



***Where be dragons? Draconic environments in the Old
Norse-Icelandic sagas***

***Onde há dragões? Ambientes dracónicos nas sagas nórdico-
islandesas antigas***

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ABSTRACT

Dragons are frequent presences in Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, composed between the 13th and 15th centuries. The locations where dragons appear have been so far observed mainly under the lens of their relation to centre/periphery dynamics and regarding the borders of the otherworldly. Less focus has been devoted to the physical environments that dragons occupy, whether the ones they habitually inhabit or the ones they turn uninhabitable.

The habitat of dragons encompasses a variety of natural environments throughout Old Norse-Icelandic literature. In this article, we will focus on the literary landscapes (sometimes informed by real geographies familiar to the authors, depending on setting), which surround dragons in the sagas, namely topographical features, weather phenomena, times of day and seasons. The main goal will be to define which landscapes saga dragons are mainly found in, and reflect on how dragons interact with their surroundings, altering their landscapes, most often through destructive means and making spaces into non-shared zones.

As descriptions of dragon surroundings are often scarce in detail, this study intends to take a broad-scope approach to the available corpus of sagas with dragons in them, combing 55 dragon occurrences across 38 sagas and *þættir* ("tales, episodes") for landscape-oriented vocabulary. It will focus on "legendary sagas" and "chivalric sagas" due to prevalence of the material, but also include episodes from "sagas of Icelanders", "kings' sagas" and other texts adjacent to those genres.

Keywords: dragons; Old Norse; saga; landscape; ecocriticism.

RESUMO

Os dragões são presenças frequentes nas antigas sagas nórdico-islandesas, compostas entre os séculos XIII e XV. Até ao presente, os locais associados aos dragões têm sido analisados sobretudo na perspetiva da sua relação com as dinâmicas centro/periferia e com as fronteiras do Outro Mundo. Uma menor atenção foi até agora votada aos ambientes físicos ocupados pelos dragões, tanto os por eles normalmente habitados como os por eles tornados inabitáveis.

O habitat dos dragões abrange, na literatura islandesa medieval, uma grande variedade de paisagens naturais. Neste artigo, focar-nos-emos nas paisagens literárias (ocasionalmente reflectindo geografias reais familiares aos autores, dependendo do cenário evocado) que rodeiam os dragões nas sagas, atendendo em particular aos elementos topográficos, fenómenos meteorológicos, alturas do dia e estações do ano. O objectivo principal será definir as principais paisagens em que os dragões são encontrados e reflectir sobre as suas interações com o meio envolvente, alterando as paisagens, principalmente através de meios destrutivos e transformando-as em lugares não-partilhados.

Como as descrições dos ambientes que envolvem os dragões são frequentemente parcas em detalhes, será realizado um estudo alargado do *corpus* de sagas com referências a dragões, procurando-se vocabulário relacionado com paisagens nas 55 ocorrências encontradas em 38 sagas e *þættir* ("contos, episódios"). Focar-me-ei nas "sagas lendárias" e nas "sagas de cavalaria", dada a prevalência de material nestes subgéneros, mas também incluirei episódios das "sagas de Islandeses", das "sagas de reis" e de outros textos que lhes são adjacentes.

Palavras-chave: dragão; Nórdico Antigo; saga; paisagem; ecocrítica.



Introduction – research questions, methodology, and article structure

In previous studies of the dragon in Old Norse (ON) sagas and *þættir*, I have often felt the need for more solid, quantifiable notions of what kind of places dragons are associated with, and in what way do they relate to them. As such, in the present article¹, I endeavoured to analyse the relationship of dragons with the environments they inhabit in these prose narratives. To do so, I first mapped the landscapes inhabited by dragons, as well as weather phenomena, times of day, and seasons most associated with their presence. Considering the potential interest of these results for further study of saga dragons, in the first and largest part of this article I will devote myself to presenting the conclusions that I arrived at, considering them quantitatively and discussing them. In a second, shorter part of the article, I will close off with some brief notes on how a dragon's presence affects the natural environment, through the sagas where that is manifest. Dragons interact with the landscape usually in a destructive way, and their presence tends to lead towards those spaces being turned into non-shared spaces, dominated by the dragon.

For the purpose of accomplishing the abovementioned goals, I conducted a wide source-survey, isolating fifty-five dragon references across thirty-eight texts – as several of the texts I studied contain more than one dragon – ranging in composition date from the 13th to the 15th centuries. The episodes are highly varied in detail². I

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented as a conference paper at the *12th Háskóli Íslands Student Conference on the Medieval North*, on the 15th April 2023, under the same title. I wish to thank the organizing committee for allowing me to present these findings to my peers at such a privileged venue, as well as the audience for all their questions, which allowed me to develop my thoughts to the stage here presented. Both this article and the preceding paper were financed by national funds through FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P, within the scope of the PhD Studentship 2022.13013.BD.

² For the purposes of this article, I have considered any mention of a separate dragon as a case, even if they are extremely brief (as in *Njáls saga*), counting them by the dragon and not by appearance. I did not count it as a different episode when the same dragon appears several times in a narrative, as, when that happens, the dragon is usually in the same environment in the narrative – such as Jakúlus in *Yngvars saga víðförla* and the dragon of *Sigurðar saga þogla*. I made an exception for the case of the *Þiðreks saga* dragon faced by both king Hernið and king Þiðrekr, as both accounts are lengthy and detailed, while the initial encounter with the dragon seems to take place in a slightly different environment, even if both end up in the dragon's cave – with a very different outcome, Hernið devoured and Þiðrekr victorious. However, I counted it as a different "episode" when a dragon which features prominently in one saga was mentioned in another text (e.g. numerous mentions of the

did not focus on geographical or toponymical data, merely on accounting for the physical features of landscapes and places that dragons interact with or inhabit. My corpus³ is comprised majorly of sagas belonging, although not solely, to the genres⁴ of legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) and chivalric sagas (*riddarasögur*), both translated and indigenous ones – by far, those two saga genres hoard almost of the

Fáfnir fight across texts related to the Völsung legend), as, even if they are quick mentions, they usually come accompanied by location vocabulary, being thus different witnesses for my purposes.

³ In alphabetical order, the texts considered in this study were: *Bærings saga*, *Bjarnar saga hítðælakappa*, *Blómstrvalla saga*, *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, *Dínus saga drambláta*, *Ectors saga*, *Eiríks saga víðförla*, *Erex saga Artuskappa*, *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans*, *Gull-Þóris saga*, *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*, *Haralds saga harðráða* (*Morkinskinna* version), *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Ívens saga*, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Ketils saga hængs*, *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, *Njáls saga*, *Norna-Gests þátr*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (*Heimskringla* version) *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, *Ragnarsonna þátr*, *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd*, *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, *Sigurðar saga þögla* (long version), *Sǫrla saga sterka*, *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, *Trójumanna saga*, *Valdimars saga*, *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, *Vilhjálmss saga sjóðs*, *Völsunga Saga*, *Yngvars saga víðförla*, *Þidreks saga af Bern*, *Þórsteins þátr forvitna*, and *Órvar-Odds saga* (version E). Fuller references will be provided as the texts are cited or referred to, and all the editions I have used will be referenced in the article's bibliography.

I endeavoured to include in this survey as much Old Norse-Icelandic texts with dragon episodes as I am aware of to exist, and as they were available to me. I was, unfortunately, not able to consider the dragons in *Guðmundar saga*, which includes a dragon episode over the same place that *Jómsvíkinga saga* does (as retold in the introduction to the latter saga in FINLAY, Alison; ÞÓRDÍS Edda Jóhannesdóttir [eds./trans.] – *The Saga of the Jómsvíkingas – A Translation with Full Introduction*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications: Western Michigan University, 2018, p. 5). For the present landscape survey, translations of hagiographical material which mention dragons have also not been included, such as *Antóníuss saga*, *Benedikts saga*, *Margrétar saga*, *Matheuss saga*, *Mikjálss saga saga*, *Nikuláss saga erkibyskups II*, *Silvesters saga* because they mostly adhere to the versions of the tales known outside of the Old Norse context, being highly typified, and the dragon in them is overtly a stand-in for the Devil, differing from other texts here studied; it should be said that they do not usually prominently feature natural environments (most of their dragon appearances take place in an urban setting). Nevertheless, reference to these texts is made when relevant. I have also not included encyclopaedic material which mentions dragons, such as the text known as *Om ormar* (see BARREIRO, Santiago [trans.] – “*De Serpentina* en el norte medieval: traducción y comentario a *Om Ormar*”. *Calamus* 7 [2023], pp. 82-98). East Norse texts, produced in Denmark or Sweden, were also not considered, nor were Latin texts produced in medieval Nordic contexts. Nonetheless, a future study, considering from a similar point-of-view the abovementioned texts which were not included, could prove enriching. Similarly, two promising modes of inquiry were not explored here: the study of poetic language for dragons (kennings especially could prove very interesting, as some of the poetic periphrases for dragons focus on “forests”, e.g. *myrkaurriði markar* [“dark trout of the forest or trout of the dark forest?”], see SNORRI Sturluson – *Edda – Skáldskaparmál. 2. Glossary and Index of Names*. Ed. Anthony Faulkes. Exeter: University College London/Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007, p. 359); and the study of place names (Iceland boasts numerous placenames related to *dreki* alone, one of the most famous in current days being the canyon called *Drekagil* [“Dragon’s Gully”]). Encompassing these additional approaches would, to my mind, require a different type of article, and my focus here has been on making available the data concerning the abovementioned sagas and advancing some conclusions about them.

⁴ Saga genres are, of course, a modern scholarly construction which would not have existed for medieval authors nor audience in the form that we look at them today. While some generic expectations would exist, most texts are nowadays recognized to feature generic hybridity. For a summary of the state-of-the-art on this subject see BAMPI, Massimiliano – “Genre”. In ÁRMANN Jakobsson; SVERRIR Jakobsson (eds.) – *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York: Routledge, 2017 (e-book); and for detailed and most recent critical studies see BAMPI, Massimiliano; LARRINGTON, Carolyne; SIF Rikhardsdóttir (eds.) – *A Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2020.

dragons in ON literature. Considerations about saga genres regarding the landscape distribution will also be pointed out when useful.

