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Magic, Fish, and Material Ecocriticism

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1. Material Ecocriticism

The aim of this contribution is to illustrate how an approach inspired by material ecocriticism can contribute to the analysis of Icelandic storytelling.¹ Thus, it hopes to show the unexpected places from which we can sometimes derive a deeper understanding of narratives, and how considering questions of materiality can add to our interpretative toolbox.

Material ecocriticism as a self-conscious research field is a relatively recent development within ecocriticism. While ecocriticism studies the relationship between narratives and the environment (see, for example, Hennig et al. 2018; Abram 2019; Clark 2019; James/Morel 2020), material ecocriticism puts a particular emphasis on the materiality of this environment (see, for example, Iovino/Oppermann 2014a; Ryan 2018: 9–13; Clark 2019: 111–136). In the words of Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2014b: 7), material ecocriticism

is the study of the way material forms – bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, and biological entities – intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories.

Material ecocritics have especially emphasised that the materiality of the environment has its own agency (see, for example, Iovino/Oppermann 2014b); and while this has been criticised as a rather unsurprising insight (see Clark 2019: 128–131), material ecocriticism's highlighting of the material aspect of environments is still an enriching corrective to approaches that separate storytelling from the materialities in which it is entangled. In the following, I will use storytelling connected with the lake of Gedduvatn in the Strandir district of Iceland to illustrate how taking the material-ecocritical cue can help us to analyse narratives and fundamentally deepen our understanding of what is going on in a story.

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2. The Fish of Gedduvatn

Gedduvatn is a small mountain lake in the highlands that form the spine of the Icelandic Westfjords, about halfway between the fjords of Steingrímsfjörður and Króksfjörður. In Strandir, this lake is a recurring object of local storytelling. Thus, there is a tradition that one of the abandoned farms of the valley of Arnkötludalur, a short way to the north-east of the lake, was given up after all of its inhabitants had died after eating fish that had been caught in Gedduvatn (see Gísli Jónatansson 1985: 128). This fish is said to have been *öfuguggi*, a mythical species that has its fins turned the wrong way round and is exceedingly poisonous. Gedduvatn here plays a key role for the aetiology of an abandoned farm and as the habitat of a fish that one really should not eat.

Another story about Gedduvatn was told by the farmers of Víðidalsá, an old farm on Steingrímsfjörður on whose land Gedduvatn is located. In 1934, Stefán Pálsson, then owner of Víðidalsá, wrote down the most detailed version of the tale to have survived:

Upptök Mjóadalsá[r] eru í vatni, sem Gedduvatn er kallað, er það vatn á miðjum fjallgarðinum. Þá munnmælasögu hefi ég heyrt, að Þormóður nokkur, er búið hafi í Gvendareyjum og var bæði skáld og galdramaður, hafi einhvern tíma veitt geddu í þessu vatni og hafi hann þá gefið vatninu þetta nafn. (Stefán Pálsson 1934: 1; cf. Jóhann Hjaltson s. a.: 5)

The sources of the Mjóadalsá river [which at a later point in its course and under a different name flows past the farmhouse of Víðidalsá] are in a lake that is called Gedduvatn (“Pike Lake”); that is a lake in the middle of the mountain-range. I have heard that traditional story that a certain Þormóður, who is said to have lived on the Gvendareyjar islands and was both a poet and a sorcerer, on one occasion caught a pike (*gedda*) in this lake, and he then gave the lake this name.²

This is all there is in terms of story, and it is puzzling. The sorcerer Þormóður from the Gvendareyjar islands is a fairly famous figure, who in local storytelling also features as the hero of the mid-nineteenth century tale “Þormóður and Bjarni in Munaðarnes” (see Jón Árnason 1954–1961: III, 587–588). In this folk tale, he is called to help against a murderous ghost, and indeed manages to banish the spectre. But what is he doing fishing up in the mountains? And how is it that he manages to catch a pike, a species that is not actually found in Iceland (Jón Jónsson, pers. comm.; see also Godard 2012)?

