

An Ethnography of an Imaginary Road: Fear, Death, and Storytelling in the Icelandic Westfjords

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Abstract

The article presents a historical ethnography of an imaginary road. Drawing on printed sources, archival material, and new field research, it analyses the Icelandic folktale of ‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’ (*Manntjónið á Heiðarbæjarheiði*), a story of regional importance in the Strandir district of the Icelandic Westfjords, esp. on the fjord of Steingrímsfjörður. The article shows the contrast between the presentation of the story in its printed ‘standard’ form and the shape that its appearances take when it is encountered locally, where its main *Sitz im Leben* is found in minimalist place-storytelling that is actualised in the engagement with particular places. In this local form as place-storytelling, the narrative shows a considerable amount of variation and a strong focus on the interpretation of local place-names. Based on the contexts of and the variation observed in the different variants of the story, the article presents an interpretation of ‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’ which reads it as a formulation of collective fears.

Introduction

On the following pages I will present a historical ethnography of an imaginary road: the road over the mountain Heiðarbæjarheiði, which is imagined to, once upon a time, have connected the Strandir region of the Icelandic Westfjords to the rich fishing grounds of Breiðafjörður. Historically, this road never existed; it makes its only appearance in the Strandir folktale of *Manntjónið á Heiðarbæjarheiði* (‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’) and place-lore connected with this story. Nevertheless, rich material from throughout the twentieth and even into the twenty-first century suggests that this story was and is very widely known in the Strandir district; in difference to many highly localised tales, ‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’ is a story of regional importance. The many different incarnations of this story, a striking number of which was formulated by local inhabitants in local venues without the involvement of academic collectors, allow us a fascinating glimpse of the normal modes of existence of this tale. This glimpse is highly informative because it stands in marked contrast to the presentation of the story in its best-known – and indeed only widely accessible – publication in Guðni Jónsson’s twelve-volume folklore collection *Íslenskir sagnaþættir og þjóðsögur* (Guðni Jónsson 1940-1957, vol. 8, 71-75). Thus,

'Loss of Men' constitutes a remarkably well-documented example of the distortion that folktales can have undergone in their publication in classic folklore collections, while at the same time illustrating in great detail its 'normal' *Sitz im Leben* outside of such collections: whereas in Guðni Jónsson's collection 'Loss of Men' appears as a long continuous narrative told in extenso, in its actual home environment in Strandir one meets the story in the form of a plethora of short belief statements connected to specific places and their names. These belief statements show a considerable amount of variation, and considering what is constant and what varies in them can throw a tantalising spotlight on what seems to be a mechanism closely comparable to Aby Warburg's theory of images, which he interpreted as results of a 'phobic reflex' (Böhme 1997, 144-146): a way of dealing with fear by giving it shape. The story of 'Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði' is the story of an imaginary disaster that occurred on an imaginary road, which seems to put collective fears both into words and into the landscape. Here, it seems, collective fears are tackled by storytelling, except that the way how the story was published is a very distorted echo indeed of how this process appears to have worked 'on the ground'.

Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði

The fjord of Steingrímsfjörður is framed by mountain ranges, the highest of which is Heiðarbæjarheiði. Heiðarbæjarheiði forms a long, narrow ridge that, for some two dozen kilometres, runs in a straight line oriented roughly north-west to south-east; its eastern side is dominated by near-perpendicular black cliffs (Fig. 1; Map 1). Heiðarbæjarheiði rises to a height of some six hundred metres;¹ this makes it tower head and shoulders over the surrounding ridges, whose height does not exceed the 300s and 400s.

Iceland's low population density and its extreme topography and climate have always made road building an enormous challenge. Well into the twentieth century, the easiest way to get from Steingrímsfjörður to the southern parts of Iceland, and especially to the rich fishing grounds off Snæfellsjökull in Snæfellsnes, was by crossing the mountains on foot and bridle paths which, at best, were marked by cairns erected by stacking up local stone to form man-high drystone cones. During winter in particular, travelling on those roads could be highly hazardous. Travellers avoided the valley floors, as the snow accumulated there made going hard and as avalanches posed a constant threat. Where this was at all possible, the preferred option was to stick to the tops of ridges, which were kept reasonably snow-free by the wind and which were above the avalanche areas. At the same time, however, these ridges are the most exposed parts of the landscape; and if a sudden change in the weather occurred, their shelter-less expanses could become death traps in their own right, and a multitude of short anecdotes as well as longer stories mention people dying from exposure because they were caught out by the weather.

'Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði' in its printed form

One of the longest stories of this type, and by far the most prominent one in Steingrímsfjörður, is *Manntjónið á Heiðarbæjarheiði*, 'Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði'. In the middle of the twentieth century, Guðni Jónsson printed a version of this story on the basis of a manuscript he had received from Pétur Jónsson of Stakkur (1864-1946), a farmer, teacher, and folklorist who for part of his career had worked in the Strandir area.² This version of the story begins with a description of the local topography that provides the central background for the story, and then tells the events as they were thought to have occurred (Guðni Jónsson 1940-1957, vol. 8, 71-75):³

Between Heiðarbær in Kirkjubólshreppur in the district of Strandir and Gróustaðir on Gilsfjörður ford in the district of Austur-Barðaströnd lies the mountain which is called Heiðarbæjarheiði. It will be twenty-six to twenty-eight kilometres long between the farms. It is higher than other mountains there in the area and almost of the same height on nearly the whole way, at many points around or over six hundred metres above sea level; furthermore, it is said that in good weather one can see from it into five districts, i.e. the three districts of the Westfjords, the Húnavatn district, and the Dalir district. On the side facing Steingrímsfjörður the mountain lies between the valleys Miðdalur and Tröllatungudalur, and in the south between Garpsdalur in the east and Bakkadalur in the west. From Miðdalur a valley cuts westwards into the high plateau, which is called Hraundalur. On the edges of these valleys there are high crags and perpendicular cliffs in many places, especially on the edges of the valley Miðdalur. This mountain is shaped like the bottom of a ship, and therefore little deep snow remains lying on it in winter, and the weather up there must be quite extreme. Little or not at all is this mountain marked with cairns, because no travellers now choose their route across it in winter. Only the men who collect the sheep [from the summer pastures] are on their way there, especially in autumn.

However, a tradition relates that this highland was much travelled-through in winter in past times by the people from Steingrímsfjörður and other people from Strandir, when they went on fishing trips to the fishing stations around Snæfellsjökull. Now shall be told of one of these mountain crossings. It should be emphasised that learned and knowledgeable men there in the nearby communities say that they do not know in which century these events have happened that the story tells of, because they are mentioned neither in annals nor either in the Yearbooks of Jón Espólín. But the many place-names, which are known and the story tells are connected with these accidents and misadventures, which have to have happened there, point decidedly towards it that the story will be true in its main features. And it goes as follows:

In the seventeenth century or early in the eighteenth it happened that a short time after New Year eighteen men from the northern part of the Strandir district wanted to go on a fishing expedition westwards under Snæfellsjökull, as it happened then very often. They intended to go over Heiðarbæjarheiði and set out early in the morning, probably before or

around dawn, most likely from the farm Heiðarbær, which is the farm closest to the highland on its northern side. It was said that these were men of vigour in their prime, who were no hotheads, as one says. When the day was a bit advanced, a murderous weather broke loose from the north, a snow storm with fierce frost and strong snowfall. Probably these men were carrying a great amount of baggage with them, such as provisions for fishing and clothing, even though the story does not explicitly mention that. That must probably have made the journey hard for them.

Nothing else is then told about the journey or the death of these companions than that, that the bodies of some of them were found at the places which since then are named from them. In truth there are traditions about that, that in the evening of the same day two women were outside at the front door of the farm Gróustaðir with a light. Then a man, covered in snow, arrived and squeezed in through the farm gate. The women asked him for his name, and he said: 'I was a man,' – and he rushed then out again into the snow storm, and nothing has been heard of him since. It is uncertain whether grown-up men were then present at Gróustaðir,⁴ and it is not mentioned that he would have been pursued or that one would have searched for him. It was said that there was ice on Gilsfjörður fjord, and then it was said as most likely, that he had ran onto the ice during the snow storm and there perished in some manner. It was also said that this man was one of the eighteen companions who on that morning had set out for Heiðarbærheiði.

