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The Devil's in the Detail:

Diabolical names in the Icelandic place-name record

1 Introduction

Toponyms have long been recognised as a rich and important source for the history of religious belief and practice in societies around the world. Together with the study of written sources and results from archaeological excavations, theophoric names (place-names with religious origins or associations) can shed light on questions such as which deities were worshipped in past times, and where religious ritual or practice took place. More broadly, these place-names bear witness to the part played by religious ideologies or spiritual beliefs in the formation of social and cultural identity, helping us to understand the mental worlds of past communities (see e.g. Reeves and Otterstrom 2018:84). As Kay Muhr writes in the introduction to her chapter on place-names and religion in *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*, “Religion is a human construct of pattern and structure, a way of understanding the world and the place of human beings in it” (Muhr 2016:585): place-names with religious connotations are part of this pattern and structure.

The relationship between place-names and religion (in particular, pre-Christian religion) in Scandinavia has been the concern of toponymists and historians for over a century. This article takes a rather dif-

ferent approach, however, drawing inspiration on the one hand from socio-toponomastic theory and research, and on the other, by focusing on Icelandic place-names that incorporate or invoke the devil or demons in some way – a corpus that has not been examined analytically in any comprehensive way.¹ The general lack of interest hitherto in the place-names under consideration here might be explained by them being viewed as more peripheral to academic understandings of ideological and practical aspects of religion in past times and societies. Insights and advances gained from the still-emerging field of socio-toponomastics, however, make the corpus an interesting prospect and case-study with which to explore what these names might communicate about Icelandic attitudes towards the devil and demons in an everyday landscape context, rather than in more formal religious frameworks. In addition to this, the article hopes to illustrate in a practical sense how the digitisation of the Icelandic place-name archive and the development of the *nafnið.is* database have laid the foundations for new research on Icelandic place-names in the 21st century.

In section 2, a brief outline of research on the subject of Scandinavian and Icelandic theophoric place-names will be presented by way of an introduction to the topic. Following this, in section 3, the methodology for identifying and surveying the corpus of Icelandic toponyms under investigation will be outlined. In section 4, results from the survey itself will be presented, organised according to thematic categories that emerged as the data were examined. Discussion of these results follows in Section 5, along with a final summary and conclusion in section 6.

2 Background to the present study

2.1 Place-name research and pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia and Iceland

Norway, Denmark and Sweden have a long tradition of place-name research with a focus on religion (especially pagan religion). Place-

¹ This article has its origins in a conference paper, “Heilagatún og önnur helg og vanhelg örnefni”, delivered in August 2022 at the conference *Heilagir menn og helgidómar á Norðurlöndum á miðöldum: Málþing til heiðurs Margaret Cormack 70*, University of Iceland. Thank you to those who engaged with the topic then, and also to the peer-reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

names have been used to shed light on which gods were worshipped, as well as on the nature of religious or cultic sites themselves: whether, for example, place-names incorporating terms such as *hof*, *hörgur* or *lundur* are sacral names and indicate the presence of cultic activity. It is not necessary, given the aims of this article as stated above, to provide a detailed overview of the extensive scholarship on the subject: scholars within the field such as Inge Særheim (2012) and Stefan Brink (2014) have published useful surveys tracing phases in methodologies and results. The 21st century has seen a renewal of interest in theophoric names with a particular emphasis on wider landscape contexts and regional variation, and on extending critical understandings of Viking-Age and early medieval religious and social practices (see e.g. Brink 2001, Elmevik 2007, Heide 2014, Sundqvist 2009, Vikstrand 2001 and 2016, and most recently and with reference to Sami sacral place-names in Scandinavia, Nyman 2023). Usefully for the present context, Heide (2014) urges the inclusion of non-farm names as data: “Although the non-farm names in Norway are usually recorded very late, a pattern in a large corpus of such names can be relatively robust and may be anchored in ancient times through individual, typologically datable names as well as supported by etymology, archaeological monuments, medieval texts and other independent material. The results of this study also suggest that more attention should be paid to possible naming patterns revealed in a wider landscape context than is normally done” (2014:44).

In Iceland, several scholars have contributed to efforts to trace the establishment and adaption of pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices on the newly settled island from the late 9th century until the adoption of Christianity in the year 1000 C.E. One prominent research theme has been concerned with explaining the apparent lack of attestations of Óðinn-names in Iceland (see e.g. Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1978); another has debated whether or not place-names with the elements *hof* or *hörgur* can be interpreted as evidence for the location of temples or ritual sites (see e.g. Orri Vésteinsson 2007, Sundqvist 2009, Heide 2025). An important survey on theophoric names and belief from pre-Christian times was published by Svavar Sigmundsson in 1992 and republished in 2009. Svavar surveyed and evaluated previous work by Ólafur Lárusson (1942), Ólafur Briem (1945, 1985) and Þórhallur Vilmundarson (1980, 1983), amongst others, adding his conclusions on whether Icelandic place-names that appear to incorporate names of gods such as Þór, Freyr, Njörður and others can be

taken as evidence for their worship, and the extent to which Christian churches were built on older sites of pre-Christian worship. The most recent contributions to these debates have been made by Sigurður R. Helgason (2017, 2023, 2024), and Sigurður R. Helgason with Marteinn Helgi Sigurðsson (2014) who, in a series of articles, argue that theophoric place-names are more widespread in the Icelandic landscape than is generally assumed, and that they can be identified in names that certain natural features of the landscape bear, or in toponyms that incorporate aliases for e.g. the god Óðinn.

2.2 Place-name research and Christianity in Iceland

Place-names have been looked to as an equally important source of evidence for the history of the Christian Church in Iceland. Following the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in the early eleventh century, place-names came into being that were associated with the new religion in a number of ways. These names provide insights into the administrative workings of the Catholic Church and, from the mid-sixteenth century, the Lutheran Church. The Church was one of the major landowners in Iceland both pre- and post-reformation, and religious institutions claimed tithe duties and other duties from a wide network of property holdings: the evidence of place-names has been marshalled to shed light on the history of these networks, for example (see e.g. Árni Daníel Júlíusson et al. 2020). On a more local level, place-names can be evidence for activities associated with Christian worship. Routes used by priests or those travelling to attend church services are hinted at in place-names, as is the possible historical existence of chapels and Christian burial sites not otherwise recorded (see e.g. Svavar Sigmundsson 2002, Jónína Hafsteinsdóttir 2002, Cormack 2010, Sigríður Sigurðardóttir 2014).

Place-names have also been used to shed light on cults of saints in pre-Reformation Iceland. Most recently, Margaret Cormack (2020) and Gylfi Helgason (2020) independently published studies on the toponym *Gvendarbrunnur*: this name is found all around Iceland attached to natural springs that Catholic Bishop Guðmundur inn góði Arason (1161–1237) is said to have blessed. The *Gvendarbrunnur*-names might be seen as a kind of grass-roots manifestation of people's informal engagement with religion or religious figures, or as an aspect of lived religion: the widely attested name speaks to people's more everyday encounters with religion or religious figures rather

than springing directly from the formal influence or administrative structures of the Church. Cormack's and Gylfi Helgason's research on *Goendarbrunnur*-names – together with a study by Helgi Þorláksson (2021) on place-names associated with saints Catherine and Cecilia in western Iceland – are a first step towards a more integrated approach to (micro)toponymic evidence for religious belief and practice that has been rather lacking in Iceland hitherto.