On one level, this little tale is simply a placename story like so many in Icelandic literature and storytelling since the Middle Ages (see Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1991, esp. pp. xxx–xli; Barraclough 2012; Egeler 2017 and 2018 b), in that it offers a narrative explanation for a toponym, in this case *Gedduvatn* (“Pike Lake”). In the case of this tale, however, identifying it as a placename story puts a name tag on it, but does not actually explain anything, as it still leaves us in the dark about why the lake is named after a species not found in Iceland.

In 2019, a research stay at the Folklore Institute (Þjóðfræðistofa) of the University of Iceland in Hólmavík allowed me to go beyond the purely textual in trying to understand what is going on in this narrative, and I think the key to this tale is found in the materialities highlighted by material ecocriticism. Even being in Strandir, however, taking the materi-

2 All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

ality of Gedduvatn into the equation was anything but straightforward; the various available maps either put the name Gedduvatn on different lakes or did not locate it at all. In the end, as so often, local knowledge turned out to be crucial. Gedduvatn may be unknown to the mapmaker, but it is known to the people whose work brought or brings them into the mountains from where the sheep have to be collected every autumn. Consequently, I was able to procure directions from Unnar Ragnarsson, a lively old man who had worked on Víðidalsá in his youth half a century ago, and from Hafðís Sturlaugsdóttir, who both studies the district as a naturalist and farms at nearby Húsavík.

If one walks up to Gedduvatn, one finds a small, triangular lake some 800 m long by 250 m broad, which tapers out into a sharp point that is oriented roughly towards south-west. Towards its north-eastern end, there is a little island inside the lake. Its most eye-catching feature, however, is the row of cairns that runs along its southern bank. These cairns mark an old highland route that crosses the upland of Bæjardalsheiði, where Gedduvatn is located, to reach the fjord of Króksfjörður (Figs. 9 and 10).



Fig. 9: Overlooking Gedduvatn from one of the cairns that mark the highland route across Bæjardalsheiði. Gedduvatn is located at N 65° 35' 25" W 21° 49' 33" (photograph © Matthias Egeler, 2019).



Fig. 10: The south-eastern shore of Gedduvatn as seen from the opposite side of the lake. The row of cairns marking the highland route is clearly visible against the horizon and runs directly above the lake (photograph © Matthias Egeler, 2019).

This row of cairns immediately answers the first of the questions that I highlighted above: Why does Þormóður catch a fish *there*, in the middle of the mountains? The answer is that Gedduvatn is located directly next to the highland route, and therefore makes for a convenient spot to do so. Modern maps suggest that Gedduvatn is located completely out of the way, deep in the wilderness of the highlands; but historically the lake is not out of the way, but by the wayside, and telling stories about it makes it one of many roadside locations in Strandir that are connected with stories.³ The materiality of the cairns thus marks a decisive context of the tale: it is a roadside story that is based on the physical materiality of the landscape that the road is passing through, and where the road meets a lake.

Another important context provided by the lake has to do with the “biological entities” from Iovino and Oppermann’s definition of material ecocriticism quoted above (see Iovino/Oppermann 2014 b: 7). Even though Gedduvatn is small, isolated, and located at 458 m above sea level, it is the habitat of a kind of arctic char (*bleikja*). This was discovered by Hafðís Sturlaugsdóttir and Matthías Sævar Lýðsson, who some years back set up nets in the lake to see what is living in it – which turned out to be arctic char. The arctic char of Gedduvatn, however, do not taste like normal arctic char, but have an unpleasantly earthy, loamy taste (Hafðís Sturlaugsdóttir, pers. comm.).

3 For more examples of tales connected to roadside locations in Strandir, see Margaret Cormack’s (2018) discussion of storytelling about the ghost Selkolla, or my research into the route across Heiðarbjörreiði (see Egeler 2021).