It seems likely that most of these companions turned back on the highland and wanted to attempt to reach the settled area north of the mountain. How long this dangerous weather lasted, does not emerge from the story, nor whether a search was undertaken after the storm, but it is said that the bodies of eleven of these companions were found at the places which since have been named after them. Böðvar was found by the so-called Böðvarslækir ('Böðvar's Brooks'), furthest to the north on Tunguheiði (Tröllatunguheiði). Ingólfur was found in Ingólflág ('Ingólfur's Hollow'), a little uphill from Tröllatunga. Hákon was found by Hákonarlækur ('Hákon's Brook'); that flows over the bottom part of the home-field of Tröllatunga and eastwards into the river Tunguá. Thus it seems as if these men had been on the right way home to Tröllatunga, when they gave up, and they are remembered only by a hard bit of the way. Hrólfur was found in Hrólfsmýri ('Hrólfur's Wetland'; Fig. 2), which is between Tungugröf and Húsavík, below Tröllatunga. Up in the valley Tungudalur the bodies of five men were found. Bjarni was found in Bjarnagil ('Bjarni's Glen'; Fig. 3). He had fallen to his death there. Bárður was found on the so-called Bárðarbreiður ('Bárður's Broads'), Jón on Jónsvörðuhjalli ('Rock Terrace of Jón's Cairn'), and two brothers on Bræðravörðuhjalli ('Rock Terrace of the Cairn of the Brothers'). It is said that one of them was called Narfi, and he was found on so-called Narfaengi ('Narfi's Meadow'); that is down in the valley Miðdalur on the land of the farm Geststaðir. Some say that Ísleifur, one of these companions, was found on Ísleifsmóar ('Ísleifur's Moorlands'), very close to Heiðarbær, – that would then be the eleventh one – , but some say that he wasn't one of the companions, rather he died there later. Then it would be almost certain for eleven or twelve of these companions, what fate befell them. About the six or seven, which were not found, it has mostly been suspected that they will have fallen from the edges of cliffs, especially in

Miðdalur valley or in Hraundalur valley, and will have suffered death in this manner, because later on never any trace was found of any of them. About their names also nothing is mentioned.

Nothing about this story seems unlikely, even if all more exact means of evidence is lacking, such as the time period when the story happened, the place of origin of the men who died, etc. It seems likely that all or most of these men were from the communities around Steingrímsfjörður fjord, the communities Kirkjubólshreppur, Hrófbergshreppur, and Kaldrananeshreppur, and if it was like that also some from Árneshreppur. It is obvious that a great loss happened at many places, and probably many a wound that never healed until death.

In all those details that are of significance for the matter, this story is recorded after a manuscript of Gísli Jónatansson in Naustavík near Heydalsá in the district of Strandir.

Even in its published form, this narrative shows the marks of a circulation which is both complex and deeply local. Guðni Jónsson bases his text on a manuscript by Pétur Jónsson of Stakkur, who was a teacher in Strandir. Pétur himself based his version on a manuscript he had received from Gísli Jónatansson, who lived on the farm of Naustavík, and Gísli Jónatansson refers to the opinions of ‘learned and knowledgeable men there in the nearby communities’ (*fróðir og kunnugir menn þar í nálægum byggðarlögum*): in this story, we are not dealing with a single author’s narrative, but with a written-down composite version of oral traditions that were in wide circulation. And while the way how the story of ‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’ circulated in this tradition appears to have been rather complex, at least judging from Guðni Jónsson’s account, this circulation also seems to have had a strong regional focus: Pétur Jónsson probably had gotten hold of the story while working as a teacher in the Strandir area; Gísli Jónatansson’s farm Naustavík is, as the crow flies, only about four kilometres distant from Heiðarbæjarheiði; and the oral sources that he refers to are explicitly described as local men. In its transmission, ‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’ very much appears to be a story of the south coast of Steingrímsfjörður.

These deep local roots of the story tally with the emphasis that the story itself puts on place-names. Early on in the story, the narrator makes a key statement (Guðni Jónsson 1940-1957, vol. 8, 72):

En hin mörgu örnefni, sem þekkt eru og sagan telur standa í sambandi við atburði þá og slysfarir, sem þá hafi átt að hafa gerzt, benda eindregið til þess, að sagan muni vera sönn í aðaldráttum.

But the many place-names, which are known and the story tells are connected with these accidents and misadventures, which have to have happened there, point decidedly towards it that the story will be true in its main features.

In this remark, place-names are invoked as the main testimony to the truth of the story. This is particularly important given the openness with which the narrator admits to how problematic the transmission of the story is otherwise: the narrator himself emphasises in the sentences immediately preceding this reference to place-names that the incident is not mentioned in any written historical sources and that the time when it is supposed to have happened is completely unknown even to well-informed local people. (That the following paragraph dates the events to the seventeenth or eighteenth century appears to be, in the light of this admission of ignorance, an educated guess.) In the following, this emphasis on place-names forms a leitmotif running through the whole narrative. The narrator states repeatedly that the bodies of the victims were discovered at those places which henceforth were named after them (Guðni Jónsson 1940-1957, vol. 8, 73 (twice)), and even states clearly that nothing else is known about their misadventures than the connection between place-names and the recovery of their bodies:

Ekkert segir síðan af ferðalagi eður afdrifum þeirra félaga annað en það, að lík nokkurra þeirra fundust á þeim stöðum, sem síðan eru við þá kennd.

Nothing else is then told about the journey or the death of these companions than that, that the bodies of some of them were found at the places which since then are named from them. (My emphasis.)

To flesh out the gaps in the skeleton structure created by the names of dead men, the narrator every now and again inserts his own speculations. Thus, early on in the story, he suggests (my emphasis): ‘Probably (*sennilega*) these men were carrying a great amount of baggage with them, such as provisions for fishing and clothing, *even though the story does not explicitly mention that* (*þótt sagan geti þess ekki sérstaklega*).’ Later, he states, referring to general probability: ‘It seems likely (*líklegt þykir*) that most of these companions turned back on the highland and wanted to attempt to reach the settled area north of the mountain.’ It is worth highlighting how open the narrator is about the gaps in his knowledge. He presents a coherent, step-by-step narrative, but at the same time he makes a clear distinction between what he knows and what he guesses. What the narrator knows are the place-names, and what he guesses is more or less everything else; the little incident at Gróustaðir is pretty much the only element of the story that is based on a tradition which is not toponymic. Thus, the place-names provide the anchor and framework for a narrative which in almost everything but its references to place-names admits its own insecurity.

‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbærjarheiði’ constitutes a good example illustrating that this way of thinking about place-names was not a quirk of an individual author, but constitutes a broader cultural habitus. It has already been mentioned that the printed version of the story published by Guðni Jónsson explicitly mentions its complex transmission and its

embeddedness into the collective discussions of ‘learned and knowledgeable men there in the nearby communities’. If the presence of the story in Strandir is considered with reference to a broader selection of material, the deep rootedness of ‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’ in the narrative traditions of Steingrímsfjörður becomes even clearer.

‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’ as found in the Strandir area

In Strandir, a long tradition exists of engaging with place-names and the storytelling related to them. Large-scale recording of this storytelling tradition started in the nineteenth century at the latest and originated from a broad range of social contexts: some work was done by school teachers, some by academic institutions of the Icelandic state, and other stories were written down and circulated directly by the farmers whose land they touched upon. Guðni Jónsson’s version of ‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’ is a good example of the dynamics involved, as Guðni had not himself ‘collected’ this story, but rather received it from a local teacher, Pétur Jónsson; and Pétur in turn had done little but passing on what he had received already in a tidy manuscript form from a local farmer, Gísli Jónatansson of Naustavík. The local farmer was the primary actor, and academics entered the stage only much later.