The studies mentioned above were all completed before the formal opening of the *nafnið.is* database and website: Helgi Þorláksson, for one, notes the difficulties he encountered in compiling his corpus of names for research at a time when only one-sixth of the collection had been digitised and made available via the *sarpur.is* website (2021:303, fn.93).

3 Aims and methodology

3.1 The aims of this study

There is great potential for new toponymic research into hitherto lesser studied (and previously inaccessible) Icelandic place-names: the establishment of the *nafnið.is* database should play a significant role in enabling this (and other) research in the future. This new direction, with a focus on a larger corpus on one hand and on minor Icelandic place-names on the other, is the starting point for the present study. The principal aim is to survey and analyse toponyms in the Icelandic place-name record that incorporate or seem to reference the Christian devil, or other demons. The working hypothesis is that place-names were one informal or everyday context in which religious ideologies and beliefs were manifested or communicated, as attached to specific natural or manmade features in the local environment. This idea builds on socio-toponomastic perspectives emphasising how names are social constructs that “connote a mental cluster of intimate knowledge, expressions, and impressions” and that “function as social signals belonging to a group” (Cacciafoco and Cavallaro 2023:221).

As already noted, a second aim is to demonstrate how new tools such as *nafnið.is*, the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies' new database and website, can be used to identify datasets that make it possible to answer research questions in a more efficient and comprehensive way than was previously the case. Building and develop-

ing a digital infrastructure to enable new research was a crucial part of the original grant application submitted to the Icelandic Research Council (Rannís) and funded in 2018; the *nafnið.is* database and on-line portal was opened in December 2020. It provides open access to all officially released documents in the Icelandic place-name archive. This archive is currently preserved at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, having passed into the Institute's keeping when it merged with the Place-Name Institute of Iceland (Örnefnastofnun Íslands) in 2006.

Some 15,000 documents pertaining to almost every farm in Iceland (as well as to other areas such as common grazing areas and fishing grounds) form the core of the archive. The 500,000 or so toponyms that are recorded in these documents were extracted during the process of developing the database using OCR-technology (see further Lethbridge 2023). These documents are far from being simple lists of names. Unusually in comparison to place-name archives and materials elsewhere in Scandinavia, the Icelandic documents also contain a great deal of descriptive information that helps to contextualise the place-names topographically, as well as culturally and socially. Notes about the origins (or believed origins) of individual names are sometimes included, along with local history and folklore.

3.2 Methodology

The first stage of this research involved assembling the corpus for analysis. Synonyms in Icelandic for the devil were taken from a list published online by Guðrún Kvaran (2004). These devil-names were (in alphabetical order):

andskoti, ankoti, ansakornið, ansi, antoti, asskoli, asskoti, assvíti, árakornið, ári, bölvættur, defill, défsi, deli, défsi, déll, déskoti, dífill, djangi, djanki, djöfsi, djöfull, drýsildjöfull, drýsill, sá eineygði, sá fetótti, fjandakornið, fjári, flugnahöfðingi, freistarinn, Gamli í Niðurkoti, sá gamli, sá gráskjótti, grefill, illdéfli, sá hrosshæfði, jónskoti, sá kolbíldótti, kolbíldur, kölski, ljótikallinn, myrkrahöfðingi, sá í neðra, ólukki, óvinur, paufi, paur, pauri, pokur, rækall, rækarl, Satan, vomur, sá vondi, skolli, skrambi, skratti, skufsi, tremill, þremill.

Other related names were also identified (e.g. *púki*, a name for an evil spirit, if not for the devil himself, *Kollus/Köllus*, and related concepts

such as Hell). For the purposes of comparison, names with positive religious connotations (e.g. those that referenced Heaven/*himnaríki*, Paradise/*paradís* etc) were also identified. Each name (or name variant) was put into *nafnið.is* and the search returns were examined. The place-name records were the primary source for information in this study, but other supplementary sources of data online were also consulted, including the toponymical database maintained by National Science Institute of Iceland (LÍ), and *Ísmús* (hosted by the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies).

Nafnið.is returned results for compound place-names in which *ári*, *djöfsi*, *djöfull*, *grefill*, *paufi*, *pauri*, *púki*, *satan*, *skolli* and *skratti* modified a range of generic elements. Occasionally, too, a devil-term also occurred as a non-inflected noun. For *ári*, *djöfsi*, *grefill*, *paufi*, *pauri*, *púki*, *satan* and *skratti* only a handful of examples came to light; in the cases of *djöfull* and *skolli*, though, the examples uncovered were much more numerous. While the *Djöfla*- names all hinted unproblematically at some association between the place or landscape feature and devils or demons (even if no outright explanation was present in the source), in the case of the *skolli*-names, the situation was often ambiguous. Not least, this was because *skolli* can also be used of a fox, one of Iceland's few native mammals. *Skolli* also occurs in the compound noun *skolla-leikur*, the game known in English as 'blindman's bluff', in which the *skolli* is the blindfolded person: some place-names with *Skolla*- seem to be associated with this game. Ambiguity was also present in place-names incorporating the weak masculine noun *ári*, indistinguishable in search results in the first instance from the genitive plural form of the feminine noun *ár* ('oar').

In total, several hundreds of examples were returned. All search results had to be examined individually to ascertain which semantic meaning was more likely, and sometimes it was not possible to determine the primary meaning. Certain patterns emerged while each individual search result was examined and on the basis of these patterns, thematic categories were identified into which the names were loosely grouped.

The thematic categories identified were:

- (i) Devilish name used of a place or landscape feature that was hazardous in some way;
- (ii) Devilish name used of a place or landscape feature that was hard to traverse (sub-categories are based

- on the type of landscape feature: coastal features; boggy features; features that are high up or steep);
- (iii) Devilish name used of a place that was hard to mow;
 - (iv) Devilish name used of a place where a landscape feature might invoke fear or awe;
 - (v) Devilish name used of a place where an event involving the devil or demons occurred, or an encounter with a ghost was said to have happened.

These thematic categories were not always exclusive. The examples listed in section 4 below do not include all occurrences of each name but were selected for illustrative purposes.