Regarding my initial search, I paid attention to descriptions of environments surrounding the dragons, not only to the places they inhabit, but also those that they visit – or, more usually, that they attack – and those where they are killed and/or laid to rest, as sometimes those are all different settings. I noted down topographical elements present in the places where dragons roam, as well as whether they are placed in the wild or close to inhabited places, in an attempt to find tendencies or lack thereof – this data will be presented through a table at the end of the article (Table 1). On a parallel search, I also took note of whether dragons were, as well as of what time of the year and what type of weather and lighting conditions they made their appearances, whenever they were specified. This information was limited and much less frequent in the sources, which is why it will be debated in the text but not presented on the table.

The question of where dragons begin and end in ON literature also lends itself to a lengthy answer. The usual vocabulary for them encompasses the words *ormr* (pl. *ormar*) and *dreki* (pl. *drekar*). *Dreki* would seem to lend itself to less debate, as it refers without fault to a concept of “dragon” as we tend to think of it now: it usually designates a serpent with unusual physical characteristics (wings, breathing fire, abnormally large size) or which assumes a significant, and usually typified, narrative function⁵. *Ormr* is a more problematic term since it is applied both to commonly sized snakes as to the creatures to which the label “dragon” is fitting above all others, such as Fáfnir of the Vǫlsung legend. I chose to include those *ormar* in this study (aside from those which are also called *drekar*) which corresponded to the above-outlined characteristics of the dragon, either physical or narrative. As Santiago

⁵ I elaborate at length on the terminology and morphology of ON dragons in the chapter “O dragão nórdico medieval – um estudo lexical e morfológico” of my Master’s thesis, see ANDRADE, Miguel Diogo – *O Dragão no Imaginário Nórdico Medieval: um estudo das sagas islandesas*. Lisboa: Universidade de Lisboa, 2020. Master’s dissertation, pp. 136-187. Other studies which review dragon terminology are EVANS, Jonathan – “As Rare as they are Dire’: Old Norse Dragons, *Beowulf*, and the *Deutsche Mythologie*”. In SHIPPEY, T. A. (ed.) - *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*. Tempe: Turnhout: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies: Brepols, 2005, pp. 217, 222-230; and LIONARONS, Joyce Tally – *The Medieval Dragon – The Nature of the Beast in Germanic Literature*. Enfield: Hisarlik Press, 1998, pp. 29, 100.

Barreiro defends, “dragon” can be understood more in terms of behaviour than of taxonomy⁶. Moreover, Ármann Jakobsson has brought attention to how supernatural beings in medieval literature do not lend themselves to an easily deployed Linnean categorization, since medieval terminology is seemingly used without following a set of rules⁷. It is my view that a dragon can be called as such, by us that study it, if both its description and the surrounding narrative context fit with the criteria listed above, even if the text directly refers to it only by the words *dýr* (“beast”) or *tröll*⁸.

Mapping draconic landscapes

Terms of inquiry and general results

I want to lead off my discussion of the environments connected to dragons by explaining the types of landscape elements that I tallied, which will be discussed and divided into broad groups. The specific vocabulary in ON varied, but its complete listing would fall here outside the mark – I will make a point of mentioning cases where the possibility of several interpretations could be relevant⁹. Firstly, then, the landscape elements connected to water: “sea”, “rivers/lakes”, “islands” and “waterfalls”. Secondly, several elements of topography that seemed connected to geological accidents: on one end, mountains/hills, canyons/chasms, and

⁶ BARREIRO, Santiago – “The Hoard Makes the Dragon - Fáfñir as a Shapeshifter”. In BARREIRO, Santiago; CORDO RUSSO, Luciana (eds.) – *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019, p. 61.

⁷ ÁRMANN Jakobsson – “The Taxonomy of the Non-existent: Some Medieval Icelandic Concepts of the Paranormal”. *Fabula* 54 (2013), p. 212.

⁸ I am referring to the “dragon” of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. I have argued before that the fact that the beast seems to embody usual characteristics of a *flugdreki* (“flying-dragon”) and is killed in the same way as those are, and that the episode resembles a “parody” of an initiatory dragon-fight, transforming Hötr into a hero, is enough to count the creature as a dragon, or at least a narrative clothed in all the trappings of a dragon episode, and liable to be examined as such (see ANDRADE, Miguel – *O Dragão no Imaginário Nórdico Medieval*, pp. 166, 253, 274-276. For a most recent study of *Hrólfs saga* which further supports this claim, see STRAUBHAAR, Sandra Ballif – “Ok flýgr þat jafnan’: Icelandic Figurations of Böðvarr bjarki’s Monster”. In ÁRMANN Jakobsson; MAYBURD, Miriam (eds.) – *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400*. Boston: Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 193-201 (as it came out soon after I submitted my Master’s thesis, I was not able to include it for consideration in my previous treatment of the subject).

⁹ In most of the cases, a specific word in Old Norse corresponding to its indicated English equivalent was present; however, at points the type of landscape is indicated rather by interpreting a descriptive passage. For example, sometimes the word *á* is used which unambiguously means “river”, while when we find the word *vatn*, which means primarily “water” but can also be used for “lake”, we must rely on context clues when they are present to be able to pinpoint what kind of body of water is meant.

cliffs/boulders; on the other, caves and "lairs"¹⁰, the last term being a more nebulous classification regarding whether it is manmade or a "natural" landscape feature – the latter seems to be the case most of the time, with "lair" being used as if to mean an underground dwelling such as a cave, but we I believe it important to keep the nuances in mind (in *Völsunga saga*, for example, walls and iron-doors are mentioned for the dragon's lair, which is described as a "hús" ["house"], even if its "stokkar" ["beams"] are said to be "grafit í jörð niðr" ("buried down into the earth")¹¹. A third category may be called "greener", so to say, as it seems connected to a more abundant reference to vegetation, under which we find forests, valleys, and heaths/moors. Among these, if anywhere, I would adjoin "tracks" as well – these are not human paths, but those carved by dragons through their movement, usually in the middle of the natural landscape. Finally, a listing of manmade locations: bridges, buildings (either a single building or a group of buildings), mounds, and mentions of dragons relative to populated areas (both far and near). Only two of the analysed texts simply mentioned dragon fights within the narrative without ascribing them any physical context¹².

The above are the totality of landscapes features that I found associated with dragon narratives in the analysed texts, in generic terms. A full table with the information about which landscapes appear in which sagas can be found at the end of the article

¹⁰ While the words counted as "lairs" were usually either *ból* or *bæli* (both meaning the lair of an animal, see "ból" and "bæli" in ZOËGA, Geir T. (ed.) – *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Mienola: Dover, 2004, pp. 65, 82), in the case of *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, I considered a "lair" also the "jarðhús" ["underground dwelling"] that lay "niðri undir dyngjunni" ["under the heap"] (HALL, Alaric; RICHARDSON, Steven D.P.; HAUKUR Þorgeirsson [eds./trans.] – "*Sigrarðs saga frækna*: A normalised text, translation, and introduction". *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 21 [2013], p. 136).

¹¹ FINCH, R.G. (ed./trans.) – *Völsunga saga – The Saga of the Volsungs*. London: Nelson, 1965, pp. 34-35, although the translation is mine in this instance. On the same subject, in *Yngvars saga víðförla*, only in the second encounter with Jakúlus is the word "lair" used; it is unclear if it merely describes the small hill where the dragon rests which seems to be made of piled-up treasure and various serpents, or if we are being introduced to new information, and we should understand there to be a cave of sorts in the hill (see GUÐNI Jónsson [ed.] – "Yngvars saga víðförla". In *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*. Vol. 2. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950, p. 454).

¹² These are: the brief mention by Sintram of the dragon which king Þiðrekr of Bern and Fasold had freed him from, as reminisced in *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans* (see BJARNI Vilhjálmsson [ed.] – "Flóres saga konungs og sona hans". In *Riddarasögur*. Vol. 5. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1951, p. 97; and the even shorter mention of the dragon fought by Þorkell hákr in *Njáls saga* (EINAR Ól. Sveinsson [ed.] – *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenszka fornritafélag, 1954, p. 303).

(Table 1), further broken down by saga genre¹³. I will now discuss the tendencies found as a result of this survey and some possible interpretations for these results¹⁴.

To start off, we can note that the landscape elements most abundantly connected to dragons¹⁵, by percentage of appearances in episodes relative to the total number of episodes, are: forests (c. 31%), the sea (c. 25% of narratives), lakes/rivers (c. 25%), mountains/hills (c. 25%), buildings (c. 18%), cliffs/boulders (c. 16%), caves (c. 16%), and lairs (c. 16%). In some instances, it would perhaps be more useful to consider the categories mentioned above as tallied together. We will now move into a detailed discussion of the aqueous places where dragons are found.

Aquatic environments

Be it at sea or in a body of freshwater, there is a significant association of water with dragons. I would add the detail that ten out of fourteen texts which mention the sea are set in Scandinavian geography. However, we should take care with the notion that the sea would be a natural habitat for a dragon, or that these dragons should be thought of as "sea dragons"¹⁶, which could be suggested by the existence of the mythological Miðgarðsormr, the gigantic serpent which "lies in the midst of the ocean encircling all lands and bites on its own tail"¹⁷. If we look at the specifics of the

¹³ The categories presented are: sagas of Icelanders, kings's sagas (and associated texts), legendary sagas, translated chivalric sagas and indigenous chivalric sagas. Three texts are included with kings' sagas which demand explanation: *Jómsvíkinga saga*, of notoriously difficult categorization, is included among the kings' sagas as it shares with them thematic, geographical and chronological affinities; *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* is a fragmentary text which seems to be a kings' saga about Danish and Swedish kings; *Þorsteins þáttr forvítna* is a short episode often copied alongside the text of kings' sagas, most notably in *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol), and features interaction between an Icelander and a Norwegian king.

¹⁴ As the following discussion will mostly deal with general results of the survey, I would direct the reader to the table if they wish to ascertain which sagas contain which landscape elements, as all the information is there present. Whenever specific vocabulary or episodes are under discussion, full references with page numbers are evidently provided in the footnotes.

¹⁵ Those which had a presence in at least 15% of the narratives.

¹⁶ An honorable mention should be made of the dragon of *Guðmundar saga*, whose text I couldn't analyse fully and so did not include in the survey, but which Jonathan Evans indicates to be a true sea-dragon, see EVANS, Jonathan - "As Rare as they are Dire", p. 245.