In fact, the first published recording of ‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’ had nothing much to do with academia. In 1929, Filippus M. Gunnlaugsson wrote down a version of the story for publication in *Viljinn*.⁵ *Viljinn* was a monthly journal which was edited by the Young Men’s Association ‘Geislinn’. It was published only during the winter months, when agricultural work did not take up as much time as during the summer, and produced in a very specifically Icelandic format: since printing was not available, the copies of *Viljinn* were written by hand and then passed on from farm to farm. To this publication, Filippus M. Gunnlaugsson contributed a description of the farm of Ós. In this text, Filippus gave a systematic account of the place-names found on the land of the farm – or at least of the 134 toponyms that he thought the most important ones – which also included a selection of the stories and explanations connected with these names. In a manner very typical for descriptions of farms published during this period, these explanations cover a broad span of registers, ranging from the workaday to the fantastic. Thus, Stórahlið (‘Big Slope’) simply is ‘a very big area of pastures’ (‘engjaflæmi allstórt’, Filippus M. Gunnlaugsson 1929, 1); Tíkarsund (‘Bitch’s Defile’) is called so because a bitch that had accompanied the workers on the pasture once had her puppies there (Filippus M. Gunnlaugsson 1929, 3); Gvendarengi (‘Guðmundur’s Meadow’) had this name ever since an accident in which a boy of that name drowned in a waterhole (Filippus M. Gunnlaugsson 1929, 4); and Dvergahlaði (‘Pile of the Dwarfs’) is the place where dwarfs once started building a bridge across the fjord, though they soon abandoned the enterprise, leaving behind only a half-finished bridge-head, identified with a lava formation which can be seen to this day (Filippus M. Gunnlaugsson

1929, 7). Filippus's description also covers the two places Þorsteinssund ('Þorsteinn's Defile') and Þorsteinsfell ('Þorsteinn's Mountain') (Filippus M. Gunnlaugsson 1929, 3):

[...] Þorsteinssund og Þorsteinsfell [...]. Örnefni þau eru svo til komin sem nú skal greina:

Það var eitt sinn, þegar Heiðarbæjarheiði var fjölfarin, að 18 menn, sumir segja, að það hafi verið skólapiltar, lögðu á hana að vetrarlagi, og gerði á þá blindhríð. Villtust þeir hver frá öðrum og urðu allir úti. Einn þeirra komst þó inn í bæjardyr á Gróustöðum í Gilsfirði, en var þá orðinn vitskertur og hljóp aftur út í hríðina, og fannst síðan dauður eigi langt þaðan. Flestir hinna fundust um sumarið og þar á meðal einn, sem Þorsteinn hét, og fannst fremst í Þorsteinssundi, sem síðar er við hann kennt.

[...] Þorsteinssund ('Þorsteinn's Defile') and Þorsteinsfell ('Þorsteinn's Mountain') [...]. These place-names have originated in such a way as [I] will tell now:

That was on one occasion, when Heiðarbæjarheiði was a much-used route, that 18 men – some say that they were schoolboys – during wintertime undertook to travel on it, and they were caught up in a whiteout. They got lost and separated from each other and all died of exposure. One of them, however, managed to get into the farm gate at Gróustaðir in Gilsfjörður, but he had lost his mind by then and ran back out into the snowstorm, and was then found dead not long from there. Most of the others were found in the summer, and among them one who was called Þorsteinn, and he was found towards the front in Þorsteinssund, which since [*leg. síðan*] is named from him.

This account is interesting in several respects. For one, it is much more representative of the format in which one normally meets 'Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði' than Guðni Jónsson's long narrative; typically, where I have encountered the story, this encounter took the shape of very short, matter-of-fact statements that place so-and-so is named from the man so-and-so who was one of the men who died when they tried to cross Heiðarbæjarheiði. A broad range of examples is found in the files of the Place-Name Institute of the Icelandic National Museum (Örnefnastofnun Þjóðminjasafns), which operated from 1969 to 1998.⁶ Most of these files for the Strandir area were collected in the 1970s by interviewing local informants, typically people who had worked on local farms for several decades and who in the 1970s already were of a very advanced age, and who were asked to give descriptions of their farms, the place-names on these farms, and the stories connected with them. In this corpus of material, another example of the typical tendency to brevity is found in an account of the farm of Tindur, which today is abandoned (Ingvar Guðmundsson 1977, 4):

Runatagl. Helstu líkur fyrir því nafni er, að þarna hafi maður orðið úti, en nokkrir menn voru á ferð hér suður yfir fjallgarðinn og týndu allir lífi, fundust víða, bæði hér norðan fjalls og fyrir sunnan heiði. Maðurinn hefur þá heitið Runólfur.

Runatagl ('Runi's Tail'). The greatest likelihood for that name is that a man has died from exposure there, when several men were on a journey here towards the south over the mountain massif and all lost their life, were found all about, both here north of the mountain and south of the highland. The man was then called Runólfur.

Even more concise is an account of the farm of Húsavík from the 1970s (Brynjúlfur Sæmundsson 27/03/1973, 2):

Hrólfsmýri og Ögmundarflói. Fyrir u.þ.b. 200-300 árum fóru nokkrir menn yfir Heiðarbæjarheiði og týndust. Hrólfur fannst í Hrólfsmýri og Ögmundur í Ögmundarflóa.

Hrólfsmýri and Ögmundarflói. Circa 200-300 years ago several men went over Heiðarbæjarheiði and were lost. Hrólfur was found in Hrólfsmýri ('Hrólfur's Bog') and Ögmundur in Ögmundarflói ('Ögmundur's Moor').

Equally laconic is a description of the farm of Tungugröf, which until its abandonment was the neighbouring farm of Húsavík (Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 14/03/1977, 4):

[...] Hrólfsmýri [...]. Sagt er, að hún sé kennd við Hrólf nokkurn, sem hafi verið einn vermannna, er villtust á Heiðarbæjarheiði og fundust þarna til og frá.

[...] Hrólfsmýri ('Hrólfur's Bog') [...]. It is said that it is named after a certain Hrólfur, who is said to have been one of the fishermen who lost their way on Heiðarbæjarheiði and were found there here and there.

Extreme brevity also characterises a description of the farm Víðidalsá from 1934 (Stefán Pálsson 05/04/1934, 2):

[...] Dauðsmannsfoldir [...]. Draga þær nafn af því, að menn, sem villzt hafa á Bæjardalsheiði, hafa þarna orðið úti.

[...] Dauðsmannsfoldir ('Dead Man's Fields') [...]. They get their name from that, that men, who got lost on Bæjardalsheiði [sic], died of exposure there.

Another interesting aspect of the account which Filippus M. Gunnlaugsson published in *Viljinn* is how it reflects a certain fluidity of the tradition. Guðni Jónsson's printed version gives a long catalogue of place-names that were created by the tragedy related in 'Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði'. Yet this list is not canonical: other place-names as well can be connected with 'Loss of Men'. Filippus tells the story apropos the two toponyms

Þorsteinssund and Þorsteinsfell, which do not occur in Guðni's text. Further examples have already been added by the descriptions of farms from the 1930s to 1970s that I have just quoted: Ögmundarflói, Runatagl, and Dauðsmannsfoldir all are not mentioned in Guðni's text but were, according to local informants, connected with the story. This list can be expanded even further. Another instance is found in the protocol of an interview about the farm of Heiðarbær. According to this file, Guðjón Halldórsson in 1981 stated about the name Tyrfingshvammur (Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 02/09/1981, 3):

[...] Tyrfingshvammur. Ekki var tekið torf þarna eða mór. Guðjón gizkar á, að nafnið sé dregið af mannsnafni. Á þessum slóðum eru víða mannanafnaörnefni, og er sagt, að þau séu kennd við hóp manna, sennilega vermanna, sem hafi villzt á Tröllatunguheiði (eða Heiðarbæjarheiði, sjá örnefnaskrá Tröllatungu) og orðið úti.

[...] Tyrfingshvammur ('Tyrfingur's Grassy Hollow'). No peat was cut there. Guðjón supposes that the name is derived from a male personal name. On these paths there are in many places toponyms derived from male personal names, and it is said that they are named from a group of men, probably fishermen, who lost their way on Tröllatunguheiði (or Heiðarbæjarheiði, see the place-name account of Tröllatunga) and died of exposure.