4 Search results and data

4.1 Devilish name used of a place or landscape feature that was hazardous in some way

All over Iceland, landscape features that posed a danger to people or livestock have negative names attached to them, indicating the need for caution. *Illagil* is a common and illustrative example. Some of the places and place-names associated with the devil or demons in the corpus under examination fall into this large category and serve a function of warning people to go carefully. In some instances, devilish names are attached to features or patches of land that must not be disturbed for some specific reason: if the spot is disturbed, negative consequences will ensue. This is a primary characteristic of so-called *álagablettir*: one theory behind the existence of *álagablettir* on farms, and injunctions not to disturb demarcated areas, is that the earth was polluted or dangerous for some reason, possibly on account of diseased livestock that was buried there (see further Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson 2019, 2021). Place-names referencing the devil in the corpus under analysis (where the sources provided contextual information suggesting a reason for the name that relate to this theme) included:

- *Áragjóta* (Stapadalur, Auðkúluhreppur, Vestur-Ísafjarðarsýsla), part of a coastal cliff section where there was often rockfall dangerous to fishermen in small boats. At one point, the rocks were destroyed by dynamite to make access easier. A second example of the name is recorded not far from the first, at Höfn (Þingeyrarhreppur, Vestur-Ísafjarðarsýsla): this feature was known by the name *Áragjóta* and *Djöflagjóta* interchangeably.
- *Djöflalækur* (Grasgeiri, Presthólahreppur, Norður-Þingeyjarsýsla), a stream said to be dangerous with unstable banks on account of erosion.
- *Púkabarð* (Akureyjar, Helgafellssveit, Snæfellsnessýsla) was located next to an *álagaþleitur* called *Hanskhóll* that was not to be disturbed.
- *Púkapyttur* (Efri-Holtatorfa, Vestur-Eyjafjallahreppur, Rangárvallasýsla), a deep pit whose edges were thick with a kind of sedge (*blástör*): the pit may have posed a danger to livestock. Another *Púkapyttur* was at Hallgeirsey (also Vestur-Eyjafjallahreppur): this was a deep pool, into which a man and his horse had once been seen sinking.
- *Púkatóft* (Voðmúlastaðahverfi, Austur-Landeyjahreppur, Rangárvallasýsla), the remains of an old cowshed in close proximity to the farmhouse: it was not to be disturbed, and its name may have been intended to warn people away.
- *Skolladý* (Dyngjandi, Auðkúluhreppur, Vestur-Ísafjarðarsýsla), a boggy spot close to the farm-mound at Dyngjandi believed to be thus named to frighten away children from it. Another example of the same name was found at Kollsvík (Rauðasandshreppur, Vestur-Barðastrandarsýsla): here, puppies and kittens were drowned and perhaps the name functioned in a similar way, to keep children away. At Grjóteyri and Flekkudalur (Kjósarhreppur, Kjósarsýsla), *Skollapyttur* was next to two other ditches in the same spot, *Hundapyttur* and *Hestabani*, whose names suggest death whether deliberate or accidental.
- *Skollatóft* (Ytri-Hóll, Hálshreppur, Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla), a spot (prior to levelling) where sheep were often found dead from disease not thought to be entirely natural.
- *Skollapýfi* (Garður, Hálshreppur, Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla), a cluster of hummocks where many sheep died after getting stuck on their backs.
- *Skrattapyttur* (Hjallahverfi, Ölfushreppur, Árnessýsla), a pit which (along with another one, *Kerlingarpyttur*), may have been a dangerous landscape feature to people. Although the devil is not mentioned explicitly other than via the place-name itself, an an-

ecdote recorded in the place-name record for Hjallahverfi relates how at some point, people working at hay-making disappeared into the pit and were regurgitated out of the earth a few days later at a spot called *Hraunsskeið*.

- *Skollaskriða* (Kolbjarnarstaðir, Hrófsbergshreppur, Strandasýsla), was the site of a small landslide, presumably a hazardous spot (though the name might alternatively indicate the presence of foxes).
- *Skolli* (Kálfafell, Borgarhafnarhreppur, Austur-Skaftafellssýsla), a stream that ran from *Skollatorfukambar* peak when it rained, possibly with hazardous consequences (though plausibly also referring to foxes).

4.2 Devilish name used of a place or landscape feature that was hard to traverse

Landscape features mentioned in place-name records are sometimes expressly described as being hard to traverse: areas along the coastline, bogs, and steep, rocky slopes all presented challenges (and in some cases, danger) with regard to movement whether by humans or animals. Distance might also be a reason to give a landscape feature a negative name. Some of the names in this category might equally fit in category 4.1 above, since they communicate the possibility of physical danger. Examples included:

Coastal features:

- *Djöflabás* (Steinanes, Suðurfjarðahreppur, Vestur-Barðastrandarsýsla), a small sea-cliff or cave named in the context of a description of landing-places that may have been difficult to navigate and, in time, filled up with sand or gravel.
- *Djöflakollur* (Vigur, Ögurhreppur, Norður-Ísafjarðarsýsla), a square-sided boulder that had been carried to Vigur island by sea-ice during the great winter of 1918. It was deposited on the shoreline where boats came into land and caused problems until it was destroyed in the mid-1950s.

Boggy features:

- *Djöflakelda* (Uppsáir and Bjargshóll, Fremri-Torfustaðahreppur, Vestur-Húnavatnssýsla), a bog, also known as *Duflakelda*, that was hard for people to cross and impossible for horses until planks were laid over it.

- *Djöflamói* (Kollafjörður, Kjalneshreppur, Kjósarsýsla), a very hummocky bog.
- *Satansflói* (Kollsá, Bæjarhreppur, Strandasýsla), a wet mire that was difficult to traverse. Another *Satansflói* was found close by at the farm of Hlaðhamar, some 10 km south of Kollsá on the shore of Hrútafjörður.
- *Skollamýri* (Kóngsstaðir, Svarfaðardalshreppur, Eyjafjörður), a mire known by this name because it was very hard to cross.

Features characterised by steepness or high elevation:

- *Skollagróf* (Hagavík, Grafningshreppur, Árnessýsla) and *Litli-Skolli*, part of the mountain Krossfjöll (the juxtaposition of holy and unholy is striking): the latter was a cliff that was challenging to ascend though with a view in all directions.
- *Skollahilla* (Hvallátur, Rauðasandshreppur, Vestur-Barðastrandarsýsla), an elevated sill up on Brunnahlíð that was almost impossible to cross on horseback when the sheep were gathered.
- *Skollastígur* (Hunkubakkar, Kirkjubæjarhreppur, Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla; Reynishverfi, Hvammshreppur, Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla), the name given to sheep-tracks: both were at considerable elevation and difficult to navigate on horseback (though the name may well have its origins in the presence of foxes).

Features characterised by distance:

- *Skollaeldhús* (Hof, Svarfaðardalshreppur, Eyjafjarðarsýsla), a feature on the edge of a meadow used for hay. Peat was taken from this spot and the place was a good source for fuel but it was not used on account of its distance from the main dwelling.