¹⁷ SNORRI Sturluson - *Edda*. Trans. Anthony Faulkes. London: Everyman, 1995, p. 27. In the original, "liggr í miðju hafinu of öll lond ok bítr í sporð sér", see SNORRI Sturluson - *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning, Second Edition*. Ed. Anthony Faulkes. London: University College London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005, p. 27. Inevitably, the maritime dragon Miðgarðsormr brings to mind comparisons with aquatic beings from other cultural contexts, of serpentine or anguiform morphology, which either personify or inhabit the ocean in other mythologies, frequently connected to the idea of the primordial waters. The most blatant and particularly relevant of these, due to

"sea" category, we see that out of all instances, 6 are dragons that either fight *on* or disappear *into* the sea; eight instances are of dragons that reside or are fought *by* the sea. Furthermore, nine out of fourteen dragons are actually shapeshifting men, usually berserkers or sorcerers, who have the ability to transform into dragons or whose *fylgja*¹⁸ is represented by a dragon in a dream.

Freshwater is a somewhat different matter, showing some dragons which appear to live in water, at least partially. We find three mentions of dragons in lakes, and while the dragon of *Flóres saga*¹⁹ simply lives on an island in a lake²⁰, both in *Vilhálms saga sjóðs*²¹ and in *Sigrarðs saga frækna*²² these dragons seem at ease in the water, attacking from underwater and happy to continue the fight from the lake. They can be understood, perhaps, to live or at least dwell there habitually, even if in *Vilhálms saga* the lake appears to be in the middle of an *eyðiskógr*, "a desert-forest" in

Miðgarðsormr biting its own tail, is the Ouroboros, a similar greek-egyptian creature which transmits the idea of completeness and unity (on the topic see a discussion in AUNE, David E. - "Circle". In JONES, Lindsay (ed.) - *Encyclopedia of Religion – Second Edition*. Vol. 3. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005, pp. 1792-1793). Another all-encompassing personification of the ocean is the greek Okeanos, sometimes represented with anguipisciform features (for a discussion, see MOURÃO, Cátia - *Autem non sunt rerum natura. Figurações heteromórficas em mosaicos hispano-romanos*. Vol. 1. Lisboa: Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2010. PhD dissertation, pp. 338-339). Furthermore, in Indo-European myth, a giant serpent often faces off against a god of storms, such as the Miðgarðsormr often does against Þórr (a major comparative-linguistic study on this conflict across cultures can be found in WATKINS, Calvert - *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). In Near-Eastern myth, some significant ones to be pointed out are the Hebrew sea beasts *tanninim*, the most famous representant of which is the Leviathan, spoken of as being domesticated by God in Job 40, but that in a previous phase of development of the religion, along with Behemoth, probably represented a chaotic force opposing the creator god, a conclusion achieved when compared with neighbouring cultures—a detailed study arguing for strong Canaanite influences on the Old Testament can be found in DAY, John - *God's conflict with the dragon and the sea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; cf. another study, highlighting instead oriental semitic influences over the occidental Canaanites, in LEWIS, Theodore J. - "CT 13.33-34 and Ezekiel 32: Lion-Dragon Myths". *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116:1 (1996), pp. 28-47. [Consulted online, 1st October 2023]. Available on <http://www.jstor.org/stable/606370>.

¹⁸ A type of figuration of the soul which appears only in dreams, in a female or animal shape (see "fylgja" in SIMEK, Rudolf (ed.) – *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*. Trans. Angela Hall. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007, pp. 96-97.

¹⁹ BJARNI, Vilhálmsson (ed.) – "Flóres saga", p. 99.

²⁰ Perhaps also so the dragon of *Þorsteins þáttr forvitna*, but we cannot be sure what kind of water the islet is in.

²¹ LOTH, Agnete (ed.) – "Vilhálms saga sjóðs". In *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*. Vol. 4. Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1964, p. 44.

²² HALL, Alaric; RICHARDSON, Steven D.P.; HAUKUR, Þorgeirsson (eds. and trans.) – "Sigrarðs saga frækna", p. 136.

*Libialand*²³, and for *Sigrgrarðs saga* the lake is next to the small hill where the dragon's lair is. Rivers are far more common, with eight mentions of dragons specifically by rivers of various dimensions (one in a dream and one underground, in a dungeon²⁴). In three instances, the word *vatn* isn't accompanied by enough descriptors to allow us to understand which type of body of water is dealt with (whether a stream or a lake is present). Of the analysed sagas, it is in two *íslendingasögur* ("sagas of Icelanders", which are mostly set in Iceland and Scandinavia), that we see waterfalls associated with dragons, and only in somewhat specific Northern geographies. One is in the north of Norway, as the saga tells us that a river falls from a mountain called Blesavergr (on the coast of Dumshaf), and behind the waterfall is the cave where Valr and his sons rest, shapeshifted into dragons—this cave is known precisely by this, bearing the name Valshellir²⁵. Another is in Iceland—a waterfall named Gullfoss, in the North of Iceland—where Gull-Þórir himself is said to have near it ["become a dragon and had lain on his gold-chests"]²⁶ ("hafi að dreka orðið og hafi lagist á gullkistur sínar")²⁷.

Dragons are often mentioned as having the habit of moving to water to drink, and the influence of Fáfñir as a model for other dragon narratives must account for the frequency of this motif – in the Fáfñir legend, in its various forms, the dragon Fáfñir is mentioned has habitually sliding or scurrying along one same path on the way to

²³ LOTH, Agnete (ed.) – "Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs", p. 44. We will circle back to the word "eyði", meaning "desert/desolate spaces", and their connections to dragons, in the second half of this article, see below.

²⁴ Respectively, in *Bærings saga* (see CEDERSCHIÖLD, Gustaf [ed.] – "Bærings saga". In *Fornasögur Sudrlanda. Magus saga jarls, Konraðs saga, Bærings saga, Flovents saga, Bevers saga*. Lund: Fr. Berlings Boktryckeri och Stilgjuteri, 1884, p. 86) and in the *Morkinskinna* version of *Haralds saga harðráða*, in the dungeon that the king is thrown into, where a great dragon sleeps by a river running through the cave ("Þar var firir einn mikill eitormr. ok svaf þa við becc einn er flæt i hellinom", see FINNUR, Jónsson [ed.] – *Morkinskinna*. København: J. Jørgensen & Co., 1932, p. 80).

²⁵ Mentioned both at the end of *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar* (see GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – "Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar". In *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*. Vol. 1. Reykjavík, Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950, pp. 284-285), where their transformation into dragons is "shown", and in *Gull-Þóris saga*, when the titular hero and his companions find and fight the transformed dragons for their treasure (edited under its alternate name of "Þorskfirðinga saga". See ÞÓRHALLUR, Vilmundarson; BJARNI, Vilhjálmsson [eds.] – *Harðar saga*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2009, pp. 187-189).

²⁶ Unless stated otherwise, translations are my own.

²⁷ ÞÓRHALLUR, Vilmundarson and BJARNI, Vilhjálmsson [eds.] – "Þorskfirðinga saga", p. 226. In the same page, one can also find in the notes a discussion on correspondences of this waterfall with real waterfalls found in Iceland, as well as on folklore traditions concerning Gull-Þórir.

water, where it goes to drink²⁸. When we consider that Fáfnir is *the* preeminent ON dragon in legend²⁹, it is a most plausible assumption that the tale of the *Völsung* dragon-slaying was one of the main contributors for the Old Norse concepts of dragons, and it is easy to understand why so many narratives also adopt most narrative spatial features that characterize Fáfnir – the water, the lair, the isolation from society³⁰.

Curiously, while the treasure of Fáfnir is said to come specifically from a river in *Völsunga saga*,³¹ the place where Fáfnir goes to drink is merely referred to as "water"³². If we consider how many episodes associate dragons with aqueous places altogether, then, we arrive at an impressive 51% of episodes. Whether on, under, or by water, the association of dragons with this element can justifiably be considered strong. To my mind, the explanation for this could most probably be understood as a literary impact of the deep-set mythological association of the titanic *Miðgarðsormr* with the sea, and also in the influence of the Fáfnir-tradition. However, given the great abundance and variety of aquatic spaces, it is curious that dragons do not seem to have an intrinsic symbolic connection to them, nor interact with them in very seemingly significant (except for those dragons which make).

Rocky environments

The same analysis of the data could be made for stony habitats. Only two hills are found, while mountains seem more abundant. However, the exact tally between "mountains/hills" and "cliffs/boulders" is unclear, as one of the words tallied as

²⁸ See the Eddic *Fáfnismál*, for example, which reflects an earlier version of the tale than *Völsunga saga* (where the dragon slithers and seemingly has no limbs) and already mentions the water in its prose introduction to the poem, in LARRINGTON, Carolyne (trans.) – "The Lay of Fafnir". In *The Poetic Edda – Revised Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 153.

²⁹ On the impact of the Fáfnir legend, see a chapter by Jonathan Evans, especially: "the story of Sigurd's killing of Fáfnir [...] had an extensive impact upon the northern legendary/literary milieu: [...] Fáfnir's literary analogues are almost innumerable. Images and motifs anchored in the Sigurd/Fáfnir legend appear in countless prose/poetic works, many of them late, and some considerably attenuated by literary dilution;" (EVANS, Jonathan – "As Rare as they are Dire", p. 216).

³⁰ More will be said about these other features below, as about the one exception to this rule: the heath, which was not a productive landscape element in ON dragon-tales.

³¹ Since, along the *Andvarafors* ("Falls of Andvari"), the shapeshifter Ottr (precisely in the form of an "otter") was eating his salmon "on the river bank" ("á árbakkanum", see FINCH, R.G. (ed./trans.) – *Völsunga saga*, p. 25.)

³² FINCH, R.G. (ed./trans.) – *Völsunga saga*, pp. 30–31.

“mountain”, *berg*, is liable to multiple interpretations and could mean either a mountain or other elevation, an agglomerate of rocks, or a cliffside³³ (in my survey I counted them among the “mountains”, as narrative context seemed to imply an elevation, but this ambiguity should be borne in mind). Additionally, if we count together those “caves” and “lair” which seem possible to group into underground dwellings of any sort (as most often seems to be the case), they are shown to be an important element of dragon stories: we are looking at c. 31% of dragon narratives with underground dens (seventeen mentions)³⁴. If we consider rocky environments as a whole, we will notice that they represent a very significant tendency in dragon narratives: twenty-four episodes, which amounts to c. 44% of the narratives. The other 56% are mostly split between episodes happening solely in water, forest areas, or populated areas.

