

# Icelandic Identity and Landscape:

The Effect of Modernization and  
Climate Change on Icelandic  
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# Icelandic Identity and Landscape: The Effect of Modernization and Climate Change on Icelandic Folklore and Supernatural Beliefs

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This paper focuses on the vast mythological landscape of Icelandic folklore and Sagas, with a specific focus on trolls, Elves, and civil war Sagas. It highlights common themes, historical reception, and their impact on current Icelandic identity. It then claims through survey data, population demographics, and climate projections that modernization, urbanization, and climate change will erase or permanently change the fundamental purpose of these traditional stories and beliefs. This paper focuses on Iceland throughout its entire existence as a settled nation (874 CE - present).

In the modern day, civilizations rely on ancient cultural traditions to underscore and support social and political decisions through providing a moral roadmap for individuals to follow. However, countless civilizations have seen their ancient cultural traditions and beliefs slip away. This can be due to internal pressures from urbanization or governance changes, external pressures from colonization or war, or environmental changes resulting from warming temperatures or natural disasters. Despite many countries in this modern age abandoning their traditional ideologies through choice or force, a few countries still garner great respect for their belief in their mythology and folklore. Such examples include Greece and Italy, which are exemplary cases of cultural preservation. However, despite their historically strong connection to folklore, Iceland is currently balancing on the delicate edge of either forsaking its deep-rooted folklore in favor of the outward perception of cultural modernization or continuing to regard folklore and the sagas as a part of everyday life.

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data, and climate projections, this paper will explore the importance of the Icelandic landscape and its impact on native culture and folklore, how locals' perceptions of history and mythology have evolved, and why traditional customs are at risk in the future due to environmental shifts.

## Background and Literature Review

Throughout human history, people have woven rich mythscapes representing their customs, beliefs, and troubles facing their people. Despite the great importance these stories have historically held, many fail to maintain relevance in modern times due to various complications. Some of these are internal conflicts, such as ideological changes or governance shifts; external conflicts, such as colonization or warfare; and environmental strains, such as natural disasters. Internal changes can occur within the span of one ruler or across multiple generations. In Ancient Egypt, internal shifts were more gradual; as Christianity grew, Egyptians slowly started rejecting polytheistic traditions, leaving myths such as those of Ra and Osiris as symbols of the past (Bárta 25). Shifts impacting the Babylonian Empire in Iraq were more accelerated. This was due to the last Neo-Babylonian ruler, King Nabonidus, who removed key religious statues and disrupted temple operations (Zawadzki 51). The Babylonian Empire also faced external pressures to adopt Persian customs and release the exiled Jewish population following the strategic and swift invasion led by Cyrus the Great. This left their mythology as a subject of archaeological study rather than a living culture (Sandowicz 197). Native American Tribes faced external conflict through colonization and mandatory assimilation, which displaced them from their ancestral lands and forced them to adopt Christianity and European customs (Widmer 113). Following cultural decimation, Indigenous people also faced environmental changes due to industrialization, further severing their access to sacred sites (120). Although these scenarios from antiquity do not perfectly reflect modern threats to cultural loss, societies still face internal shifts in ideology, external

In the face of Iceland's late development and accelerated modernization, it remains to be seen how Icelanders' identity will evolve in the face of urbanization and environmental change. Through primary and secondary scholarship, interviews, survey

pressures, and environmental changes that risk separating people from the culture and traditions that shaped them.