4.3 Devilish name used of a place that was hard to mow

Examples of place-names that incorporate a name for the devil and reference spots that were difficult or even detrimental to mow are found all around Iceland. These spots were generally hummocky, steep, or rocky; despite the challenges mowing them, the small gains of hay these spots yielded were still needed to keep livestock fed over the long, Icelandic winter. Examples included:

- *Áradalur* (Stapi, Nesjahreppur, Austur-Skaftafellssýsla) was toilsome to mow.
- *Djöflabali* (Brimnes, Seyðisfjarðarhreppur, Norður-Múlasýsla), a small hump in the *tún* where a farm labourer broke his scythe twice, declared the patch to be cursed, and refused to mow it.
- *Djöflabrekka* (Skútustaðir, Skútustaðahreppur, Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla), a steep and annoying slope that was toilsome to mow.
- *Djöflamór* (Grænavatn, Skútustaðahreppur, Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla), a bog that was toilsome to mow on account of it being hummocky. Similarly, *Djöflamóur* (Trostansfjörður, Suður-fjarðahreppur, Vestur-Barðastrandarsýsla), a hummocky patch that was toilsome to mow.
- *Djöflareitur* (Vatnsfjörður, Reykjarfjarðarhreppur, Norður-Ísafjarðarsýsla) was thought to be called this because its alternate stony patches and rocky hummocks made it very hard to mow. Around twenty examples of the name *Djöflareitur* were found in total. Records in which explicit comments about how the name was related to the difficulty in mowing these patches include Tunga (Rauðasandshreppur, Vestur-Barðastrandarsýsla), Laxárholt (Hraunhreppur, Mýrasýsla), and Ríp (Rípurhreppur, Skagafjarðarsýsla (where the artist, writer and vagrant Sölvi Helgason (d. 1895) likened the experience of mowing there to gnawing the devil's eye-sockets). At Höfði (Grýtubakkahreppur, Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla), the name sprung out of the rage of farmer Sigrún Jóhannesdóttir and her husband (presumably because of the effort required to mow the patch).
- *Paufi* (Stóri-Hamar, Öngulsstaðahreppur, Eyjafjarðarsýsla), a location in the *tún* where a cot belonging to a man called Paufi had once stood. A similar explanation is given for the same name, also associated with the traces of a building, on the island of Flatey, Hálshreppur, Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla.
- *Skollareitur* (Kleifarstekkur, Breiðdalshreppur, Suður-Múlasýsla), an area toilsome to mow, as were other hummocky patches with the same name at Rannveigarstaðir (Geithellnahreppur, Suður-Múlasýsla), Karlsskáli (Helgustaðahreppur, Suður-Múlasýsla), and elsewhere. Two other examples of *Skollareitur* are found in Suður-Múlasýsla (at Streiti, Breiðdalshreppur, and Núpur, Beruneshreppur): it is striking that all but one of the ten examples of the name seem to be in the same county.
- *Skollatunga* (Selárdalur, Ketildalahreppur, Vestur-Barðastrandarsýsla), another spot known to be toilsome to mow.

4.4 Devilish name used of a place where a landscape feature might invoke fear or awe

One aspect that some names in the corpus under consideration have in common is that their referents are places characterised by being visually striking and perhaps fear-invoking. More generally in Iceland, widespread examples can be found of prominent, rocky features (especially those that are elevated) that are associated with supernatural beings of one or another kind in folk-tradition: rock-stacks or outcrops that have etiological stories about trolls turned to stone by daylight, or some other sorcery. It is not implausible to imagine that some places with a strange or threatening appearance might have been given names with a devilish connection on a similar basis. In most cases, a connection with the devil cannot be demonstrated with certainty unless some anecdote or explanation survives; as elsewhere with *Skolla*-names, the presence of foxes might have prompted the name. Place-names referencing the devil in the corpus under analysis (where the sources provided contextual information suggesting a reason for the name that relate to this theme) include:

- *Djöflabotn* (Sleðbrjótur og Breiðamörk, Hlíðarhreppur, Norður-Múlasýsla), a rocky area that the Devil created by throwing up boulders.
- *Djöfsi* (Haugur, Fremri-Torfustaðahreppur, Vestur-Húnavatns-sýsla), a rocky extrusion, possibly so-called on the basis of its prominent appearance in the landscape.
- *Grefilsgil* (Litlagerði, Grýtubakkahreppur, Suður-Pingeyjarsýsla) a gully through which *Grefilslækur* runs, described as being very large (though no specific explanation for the name is supplied²).
- *Paufaklettur* (Hamrar, Lýtingsstaðahreppur, Skagafjarðarsýsla), a low cliff or rocky outcrop surrounded by rocks known collectively as *Sortugrjót*; black lichen patches are apparently a characteristic of these rocks, and this is supplied as a possible explanation for the name though no explanation is supplied for the name *Paufaklettur*.
- *Skollagata* (Berserkjahraun, Helgafellssveit, Snæfellsnessýsla), an old, difficult route through the Berserkjahraun lavafield: it is explicitly associated with foxes in the place-name record for Ber-

² As one reviewer noted, *grefill* is also the Icelandic name for the tool known in English as a graver's chisel: perhaps the gully looks like it was dug or chiselled out in some (trollish?) way; without fieldwork, however, this hypothesis must remain an attractive idea.

serkjahraun, foxes being the only creatures who might be able to follow the path, but a connection with the devil might also be an implicit part of the name's suggestive power. The story behind how the lava-plain itself got its name as told in *Eyrbyggja saga* (two *berserkir* cleared a path through it but were tricked out of their prize) might also be remembered and could be relevant in this context as it draws on a folk-tale-type known as the 'Master-builder' (see discussion below, in section 5.3).

- *Skolli* and *Skollagjót* (Víðivallagerði, Fljótsdalshreppur, Norður-Múlasýsla), a rock-stack or outcrop and a cliff, respectively.
- *Skollahryggir* (Brimnesgerði, Fáskrúðsfjarðarhreppur, Suður-Múlasýsla), an elevated, rocky ridge leading up to higher peaks; the ominously named *Heljardalsbrúnir* is nearby.
- *Skollahvómur* (Eyjar, Kjósarhreppur, Kjósarsýsla), an apparently bottomless pit, in which the devil was said once to have been trapped.
- *Skrattaskál* (Þorgrímsstaðir, Kirkjubvammshreppur, Vestur-Húnavatnssýsla), a couloir full of large boulders, though no explicit explanation for how the name came about is supplied.
- *Skrattatindur* (Litla-Skarð, Stafholtstungnahreppur, Mýrasýsla), a bare peak, part of Háfjall ('High mountain').

4.5 Devilish name used of a place where an event involving the devil or demons occurred

In a number of instances, the place-name records include stories or anecdotes about events that gave rise to the place-name referencing the devil. Unsurprisingly, a significant number of these stories involve hauntings or evil spirits and their baleful influence, though not all place-name referents said to be haunted are accompanied by stories that relate exactly how the name came about – these are mentioned at the end of this category. Place-names referencing the devil in the corpus under analysis (where the sources provided contextual information suggesting a reason for the name that relate to this theme) include:

- *Djöflabæli* (Utanverðunes, Rípurhreppur, Skagafjarðarsýsla), the only recorded name in the *tún* at Utanverðunes. It referred to the only smooth spot in the otherwise hummocky field. At the time the place-name record was put together in 1935, the name apparently had considerable weight on account of the story that accompanied the name. This story concerned a dispute between

a woman who lived at Utanverðunes and her neighbour at Keflavík over fishing rights in Nesvatn lake. The argument grew until the women came to blows and then sunk down into the *tún*, frothing at the mouth and swearing. Both women delivered a curse before vanishing (though in the case of one woman, it is more like a blessing), and the Devil was credited with the women's disappearance.