This Tyrfingshvammur, 'Tyrfingur's Grassy Hollow', likewise is not found in Guðni Jónsson's printed version. Here, furthermore, the fluidity of the tradition not only becomes tangible in the reference to a place-name that is not found in the earliest printed text of the story, but also in how the place-name is handled and in the cavalier approach that the description takes to otherwise well-established details. In this account, the handling of the place-name itself is explicitly highlighted as conjectural: Guðjón explicitly 'supposes' (*gizkar*) that the toponym belongs to the context of 'Loss of Men'. This appears to be an inference based on etymological analysis. The account of Tyrfingshvammur starts with the statement: 'No peat was cut there.' In the Icelandic original, this is not the random remark that it seems to be in the English translation, but rather it appears to reflect a musing on etymology: *Tyrfings-* is reminiscent of the Icelandic word for peat (*torf*), so here – or so it seems – we get a glimpse of the informant thinking about the background of the toponym through its meaning: the name sounds a bit like turf-cutting, but then Guðjón knew that turf was never cut at that place, so the name could not have been derived from turf-cutting, and therefore it seemed more likely to Guðjón that it was just another of the many place-names derived from 'Loss of Men'. Yet Guðjón was not sure; what he voiced is just a supposition (*gizkar*), and his uncertainty may also be reflected in how he deals with an otherwise consistent element of the story: in this account, the 'Loss of Men' occurred on Tröllatunguheiði, the next range to the west of Heiðarbæjarheiði. Heiðarbæjarheiði itself is only mentioned in an insert in brackets which may be due to Guðjón himself, but sounds more like an editorial insert made

by the interviewer, who noted and highlighted a discrepancy with how the story appears in other files.

The file about Tröllatunga that the Heiðarbær-file refers to has its own quirks. There, the relevant passage reads (Guðrún Magnúsdóttir 05/10/1975, 3):

Lágin sunnan við Torfskarð heitir Ingólflág. Sagan segir, að hún ásamt fleiri mannanafnaörnefnum á þessum slóðum sé kennd við skólapipta frá Hólum (sumir segja vermenn), sem hafi orðið úti á þessum stöðum, villzt á leið eftir Heiðarbæjarheiði [...].

The hollow to the south of Torfskarð is called Ingólflág ('Ingólfur's Hollow'). The story tells that it, together with several place-names derived from male personal names on these paths, is named from schoolboys from Hólar (some say fishermen), who died of exposure at these places, lost on the way along Heiðarbæjarheiði [...].

In this account, the fluidity of tradition surfaces when the victims of the fateful trek over the mountain become pupils of the cathedral school at Hólar. In Guðni Jónsson's printed version as well as in many of the passages quoted above, the dead men had been fishermen; Filippus M. Gunnlaugsson in his contribution to *Viljinn* mentioned an alternative tradition ('some say') which saw them as schoolboys; and here, idiosyncratically, they become associated with one of Iceland's most famous schools, and it is their identification as fishermen which is downgraded to 'some say'.⁷ 'Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði' is not so much a fixed narrative, but rather a loose framework into which place-names can be inserted quite freely and where details can shift to the point where almost the only stable element is the basic argument: 'place-name X is derived from a male personal name; therefore, here the body of one of the men who died of exposure in the mountains must have been found'.

If one tries to map the toponyms that got entangled in the 'Loss of Men'-tradition, it soon becomes apparent over what a remarkable geographical area they are spread out (**Map 1**): some of the names derived from 'Loss of Men' are located at a surprising distance from Heiðarbæjarheiði. This as well is illustrated best by Filippus's contribution to *Viljinn*: Þorsteinssund and Þorsteinfell, where he places the body of one of the victims of 'Loss of Men', are located more than a dozen kilometres north of Heiðarbæjarheiði as the crow flies. The idea that anybody would be able to cover this distance in whiteout conditions is simply grotesque – the more so, as the route from Heiðarbæjarheiði to Þorsteinssund and Þorsteinfell would run crosswise to the predominant direction of the mountain ridges on the south coast of Steingrímsfjörður, i.e. in order to get from Heiðarbæjarheiði to Þorsteinssund, one would have to climb up and down some five mountain ridges (cf. Map 1).

Filippus's narrative is not the only one which connects toponyms with 'Loss of Men' that are strikingly far away from Heiðarbæjarheiði. Not much closer than the place-names

that Filippus talks about are some place-names on the land of the farm Þiðriksvellir, which are connected with ‘Loss of Men’ in a description of the farm from the 1950s (Stefán Pálsson 10/03/1953, 2-3) (Figs. 4, 5):⁸

Þá sögusögn hefi ég heyrt, að vermenn, er komu sunnan úr Barðastrandarsýslu og ætluðu til róðra að Gjögri í Strandasýslu, hafi hreppt vont veður á heiðinni, villzt og ekki komizt til byggða. Hafi þeir allir látið lífið og sumir findizt í Halldórshvammum og Pálshvammum. Eru þarna víða djúp og hrikaleg gljúfur, sem hættuleg geta talizt.

I have heard this rumour, that fishermen, who came from the south from the district of Barðastrandarsýsla and wanted to go to Gjögur in the district of Strandasýsla to put to sea, had gotten bad weather on the highland, got lost and did not manage to come to the inhabited area. They have all lost their life and some were found in Halldórshvammur (‘Halldór’s Grassy Hollow’) and Pálshvammur (‘Páll’s Grassy Hollow’). There, there are deep and fantastic gorges at many places, which can be called dangerous.

Halldórshvammur (‘Halldór’s Grassy Hollow’) and Pálshvammur (‘Páll’s Grassy Hollow’) are located some ten kilometres, as the crow flies, from Heiðarbæjarheiði – in order to try to cross the one and to die at the others, which are separated from Heiðarbæjarheiði by a whole series of mountains, one would need to have both outstanding stamina and outstandingly bad luck indeed.

The remote place-names mentioned so far are located far north of Heiðarbæjarheiði. However, the range of the ‘Loss of Men’-narrative also extends far to the south: there are at least two testimonies that connect the tragedy on Heiðarbæjarheiði with the naming of Þórarinsdalur, which at its closest point lies some six kilometres to the south-east of Heiðarbæjarheiði and is separated from it by deep valleys and high ridges (Fig. 6). The older one of these accounts is found in an undated manuscript by Jóhann Hjaltason (1899-1992) which gives an account of the farm of Fell (Jóhann Hjaltason s.a., 10):

[...] Þórarinsdal[ur] [...] Dalurinn er kenndur við einn hinna 18 manna, sem mælt er að eitt sinn hafi orðið úti á Heiðarbæjarheiði, á leið til vers vestur að Ísafjarðardjúpi.

[...] Þórarinsdalur (‘Þórarin’s Valley’) [...]. The valley is named from one of the 18 men about whom it is said that they once died of exposure on Heiðarbæjarheiði, on the way westwards to Ísafjarðardjúp to a fishing station.

Geographically speaking, here the story has gotten completely lost. Normally, the narrative states that the men who died were travelling south-west from Steingrímsfjörður, to the fishing grounds of Breiðafjörður and specifically those around Snæfellsjökull. Here, the destination suddenly is Ísafjarðardjúp in the far north-west; the story has been turned

around by 90°. This has the consequence that the men not only get lost on the road, but the road over the mountain *Heiðarbæjarheiði* leads in the wrong direction to start with. Of course, that something had gone wrong here did not escape attention. When Björn Finnbogason, who had lived in the area for the first forty years of this life (1890-1930), was interviewed about local toponymy in 1977, the interview protocol noted (Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 23/02/1977, 6):

[...] Þórarinsdalur [...]. Björn kannast við sögnina, að dalurinn sé kenndur við einn átján vermannna, sem hafi villzt á *Heiðarbæjarheiði*, en ekki er það sennilegt.

[...] Þórarinsdalur ('Þórarin's Valley') [...]. Björn remembers the story that the valley is named from one of the eighteen fishermen who have lost their way on *Heiðarbæjarheiði*, but that is not likely.