“Green” environments

Nevertheless, the clear “winner” in this tally of isolated landscape elements, if there is to be one, is clearly “forest” (*skógr*), contained in nearly 31% of the episodes as the most common setting for dragon encounters. The abundance of this element is clearly explained by the influence of continental romance in saga narrative and is a good example on which to pivot our discussion towards considerations of landscapes by genres. Chivalric romance literature posits the forest as a preferred space for the knightly quest³⁵, and that will be preserved in both ON translations of romances and in the indigenous romances featuring dragons, highly influenced by the translations (mixing them up with the Norse tradition at points). Six out of the nine episodes from translated material are set in forests (*Þiðreks saga* alone contributes four of those), and in the indigenous romances, we find that five out of eleven analysed sagas contain at least one dragon in a forest, most of them inspired

³³ See “berg” in *ONP: Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* [online]. The Arnamagnæan Collection/Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics/University of Copenhagen. [Consulted on 25th April 2023]. Available on <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o7926>

³⁴ Counting those mentioned as both caves and lairs as a single landscape feature, and including *Yngvars saga*’s “lair”, which is admittedly uncertain to be a cave.

³⁵ As put by Jacques Le Goff, the forest “played an important narrative and symbolic role [...] The forest is called lonely, false, and treacherous, for it is a place of hallucinations, temptations, and ambushes, characteristic of the symbolism of the desert” (see LE GOFF, Jacques – “The Wilderness in the Medieval West”. In LE GOFF, Jacques – *The Medieval Imagination*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago - London: University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp. 55, 57).

either in the lion-knight motif from *Ívens saga* and *Piðreks saga*, or the dragon and kidnapped knight motif from *Piðreks saga*. For contrast, only two out of sixteen *fornaldarsögur* episodes also contain a forest: the *E*-version of *Qrvar-Odds saga*, which depicts a dragon in a forest with younglings³⁶, similar to *Piðreks saga*; and *Yngvars saga*, where Sveinn, the titular hero's son, comes upon the dragon Jakúls and we learn that there is a forest by its lair (i.e. a small hill made up of treasure and serpents)³⁷. It should be noted that indigenous *riddarasögur* is the genre which contains as a whole the most descriptive texts regarding landscape features, thriving on elaborate descriptions of the topography of dragon encounters³⁸. Tracks made by dragons are also usually found in the middle of a forest – two times, plus one more in a heath and another near a city. We will revisit interactions between dragons and forests in the second part of this article.

Valleys (*dalar*) appear five times in the tally, and in three of those they are forested valleys. In one of the outliers, *Valdimars saga*, it is mentioned that a fight between armies (including a hostile sorceress shapeshifted into a dragon) happens above the valleys and plains outside the walls of a city³⁹. The other exception, where no *skógr* is mentioned, comes up in the *Heimskringla* version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* – there, the dragon is the *landváttr* (“spirit of the land”)⁴⁰ of East Iceland, coming out from the valley of Vápnafjörðr to ward off the sorcerer who, shapeshifted into a

³⁶ BOER, R.C. (ed.) – *Qrvar-Odds saga*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1888, pp. 118-119.

³⁷ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – “Yngvars saga”, p. 454.

³⁸ An illustrative example can be found in *Flóres saga*: the dragon lives in an island, within a lake, within a forest. The island has high cliffs all around it, and a cavern-entrance below a jutting rock on top of the cliffs. Únus, the hero, must take a narrow path along the cliffs to get to the entrance, which then drops a long way down to the ground. Únus needs the help of a prince who accompanies him to get down, as he lowers him with a rope; but the prince then drags the rope up and abandons Únus with the sleeping dragon. To escape, he will have to climb to the entrance, dangle on the jutting rock, and ride the flying dragon as it heads out of its lair. This constitutes, to my knowledge, the only instance of a dragon-rider in ON literature, and its outcome is quite disastrous, as Únus tries to kill the dragon mid-flight, making it crash into the trees below as it fights back, before dying, and seriously harming Únus in the process (see BJARNI, Vilhjálms [ed.] – “Flóres saga”, pp. 99-101).

³⁹ LOTH, Agnete (ed.) – “Valdimars saga”. In *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*. Vol. 1. Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962, p. 76.

⁴⁰ On this Icelandic class of supernatural beings, see “landvættir” in SIMEK, Rudolf (ed.) – *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 186. Cf. “landvættir” in ORCHARD, Andy (ed.) – *Dictionary of Old Norse Myth and Legend*. London: Cassell, 1997, 102-103, for a consideration of possible Christian influences on the *Heimskringla* episode.

whale, is scouting the shores of Iceland at the command of king Harald Gormsson, looking, unsuccessfully, for a place where the king could easily invade the island⁴¹.

On the other end of the spectrum, some elements are worthy of note for their almost-complete absence. The heath/moor shows up only three times, two of them through the placename Gnitahiðr⁴², the place where Fáfnir abides – the element *heiðr* is an obvious cognate of English “heath” and takes the same meaning⁴³. The remaining heath seems to occur in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and isn’t as directly referred to, but it can be surmised from when the champion Þoðvarr-Bjarki is facing the creature, as he throws the covering Høttr “down into the moss/moorland” (“niðr í mosann”).⁴⁴

Manmade structures and populated areas

There is a considerable number of dragons who choose to make their presence felt in human towns and buildings. These will be enumerated individually, as they are very different episodes. As mentioned above, only once there is a “lair” which is declaredly a building (that of Fáfnir), but other examples exist where the word “lair” is not used. In *Haralds saga harðráða*, the dragon faced by the king lives in a dungeon⁴⁵, which, while resembling a cave, is situated within *Miklagarðr* (Constantinople)⁴⁶. In *Bósa saga*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Ragnarsonna þáttur*⁴⁷,

⁴¹ SNORRI, Sturluson – *Heimskringla*. Vol. 1. Ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941, p. 271.

⁴² Mentioned by name in *Völsunga saga* (see FINCH, R.G. [ed./trans.] – *Völsunga saga*, p. 23) and also *Norna-Gests þáttur* (see GUÐNI Jónsson [ed.] – “Norna-Gests þáttur”. In *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*. Vol. 1. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950, p. 315).

⁴³ “heiðr” in *Concise Dictionary*, p. 190.

⁴⁴ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – “Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans”. In *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*. Vol. 1. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950, pp. 66-67. Both meanings are ascribed to “mosi” in *Concise Dictionary*, p. 301.

⁴⁵ The story of the dungeon with the dragon is also preserved by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus in his Latin *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1200), see SAXO Grammaticus – *Gesta Danorum – The History of the Danes*. Vol. 2. Ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen; trans. Peter Fisher. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015, pp. 790-791. The motif as a whole seems to resemble a hagiographic tale such as the one of St. Margaret of Antioch, which faces the Devil in the shape of a dragon in a dungeon. Margaret is devoured but the dragon bursts from the inside when she makes the sign of the cross. This story also made its way to Iceland sometime before 1300 (see WOLF, Kirsten [ed.] – “Margrétar saga II”. *Gripla* 21 [2010], p. 62), as told in the ON *Margrétar saga*, where the saint is (similarly to the king) thrown into a *myrkvastofa* (“dungeon”), see WOLF, Kirsten (ed.) – “Margrétar saga”, p. 69.

⁴⁶ FINNUR, Jónsson (ed.) – *Morkinskinna*, p. 80.

⁴⁷ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – “Bósa saga”. In *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*. Vol. 3. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950, p. 322; GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – “Ragnars saga loðbrókar” and “Þáttur af Ragnars sonum”. In *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*. Vol. 1. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950, pp. 226–229, 290.

the same dragon is discussed – the pet of the Þóra, given to her by her father earl Herraauðr, it is kept initially inside a small box, but outgrows it to engulf the whole lady's bower (the *skemma*). In translated *riddarasögur*, the dragon of *Tristrams saga* recurrently attacks a city, even if it is afterwards slain in the wilderness⁴⁸; and in *Þiðreks saga*, the sorcerer-queen Ostasia seems to project herself in dragon-shape to aid her husband, king Hertnið, in an enormous battle which occurs outside their fortress against the forces of king Ísungr, while her human body never leaves the building⁴⁹. In *Dínus saga drambláta*, there is an episode where a fortress is suddenly rendered asunder by earthquakes and other natural phenomena, while a dragon suddenly shows up and contributes to the destruction⁵⁰. *Konráðs saga keisarasonar* sees the hero find and rob precious gems from a whole *ormar*-infested city, where a singular, bigger *dreki* is king. On the way to this city, the hero jumps over some *ormar* guarding a bridge⁵¹. We find two other bridges connected to dragons: one in *Ectors saga*, regarding the shapeshifter Argus episode⁵²; and another in *Eiríks saga víðförla*, where a terrifying dragon guards a bridge to Paradise – in a test of faith, the heroes must jump into his gaping maw to reach the Edenic lands they seek⁵³. While not precisely a named landscape element, I would like to note here that c. 22% of the episodes studied mentioned their level of proximity/distance to human settlements. More will be said about this later on, when we discuss the relationships dragons form with several spaces.

"Grave-mound" or "barrow" is only mentioned as a landscape element once by name, in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, in the dying words of Grímr Ægir, the nemesis of the hero Hrólfr. This sorcerer had turned into a dragon (but also other animals) during their fight, and, after defeat, expresses his wish that Hrólfr builds a mound

⁴⁸ JORGENSEN, Peter (ed./trans.) – "Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar". In KALINKE, Marianne (ed.) – *Norse Romance I – The Tristran Legend*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, p. 96.

⁴⁹ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – *Þiðreks saga af Bern*. Vol. 2. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1951, pp. 477-481.

⁵⁰ JÓNAS, Kristjánsson (ed.) – *Dínus saga drambláta*. Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, 1960, p. 55.

⁵¹ BJARNI, Vilhjálms (ed.) – "Konráðs saga keisarasonar". In *Riddarasögur*. Vol. 3. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1951, pp. 323-329.

⁵² LOTH, Agnete (ed.) – "Ectors saga". In *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*. Vol. 1. Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962, pp. 161-162.