- *Djöfladý* (Geitavík, Borgarfjarðarhreppur, Norður-Múlasýsla), a pit where two neighbouring sorcerers conjured up and banished demons or ghosts, hence the name (see also Sigfús Sigfússon 1984:396).
- *Djöfladæld* (Grund, Hrafnagilshreppur, Eyjafjarðarsýsla), a depression near the ruins of a farm or cot called Asnagarðar: it was believed to be dangerous after dark. In Jón Árnason's folk-tale collection, the place-name is said to have its origins in the 18th century, in a ghost-conjuring battle between two men, Sigfús Þorláksson of Grund and an unnamed man from the west (Jón Árnason 1862:I, 346).
- *Djöflalág* (Reykir, Hálshreppur, Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla), a depression or hollow whose name is said to have come about after two neighbouring farmers encountered an enormous ghost or supernatural creature by a small hill near the *tún*.
- *Djöflagróf* (Efri-Dálksstaðir, Svalbarðsstrandarhreppur, Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla), a small pit little deeper than a man's height. Its name was of interest to the author of the place-name record for Efri-Dálksstaðir, Benedikt Baldvinsson, when he arrived at the farm, and he got the story from his aunt who had worked there. The story involved a man on the farm and his desire for a woman there who didn't reciprocate his interest. When the man tried to seduce the woman while they were out haying by this pit, she rejected him and he was angry. The other men who were out haying said he had become devilishly angry and that some evil spirits had come up out of the pit and got into the man, and thus the spot got its name. Benedikt notes that he gives the story as an example of how some place-names come into being.
- *Djöflareitur* (Hofstaðir, Hálsahreppur, Borgarfjarðarsýsla), a patch of meadowland in the *tún* with a story about a ghost that linked the farm at Hofstaðir with that of Húsafell, where the well-known priest and poet Snorri Björnsson (1710–1803) lived, and who was said to have dealt with the ghost. A note of scepticism regarding the origins of the name is added after the story, with the suggestion that a farmhand might well have made the story up since the patch was so hummocky and hard to mow.
- *Paurasel* and *Skollastekkur* (Vatnadalur, Suðureyrarhreppur,

Vestur-Ísafjarðarsýsla), the ruins of a shieling and a sheepfold said to have been built by the Devil, after he made a bargain with the farmer whereby the Devil would claim the first living soul that went into the completed pen. On completion, the man's dog ran into the pen ahead of the farmer and the Devil was cheated of the man's soul (see also *Ísmús*³).

- *Púkapyttur* (Hallgeirsey og Hallgeirseyjarhjáleiga, Austur-Landeyjarhreppur, Rangárvallasýsla), a deep pool in a stream: a man on horseback was once seen sinking into the pool but nothing was found at the spot when people went to look.
- *Skollalautir* (Árbær og Árbæjarhjáleiga, Holtahreppur, Rangárvallasýsla), a spot associated with the Devil, where he pulled his sledge on his way from the mountains to the sea.
- *Skollaskarð* (Barðanes, Norðfjarðarhreppur, Suður-Múlasýsla), a wide gap or pass in a hill that was said to have been formed when a trollwoman kicked part of the mountain ridge down onto the site of the original farm that the first settler Barði established, causing a landslide.
- *Skrattabæli* (Haukagil, Hvítársíðuhreppur, Mýrasýsla), a patch of land between two streams that came to be associated with the Devil after livestock were lost there in 1925 in a huge winter storm.
- *Skrattavarða* (Giljaland, Haukadalshreppur, Dalasýsla), one of two manmade features in the area known by the name; the other is mentioned in *Laxdæla saga* and associated with the burial spot of the couple Gríma and Kotkell of Leiðólfsstaðir, two sorcerers killed on account of their magic. The records for Þorbergsstaðir (Laxárdalshreppur, Dalasýsla) and Leiðólfsstaðir (Laxárdalshreppur, Dalasýsla) discuss the latter example: the name is said to be one of the oldest and most remarkable names in the area.

In addition to the examples listed above, there are a number of devilish names attached to places that are said to be haunted in the records, but no further anecdotal details explaining why are supplied. These toponyms include:

- *Djöflastaðir* (Galtastaðir ytri, Tunguhreppur, Norður-Múlasýsla), a haunted sheep-shed.
- *Djöflapúfur* (Krókur, Rauðasandshreppur, Vestur-Barðastrandarsýsla), a hummocky patch of land in a depression between two grassy spots where unclean spirits were said to roam.
- *Skollhólar* (Vestri-Kirkjubær og Strönd, Rangárvallahreppur,

³ <https://www.ismus.is/thjodfraedi/sagnir/4855>.

Rangárvallasýsla), small hills believed to be haunted. Other instances of the name *Skollhóll* or *-hólar* seem to derive from the presence of foxes though (e.g. at Ölkelda, Staðarsveit, Snæfellsnessýsla, where foxes are believed to be the reason for the name).

- *Skollagróf* (Hreiður, Holtahreppur, Rangárvallasýsla), a ditch near a sheepfold that was abandoned because the area was not considered to be safe, particularly after dark, according to a priest.
- *Skollalaut* (Hvammur, Holtshreppur, Skagafjarðarsýsla), a haunted hollow by the main highway.

5 Discussion

5.1 Thematic categorisation

One of the main theoretical challenges of toponymic research is the question of categorisation or typology, and how far it is possible and useful to assign names to exclusive categories (see e.g. Gammeltoft 2005, Blair and Tent 2021). For the present purposes of this article, the thematic approach adopted was useful in the process of analysing the dataset as a whole, and for helping to differentiate between examples regarding the context or reasons why places might have been given the devilish names they bear. The categories identified were not mutually exclusive in all instances and there was overlap between them. A place that is hazardous (category 4.1) might also by extension be difficult or dangerous to traverse (category 4.2). A potentially dangerous place might be more likely to have a story attached to it regarding an unfortunate event or a haunting (category 4.5): the story itself or some memory of it might function as a kind of warning. However, since the main purpose of the article was not to produce a typology for these devilish place-names, the overlap was not considered a particular hindrance. If more quantitative research were to be done on the topic in the future, the model might be refined.

A common function of stories attached to specific places and communicated through place-names is that of providing (folk-)etymological or etiological explanations concerning why a place or landscape feature looks the way it does. This function is found all around the world, in different languages and cultures. With regard to Icelandic place-names, Þórhallur Vilmundarson published extensively, arguing

that (in many cases), anecdotes concerning people, animals or events that had apparently given rise to place-names were more likely to be later inventions, narrative-driven attempts to retroactively understand places and their names (see Callow 2022 and Helgi Skúli Kjartansson 2019 on Þórhallur's so-called "náttúrunafnakenning"). Þórhallur's primary concern, following the principal concern of traditional toponymists, was to establish the earliest forms and meanings of place-names. This is of course important from the perspective of historical linguistics, the discipline within which the study of place-names has traditionally been situated. A socio-toponomastic approach expands the scope of investigation to take in the range of socio-cultural insights that anecdotal or narrative etymologies might give us concerning how people from past times came to know their local environments, perceived them and, in turn, transmitted knowledge about places to ensuing generations. This article is thus more concerned with what names can tell us about the lived experiences and contexts of those who used them and passed them on, than with the names' origins.