Björn is well aware that the story has become overstretched, and voices his resulting doubts. The story of the 'Loss of Men on *Heiðarbæjarheiði*' has turned out to be so flexible that it has engendered place-name explanations that were intrinsically implausible even to those who told the tales.

I have already quoted a substantial number of attestations of the 'Loss of Men'-narrative, and even more could be added. Thus, the *Ísmús* database of sound recordings contains recordings of two interviews from the year 1970, in which Guðrún Finnbogadóttir (1885-1972) and Magnús Gunnlaugsson (1908-1987), who both lived on farms in the area, recount what they knew of the story and place-names derived from it.⁹ Three decades later, in 1999, Stefán Daníelsson, then farmer at Tröllatunga, gave the following explanation about place-names on his land (Fig. 7):¹⁰

Örnefni með mannanöfnum eru flest til komin vegna 18 manna slyssins sem var í Tröllatungulandi. T.d. Ingólflág, Bræðravörðuhjalli, Jónsvörðuhjalli, Hrólfsmýrarbörð, Böðvarslækir, Bárðarbreiðar, Eiríksvöllur, gæti verið Hákonarlækur (Brunnhúslækur) segir Stefán.

Miðdalur – Narfengi í Gestsstaðalandi.

Húsadalur – Í Hólmavíkurbreppi. Halldórshvammur, Pálshvammur.

Þetta voru skólastrákar eða vermenn. Er skrifað um þetta í Strandapósti.

Place-names with male personal names have for the most part come into being because of the misadventure of 18 men which happened on the land of Tröllatunga. E.g. Ingólflág, Bræðravörðuhjalli, Jónsvörðuhjalli, Hrólfsmýrarbörð, Böðvarslækir, Bárðarbreiðar, Eiríksvöllur, possibly Hákonarlækur (Brunnhúslækur), says Stefán.

Miðdalur – Narfengi on the land of the farm Gestsstaðir.

Húsadalur – In the district of Hólmavíkurbreppur. Halldórshvammur, Pálshvammur.

That were schoolboys or fishermen. About that has been written in *Strandapósturinn*.

This testimony is not without its challenges. Stefán Daníelsson refers to a published account in the regional annual journal *Strandapósturinn*, which illustrates the tight interweaving of written and oral tradition.¹¹ More importantly, furthermore, his testimony illustrates that the tradition of thinking about local place-names in terms of ‘Loss of Men’ continues to this day, adding testimony after testimony and place-name after place-name – for Stefán gave his testimony as an oral one, and the field-name Eiríksvöllur that Stefán mentions does not appear to be attested before the 1980s (Fig. 8).¹² In fact, when I myself was making enquiries about the whereabouts of place-lore sites in 2019, it was pointed out to me by Jón Jónsson of Kirkjuból that Hjálparsteinn, a big boulder next to an old road on the land of Tröllatunga, also is connected to ‘Loss of Men’ (Fig. 9): Hjálparsteinn, ‘Stone of Help’, is said to be called so because there a sole survivor of ‘Loss of Men’ was found, half-dead, and then received help. While several surveys of the place-names of Tröllatunga exist, none has mentioned this tradition before.¹³ The story still is very much alive, and so any list of toponyms connected with ‘Loss of Men’ can only be preliminary.

‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’: Further discussion

‘Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði’ is one of the ‘great’ stories of Steingrímsfjörður. It has grown deep roots on not just the highest mountain of the fjord’s south coast, but also in a score of smaller places in a radius of more than ten kilometres around this mountain. The way how these places are connected with the story is very stable: in almost all cases (the exceptions being the ‘Stone of Help’ Hjálparsteinn and the ‘Dead Man’s Fields’ Dauðsmannsfeldir), a place-name formed with a male personal name is explained by the assertion that at this place the body of the man in question was found, who is identified as one of eighteen men that tried to cross Heiðarbæjarheiði. Pretty much everything else can be in a state of flux: the destination may be Snæfellsnes or Ísafjarðardjúp, the victims of the tragedy may be fishermen or schoolboys. In some cases, even the mountain where the tragedy occurred can fluctuate, as at least two attestations locate the ‘Loss of Men’ on Tröllatunguheiði.¹⁴

This fluctuation – or rather: what fluctuates and what does not – throws an interesting spotlight on the *Sitz im Leben* of the story. Almost the only stable element in the story appears to be that it is based on a reflection about place-names, and exactly this seems to be its main *Sitz im Leben*: Guðni Jónsson’s standard publication of the tale, working from Gísli Jónatansson’s manuscript, presents a long, coherent, streamlined narrative, but almost all other attestations of the story that I have encountered are short explanations of one or two names by allusion to a tragedy claimed to have occurred on Heiðarbæjarheiði.¹⁵ In the centre of these tellings stand the individual place and its name, which is thought about and

then speculatively connected to a disastrous attempt at crossing the highest mountain of the fjord.

At this point it is worth addressing how realistic the story is. Are the occurrences described in it historical? An important clue is provided by practicalities. From a practical perspective, it was indeed advantageous to cross the mountains by following a ridgeline, as there snow did not accumulate as much as on the valley bottoms and as there one avoided the risk of avalanches, which were greatly feared.¹⁶ This is the reason why the routes marked on the maps created by the Danish General Staff between 1905 and 1915 so often follow the high ground,¹⁷ whereas modern roads, made for automobiles, prefer the low ground. However, even to cater for this legitimate practical reason, Heiðarbæjarheiði would be overkill: to achieve the desired effect of avoiding deep snow drifts and avalanches, the route needs to follow the high ground, but it does not need to follow the ridge of the highest mountain in the area. The next ridge that would serve the purpose is Tröllatunguheiði, which is located only two kilometres from Heiðarbæjarheiði and has all the same advantages minus its disadvantages: being almost one hundred and fifty metres lower as well as much gentler in its ascent, Tröllatunguheiði is much easier going than Heiðarbæjarheiði. It also runs in exactly the same direction. As far as records go back, Tröllatunguheiði has always been the route of choice for crossing the mountain massif; the row of massive cairns that mark the highland route to this day – now running in parallel to a road and the power lines of the Icelandic grid – is marked already on the map of the Danish General Staff drawn in 1912.

The purported route over Heiðarbæjarheiði, in contrast, has never been marked with cairns. There are a few cairns on the mountain, but they do not align to mark a route, and comparison with the map of the Danish General Staff shows that by far most of them have been erected by the men of the Danish land survey to mark triangulation points – most prominently in the case of the massive summit cairn that was built to mark the 600-metre point and which is widely visible from the mountains surrounding Heiðarbæjarheiði (Fig. 10).¹⁸ So there is neither documentary nor material evidence that Heiðarbæjarheiði was ever used as a route to cross the mountain range. All mentionings of Heiðarbæjarheiði as a route to Breiðafjörður that I have been able to find speak of a *past* use of the mountain as a route; there appears to be no actual contemporary testimony that the mountain was ever used as such.

Interestingly, what little purported evidence there is for a former use of Heiðarbæjarheiði as a route to cross the mountains is itself tied up in a place-name. In a description of the farm of Miðdalsgröf at the foot of Heiðarbæjarheiði, one finds the following statement (Samúel Alfreðsson and Alfreð Halldórsson 15/09/1979, 2; cf., almost verbatim identical, Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 23/10/1979, 3):

Leiðaröxl dregur nafn sitt af því, að þar var farið upp á Heiðarbæjarheiði, sem áður var alfaraleið vestur í Geiradal.

Leiðaröxl ('Shoulder of the Way') gets its name from that, that one went up onto Heiðarbæjarheiði there, which used to be the generally used way to the west into Geiradalur.