Although similar to the aforementioned challenges that other civilizations face, Iceland's issues are unique due to the lack of purposeful or violent outside pressure. This is further differentiated due to the separation of Iceland from others, geographically and temporally. This is perhaps the greatest difference—Iceland is grappling with its evolving identity far later than other places. Because of the country's rapid modernization in the mid-twentieth century, Iceland faces different threats to tradition, including ur-



Bromr, *Troll Wife's Leap*

banization, climate change, and foreign perception (Wyatt 60). Urbanization and climate change in Iceland have a critical influence on place attachment, the emotional bond that is formed through experiences in a specific location. Due to Iceland's geographic position just outside of the Arctic Circle, the harsh environment forced inhabitants to adapt to the isolation and extreme weather in different ways. As people lacked human interaction, the landscape was a living thing in and of itself, so to explain the wildness of their surroundings, they created fantastical and supernatural stories, such as the pantheon of Norse Gods like Óðinn and Þórr (Gísladóttir et al. 25). These stories were carried down through oral tradition for generations. Because of this, the landscape gives locals a strong sense of pride and belonging—it not only represents their heritage, but also their ability to survive in such a harsh environment. This is seen in traditional literature through the connection to natural landmarks, such as Óðinn's Eye or the broader genre of *Goðfræðisögur*, the tales of spiritual beings (Gunnell). Since folklore and sagas are rooted in specific environmental features that still exist, they do not become abstract ideas from the past; they are anchored in current reality.

### Supernatural Beings

This is especially common in *Goðfræðisögur*, which often describe natural Icelandic landscapes in terms of their supernatural qualities. For example, Elves are said to inhabit large rock formations and grassy hills, while trolls dwell in mountains and less majestic rock formations, like stout boulders or craggy mountains (Benedikz 3). This can be explained through the differing etiology of these creatures and who was originally telling these stories. Troll stories come from Norwegian roots and were often passed

down by the fathers in families, who came primarily from Norway in the Viking Age (Hallmundsdóttir). In this era, men were often out of the house hunting or dealing with interpersonal matters, so they spent less time around their children telling their native tales. As a result, troll stories are less common and often more violent because they mirror the everyday lives of male settlers (Hallmundsdóttir). These creatures are portrayed as frightening and disgusting, often the opposite of humans and the parallel of Elves—similar in the overall basics, yet so vastly different (Benedikz 5).

In the Troll stories *Drangey Consecrated* and *Gissur of Botnar* in Appendices A and B, they are shown as different from humans, but the stories also educate about the origins of specific locations. In the first story, we are told about the indiscriminate cruelty of Trolls when they massacre large numbers of explorers and missionaries on the island of Drangey; any time someone rappelled down the cliff, a hand would cut the rope and send the man to his death (Sveinsson 31). *Drangey Consecrated* also serves as a link to the Sagas through topographic references to the *Saga of Grettir*, putting the place into context for Icelanders, before explaining the reasoning behind the names Lambhöfði and Uppgönguvík, which helps anchor and preserve the historic place names (32). In *Gissur of Botnar*, we get an even more detailed explanation for a natural landmark, Trollwife's Leap, citing the Troll Wife from Búrfell as the creator of the huge stepping stones (32).

The Troll Wife of Búrfell was known to communicate with her sister in Bjólfell across Tröllkonugil—Troll Wife's Canyon—to plot against any wandering travelers (33). This tale details the chase of Gissur of Botnar, who scarcely avoided being cooked and eaten by the Troll Wife of Búrfell (34). Gissur obtains assistance from a nearby village, which rings their church bells to drive the Troll mad—she is later found dead in the canyon named for herself and her sister (36). These stories serve as cautionary tales against



Bauer, *Icelandic Trolls*

the terrifying race of Trolls that dwell in the countryside. However, there are other beings to be wary of in the vast landscape of Iceland.

To parallel the Trolls, Iceland has a deep-rooted culture sur-



ter-species interactions, which extend into how they shared the land—something of incredible importance to early Icelanders as seen in the epic collection of the Sagas.