5.2 Age, landscape features, geographical distribution

Although establishing the age of individual names or the use of terms referring to the devil in place-names was not one of the primary aims of this study, it is nonetheless useful to make some broad observations. While written sources for some Icelandic place-names (diplo-mas, historical writing and saga narratives etc.) go back to the twelfth century, the place-name *örnefna lýsingar* records rarely discuss the age of individual names. Dating Icelandic place-names with any precision is often difficult, especially since a significant proportion of names included in the place-name records are microtoponyms that were only put down in writing for the first time in the twentieth century, when organised efforts to collect Icelandic place-names were undertaken. *Íslensk orðsifjabók* (ÍO) and *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* (ONP) provide information about the earliest attestations of each devilish term in written sources though, so in some cases a *terminus post quem* for some place-names at least can be tentatively posited. Since the nouns *grefill*, *paufi* and *pauri* are not attested prior to the 17th century, place-names with these terms as modifiers must be early modern. *Ári* is not found before the 15th century, so these names are unlikely to be older (and may be much younger). *Djöfull*, *púki*, *satan* and *skratti* are

found in texts preserved in manuscripts dating from the late 12th, 13th and 14th century thus names with these modifiers may be amongst the oldest place-names invoking the devil (but equally, they may be young). *Skolli* is not in ONP with a semantic meaning of devil but the form *Skoll* has mythological associations, being “nafn á úlfi þeim sem eltir og gleypir sólina samkv. hugmyndum Ásatrúarmanna” (ÍÓ), i.e. ‘the name of the wolf that follows the sun and swallows it according to Norse mythology’.

As is clear in the survey above in section 4, the names identified in this study that reference the devil or demons are attached to a variety of landscape features of different types. These landscape features include: shallow sea-caves or gullies (*bás, ból, gjá, gjóta*), skerries (*kollur, sker*), lava (*hraun*), elevated (sometimes prominent) rocky features (*hóll, holt, klettur, tindur*); grass-covered areas, sometimes within the *tún* or homefield, sometimes beyond (*bali, dalur, brekka, reitur, þúfur, þýfi*); hollows or depressions in the ground (*bæli, dæld, gróf, lág, laut, pyttur*); boggy areas (*dý, flói, kelda, mói, mór*); water features (*lækur, tjörn*). In a few examples, human-made structures are also referenced (*sel, staðir, tóft, varða*) but these are the exception rather than the rule. One aspect that unifies all of these various place-types is that they are generally on a smaller rather than larger scale: a patch of the homefield or other meadowland rather than the whole field or meadow; a peak on a mountain rather than the whole mountain.

Nafnið.is has a feature that shows the geographical distribution of names listed as search results: although it is important to remember that the data in the database are not complete in all instances, this feature still points to some geographic patterns that are worth mentioning. As noted above, the *Skolli*-names are the most numerous and unsurprisingly, they have the widest distribution around the country. Although many of the *Skolli*-names refer in the first instance to foxes rather than the devil (at least on the basis of contextual comments in the place-name records), given that foxes were considered to be a pest as they preyed on livestock and other natural resources (e.g. birds' eggs and chicks), in a broader sense it may be that some elision of semantic meaning was present in the usage of *Skolli*-names in everyday life. In Christian medieval allegory, the fox was in fact a symbol of the devil, and in other contexts, e.g. in fables and vernacular romances, the fox had a negative reputation for slyness and cunning (Wackers 2023). Another negative association of a variant form of the term *skolli* is found in *Grímnismál* and in *Gylfaginning*: in these sources, *Skoll* is

the name of the wolf that chases the sun and ultimately swallows it at Ragnarök.

Djöfla- and *Ára-* names are found widely around Iceland with the exception of the south and south-east where no *Djöfla*-names seem to occur. It ought to be noted, too, that no examples of *djöfull* in place-names in the singular form were found: the use of the plural form suggests the reference is more generic, meaning evil spirits rather than Satan. Turning to the distribution of other terms associated with the devil that are found in place-names, it is striking that in some instances, occurrences seem to be a local phenomenon—though here, absence of evidence may not be evidence of absence. It is particularly striking that *Skratti*-names recorded in the place-name archive are only found in the west of Iceland; that *Grefill*-names are found in a cluster in Fnjóskadalur in Eyjafjarðarsýsla; that *Paufi*-names are only found in the north, in Skagafjarðarsýsla, Eyjafjarðarsýsla, and Suður-Pingeyjarsýsla; and that *Pauri*-names are only found in the West Fjords and the West of Iceland. However, given how few examples there are in each of these cases, it is hard to make a strong case for exclusively local or regional use of each term.

5.3 One or many, Iceland and beyond

It is worth addressing whether it can be ascertained whether or not in most cases, the place-names presented above refer to the Christian Devil, or to lesser evil spirits, demons, or ghosts. While the Devil is clearly the referent in place-names that use *Satan*, *Grefill*, *Pauri* and *Paufi*, *Djöfsi* and *Kollus/Köllus* either as a bare noun or as the modifier in a compound place-name, the names in *Ára-*, *Djöfla-*, *Púka-*, *Skolla-*, and *Skratta-* are more ambiguous, referring also to demons or evil spirits more generally. The anecdote in *Laxdæla saga* that is told to explain the origins of the place-name *Skrattavarða* also indicates the need for caution. The cairn is said to mark the burial place of a sorcerer rather than having an association with the Devil in the narrative context of the saga. While sorcery has strong associations with pre-Christian religion, the lines are blurred.

Close parallels to *Púka*- place-names are found in the English landscape: *Puck Pits*, for example, is cognate to *Púkapyttur* but the term in Icelandic (as in English) probably refers to imps or spirits rather than the devil: OE *pūca* “were ubiquitous in the medieval landscapes of southern England, and it was common for spirits and demons of all

kinds to be found in a *pytt*" (Harte 2011:30; Gelling 2005:150 gives further examples). The most famous Puck in the English-language tradition is, of course, found in Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, which was itself based on older traditions. A few centuries later, the writer Rudyard Kipling wrote a series of children's books about this mischievous sprite, who had lain dormant in *Pook's Hill* for centuries (Kipling 1906).

Elsewhere around Scandinavia, as would be expected, place-name records attest to a widespread association of the Devil and/or devils and ghosts with landscape features both close to settlements and further away from them, with cognate results returned from searching the Danish database *Danmarks stednavne* (DS), the Norwegian database *Stadnamnportalen* (SP) and the Swedish database *Ortnamnregistret* (OR). Extensive comparative research into devilish place-names elsewhere in Scandinavia and beyond would repay all efforts made but was beyond the scope of this study. A few observations will nonetheless be made here.

Types of legends or explanations found in the Icelandic sources examined above regarding how devilish places came to be known by the names they bear are in step with legends and traditions found in the British Isles, Scandinavia, Europe and North America. A study by Harte (2011) on alliteration in English place-names includes a number of devilish names: Harte observes that "The Devil plays many parts in place-name formation. Some of the names that refer to him are, apparently, to be understood literally as haunted places; some allude to local legends; some are variations on the derogatory description of poor land" (29). A larger-scale survey by Harte of devilish names in the English landscape published in 2022 includes numerous anecdotes and legends with etiological functions, and in some cases, there are very close parallels in the Icelandic record for the examples Harte gives. Stories from around the British Isles about how names such as *Devil's Bridge* came to be are identical in many respects to the story of how *Paurasel* and *Skollastekkur* at Vatnadalur, Vestur-Ísafjarðarsýsla, apparently got their names (see section 4.5 above): the Devil offered to build a bridge on the condition that he would take possession of the first soul to cross it. Instead of the human crossing the bridge, something is thrown to tempt a dog or other animal onto the structure first, thus confounding the Devil's intention of claiming their

souls (Harte 2022:29–35).⁴ The bigger frame of reference for this type of story is the so-called ‘masterbuilder’ tale-type: there are several reflexes of this tale-type in medieval Icelandic literature and folklore (see further Harris 1976).