In a way quite similar to the derivation of toponyms formed with male personal names from dead men, this statement correlates the place-name Leiðaröxl, 'Shoulder of the Way', with the use of Heiðarbæjarheiði as a through-route. Thus, the place-name is turned into evidence for a now-defunct road over the mountain to Breiðafjörður. Yet while at first glance this sounds all very logical, it is not the only way to interpret the place-name. Leiðaröxl is a section of the slope on the northern end of Heiðarbæjarheiði, and its location towards the end of Heiðarbæjarheiði, just below the point where the slopes of the mountain turn into perpendicular cliffs, suggests that it may well have been a route over the mountain, but perhaps not quite in the way in which the statement quoted above imagines it: rather, Hafdís Sturlaugsdóttir assumes that Leiðaröxl is the point where an old route, coming from Miðdalur, crossed Heiðarbæjarheiði in order to reach the road over Tröllatunguheiði some two kilometres later. Hafdís has indeed been able to find traces of an old bridle path which crosses Heiðarbæjarheiði at Leiðaröxl,¹⁹ and a journal article from the late 1980s mentions Leiðaröxl as the point where a path crossed Heiðarbæjarheiði that led from the now-abandoned farm of Tindur in Miðdalur to Tröllatunga (Gísli Jónatansson 1989, 124). Thus, it seems that the place-name Leiðaröxl indeed reflects a path that led over Heiðarbæjarheiði; but this was not a path that went length-wise over Heiðarbæjarheiði to Breiðafjörður, but merely one which crossed it at a comparatively low and easy spot in order to access the easier road over Tröllatunguheiði.

Furthermore, not only is there no evidence that Heiðarbæjarheiði, against all considerations of practicality, was ever used as a way to reach Breiðafjörður, but the story also displays common elements of traditional folk narratives of the more openly fictional kind. One of these is numerical. In 'Loss of Men', it is a group of eighteen fishermen (or schoolboys) that is lost; this number is a very typical feature of Icelandic folktales, where companies of men normally consist of either 18 or 12 members (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003, 293). Furthermore, the cathedral school at Hólar, which is named as the origin of the schoolboys in a version of the tale recorded in Tröllatunga, was one of the most famous schools of Icelandic folk storytelling, where it was typically associated with knowledge of magic (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003, 206). Thus, 'Loss of Men' describes a scenario which appears to have no historical basis, is topographically intrinsically implausible, and employs common motifs of Icelandic folk legends.

At the same time, it is also characterised by an element tragically rooted in real-life experience: death from exposure was a sadly common occurrence. Thus, to pick just a few

examples from the region, there is a tradition recorded in 1953 according to which on one occasion the farmer owning the farm of Hólar froze to death on his own land (Magnús Steingrímsson 06/03/1953, 3).²⁰ In the summer of the year 1911, the body of a young woman was found on the land of the farm Hrófberg; this woman had frozen to death in the autumn of the previous year, when she was overtaken by a snow storm (Halldór S. Halldórsson 01/1989, 3). On the land of the farm of Kleppustaðir, there is a cairn called Björnsvarða, 'Björn's Cairn'. It got its name when the body of a certain Björn was found there, who was one of two men who froze to death on Maundy Thursday of the year 1865; the body of his companion was never recovered (Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 13/11/1979, 5; Magnús Steingrímsson 17/03/1953, 3; cf. Magnús Sveinsson s.a., 1). In the valley of Selárdalur the meadow Guðfinnuengi, 'Guðfinna's Meadow', is said to be named from a woman called Guðfinna who died there of exposure (Sigurður Rósmundsson s.a., 5). Kattardalur, 'Valley of the Cat', was re-named Ragnarsdalur, 'Ragnar's Valley', when a certain Ragnar froze to death there around the year 1906 (Stefán Pálsson 05/04/1934, 7). The farm Kolbjarnarstaðir is said to have been abandoned after the last farmer, together with almost all members of his household, died when they were overtaken by a snowstorm while crossing the mountain Staðarfjall on the way home from a Sunday service in the church at Staður (Sigurður Rósmundsson s.a., 6-7). On 7 December 1925, a sixteen year old boy died of exposure in Brunngilsdalur, only a few hundred metres from the buildings of the next farm, when, after a particularly warm autumn, the livestock was gathered later than normal and the herding party was overtaken by a snowstorm. In the morning of that day, three went out to drive home the sheep, but only two came back (Gísli Þ. Gíslason 12/04/1977, 7).

One could continue this litany of death, but I think the point is clear: death from exposure, especially in the mountains, was a very real danger. Viewing 'Loss of Men' before this background, I think it is possible to pull the various strands of the preceding discussion together into an overall interpretation of this story.

In 'Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði', we are not facing a simple account of an occurrence 'as it really happened'. Heiðarbæjarheiði, in all likelihood, never was used as a through-route to the south; the mountain would have been too difficult for that, especially with a functionally equivalent and much easier alternative available at nearby Tröllatunguheiði. Yet, as the highest mountain of the area, domineering its surroundings, Heiðarbæjarheiði attracts attention and inspires the imagination. This imagination, being the imagination of people deeply familiar with the local mountains and their weather, would immediately see how exposed one would be up on the ridge; Guðni Jónsson's account explicitly muses on this point, stating: 'the weather up there must be quite extreme' (*allstórviðrasamt hlýtur að vera uppi þar*). In Strandir, however, the idea of being exposed to the weather not just stands for discomfort, but for a very real danger of death by exposure, a danger which was constantly present and again and again demanded its victims. This

danger would have been a very real one on Heiðarbæjarheiði, and thus a story that had this danger at its core could easily latch onto the towering mountain, or maybe rather: the towering presence of this mountain could suggest a way of putting this fear into words. At the same time, as soon as the idea of death on Heiðarbæjarheiði, as a formulation of the collective fear of death in the mountains, would have taken root, a multitude of toponyms derived from male personal names could suggest the identities of the victims. This combination of factors – the reality of the threat of death by exposure, the dominating presence of the mountain, and the presence of toponyms derived from personal names – thus seems to have combined to form one big story about a tragedy which reflected the extent of the fear of death by exposure and befitted the size of the mountain onto which it was latched. Narratively, the biggest mountain became the place of the biggest tragedy, and in this way it could tell the story of one of the region’s great fears. I suppose that the story owns much of its success to the specific local combination of factors: the physical dominance of Heiðarbæjarheiði, the real-world death toll taken by exposure, and the presence of place-names suggestive of the names of possible victims. These factors made the narrative plausible and allowed it to act like a vortex into which ever more place-names were drawn. In this way, we can observe how in ‘Loss of Men’ a very real collective fear crystallises into a narrative told through place-names interpreted as the names of its victims.

It should be noted that, of course, we don’t know what the ‘real’ historical basis of the various toponyms is. Þórarinsdalur, Pálshvammur, Halldórshvammur, and Þorsteinssund are too far from Heiðarbæjarheiði to possibly be named from men who died while trying to cross it; and if these place-names had other origins and later were re-interpreted, the same may be true for other toponyms as well. Also, the toponymy of Strandir contains more place-names said to be derived from victims of ‘Loss of Men’ than ‘Loss of Men’ is said to have had victims; even the names discussed in this article would reflect more than twenty victims, and further enquiry might turn up even more such toponyms. The *primum movens*, or at least the strongest moving force of the narrative, appear to be the place-names in the real-life landscape: where a toponym is derived from a male personal name, it can respond to the magnetism of Heiðarbæjarheiði and can be read as a toponymic epitaph to a victim of the mountain. A story constructed out of collective fears thus is activated by place-names and in this way turned into local history. In current theorising, place-names are often conceptualised as ‘mnemonic pegs’ serving historical memory (e.g., Brink 2013, 36); these place-names, however, do not remember the story – because it never ‘really happened’, even though tragedies like it happened all too often – but they form the catalyst through which it gets presence and reality.