⁵³ GUÐNI, Jónsson; BJARNI, Vilhjálms (eds.) – "Eireks saga víðförla". In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Vol. 3. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1943-44 [Consulted online, 25th April 2023]. Available on https://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Eireks_saga_v%C3%AD%C3%B0f%C3%B6rla

overlooking the sea for his body, which he will haunt and pronounce doom over passing sailors; nevertheless, the mound is never built, as his body melts away⁵⁴. Furthermore, the ambivalent nature of "lair" (as I tallied them here), should be taken into account. While they are rarely well-described, I encountered at least one instance of a lair that doubles as a grave: in *Yngvars saga víðfǫrla*, the second dragon's lair is later revealed to be the resting place of one king Siggeus, who amassed much gold while alive, and "when he died, he was buried there, where you now saw the dragon" ("er hann dó, var hann þar grafinn, sem nú sáu þér drekann")⁵⁵. Then, it is clarified that his body and that of his greedy daughters were eaten by dragons, but that "some men think that they were turned into dragons" ("en sumir menn ætla, at þau sé at drekum orðin")⁵⁶ This double presentation of theories on the destiny of the corpses may be an instance of the type of phenomenon that H.R. Ellis Davidson speaks of regarding the *Beowulf* dragon and the last survivor of the treasure-holding people:

"The account suggests that this is a rationalization of the idea (which would be repugnant to a Christian audience) that the dead man himself became a dragon. It is a familiar idea in Old Norse literature."⁵⁷

As Davidson points out, in ON literature, very often men who hold treasures become dragons, especially if they are greedy – sometimes at the end of life, such as Gull-Þórir⁵⁸. However, aside from *Yngvars saga* (and the even more oblique idea in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*), there is a general absence of mentions of mounds as "resting" places for dragons, which reinforces this point in the discussion. Often, parallels are made between Anglo-Saxon dragon notions and ON ones, but Old English literature is much more definite about dragons belonging in mounds: 11th century poem *Maxims II* pronounces "Draca sceal on hlæwe/ frod, frætwum wlanc" ("The dragon

⁵⁴ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – "Göngu-Hrólfs saga". In *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*. Vol. 3. Reykjavík, Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950, p. 263.

⁵⁵ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – "Yngvars saga", p. 443.

⁵⁶ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – "Yngvars saga", p. 443.

⁵⁷ ELLIS DAVIDSON, Hilda R. – "The Hill of the Dragon: Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds in Literature and Archaeology". *Folklore* 61 / 4 (1950), p. 181.

⁵⁸ These ideas have been developed at length by EVANS, Jonathan – "As Rare as they are Dire", pp. 248-269; and BARREIRO, Santiago – "The Hoard Makes the Dragon", pp. 53-81.

shall dwell in a barrow,/ Old and treasure- proud.") (ll. 26-27)⁵⁹. It is interesting that sagas seem to ascribe grave mounds mostly to other types of supernatural beings than to dragons⁶⁰, but the connection of dragons with graves cannot be discounted from Norse culture when we consider that only Eddic *dreki*, *Níðhoggr*. It is spoken of with corpse connections in two instances of *Völuspá*⁶¹, for instance. The idea of corpses transformed into dragons may also have existed, but it was not very productive in surviving narratives.

The schedules of dragons and their relationship with light/darkness

As a parallel inquiry to the survey of topographical data presented above, the sources were combed for whether there was a specific time of day and year, or weather conditions, that were associated with dragons. The information proved more limited than regarding the physical settings. Regarding seasons, *Bjarnar saga hítðelakappa*⁶² and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*⁶³ mention the dragon fights happening during the summer. In *Gull-Þóris saga* the first dragon encounter can be surmised to happen sometime in the fall or winter, as Þórir dreams of his encounter with Agnarr in the fall, where he obtains the information about Valr, and they seek the dragon "litlu síðar"⁶⁴, that is, "shortly after". Other two sagas are more specific: in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the beast is said to have attacked for the last two winters in a row, specifically

⁵⁹ SMITH, Kyle; FOYS, Martin (eds.) – "Cotton Tiberius B.i, Maxims II: Edited Text & Source Details" [online]. In *Old English Poetry in Facsimile 2.0*. Madison: Center for the History of Print and Digital Culture, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2019-. Available on <https://oepoetryfacsimile.org>; WILLIAMSON, Craig (trans.) – "Maxims II: Cotton Maxims". In *The Complete Old English Poems*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, p. 978.

⁶⁰ For a classic study of Old English and ON barrows, dragons and *draugar*, see ELLIS DAVIDSON, Hilda R. – "Hill of the Dragon", 169-185; for a more recent review of the subject, see EVANS, Jonathan – "As Rare as they are Dire", pp. 275-261, although I would contest Evans's generalization in p. 258 of the term "mound-dwelling revenants" to the ON dragons in *Hálfadanar saga*, *Gull-Þóris saga* and *Haralds saga haðráða*; in my view, a man in a cave behind a waterfall does not a mound-dweller make, nor a dragon in a dungeon.

⁶¹ See "39. [...] þar saug Níðhöggur nái framgengna" "[38. [...] there Nidhogg sucks the corpses of the dead]" and: "66. [...] þar kóm inn dimmi dreki fliúgandi/ naðr fránn, neðan frá Niðafiðlóm;/ berr sér í fiðrom—flýgr völl yfir—/ Níðhoggr, nái" ["62. [...] There comes the shadow-dark dragon flying, the gleaming serpent, up from Dark-of-Moon Hills; He flies over the plain, in his pinions he carries corpses"] (see NECKEL, Gustav; KUHN, Hans [eds.] – "Völuspá". In *Edda. Die Lieder Des Codex Regius Nebst Verwandten Denkmälern*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter/Universitätsverlag, 1962, pp. 9, 15; LARRINGTON, Carolyne (trans.) – "The Seeress's Prophecy". In *The Poetic Edda – Revised Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 9, 12.

⁶² NORDAL, Sigurður (ed.) – "Bjarnar saga hítðelakappa". In *Borgfirðinga sögur*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938, p. 124.

⁶³ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – "Ragnars saga", p. 227.

⁶⁴ ÞÓRHALLUR, Vilmundarson; BJARNI, Vilhálmsón (eds.) – "Þorskfirðinga saga", p. 186.

around Yule's Eve ("Jóla-aptan")⁶⁵; while in *Konráðs saga*, the dragon and other beasts haunt the city during autumn-nights⁶⁶. Speaking of times of day, there are slightly more encounters with dragons happening during the evening/night (seven)⁶⁷, but some dragons are also specifically encountered at noon (two)⁶⁸, and even more so at dawn or in the morning (five)⁶⁹. Considering lighting conditions, one should add that dragon caves are pitch black in both *Piðreks saga* and *Flóres saga*, while the one in *Gull-Þóris saga* is conversely said to be shining bright. Seldom, dragons bring with them unexpected weather conditions – in *Dínus saga*, the dragon brings darkness and shadow with it⁷⁰, while in *Valdimars saga* the dragon manifests dark clouds, fog, and fiery thunder⁷¹. I do not think enough data is available to speak of true tendencies, but one can perhaps state that dragons seem to be slightly more associated with dark visibility and cold seasons. We need to bear in mind that these are not hard rules. Contradictory instances are present even within the same type of narrative (e.g. a dragon raiding a population center, which variously occurs in the morning or at night). Nevertheless, they seem to be creatures of habit, often said to do one of two things regularly at specific times: attack towns, or drink water (the latter probably owing to the story of Fáfñir) – these are the main contexts in which times of day are mentioned.

Some conclusions about draconic landscapes

As stated above, forests, rocky areas, and aquatic spaces are all frequent landscapes featured in dragon episodes. Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that they do not appear isolated, and several landscape motifs are often clustered together. To a point, landscape elements mirror the types of narratives being represented. What we can call "heirs of Fáfñir", for example, i.e. men who transform into dragons while holding treasures, are often represented in a cave/lair, near water. However, *Piðreks*

⁶⁵ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – "Hrólfs saga kraka", p. 66.

⁶⁶ BJARNI, Vilhjálms (ed.) – "Konráðs saga", pp. 308, 313.

⁶⁷ In the dream-sequence of *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Ketils saga hængs*, *Yngvars saga víðfþrla's* first Jakúlus encounter (possibly the second too, as the serpents are also asleep then), *Konráðs saga's* raiding dragon episode, *Sigurðar saga þogla*, and *Tristrams saga og Ísoddar*.

⁶⁸ In *Þorsteins þáttr forvitna* and *Blómstrvalla saga*.

⁶⁹ In *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, the Sigurðr dragon-slaying of *Piðreks saga*, *Ectors saga's* Fenacius episode, and *Viktors saga ok Blávus*.

⁷⁰ JÓNAS, Kristjánsson (ed.) – *Dínus saga*, p. 55.

⁷¹ LOTH, Agnete (ed.) – "Valdimars saga", p. 54.

saga, which contains an alternate version of the Sigurðr dragon-slaying relocates the fight from a heath into a forest⁷² – this can be well understood by the generic context of the same basic tale belonging here to a text which owes so much in style to knightly romance, being composed, at least in part, of translated material from medieval German literature⁷³. Dragons which are fought by knights are indeed often found in the middle of a forest, sometimes already in battle with a lion, and often try to take both knight and lion to a rocky outcrop or cave where they feed them to their young.

However, these are not perfect indicators of what landscapes to expect: medieval authors were creative with the material and did not statically reproduce the landscapes they found in their inspirations when crafting new stories. Things get especially muddled when we get into the indigenous *riddarasögur*, which tend to mix motifs from several sources in their narratives. A good example of this is *Ectors saga*, where we find three knights fighting dragons, but all of them occurring in different landscapes: the episode of Ingifer, a shapeshifter, involves a cave, mountains, a track left by the dragon (much like Fáfñir), but proximity to a populace (whereas Fáfñir was completely isolated); the dragon-lion episode faced by Trancival takes place in a forest, by the sea; and the episode involving Ector himself and the shapeshifter-dragon Argus is very similar to the Ingifer-episode but involves a forest, a river with a bridge, and a nearby town severely affected by the dragon. We will look at the *Ectors saga* episodes further below, as we consider the effects of dragons on the environment.

The dragon and environments

Integration with the *milieu*

Dragons' relationships with the environment are seldom harmonic, but those do exist. As they are fewer, we will start by reviewing the examples I found of draconic integration. For one, dragons are sometimes inserted into marvellous landscapes⁷⁴

⁷² GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – *Þiðreks saga*. Vol. 1, pp. 234-237.

⁷³ FINCH, R.G. – “Þiðreks saga af Bern”. In PULSIANO, Phillip; WOLF, Kirsten (eds.) - *Medieval Scandinavia – An Encyclopedia*. New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 662-663.