This detail – the taste of the fish of Gedduvatn – may at first seem so obscure as to be almost esoteric, but it is actually crucial: it provides an illuminating context both for the tale of the abandoned farm in Arnkøtludalur and for the tale of Þormóður's fishing. Gedduvatn is a lake with fish that are bad to eat, a fact directly mirrored, if in an exaggerated fashion, by the Arnkøtludalur tale: in this story, every inhabitant of a now-abandoned farm dies after eating the poisonous mythical fish *öfuguggi* from Gedduvatn. A lake that produces foul-tasting fish is narrated as a lake that produces fish which are *really* bad for anybody who eats them.

In the tale of the sorcerer Þormóður, by contrast, the ecology of the lake is turned on its head. There, the lake with the bad-tasting fish becomes a lake with particularly good fish, creating a placename that we now recognise as ironic: pike (*gedda*) is an exceptionally good fish for eating, but to get such fish out of Gedduvatn requires nothing short of sorcery. It takes a well-known sorcerer to perform this sorcery – and yet at the same time, the ascription of this particular kind of sorcery may also constitute a token of respect. The ability to make fish appear at will is a stock motif of Christian hagiography that in Iceland appears already in the medieval period. In *Landnámabók* it is connected with the Christian holy man Ásólfr (see Clunies Ross 2002): wherever this Ásólfr lives, there is an incredible abundance of fish, but as soon as he leaves, this fish disappears (see *Ldn*: 59–65). The motif that Christian saints can find fish anywhere is also common beyond Iceland, being a standard motif of Irish hagiography (see Egeler 2018a: 143–151). To ascribe this kind of miracle-working power also to the sorcerer Þormóður may indicate that the story is making a value judgement about his deeds and character. In the story “Þormóður and Bjarni in Munaðarnes”, which was recorded by Jón Árnason in the mid-nineteenth century, Þormóður is presented as a saviour figure who prevails against a ghost that otherwise would have done great and indeed lethal harm. This may have placed him among the ranks of salvific miracle workers, and may have made it seem fitting to let him perform the same kinds of miracles that elsewhere are performed by saints.

3. Fish and Material Ecocriticism

The manner in which the story plays with the fish of Gedduvatn brings us back full circle to the applicability of material ecocriticism to Icelandic storytelling. If material ecocriticism is the study of “the way material forms – [...], organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, and biological entities – intra-act with each other and with the human dimension”, which aims to draw attention to “the complex interrelations between discourse and matter” (Iovino/Oppermann 2014b: 2 and 7), then a case like that of Gedduvatn seems custom-made to illustrate some of the contributions that such a perspective can make to the analysis of narratives. Narratives not only cluster around specific places (see Egeler/Gropper 2020), but they also directly engage with – and indeed are developed out of – the materiality of these places, and in some cases can only be fully understood and appreciated with recourse to this materiality. Storytelling about Gedduvatn is storytelling about a specific lake in a specific landscape that is inhabited by specific fish – *all of which* is reflected in the storytelling about it, but *none of which* is made explicit. If the analysis goes the extra step of considering not only the text, but also its material context, then what may otherwise have seemed like a run-of-the-mill placename story turns out to be a cleverly constructed miniature narrative,

which with great narrative economy mirrors and plays with multiple aspects of the materiality of the local environment. Indeed, one of the central contributions of material ecocriticism is to highlight this potential that the materiality of the environment has for elucidating storytelling.

As a limitation of such an approach, it has to be acknowledged that a material perspective can achieve little when the material environments of stories are unknown or lost. This is the case for most of medieval Icelandic literature: while Icelandic saga literature closely engages with the landscape, more often than not we no longer have the landscapes of this literature as they are reflected in those texts. It is only very rarely, if ever, that the level of contextualising materialist analysis offered here for the folk storytelling of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where we are still able to pin down the materialities (including the fish) involved in the story, will be possible for medieval texts. But even if these materialities now elude us, it is worthwhile to acknowledge them as a structural lacuna in our understanding of saga literature. For all we know, medieval saga literature played as intensely on the materiality of the land as did the storytelling about Gedduvatn. Our inability to grasp such literary play should not stop us from taking the Socratic approach of at least being aware of our ignorance.

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