In his groundbreaking survey of Icelandic folk narrative, *The Folk-Stories of Iceland*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson noted that ‘[p]lace-name stories come to life when the place-names

come under discussion or when one sees the places' (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003, 67). This tallies both with my own experience in Strandir and with the pattern observed again and again in the material presented above: while 'Loss of Men on Heiðarbæjarheiði' is also printed as a continuous story in a folk-tale collection, the vast majority of its attestations have the form of very brief summaries used to explain one or two local place-names. The primary *Sitz im Leben* of the story seems to be the encounter with places whose names can – sometimes with more, sometimes with less conviction – be connected to the occurrences described in the tale. The density with which this is attested in the case of 'Loss of Men' gives us a sobering impression of the extent to which the storytelling tradition is distorted in its publication in the classic Icelandic folklore collection. The published version is a synthetic narrative that, to a very large extent, has been tidied up by its author; the extreme fluidity, variation, and brevity that characterises the story 'on the ground' can barely be glimpsed through the homogenised narrative. This does not mean that in Guðni Jónsson's published version in his *Íslenskir sagnaþættir og þjóðsögur* is 'wrong'; after all, it is based on a manuscript written by a local farmer from Steingrímsfjörður, so it is a genuine local variant of the story. But this variant, in its tidiness and focus on narrating the whole sequence of occurrences, is not at all representative of the typical *Sitz im Leben* of the story. This *Sitz im Leben* is the encounter with individual places, and it is only in seeing these place-focused formulations of the story that we appreciate the extent of variation, but also what remains constant and unchanged throughout this variation: the huge reach and impact of the collective fear of death on the mountain.

Captions



Fig. 1: On Heiðarbæjarheiði, looking along the cliffs on the eastern side of the ridge towards Steingrímsfjörður. On the right, the valley of Miðdalur. Photo © M. Egeler, 2019.



Fig. 2: Hrólfsmýri ('Hrólfur's Bog'), now a well-drained grass field. Photo © M. Egeler, 2019.



Fig. 3: The ridge of Heiðarbæjarheiði with the gorge Bjarnagil seen from the yard of the farm Tröllatunga. Photo © M. Egeler, 2019.



Fig. 4: ‘They had all lost their life and some were found in Halldórshvammur (‘Halldór’s Grassy Hollow’) and Pálshvammur (‘Páll’s Grassy Hollow’). There, there are deep and fantastic gorges at many places, which can be called dangerous.’ One of the gorges on the way to Halldórshvammur. Photo © M. Egeler, 2019.



Fig. 5: Halldórshvammur. Photo © M. Egeler, 2019.



Fig. 6: Þórarinsdalur. Photo © M. Egeler, 2019.



Fig. 7: Brunnhúslækur (=Hákonarlækur) and Ingólfslæg. Note how closely some of the places connected with 'Loss of Men' cluster together. Photo © M. Egeler, 2019.



Fig. 8: Eiríksvöllur (to the left of the road), directly below the farm buildings of Tröllatunga. Photo © M. Egeler, 2019.

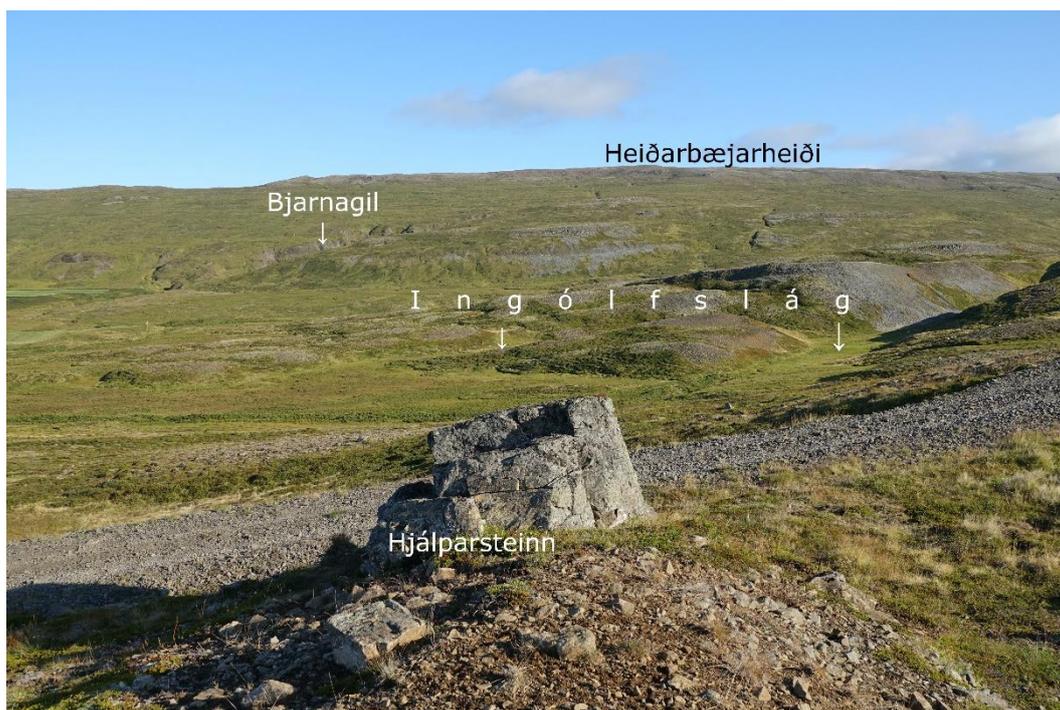
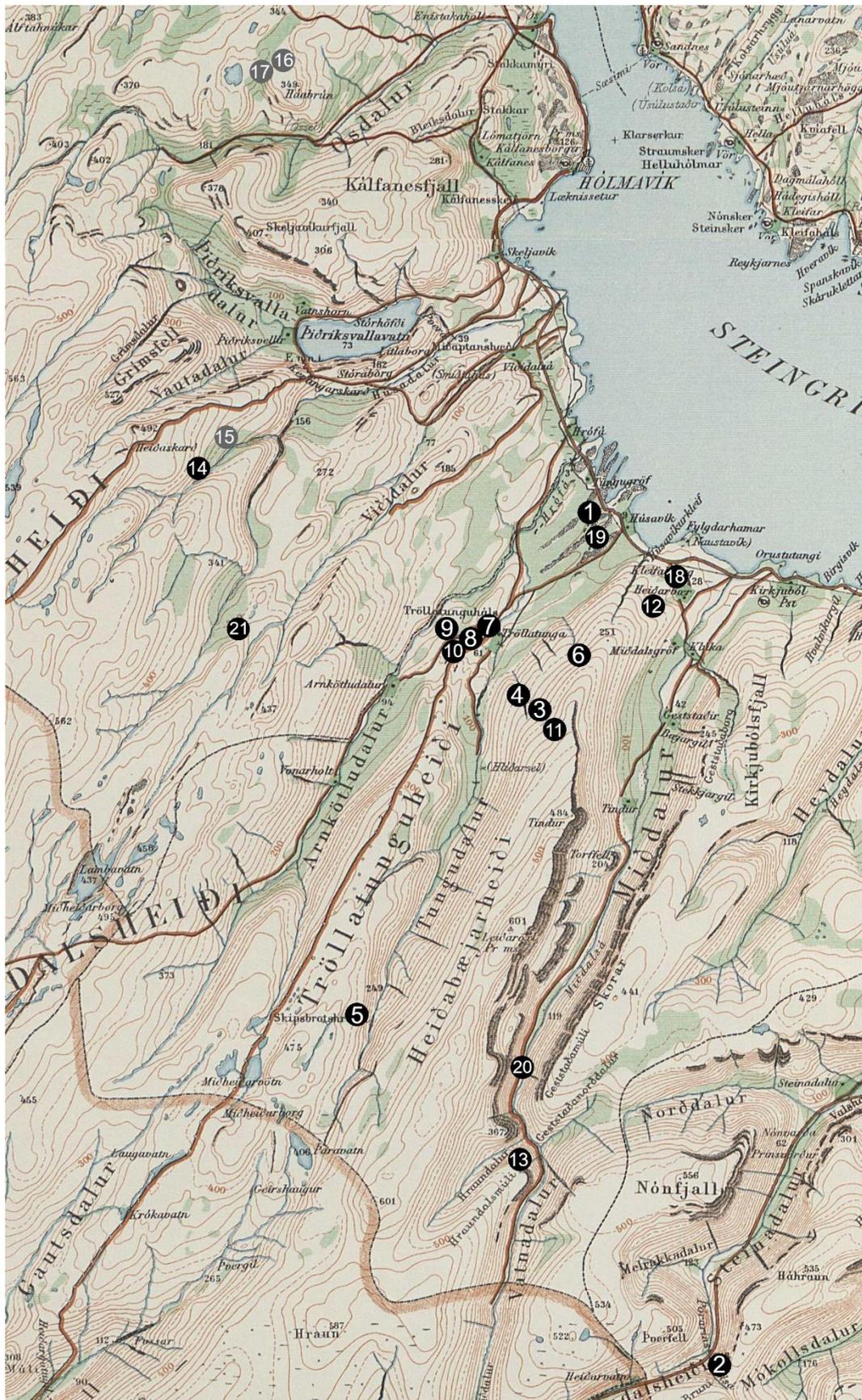


Fig. 9: Heiðarbæjarheiði with Bjarnagil, Ingólflálg, and Hjálparsteinn. Ingólflálg is a horseshoe-shaped hollow encircling a hill; the arrows mark its two ends on both sides of the hill. Note the close clustering of places connected with the story which is found here, but not in other locations. Photo © M. Egeler, 2019.