### The Sagas

Icelandic culture is historically and spiritually tied to its landscape; myths are not abstract but embedded in specific geographic features. In the Sagas, a collection of prose narratives from the 13th and 14th centuries detailing Icelandic history, there are many references to specific landmarks that still exist today (Gunnell, *On the Border* 12). Many Sagas incorporate volcanic eruptions and glacial floods as pivotal events—things that have impacted and will continue to impact the landscape for centuries (Halink 209). Sagas such as *Íslendingasögur*, the family Sagas, and *Sturlunga*, the civil war Saga, were considered history, not fiction, by academics until well into the twentieth century (Wyatt 56). This was largely due to Icelandic belief in the validity of oral tradition and the ability to keep accounts accurate without writing them down (Hallmundsdóttir). In scholarship, belief stemmed from Denmark's king commissioning *The Reise igennem Island* by Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Palsson in 1772 to document the landscape of Iceland, so in turn, “the land becomes a means of validating the text” (Wyatt 56). Nearly a century later, Frederick Metcalfe, a British travel writer, called upon foreigners to “see with your own eyes the spots we have been reading of in the Sagas” (Metcalfe 3). In that time, the correlation between the landscape in the Sagas and the physical landscape was enough to confirm the validity of the stories (Wyatt 57). This belief was widely held by not just Icelanders but historians worldwide for another two centuries.

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***Urbanization and migration to cities from rural areas like the West Fjords best correlate with the decline in belief because Icelanders are removing themselves from the places where these stories hold the most weight.***

However, around the time of Iceland's industrialization, this belief evolved, largely due to the opinion of Sigurður Nordal, who claimed that the locations described in the Sagas were inaccurate and possibly nonexistent. This was specifically in Freysgoða, with Nordal saying, “much of the belief in the truthfulness of the Icelandic Sagas is based on reasons which, if closely scrutinized, would turn out to be untenable” (60). This was controversial at the time because questioning the legitimacy of the Sagas was a direct attack on Icelandic nationalism and environmentalism (Lindow 455; Sigurðsson 43). Gísli Sigurðsson later landed on a more moderate take that “the events of many of the medieval Sagas take place in Iceland, and are thus set in the same landscape as that which people still have before their eyes today. Sagas were (and still are) linked to the land in the minds of people” (43). This combined the ideas of both Metcalfe and Nordal by stating the importance of these places in Icelandic culture, while addressing that geographic correlation does not necessarily prove that the event happened. Today, scholars are trying to balance the entanglement of

myth, history, and identity to honor the past without ignoring physical evidence (Olwig 1). However, due to the tension between stories and science (the very fundamentals of supernatural beings directly contradict science), it is unclear what the prevailing current belief in Icelandic mythology is (Gunnell, *Narratives Across Space* 338).

The effect of globalization and modernization on folklore beliefs is also sparsely researched, leading to a limited understanding of how traditional customs may erode in the coming years. A useful but unexplored way to measure these effects would be through a factorial ANOVA test to see if there is a statistically relevant influence of one dataset of independent variables, like age, education, and gender on the dependent variables, like different beliefs; however, there is not currently enough sample data on this subject to complete this test in an accurate manner, due to skewed samples and a disproportionate amount of urban responses (Lakens et al.). Another gap is the role of environmental degradation in disrupting the place attachment and interconnectedness of mythology and landscape. Although Icelandic stories have been researched since the 1700s and landscape change has been studied for even longer, there is very little work done at the intersection of these two disciplines. This multidisciplinary research is especially timely due to the accelerated loss of natural landscape through melting glaciers and urbanization, which pose a threat to historical and mythological landmarks (Jónsdóttir et al. 393). Additionally, Iceland has been undergoing a social transformation as more of the population gains access to global media, technology, and beliefs, exposing them to foreign ideological pressures. Because of the disappearing environment and the fading aspects of identity, it is important to be aware of the threats and preserve Icelandic heritage as much as possible (Gunnell, *Contact with the Dead* 9).