⁷⁴ The precious nature of the landscape may be understood more generally as originating in the medieval notion of marvellous distant lands where precious stones and metals were extremely

which seem to take on the properties of the treasures that dragons are connected to: we find a golden forest in *Blómstrvalla saga*, where even the rocks are made of gold⁷⁵; and one also in *Þorsteins þátr forvitna*⁷⁶. *Yngvars saga víðfjóra* shows us a hill that seems made of gold, because it is completely covered with serpents and treasure⁷⁷. However, no other instance of a dragon being one with the landscape is as blatant as the *landváttr* of east Iceland in *Heimskringla* that was mentioned above. In that episode, not only does the dragon act as a guardian spirit of the land, but it also acts in the protection of the Icelanders. It would be interesting, perhaps, to consider this spirit in accordance with the idea of mythological dragons and serpents connected to the cosmology itself⁷⁸. However, contrary to the dragon-spirit of East Iceland, the Eddic dragons are, at best, neutral, and, at worst, harmful to the mythological representations of a stable natural world. Jǫrmungandr/Miðgarðsormr encircled the ocean and all of Miðgarðr, embodying the idea of domesticated chaos and of temporarily stable unity of the world, but all that crumples away in Ragnarøk, as it unleashes the power of the ocean into the land⁷⁹. Níðhöggr, the underground dragon who gnaws at corpses, is also mentioned in relation to Yggdrasill, living near its roots alongside other serpents and constantly eating away at them⁸⁰. This Eddic notion may have been especially productive

abundant, one such example being the land of Prester John (see one of its first descriptions in the “Prester John Letter”, in BREWER, Keagan (ed./trans.) - *Prester John: the Legend and its Sources*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, pp. 46-96).

⁷⁵ MÖBIUS, Theodorus (ed.) - “Blómstrvalla saga”. In *Riddarasögur*. Lipsiae: Breitkopfius et Haertelius, 1855 [Consulted online, 25th April 2023]. Available on https://heimskringla.no/wiki/Bl%C3%B3mstrvalla_saga.

⁷⁶ ÞÓRHALLUR, Vilmundarson; BJARNI, Vilhálmsson (eds.) - “Þorsteins þátr forvitna”. In *Harðar saga*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2009, p. 436.

⁷⁷ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) - “Yngvars saga”, p. 436.

⁷⁸ See above, regarding Miðgarðsormr.

⁷⁹ Views on what would be an hypothetical original mythological and narrative function of the Miðgarðsormr are not consensual in the scholarship. There are those who argue that the Christian compilations that reached us necessitated moved the Miðgarðr serpent fight from an earlier encounter with Þórr to the eschatological context of Ragnarøk, so as to better fit with the Christian mythological worldview (see TURVILLE-PETRE, E.O.G. - *Myth and Religion of the North – The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975, p. 76); and those who argue that originally the serpent may have had a more peaceful integration into a static cosmos, which became transformed into eschatology by Snorri and his contemporaries (see SØRENSEN, Preben Meulengracht - “Þórr’s Fishing Expedition”. In ACKER, Paul; LARRINGTON, Carolyne [eds.] - *The Poetic Edda - Essays on Old Norse Mythology*. New York: Routledge, 2016. E-book version).

⁸⁰ As related in *Grímnismál* 34 and 35: “Ormar fleiri liggja undir asci Yggdrasils,/ [...] æ scyli/ meids qvisto ma./ Ascir Yggdrasils drýgir erfiði,/ [...] scerðir Niðhöggr neðan.” [“More serpents lie under Yggdrasill’s ash/ [...] for ever will erode the tree’s branches./ Yggdrasill’s ash suffers agony/ more than men know/[...] Nidhogg rends it beneath.”] (see NECKEL, Gustav; KUHN, Hans [eds.] - “Grímnismál”. In *Edda. Die Lieder Des Codex Regius Nebst Verwandten Denkmälern*. Heidelberg: Carl

regarding the conceptualization of great worms, as we will see below that saga dragons often cause damage to trees and other natural environments by their mere presence.

Environmental Hazards

We will now move on to the most impactful cases where dragons make themselves felt. All of them have to do with a notion of non-shared space which seems to accompany dragons through the sources. They are not only greedy for wealth, but also for space: we see this from the most influential, and, by all evidence, earliest, of Norse dragon tales, with Fáfnir, the quintessential Germanic dragon, who isolates himself completely from society with his gold. This is a tendency in dragon episodes: they inhabit wild and fundamentally marginal spaces, opposite to society; when they interact with urban and populated spaces, either those moments are temporary predatory incursions, or more permanent stays lead to devastating consequences for the human inhabitants of the area.

The isolation of dragon landscapes is a feature searched for by shapeshifters who guard their treasures upon transformation, and seems to be a natural feature of those dragons which show no hint of having a human past. Dragons also guarantee that their space continues to be isolated: Fáfnir tells himself of one method he used to ensure others kept away from him: “svá fnýsta ek eitri alla vega frá mér í brott at engi þorði at koma í nánd mér”⁸¹ [so I blew poison in all directions away from me, so that no one dared to come into my proximity]. Whether in the wild or in an urban setting, dragons cause people and animals to move or keep away. I have mentioned before the serpent-city of *Konráðs saga*, about which the rumour goes, to paraphrase, that it was inhabited by people who were entirely driven out by serpents who harmed them⁸². The entire population of the city seems to have been substituted by serpents/dragons who now fill several social roles, posing as guards, entertainers (the juggling *ormar*), and one king, with his *ægishjálmr*⁸³, the helm-of-

Winter/Universitätsverlag, 1962, p. 64; LARRINGTON, Carolyne (trans.) – “Grimnir’s Sayings”. In *The Poetic Edda – Revised Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 53).

⁸¹ FINCH, R.G. (ed./trans.) – *Völsunga saga*, p. 32.

⁸² BJARNI, Vilhjálmsón (ed.) – “Konráðs saga”, p. 344.

⁸³ BJARNI, Vilhjálmsón (ed.) – “Konráðs saga”, p. 325.

terror that Fáfnir is also said to bear in his legend, which also drove others away in fear⁸⁴. This is perhaps taking to the limit the circumstance that seems to be developing with the dragon of Þóra in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, taking up progressively more space and forcing people in the kingdom to reluctantly cohabit with it until Ragnarr steps in:

“Þar kemr, at eigi hefir hann rúm í eskinu, ok liggr nú í hring um eskit utan. Ok þar kemr of síðir, at eigi hefir hann rúm í skemmunni, ok gullit vex undir honum jafnt sem ormrinn sjálfr. Nú liggr hann utan um skemmuna, svá at saman tók höfuð ok sporðr⁸⁵, ok illr gerist hann viðreignar, ok þorir engi maðr at koma til skemmunnar fyrir þessum ormi nema sá einn, er honum færir fæðslu, ok oxa þarf hann í mál. Jarli þykkir mikit mein á þessu”

[“Then the day came when it had no room inside the box, and it lay in a ring around the box. And it happened later that it had no room in the bower – and the gold grew underneath it just as much as the serpent itself. Now it lay outside, around the bower, so that it put its head and tail together, and it became hard to deal with. No one dared to come to the bower because of this serpent, except for the person who brought its food – and it required an ox for every meal. This seemed to the jarl to be a great harm”]⁸⁶

In *Ragnarssona þáttr*, people are said to be afraid of the same dragon’s savagery⁸⁷. Similarly, in the first episode of *Konráðs saga*, it is said that nobody dares to go outside in the open during the autumn-long nights because of the dragon (“fyrir sakir þessa hins grimma dreka mátti engi maður haustlanga nótti úti vera undir berum himni”)⁸⁸.

⁸⁴ “Ek bar ægishjálms yfir öllu fólki” [“I raised a crest of terror above all men”] (see FINCH, R.G. [ed./trans.] – *Völsunga saga*, p. 32).

⁸⁵ Þóra’s dragon in this pose resembles the abovementioned Miðgarðsormr, all-encompassing. A further study of how these later literary dragons might relate to pre-Christian cosmological notions could prove fruitful.

⁸⁶ Edited in GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – “Ragnars saga”, pp. 226-227; translation in WAGGONER, Ben (trans.) – “The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok and his Sons”. In *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*. New Haven: The Troth, 2009, p. 5.

⁸⁷ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – “Þáttr af Ragnars sonum”, p. 289.

⁸⁸ BJARNI, Vilhjálmsson (ed.) – “Konráðs saga”, p. 313.

Not only does the dragon drive others away from the space it chooses to take, but it also alters the physical reality and the dynamics of said spaces in destructive ways. Before moving on to changes in the natural landscape, we will first continue looking at its effects when intruding on human space. In both Tristram sagas, the translated and the original romance, the dragon has a similar effect, killing people and cattle in the city, and in the case of the indigenous saga, causing people not to go outside when it became dark⁸⁹. In *Hrólfs saga*, Þoðvarr-Bjarki the regular attacks by the monster seem to “lay waste to the domains and cattle of the king.” (“eyða ríki ok fé konungsins”)⁹⁰. Two of the dragons in *Ectors saga* have similar effects. Take the dragon Argus, who has installed itself over a bridge that led to an abundant forest where the people of the castle foraged their sustenance. These are the effects of the dragon’s presence:

“Mæ nu eingi fara yfir modunna þuijat ormurinn blæs eitri suo aull iþrd er suort ij nand og drepur þedi menn og fe og er suo s(agt) ath bratt mune eydazt⁹¹ casta(linn).”⁹²

[Now nobody could cross over the river because the serpent blew poison, such that all earth was black in its proximity and killed both men and cattle and it is said that soon the castle will waste away.]

The first dragon of the saga, Ingifer, also has pernicious effects on the nearby city:

“Hefir hann þar uerith xxx æra [...] hann eitrath æ þæ er fellr wm borginna og uerda menn langa uegu vatn ath sękia. Drepur hann þedi menn og fenad.”⁹³

[He has been there for 30 years [...] he has poisoned the river which comes from the city and men must now go a long way to seek water. He kills both men and cattle.]

⁸⁹ JORGENSEN, Peter (ed.); HILL, Joyce M. (trans.) – “Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd”. In KALINKE, Marianne (ed.) – *Norse Romance I – The Tristram Legend*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1999, p. 273.

⁹⁰ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – “Hrólfs saga”, p. 66.

⁹¹ Note the usage of the same verb *að eyða* as in *Hrólfs saga*, which can mean “to make empty”, “to desolate, lay waste” (see “eyða” in *Concise Dictionary*, p. 119).

⁹² LOTH, Agnete (ed.) – “Ectors saga”, pp. 161-162.

