandic Conception of History
(Abstract)**

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One of the most important aspects of the conception of history is the discovery and settlement of the country. My paper will compare episodes which describe the discovery and settlement of Iceland with others that relate to Norway (*Hversu Noregr byggðist* and *Fundinn Noregr*) and Denmark (*Frá Gylfa konungi og Gefjuni* from *Snorra-Edda*) in order to show how the same motifs can function in both mythological and non-mythological texts.

One such motif is the allocation of land. When the first settlers came to Iceland there was plenty of land for everybody, but soon people had to make rules about how much land every person could possess. For example, there was a sacral belief according to which women could claim a piece of land by driving a young cow round it from early morning until late evening. A mythological form of this rule can be seen in the story of Gefjun in *Snorra-Edda*, where the discovery (creation) and allocation of land are closely connected. Having been promised by the mythological Swedish king Gylfi as much land as she can plough round in a day and a night, she transforms her four sons into oxen and takes enough land to create the Danish island of Zealand, leaving the Swedish lake Mälaren in the hole from which the land had been taken.

Similarly, *Hversu Noregr byggðist* and *Fundinn Noregr* contain parallel but not quite identical accounts of Nór, the eponymous founder and first great king of Norway. *Hversu Noregr byggðist* also gives details of how Nór's sons, grandsons and later descendants continually divided their inheritances among themselves, so that Norway came to consist of many small kingdoms and lordships. The accounts of possession and allocation of land are given as a long sequence of saga formulae that connect different regions of Norway with their rulers by means of poetic etymology (which may or may not coincide with the actual etymologies of the words concerned), and in some cases by alliteration. This organisation of the text makes it resemble the Old English *Widsið*, especially its first *þula*, which runs through a list of famous kings, both contemporary and ancient.

The main difference between these mythological land-takings and the analogous accounts that can be found in the sources of the early Icelandic history is that while the former serve to create euhemerised myth, the latter come to form the basis of administrative divisions and legal organisation in Iceland and thus become an inherent part of the 'historical' memory of the new society.