### Methods and Data

This paper draws on traditional Icelandic folklore with a specific focus on trolls and Elves, the Sagas, and historical travel accounts written by antiquarians in the 18th and 19th centuries. These are examined in combination with peer-reviewed articles written by locals and specialists in Icelandic folklore to understand the cultural implications and deep roots of their identity. Then, survey data collected in 1974, 2006, 2007, and 2023 by the Social Sciences Institute at the University of Iceland were analyzed with a specific focus on changes in Elf, Troll, and mythological ideologies within demographics to see how public perception of supernatural beings and occurrences has changed over the past half-century. Next, I compared various climate projections for Iceland as a whole to coastal and glacial mythological and supernatural sites to see how place attachment will be affected in the near future by sea level rise and glacial melt. Lastly, interviews on supernatural attitude and the origins of these beliefs were conducted with Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, a professor of Medieval Icelandic Literature at the University of Iceland, and Margrét Hrönn Hallmundsdóttir, an archaeologist in the Westfjords, to gain firsthand knowledge from experts in the field (see Appendices E and F for specifics).

### Analysis

Icelanders tend to err on the side of caution when stating their opinions on the supernatural, as demonstrated in an interview with Margrét Hrönn Hallmundsdóttir. She shared a personal experience about a time when she proclaimed her disbelief in Elves—something she now has physical trouble saying out loud—and was met

with a small unexplained fire in her bathroom less than an hour later. She thinks it was a sign from the Elves; from then on, she said, “I believe— I will not say no. I will never refuse their existence again, ever” (Hallmundsdóttir). Although there are still Icelanders like Margrét who hold deep beliefs in the supernatural world, through experience or reverence for tradition, survey data from the Social Science Institute indicates a decline in supernatural beliefs in Iceland from 1974 to 2023. The most recent survey questioned 2792 Icelanders on 74 different supernatural-related questions (Gunnell, *Survey of Icelandic* 2). Results show that sightings of Elves and Hiddenfolk, which are the nonpejorative version of Elves, have remained stable at 6% since 1974, see Appendix G, Figure 2 (2). However, the majority of findings showed a sharp decrease in belief, with typically less than 5% being certain about the existence of anything supernatural by 2023. In 1974, only 12% of the population thought Elves and Hiddenfolk to be unlikely or impossible; by 2023, that number grew to 50%; see Appendix G, Figure 1 (2). This percentage threatens to rise with continued rural flight, foreign influence, and climate change (Gunnell, *Contact with the Dead* 9).

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### *Icelandic folklore faces dual threats: social disconnection and environmental degradation.*

Icelandic folklore faces dual threats: social disconnection and environmental degradation. Urbanization and migration to cities from rural areas like the West Fjords best correlate with the decline in belief because Icelanders are removing themselves from the place where these stories hold the most weight. This is something that was highlighted in both interviews:

*In the countryside, say, you would say this is a Noon Hill, because the sun is there at noon. This is this hill, and you would tell everything according to this hill and this hill. And now we are losing that because people don't use this anymore, they don't use place names. And the same is with stories, we have phones, we have other means, we don't have to recite it. And as you take yourself out of the environment, you lose the story. You know that the cliff, this is an Elf church, then when you move away, nobody is to tell you it is an Elf church, it just becomes a rock. So I think definitely we are losing that. Both place names and beliefs, and in the past, we didn't have anything except the environment, we look at this hill, and yes, this could be an Elf church there or something. There's a stone up there, and it is just like a face. It's a troll that saw the light of day and was— all kinds of that. We lose that, I think, definitely. I am afraid of it. (Hallmundsdóttir)*