⁹³ LOTH, Agnete (ed.) – “Ectors saga”, p. 110.

Furthermore, the cityscape is described as seeming to bear marks of the dragon's prolonged presence: "allir borgar ueggr (voru) suartir og suo iþrd ij nand borginne. enn griot uar orm skridith sem gullz litur uęri áá."⁹⁴ ["All the walls of the city and the earth around it were black, but the stones where the dragon slithered were golden"]. Blackened walls and earth, perhaps because of the dragon's poisonous emanations, while it leaves a golden track wherever it slithers.

Going from Kathryn Hume's typology for dragon fights⁹⁵, we can consider these fights to have a very marked social impact. Not only the hero (or a maiden chained to a rock, to use Hume's example) is at stake, but whole societies are being heavily damaged by the dragon. The vanquishing of the beast gains impact in the narrative since it is not only a passing depredation but a regular one that can even have terminal results for the communities. Speaking on the occasion about the dragon fight of *Beowulf*, Christine Rauer proposes that when presented within a social context, dragon fights may betray some hagiographical influence in their origin, even Scandinavian ones, giving precisely, among others, the examples of the Tristram sagas⁹⁶. I believe there is some merit to this theory, and I feel it is reinforced when we observe the poisonousness of dragons in rivers. Aside from the above-cited example of Ingifer in *Ectors saga*, the third dragon, Argus, also poisons the river, even after death: "Enn er ormurin uar daudur drogu menn hertugans hann af steinnboganum og brendu hann aa bali. enn steyptu öskunne ij moduna."⁹⁷ ["and when the serpent was dead, the duke's men dragged him [dragon] from the bridge and burned him on the bank, and cast the ashes into the river"]. Similarly, the dragon (Siggeus) of *Yngvars saga* is pestilential after being killed, its stench killing six men who looked closely at its corpse, and affecting many others, so that they have to steer

⁹⁴ LOTH, Agnete (ed.) - "Ectors saga", p. 112.

⁹⁵ "Because the fight arises in a social context, much more rides on the outcome. In the shorthand of symbols, a maiden chained to a nearby rock adds significance to a dragon fight because her life is in the balance, too. Most Icelandic giant and dragon stories fail to make anything of this social potential." See HUME, Kathryn - "From Saga to Romance, the Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature". *Studies in Philology* 77 / 1 (1980), p. 5.

⁹⁶ RAUER, Christine - *Beowulf and the dragon - Parallels and analogues*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000, p. 132.

⁹⁷ LOTH, Agnete (ed.) - "Ectors saga", p. 164.

away from it quickly⁹⁸. It is also significant that in *Valdimars saga*, after the poison-spewing shapeshifting queen Lúpa is defeated, one of the actions taken to return to normalcy is to clear the plains of the city of poison (“uoro *hreinsadjr allir vellir af eitri”) ⁹⁹. This motif of the pestilential dragon has antecedents in early hagiographical tradition¹⁰⁰ and even classical antiquity¹⁰¹.

⁹⁸ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) – “Yngvars saga”, p. 441.

⁹⁹ LOTH, Agnete (ed.) – “Valdimars saga”, p. 76.

¹⁰⁰ To provide two parallels of many that exist, see: *Acts of Silvester B* (circa 500 AD), where “There was a most monstrous dragon in the Tarpeian rock, on which the Capitol is located. [...] This dragon suddenly and unexpectedly came up and, although it did not come out of this hole, nonetheless it corrupted the air around about with its breath. As a result of this came the death of people and, in great measure, mourning for the death of children.” (see OGDEN, Daniel [trans.] – “Acts of Silvester B”. In *Dragons, Serpents and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds – A Sourcebook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 221); and Sozomen’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* (circa 440s AD), about Saint Donatus and the dragon he vanquishes: “And indeed, as I was told, the natives dragged it off to the nearby plain with eight yoke-pair of oxen and burned it, so that it would not befoul the air when it rotted and render it pestilential. (in SOZOMEN – “Historia Ecclesiastica”. In *Dragons, Serpents and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds – A Sourcebook*. Trans. Daniel Ogden. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 231).

¹⁰¹ See the dragon of the river Bagrada faced by a Roman legion, as related by Valerius Maximus (c. 13-37 AD) in his *Facta et dicta memorabilia* (VALERIUS MAXIMUS – “*Facta et dicta memorabilia*”. In *Dragons, Serpents and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds – A Sourcebook*. Trans. Daniel Ogden. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 141-142). The classical world used the terms *draco* (Latin) and *drakōn* (Ancient Greek) – the etymological origins of the English word “dragon” and, indeed, ON *dreki* – with considerable semantic amplitude, as a type of serpent (Latin *serpens*, Greek *ophis*), both to “designate the large snakes of the real world” and “snakes of supernatural size and nature, often compounded with human or other animal forms, and often credited with fire-breathing or other varieties of fieriness” (see OGDEN, Daniel – *Drakōn – Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 2). Etymologically, the Greek origin of the word seems connected to the verb form “*derkōmai*”, which signifies to gaze fixedly—one possible explanation for their name can perhaps be found in the famously unrelenting stare of real-world snakes (see BILE, Monique – “Etymologies”. In PRIVAT, Jean-Marie (ed.) – *Dans la Gueule du Dragon – Histoire, Ethnologie, Littérature*. Sagnerremines, Editions Pierrons, 2000, p. 124), echoed in one of the mythical-narrative functions of the Classical dragon as a watcher/guardian of sacred spaces, such as the Hesperides’ Ladon (see HESIOD – *Teogony*; and APOLLADORUS, *Bibliotheca*. In *Dragons, Serpents and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds – A Sourcebook*. Trans. Daniel Ogden. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 14; 58). The term is especially used to describe enormous snakes, as Bile states “On peut [...] tenter de cerner le parcours sémantique de *drakōn*. – *Drakōn* est le seul substantif, en poésie, qui désigne un serpent d’un type particulier, énorme, malfaisant ou non” (see Bile, Monique – “Etymologies”, p. 127. It is appended, furthermore, to a series of hybrid creatures which possessed any amount of anguiform features, such as the Chimaera with its tail (see MOURÃO, Cátia - *Autem non sunt rerum natura*, pp. 216-223; cf. OGDEN, Daniel, *Drakōn*, pp. 68-115, for a comprehensive list of composite *drakontes*). The medieval Christian dragon is, in its multiple manifestations a composite being of varied influences – one should rather speak of “medieval dragons” instead of a uniform creature – emerging from the Classical dragons of both mythical and encyclopaedical nature, while also implementing features from Biblical and vernacular traditions, such as the narrative tradition being explored here (which reaches us, evidently, in a Christianized form and already carrying heavy influences from Christian European culture). The most influential dragon of the New Testament for the Middle Ages, found in the Revelations 12, while owing much to the Old Testament Leviathan (see KIESSLING, Nicolas K. - “Antecedents of the Medieval Dragon in Sacred History”. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 / 2 [1970], pp. 167-177), is a *drakōn*, and that word carries with it assumptions and motifs built upon the Classical draconic tradition (see ARNOLD, Martin – *The Dragon – Fear and Power*. London: Reaktion,

Not only through poison does the dragon mark the natural landscape. Due to the enormous forces at play, both the dragon's and its enemies', several sagas mention trees being damaged during dragon fights¹⁰² – it would be tempting to find here perhaps a faint echo of the function that Níðhöggr and the serpents seem to perform by the ash Yggðrasill, but similarities end at the function (being harmful to trees), not extending to the form – Níðhöggr and his serpent companions are gnawing at Yggdrasill, but in the sagas we never see dragons gnawing trees. We can also count the earthquakes and tremors provoked by the dragons' movements and death struggles among the ways in which dragons affect the landscape, Fáfñir is a prime example¹⁰³, and so is Argus: “uad nu suo mikil gnyr ath fiðrbrotum ormsinns ath allr skogur og fiðllinn skulfu sem æ þręde leki.”¹⁰⁴ [“there were so great clashes from the death-struggles of the dragon that all the forest and the mountain shook as if they were swinging from a thread”]. Dragons shape the earth, as when one flies so close to the ground in *Þiðreks saga* that his claws act almost as a plough (“Hann flýgr nálíga með jörðu sjálfri, ok hvervitna sem klær hans taka jörðina, þá var sem með inu hvassasta járne væri höggvit” [He flies close to the earth itself, and wherever his claws touch the earth, it was as if it were struck with the sharpest iron])¹⁰⁵; or another leaves a huge track as vestige of its passage: “ein mikil slóð. Þessa hafði farit einn dreki”¹⁰⁶ [“A great track. This had been trodden by a dragon”].

The earthquakes and destruction provoked by the dragon's sheer movement and death-struggles all seem to take us back to a mythological scale, where the whole environment can be altered by gigantic creatures of enormous power, although in

2018, pp. 56-63; cf. BEAUDE, Pierre-Marie - “Les dragons dans la Bible”. In PRIVAT, Jean-Marie (ed.) - *Dans la Gueule du Dragon*. pp. 135-143). For a study of the connection between classical narratives and hagiographical dragonslaying, see the chapters “The Birth of the Christian Dragon” in OGDEN, Daniel - *Drakōn*, pp. 383-426. See also, for a detailed exploration of the medieval dragon's relationship to the several draconic traditions preceding it, already with an eye to Norse comparisons, the chapter “O dragão na cultura europeia medieval - origens antigas e desenvolvimentos” in ANDRADE, Miguel - “O Dragão no Imaginário Nórdico Medieval”, pp. 86-135.

¹⁰² By the dragon, see BJARNI Vilhjálmsón (ed.) - “Flóres saga”, p. 100; by lions, see LOTH, Agnete (ed.) - “Ectors saga”, p. 123, and LOTH, Agnete (ed.) - “Sigurðar saga þögla”. In *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*. Vol. 2. Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963, pp. 138-139; by Sigurðr the Völsung and king Þiðrekr, GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) - *Þiðreks saga*. Vol. 1, pp. 235-236; Vol. 2, p. 563.

¹⁰³ FINCH, R.G. (ed./trans.) - *Völsunga saga*, p. 28-31.

¹⁰⁴ LOTH, Agnete (ed.) - “Ectors saga”, p. 162-163.

¹⁰⁵ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) - *Þiðreks saga*, vol.1, p. 156.