By far the greatest number of names identified as invoking or referring to the devil or devils in the Icelandic sources examined, though, are associated with patches of land that were hard to mow, i.e. *Djöflareitur* or *Skollareitur*. The difficulty of working this land on account of its hummocks, or its poor returns, and the negative perception of these spots by those who accessed them were captured in the reference to the Devil (or devils). That the everyday association between the devil and poor land has deep roots socio-culturally is suggested by the numerous variations that exist of a tale, *Túnið á Tindum*, about the homefield at farms called *Tindar* all around Iceland. In this tale, the farmer at Tindar has left hay-making late in the day and makes a pact with the Devil to mow the homefield overnight; in return, the Devil will decide payment. The next morning, the Devil has nearly finished the work – but not quite, for he is unable to complete mowing a patch of the field known as *Gnýputótt*, where the remains of an old building are located. A verse uttered by the Devil about how stony the field is, *Gnýputótt* in particular, is part of all recorded variations of the Icelandic tale. The Icelandic tale is, itself, found in reflexes around Scandinavia and has been related to an international tale-type with the reference ATU 820, ‘The Devil as Substitute for Day Laborer at Mowing’, and its variants (e.g. 820A ‘The Devil Mows with a Magic Sickle’, and 820B ‘The Devil at Haying’; see Uther 2011:458–59).⁵

Many examples of names given to unproductive or recalcitrant land are found in field-name studies undertaken in other countries, not least around Great Britain. *Devil’s Own*, *Purgatory*, *Hell Hole* are noted by Field in his *History of English Field-Names* (2013:105–106), and Cavill (2018:110) lists *Devil’s*, *Devils Acre*, *Devils Back*, *Devils Bed*, *Devils Bowling Green*, *Devils Corner*, *Devils Dell*, *Devils Den*, *Devils Dole*, *Devil’s Dream*, *Devil’s Elbow*, *Devil’s Garden*, *Devils Meadow*, *Devil’s Nest*, *Devil’s Own* and *Devils Thumb* amongst examples of field-names

⁴ Another Icelandic reflex of this story (though without the place-name) involves Sæmundur fróði and is called *Kölski smíðar brú á Rangá* [‘The Devil builds a bridge across the river Rangá’], see https://www.ismus.is/tjodfraedi/sagnir_aevin-tyri/1356/.

⁵ Thank you to Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir for information about the tales *Túnið á Tindum* and *Kölski smíðar brú á Rangá*.

for unproductive and difficult land (including tiny plots), or for large and misshapen topographical features. *Three Devils* is “A derogatory name for particularly intractable land” (Cavill 2018:425). In Cavill’s *New Dictionary of Field-Names*, *Devil’s Chimney* is mentioned as a name in Gloucestershire for a hill with a large, protruding twisted limestone rock (2018:73); no further information about the name is provided. In John Field’s older *History of English Field-Names* (itself the forerunner and inspiration for the *New Dictionary*, along with his original *Dictionary of English Field-Names*), Field notes that “Apart from designating land of such poor quality that it was regarded as Satan’s work, such names may also have referred to places of real or imagined physical danger ... Stories of the devil making his devotions in ... inaccessible spots no doubt served as a warning of the dangerous nature of the places” (2013:248). Many of the Icelandic examples listed above fit well with this sentiment. A couple of recently published studies examining devilish place-names in the U.S.A. and in Transylvania, respectively, fit this pattern too. Bárh (2017) states that the Hungarian word *ördög* ‘devil’ “appears frequently in Transylvanian place-names, in some 400 entries and name variations of 124 objects, from all periods in the [eha.elte.hu] database” (521), and that most names “describe some kind of special, peculiar, frightening or unpleasant place” (523).

Abel and Kruger (2008) identified 1699 (colonial) place-names in the United States Geographic Names Information System Database that have the Devil associated with them. The great majority of these are natural rather than artificial or manmade places, including canyons, creeks and other waterways, holes and dens, and passageways (Gates, Gulches, Slides, Gaps, Passes) (99–100). Using names with ‘angel’ or ‘heaven’ for a comparative perspective (525 plus 32 additional cognates), they calculated a 3:1 ratio of names in favour of the Devil, which “would seem to indicate that Americans have a much stronger preference for naming places after the Fallen Angel than the Heavenly Angel” (101). They explain: “While the Devil may be (and still is) a real entity for many people ... he is also a metaphoric personification of danger. Frontiersmen undoubtedly knew their Bible and, when encountering formidable or unusual places in the landscape, the metaphor that seems to have come to mind was often the one they had been schooled to think of in terms of fear and danger” (103).⁶

⁶ On place-names around Scandinavia that reference Heaven and Hell, see e.g. Magnús Már Lárusson et al. 1961:425–437, and Gammeltoft 2002.

5.4 Hellish and heavenly names in Iceland

This pattern of a higher proportion of devilish names over angelic identified by Abel and Kruger in the United States, and by Bárth for Transylvanian place-names, seems to be at least partially reflected in the Icelandic record. There do not seem to be many place-names invoking angels to counterbalance the devils but for all the one hundred or so place-names that reference hell, there are equally many that evoke heaven, or paradise. A few examples will suffice for the purposes of illustration. *Helja* at Sandur, Aðaldælahreppur, Suður-Pingeyjarsýsla, for example, was a circular pit at the edge of the *tún* believed to be a bottomless abyss. *Heljarauga* at Skálmarnesmúli, Múlahreppur, Austur-Barðastrandarsýsla was a 2-metre-long gash in a cliff, so narrow that a 7-year-old child could not crawl through it.

Only one name referencing angels could be found in the *nafnið.is* database: *Englapyttur*, in the record for Efrasel og Syðrasel, Hrunamannahreppur, Árnessýsla. More results were returned for searches using the keyword *himinn*, e.g. *Himnaríki* at Straumur, Garðahreppur, Gullbringusýsla, and *Himnaríki* at Efri-Dálksstaðir, Svalbarðsstrandarhreppur, Suður-Pingeyjarsýsla. The former name, given to a patch of land, apparently came about when a farmer, having drunk for a week, declared he would ride his horse to heaven. He set off at dusk with a snack and new shoes (no need for socks as there were plenty of them in heaven) but the horse came home riderless soon after; the farmer reappeared some time later. The horse's saddle and bridle were found in the homefield and the spot was subsequently known as *Himnaríki* (in another tradition, the saddle was found in Draugadalir, Ghosts' valley). The latter example was a name given by a child in the early 20th century to a large stone with a cleft big enough to walk into. *Himnastigi* was a steep cliff with steps (Fjörður, Miðfjarðarhreppur, Suður-Mýrasýsla), a steep slope with notches and later steps (Borgarnes, Mýrasýsla); *Himnavegur* was the name given to an elevated track on which a traveller would seem to be right up in the sky when seen from the homefarm (Hagakot, Ögurhreppur, Norður-Ísafjarðarsýsla); *Himinskjól* was a grassy, gentle slope (Streiti, Breiðdalshreppur, Suður-Múlasýsla).