With fewer people living in these places, cultural transmission occurs less because there is no one to explain natural phenomena. This correlates to statistics found on population demographic shift in Iceland, see Appendix H (Helniak 10). From 1901 to 1960, the population in Reykjavík rose from 12% of the country's population to just over 50%; by the year 2023, 65% of people were concentrated in the capital (12). Because the majority of people are living in an urban setting and have greater access to modern technologies and luxuries, there are fewer locals carrying on the traditional stories and ways of life. However, emigration has also impacted the legacy of traditional

practices. Locals have not only moved out of the rural areas, but some have left Iceland altogether. This was especially seen after the 2008 financial crash, which “led to many Icelanders moving away; both the rise of tourism and increasing access to international media were leading to an influx of ideas from abroad” (Gunnell, *Contact with the Dead* 5). This removed a key component for passing down traditional folklore. It also exposed Icelanders to heavier international criticism, and in turn, they ‘commodified’ their folklore and history, something that is blatantly seen through the rampant inaccurate portrayal of Vikings, the original Icelandic settlers (Warren). We see this not only in Icelandic tourism, where the Elves and Trolls have been made comedic, but also in mainstream media, where Icelandic Elves have morphed into kinder beings—specifically in *The Lord of the Rings* series. They have caught the attention of foreign news sources many times, and the tone of the articles frequently conveys a sort of condescending disbelief that a modern country could believe in such a thing (Warren). The disapproval typically heightens whenever Elvish matters, like landscape disturbance, are cited as a reason to halt political or developmental decisions—something fairly common up until the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century (Kirby). This has been exacerbated by the percentage of foreigners living in Iceland, which has increased exponentially since 2000—once only accounting for 2%, foreigners now make up 17% of the population (Helniak 12). This can introduce new ideological beliefs and apply pressure on traditional customs by making locals feel embarrassed to celebrate this aspect of culture that was once so important to them.



Kristinsson, *The Entrance to the Center of the Earth*

Another major threat is anthropogenic climate change, specifically glacial melt and sea level rise. According to the Icelandic Meteorological Office, two glaciers, Langjökull and Hofsjökull, are expected to melt completely by 2100 and 2200, respectively (*Climate Report*). This will cause glacial flooding in surrounding areas, wiping out the sites of Óðinn's Eye and the entrance to the center of the Earth (*Entrance to the Centre*).

Sea level rise poses a similar threat to the supposed dwellings of supernatural beings. In the figure in Appendix I, the locations of eight known Elf hills are marked along the coast between Steingrímsfjörður and Bjarnarfjörður. SSP scenarios 2-4.5, 3-7.0, and 5-8.5, with the most conservative projection of one meter of sea level rise, place six of the eight Elf hills underwater (Jónsdóttir et al. 407; *Sea Level Projection Tool*). This greatly threatens the direct relationship between the Icelandic landscape and folklore. In a conversation with Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, she shed light on just how deep the root of environmental attachment is in Iceland:

*Even if the first settlers came from countries where the landscape was not so different from the Icelandic landscape, they probably had to adjust to even worse weather, darker winters and what we might call "a living landscape," where they had to be prepared for volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, snow floods, water floods, rough sea and so on. The landscape itself was wild with big mountain areas and glaciers. Because of the harsh winters, it also became very cold, for example, the high and rocky sea cliffs, and the volcanic landscape, the lava, that is made from endless natural stone sculptures, with lots of shadows that probably encouraged people's imagination. In this big island and overwhelming, difficult landscape, people lived in small farmsteads along the coastal area and could easily become very isolated during the winter. Furthermore, the regular natural disasters could ruin land and livestock that was necessary for people to survive. All this is bound to influence everyone who lives here – the weather is constantly changing, and the landscape itself is extremely dangerous and variable. We can see how this is reflected in the saga literature, and specifically in the folktales, e.g., in the various supernatural beings. (Guðmundsdóttir)*

Without these coastal areas and similar landscapes to old Iceland, the connection is going to be lost.