¹⁰⁶ GUÐNI, Jónsson (ed.) - *Þiðreks saga*, vol. 2, p. 563.

the Eddas, differently from most sagas, we find dragons embedded in the structure of the cosmos itself. No worse movement can be imagined than that of Miðgarðsormr: first¹⁰⁷ as a warning, when Þórr manages to slightly lift it off the ground (believing it to be a mere grey cat, as one of the three deceptive challenges imposed on the god by the giant Útgarða-Loki), the effect is that “hræddusk allir”¹⁰⁸ [“all were terrified”] – such was the danger of the sea-serpent loosening its grip on the world; secondly, when the full effect of the former threat is unleashed, as Miðgarðsormr “snýsk [...] í jötunmóð ok sækir upp á landit”¹⁰⁹ (“turns itself in a giant’s rage and advances into the land”), letting loose the waters of the ocean upon Miðgarðr as part of the destruction of Ragnarøk, when the world as both god- and humankind knew it would cease to be. As part of that event, the Miðgarðsormr fights and is defeated by Þórr, simultaneously killing the god with its poison. Saga dragons are not usually integrated into the landscape in a similar, but the notion seems to have remained, even in Christian times, that a dragon on the move is rather impactful, and thus it wreaks havoc and shapes the environment in multiple ways as it goes about fighting heroes, as dragons are wont to do.

Concluding remarks

The environments of dragon episodes tend to adhere to certain predictable distributions along genre and narrative types, similarly to how the terminology of dragon works (*ormr* tending to characterize wingless Fáfnir-like serpents and *dreki* almost always applied to winged beasts defeated by knights) alongside certain types of stories; but neither one nor the other are hard-and-fast rules that we can take with us as guaranteed expectations into any text. As we know that treasures and shapeshifters are to be expected when ON dragons are at stake, I hope to have shed some light into the most important elements of dragonscapes as well: one can count on rocky terrain, water, and forests to be present in different combinations; and one can count on a dragon to be a nuisance to others, wherever it may be, even to the very place where it lies.

¹⁰⁷ First in the chronology of events related to the divine beings in the mythology, as the expedition to Útgarða-Loki happens before Ragnarøk.

¹⁰⁸ SNORRI, Sturluson – *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁹ SNORRI, Sturluson – *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, p. 50.

Where be dragons? Draconic environments in the Old Norse-Icelandic sagas • Miguel Andrade

Sagas - themes/ Sagas of Icelanders (right below)	Composition Range	ON Dragon Vocabulary	Sea (on/by)	River/Lake	Island	Waterfall	Cave	"Lair"	Mountain/Hill	Canyon/Chasm	Cliffs/Rocks	Valley	Heath	Forest	Track	Bridge	Buildings	Mound/Grave	Outside Populated Area	No Info	
<i>Brennu-Njáls saga</i> - Þorkell hákr famously fought a dragon	c. 1270s-90s	flugdreki																		X	
<i>Bjarnar saga hítædakappa</i> - dragon attacks ship	Before 1230	flugdreki	On																		
<i>Gull-Þóris saga</i> - Valr and sons turn into dragons	1300-50	flugdrekar	By	River		X	X		Fjall		X										
<i>Gull-Þóris saga</i> - Gull-Þórir himself turns into dragon		dreki	By			X			Fjall												
Kings' sagas (and adjacent)																					
<i>Haralds saga harðráða</i> (Mork) - shapeshifting seducer	c. 1275	ormr	On					X			X										
<i>Haralds saga harðráða</i> (Mork) - dungeon dragon		eitormr/ormr		River			Cave-like dungeon										X				
<i>Jámsvíkinga saga</i> - shapeshifting enemy	c. 1200	ormr	On																		
<i>Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar</i> (Hkr) - shapeshifting scout	1220s/1230s	dreki	By									In a fjord									
<i>Sogubrot af fornkonungum</i> - Hrærek's dream	late 13th c.	flugdreki												Plain by forest							
<i>Sogubrot af fornkonungum</i> - dream vision of dragon		flugdreki/ormr/Miðgarðsormr	On																		
<i>Þórsteins þáttur forvitna</i> - dragon guards golden forest-islet	1380s-90s	ormr		Uncertain	X			X						Golden							
Legendary sagas																					
<i>Bösa saga ok Herráuds</i> - shapeshifting enemy	Before 1350	flugdreki	On																		
<i>Bösa saga ok Herráuds</i> - Þóra's dragon occupies bower		yrmlingr/ormr															X				
<i>Eiríks saga víðforla</i> - dragon's mouth as entry to Paradise	c. 1300	höggormum ok flugdrekm / dreki		River												X					
<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i> - shapeshifting enemy	early 14th c.	flugdreki/orm	By															X (not built)	X		
<i>Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar</i> - shapeshifting enemy	1350-...	flugdreki/dreki																	0		
<i>Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar</i> - Valr and sons turn into dragons		flugdrekar	By	River		X	X				X										
<i>Hrólfs saga kraka</i> - dragon raids population	14th c.	ekki dýr/mesta tröll											X?						X		
<i>Ketils saga hængs</i> - dragon encounter in islands	13th c.	dreki/ormr/fisk/övatir			X				Berg										X (not very far)		
<i>Normagests þáttur - Sigurðr vs Fáfnir</i> (shapeshifter)	early 14th c.	ormr											X								
<i>Orvar-Odds saga</i> (E) - dragon kidnaps hero to nest	late. 13th/early 14th c.	flugdreki / dreki								X	X			X							
<i>Ragnars saga loðbrókar</i> - Þóra's dragon occupies bower	early 13th c.	lyngorm / ormr															X				
<i>Ragnarsonna þáttur</i> - Þóra's dragon occupies bower		yrmlingr/ormr															X				
<i>Sprla saga sterka</i> - shapeshifting enemy	14/15th c.???	dreki																	X		
<i>Völsunga Saga</i> - Sigurðr vs Fáfnir (shapeshifter)	c. 1260-1270	ormr/lyngormr/dreki		Unclear				X					X		X		lair is a building		Far from all		
<i>Yngvars saga víðforla</i> - Jakúlus guards treasure (2x, same setting)	end of 12th c.	yrmlingr/ormr		River				X (hill)	Hill					X							
<i>Yngvars saga víðforla</i> - Dragon guards Siggeus' grave/treasure		dreki		River spring				X							X			X			
Translated chivalric sagas																					
<i>Erex saga Artuskappa</i> - dragon kidnaps knight in jaws	1217-1263	flugdreki/dreki												X							
<i>Ivens saga</i> - dragon/lion	1217-1263	ormr										X		X							
<i>Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar</i> - dragon raids population	1226	dreki	By						Berg			X		X			X		In		
<i>Trjúmannanna saga</i> - dragon guards Golden Fleece	early 13th c.	dreki	By								Headland										
<i>Þidreks saga</i> - Fasold rescues Sintram from dragon's jaws	late 12th c.-1250/1	flugdreki/dreki												Just outside →							
<i>Þidreks saga</i> - Sigurðr vs Reginn (shapeshifter)		ormr / mikill limormr												X							
<i>Þidreks saga</i> - Queen Ostasia, shapeshifter enemy		flugdrekar															X				
<i>Þidreks saga</i> - dragon kidnaps King Hermod to nest		dreki/ormr					X		Berg			X		X							
<i>Þidreks saga</i> - dragon kidnaps Þidrekr to nest+lion		dreki/ormr/ungar [drekar]/inn gamli dreki					X	X	Berg			X		X	X						
Indigenous chivalric sagas																					
<i>Bærings saga</i> - dream vision of dragon	early 14th c.	dreki		River (dream)																	
<i>Bærings saga</i> - shapeshifter enemy		ormr/dreki	On																	X	
<i>Blómstrvalla saga</i> - dragon kidnaps knight to nest	before 1500	dreki					X				X			Golden							
<i>Dinus saga dramblátá</i> - fortress disaster	14th c.	flugdreki																X			
<i>Dinus saga dramblátá</i> - wizard illusion		flugdreki							Fjall		X										
<i>Ectors saga</i> - Fenacius vs Ingifer (shapeshifter)	late 14th-early 15th c.	ormr					X		Fjall						X					X	
<i>Ectors saga</i> - Trancival, the lion and the dragon		dreki	By											X							
<i>Ectors saga</i> - Ector vs Argus (shapeshifter)		ormr		River										X		X				X	
<i>Flóres saga konungs</i> - Sintram's tale	late 14th c.	flugdreki/dreki																			
<i>Flóres saga konungs</i> - Únu's tale		flugdreki/dreki		Lake	X		X				X			X						X	
<i>Konráðs saga keisarasonar</i> - dragon raids city+lion	early 14th c.	skriðorma, flugdreki/flugdreki							Fjall/skríb											X	
<i>Konráðs saga keisarasonar</i> - city of dragons/serpents		ormr														X	X				
<i>Siggarðs saga frækna</i> - lake dragon	1350-75	ormr/dreki		Lake				jarðhús	Hill with window												
<i>Sigurðar saga þögla</i> - dragon/lion fight	14th c.	dreki/ungar						X	Fjall		X	X		X							
<i>Tristrams saga og Ísöddar</i> - dragon raids population	14th c.	dreki		Unclear			X		Fjall	X	X			X							
<i>Valdimars saga</i> - Queen Lúpa, shapeshifter enemy	15th c.	flugdreki				X						Valleys and plains					X			X	
<i>Viktors saga ok Blávus</i> - shapeshifter enemy	1350-1400	flugdreki																			
<i>Vilhjálm saga sjóds</i> - lion/dragon	late 14th - early 15th c.	flugdreki						X	Stree					X							
<i>Vilhjálm saga sjóds</i> - lake dragon		ormr		Lake										X							
Total: 4+7+16+9+19 = 55 dragon "episodes"																					
			14 (6 on 8 by)	14 (8+3+3)	4	3	9	9	14	2	9	5	3	17	4	3	10	2	12	2	
			25.45%	25.45%	7.27%	5.45	16.36	16.36	25.45	3.64	16.36	9.09%	5.45	30.90	7.27	5.45%	18.18%	3.67	21.82%	3.64	

Table 1 – Distribution of landscape features across a selection of Old Norse-Icelandic saga

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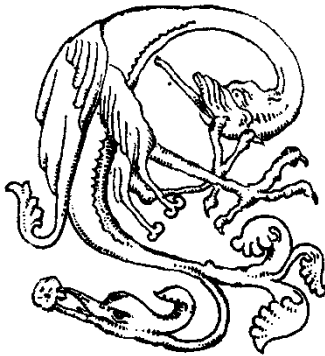
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