The noun *himinn* in the first instance simply designates the sky and thus the Christian, religious connotations of 'heaven' might not be explicit in the examples *Himnastigi*, *Himnavegur* or *Himnaskjól* but in the one hundred or so examples of the name *Paradís* in the *Nafnið*

database, however, the religious connotations are stronger. Many of these names are given to slopes or hollows which have luxurious plant-life or offer good shelter. *Efri-* and *Neðri-Paradís* were beautiful slopes at Núpur, Haukadalshreppur, Dalasýsla, *Efri-Paradís* being especially rich with colourful and scented flowers of many kinds. A ditch between the slopes was called *Víti* (hell); in other records for this farm, *Víti* is a *kálgarður* or cabbage-patch nearby. *Paradís* at Fjall, Seyluhreppur, Skagafjarðarsýsla, is a deep hollow where there is always calm, “just as in Paradise”, even if it is windy everywhere else. Other natural features that have been given the name *Paradís* include spots in the homefield or meadows, potato patches, springs (especially those believed to have healing properties, where the water is warm, or the water source is completely reliable; *Júdas* is the name of a stream that dries up in dry weather, e.g. at Brekka, Mjóafjarðarhreppur, Suður-Múlasýsla), marshes, cliffs, peaks, gullies, boat-landing places, boat-noosts; a few manmade features also bear the name (see further Lethbridge 2020).

In a few instances, the name *Paradís* was used ironically, for example of a spot that was infertile or treacherous: a bog that was horrible to mow known as *Paradís* at Eyri, Fáskrúðsfjarðarhreppur, Suður-Múlasýsla illustrates this usage. Ironic name-usage along the same lines is found in naming-traditions beyond Iceland, e.g. in England where, as a field-name, *Paradise* is “generally taken as indicating approval, but sometimes ... ironically applied, e.g. at Motcombe Do, where *Paradise* designates a steep, bracken-covered hill” (Gregory 2018:317; see also Field 1977). It is hard to see the juxtaposition of *Púkabarð* and *Paradís* at Akureyjar and Seljar in Helgafells-sveit, Snæfellsnessýsla (see section 4.1 above) without imagining that these names were viewed with some tongue-in-cheek humour on the part of the inhabitants. Similarly, at Kraunastaðir, Aðaldælahreppur, Suður-Pingeyjarsýsla, a cluster of place-names with religious references (both Christian and pre-Christian) used to designate different outbuildings must have come about in conjunction with each other in a humorous way (and on account of their proximity to the site of an old church): two sheepsheds were known as *Paradís* and *Valhöll* respectively, while an old horse-barn was called *Helvíti*.

6 Conclusions and future work

Using the place-name records (*örnefnalýsingar*) held at Árnastofnun and now accessible via *nafnið.is*, this article has surveyed a corpus of Icelandic toponyms that reference a range of terms for the devil or demons. These names occur all over Iceland. Some may be several centuries old, others may be relatively young. The geographical features to which these names are attached are predominantly natural rather than human; some (especially field-names, but sometimes also ditches or hollows) are found in the near environment of the farmhouse, others are further afield, either along the coastline or at higher elevations. Some names refer to places that are dangerous for people or livestock, or difficult to traverse in some way; others may have an association with the devil or demons on account of their unusual or fear-provoking appearance. Many names designate patches of farmed land that were hard to mow: for this reason, these spots were no doubt considered troublesome (if not actually cursed) in an everyday, working environment. In the context of their written documentation (whether in formal place-name records, or in other sources such as sagas and folk-tales), anecdotes explaining the origins of some names were at times preserved along with the names themselves: these names can be categorised as incident names, regardless of whether or not an interaction with the Devil or some other supernatural occurrences actually took place.

The corpus examined in this article illustrates how the everyday landscape of Icelanders in past times, both close to the farm buildings and further away from settled areas, was marked or inflected informally by religious beliefs or ideas associated with the Devil or evil spirits of one or another kind, at local, regional and national levels. These devilish place-names were, in turn, part of a bigger network of place-names that alluded more widely to aspects of belief (whether pre-Christian, Catholic or Lutheran Christian, or folk/superstitious) and collectively formed a complex and multi-layered religious landscape. Beyond formal sites of worship, people's beliefs were attested and reinforced in everyday locations via these informally transmitted names. These place-names give us various insights into people's lived or informally manifested religion.

While the Icelandic *huldufólk* and related elfish traditions have attracted numerous researchers (most recently e.g. Egeler, Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson 2024), little attention has been paid to the

presence of the Devil or demons in Icelandic place-names. One exception is Svavar Sigmundsson (2023), but this publication only lists names relating to the devil and swearwords and does not provide any analysis. The present article has tried to make a beginning at filling this gap, sketching the background to what might become a larger-scale, holistic study of Icelandic (micro)toponyms associated with holy and unholy figures, as one example of many other possible studies that might draw on Iceland's rich place-name archive to illuminate aspects of Icelandic social and cultural history. Far-reaching corpus-based investigations of Icelandic place-names are now feasible in a way not before possible thanks to the development of the *nafnið.is* database and website. The ways that land was perceived by those who owned or worked it, and the processes by which the land's social and economic significance was enhanced by and became bound up with its cultural significance, can be appreciated through the study of minor names and microtoponyms. Much work remains to be done.

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Lykilorð

lítil kennileiti, átrúnaðarnöfn, landslag, átrúnaður, félagsnafnfræði

Keywords

minor names, microtoponyms, theophoric names, landscape, religion, socio-toponomastics

Ágrip

Í þessari grein eru íslensk örnefni sem tengjast djöflinum eða öðrum bölvættum tekin saman og greind. Aðalfrumheimildir eru örnefnalýsingar frá 20. öld sem nú eru leit-
arþær og aðgengilegar á vefsvæðinu *nafnið.is*. Leitast er við að sýna að örnefni á litl-
um kennileitum (e. microtoponyms) geta miðlað hugmyndum fólks frá fyrri tímum
um landslag sem það þekkti til úr hversdagslífi sínu. Sér í lagi eru skoðaðir staðir sem
tengjast trúarhugmyndum eða hjátrúarsiðum um ára eða púka af ýmsu tagi, bæði
staðbundnum sem og á landsvísu.

Abstract

In this article, Icelandic place-names associated with the Devil or demons are sur-
veyed and discussed. 20th-century place-name records (*örnefnalýsingar*) that are now
searchable and accessible online via *nafnið.is* comprise the primary source materials.
Ultimately, the article seeks to show how minor names or microtoponyms can illus-
trate ways in which the everyday landscape of Icelanders in past times was marked
or inflected informally by religious beliefs or ideas associated with the Devil, or evil
spirits of one or another kind, at local, regional and national levels.

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