## Implications and Discussion

We have seen similar cultural disconnection in other civilizations from antiquity; however, because we have these case studies, Iceland can reference those successful and unsuccessful in saving traditions. Greece is a prime example of preservation. Ancient Greece fell due to a combination of internal and external factors, including transitioning from worshiping the Olympian pantheon to practicing Christianity, military defeats to Macedon and Rome, and the fragmentation of the poleis, the Greek city-state (Carugati et al. 1138). Unlike other civilizations that lost cultural connections, modern Greece honors its mythology through tourism at historical places like the Acropolis in Athens, as well as the education of its population and foreigners (Mackridge 41). Although the beliefs are no longer widely held, Iceland can still apply the educational aspect of preservation to its own culture. Italy has also maintained its connection following the fall of the Roman Empire. Rome's fall is agreed to have been due to a combination of corrupt politics and the Late Antique Little Ice Age, a period in the 6th and 7th century CE when global temperatures dropped approximately 2 °C (Piganiol 69; Harper 145). Ancient Roman culture is a special case of preservation because it not only promotes historical tourism and education, but many of the core institutions are the basis for modern law and politics—especially in the United States (Olivadese et al. 7-8, 13). Iceland can learn from Greece and Rome in many ways; however, what makes this case so uniquely challenging is the timing—the shift is still underway, and we do not know what the outcome will be.

To mimic the success of its European neighbors and limit culture loss, Iceland should institute educational programs for Icelandic children to instill a balance between scientific knowledge and cultural heritage from a young age, in hopes of overcoming the separation from rural Icelandic life. In the surveys from the Social Science Institute, the age group that believed in the supernatural the least in 2023 were those in the 18-25 range (Gunnell, *Survey of Icelandic* 77). Younger generations are already exhibiting a steep drop-off in folklore faith, and it must be addressed before this extends to new generations.

Iceland should also continue to invest in cultural institutions as well as the environment to preserve and share folklore with future generations in more purposeful ways. While the public has shown

great support for nationalist environmentalism, as seen through civilian-supported government policies, there has been a less prevalent movement to protect traditional identity in the same way. Iceland is the leading country in habitat conservation and sustainability. Not only are there extensive policies to evaluate environmental impact for large construction projects, but they also promote innovation clusters to elevate their sustainable fishing industry and cause minimal impacts on the aquatic ecosystem. Furthermore, Iceland is almost entirely powered by renewable energy, primarily geothermal, while still providing a high quality of life through massive energy consumption. Although Iceland is taking strides, there is still work to be done. For example, while the Settlement Museum in Reykjavík does a thorough job of explaining the founding of Iceland through a political and domestic lens, it lacks an explanation of Icelandic folklore, especially when compared to the Athens Living Museum, which immersively exposes visitors to the ins and outs of Greek mythology and its impacts (*Athens Living Museum*). Considering its vast importance in the early days, the absence of any mention of folklore in the exhibits implies to visitors that this is insignificant to the foundation of Icelandic society. By educating the younger generations, immigrants, and tourists as well as investing in cultural institutions and preservation projects, the stories and folklore of traditional Icelanders can be more effectively protected.

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*To preserve their old identity, more effort will be needed to further the folklore and saga narrative.*

## Conclusion

Icelanders are becoming disconnected from traditional customs and stories, partly due to changing beliefs and modernization, and partly due to the loss of physical sites tethered to mythology and folklore. While Icelanders should not have to sacrifice the comforts of living in an urbanized city, it is essential to recognize that change is underway. To preserve their old identity, more effort will be needed to further the folklore and saga narrative.

Great strides have already been made by incorporating these stories into tourism; however, it is not the foreign population that needs convincing of the importance of Icelandic tradition.

Iceland can and should look to Greece's approach to cultural preservation. Not only have they gained cultural admiration and respect, but by speaking to locals, it is easily communicated by them that they believe in the epic myths, and they even talk about events like the Trojan War or the journey of Aeneas as if it were not an outlandish tale, because to them, that is their history.

They do not shy away from criticism, but rather have trust that their ancestors accurately carried down these stories for generations as a living history of their nation, and who are we to decide that what they experienced and lived did not happen? By losing connection to the supernatural aspects of their identity, Icelanders will risk losing attachment to their ancestors, the land, and all that makes Iceland so unique.

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## Appendix

Find the full appendix at WUJUR.org.