Fig. 10: The triangulation cairn erected by the Danish land surveyors in the first years of the twentieth century to mark six hundred metres elevation. Photo © M. Egeler, 2019.



Map 1: The location of places connected with the recovery of the victims of ‘Loss of Men’. Names marked with an asterisk are not found in the version of the story published by Guðni Jónsson. Grey dots: location approximate. 1: Hrólfsmýri (‘Hrólfur’s Wetland’); 2: *Þórarinsdalur (‘Þórarin’s Valley’); 3: Bárðarbreiður (‘Bárður’s Broads’); 4: Bjarnagil (‘Bjarni’s Glen’); 5: Böðvarslækir (‘Böðvar’s Brooks’); 6: Bræðravörðuhjalli (‘Rock Terrace of the Cairn of the Brothers’); 7: *Eiríksvöllur (‘Eiríkur’s Field’); 8: Hákonarlækur (‘Hákon’s Brook’); 9: *Hjálparsteinn (‘Stone of Help’); 10: Ingólfslág (‘Ingólfur’s Hollow’); 11: Jónsvörðuhjalli (‘Rock Terrace of Jón’s Cairn’); 12: *Tyrfingshvammur (‘Tyrfingur’s Grassy Hollow’); 13: *Runatagl (‘Runi’s Tail’); 14: *Halldórshvammur (‘Halldór’s Grassy Hollow’); 15: *Pálshvammur (‘Páll’s Grassy Hollow’) (location approximate); 16: *Þorsteinsfell (‘Þorsteinn’s Mountain’) (location approximate); 17: *Þorsteinssund (‘Þorsteinn’s Defile’) (location approximate); 18: Ísleifsmóar (‘Ísleifur’s Moorlands’); 19: *Ögmundarflói (‘Ögmundur’s Moor’); 20: Narfaengi (‘Narfi’s Meadow’); 21: *Dauðsmannsfoldir (‘Dead Man’s Fields’). Composite map with marked locations © Matthias Egeler and Jón Jónsson, 2019. The base map is based on the maps of the *Uppdráttur Íslands* (1:100 000), reproduced from the digitised edition published by the Icelandic National Library and University Library in Reykjavík (Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn) with kind permission of the library (Jökull Sævarsson, 03/05/2019).

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¹ The maps of the Danish General Staff (Generalstabens topografiske Afdeling 1914) and their re-edition from the 1930s (Geodætisk institut 1933) give the height of the main triangulation point on Heiðarbærjarheiði as 600 m and 601 m respectively. My own GPS reading at this point, using a Garmin GPSMAP 64s, was 587 m elevation at N 65°34.739' W 021°40.906'.

² About Pétur Jónsson cf. Anonymus 1944; Indriði Indriðason 1946.

³ Since, as far as I am aware, no translation of the story is available, I translate the complete text. Given the length of the narrative, however, I refrain from giving the whole text bilingually. All translations in this article are mine unless specified otherwise.

⁴ Who would have been expected to form a search and rescue party.

⁵ Filippus M. Gunnlaugsson 1929. Cf. also Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 07/04/1981, 4.

⁶ Cf. <<https://www.arnastofnun.is/is/ornefnastofnun-islands>>, last accessed 17/03/2020. It later was integrated into the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík as Örnefnastofnun Íslands.

⁷ On the school of Hólar in Icelandic folk tales cf. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003, 206.

⁸ The connection of Pálshvammur and Halldórshvammur with 'Loss of Men' is also found in Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 06/02/1978, 4.

⁹ Guðrún Finnbogadóttir: SÁM 91/2370 EF – 5, dated 14/07/1970, <<https://www.ismus.is/i/audio/id-1013266>>, last accessed 28/10/2019; Magnús Gunnlaugsson: SÁM 90/2356 EF – 20, dated 08/07/1970, <<https://www.ismus.is/i/audio/uid-010f5cb9-cf1f-49ac-9af6-9e3f21485d48>>, last accessed 28/10/2019.

¹⁰ Quoted from the unpaginated field notes of Hilmar Egill Sveinbjörnsson, who in 1999 undertook a study of the place-names of the district of Kirkjubólshreppur for Ungmennafélagið Hvöt. The field notes are now held by the Environmental Institute of the Westfjords (Nátturustofa Vestfjarða) and quoted by kind permission of Hafdís Sturlaugsdóttir.

¹¹ Gísli Jónatansson 1983, 150-152. The interweaving of oral and written tradition is also highlighted by the text of Gísli Jónatansson as such: Gísli states that he has based his account on traditions which he had 'heard' (*heyrt*), yet it is closely related – in parts almost verbatim – to 'Loss of Men' as it had been published by Guðni Jónsson – which of course is unsurprising if one remembers that Guðni had based his text on a manuscript which he had received second-hand, but which had originated with Gísli, as the Gísli Jónatansson of Naustavík who wrote the contribution to *Strandapósturinn* is the same man as the Gísli Jónatansson of Naustavík who supplied the manuscript to Pétur Jónsson which Pétur then passed on to Gísli for publication. In fact, Gísli Jónatansson (1904-1992) was a key figure of the collection of Steingrímsfjörður folklore; a number of interviews with him are accessible on the Icelandic *Ísmús* database (<<https://www.ismus.is/i/person/uid-6501634d-2a1b-4ef6-92bb-188788536520>>, last accessed 21/12/2019). In his publication of the 'Loss of Men'-story in *Strandapósturinn*, Gísli also includes material not contained in the text printed by Guðni, such as the reference to Eiríksvöllur ('Eiríkur's Field'), where the body of a certain Eiríkur was said to have been found.

¹² It is first attested in Gísli Jónatansson 1983, 152. Eiríksvöllur is particularly interesting because it is located directly below the farm buildings; the Eiríkur who is supposed to have frozen to death there thus would have died within a few metres of the safety of the farm. One wonders – though of course this is pure speculation – whether this place-story was created to provide an educational reminder of the (very real) extreme danger posed by snow storms.

¹³ The stone and its name is mentioned in Guðrún Magnúsdóttir 05/10/1975, 3, but no connection with ‘Loss of Men’ is recorded.

¹⁴ Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 02/09/1981, 3, and Magnús Gunnlaugsson: SÁM 90/2356 EF – 20, dated 08/07/1970, <<https://www.ismus.is/i/audio/uid-010f5cb9-cf1f-49ac-9af6-9e3f21485d48>>, last accessed 28/10/2019.

¹⁵ The exception being Gísli Jónatansson’s second publication of the story (Gísli Jónatansson 1983), which only slightly differs from his version of the story as it had earlier been published by Guðni Jónsson (1940-1957, vol. 8, 71-75), see above, n. 11.

¹⁶ Jón Jónsson, pers. comm.

¹⁷ The maps of the Danish General Staff are digitally available on the webpage of the Icelandic National Library at <<https://islandskort.is/is/category/list/29>>, last accessed 29/10/2019.

¹⁸ This cairn was known by the name Lautinantavarða: Guðrún Magnúsdóttir 05/10/1975, 4.

¹⁹ Hafdís Sturlaugsdóttir, pers. comm.

²⁰ This Hólar is a different Hólar from the Hólar where the famous cathedral school was located. The existence of a local farm of this name might well have facilitated an associative connection with the much more famous Hólar that was known for its episcopal see and its school.