

Driftage and (Super) natural Entanglements

Kristinn Schram & Alice Brower
(*University of Iceland*)

Abstract

The nature-culture entanglements of Arctic and Subarctic coasts are discussed here with a focus on the non-human actants present in myths, legends and personal experience narratives that reveal worldviews and belief systems. It explores these dynamics on Iceland's northern shores and engages with how driftage (e.g. of flora and fauna and nature-cultural material), landscape and the human experiences within it are narrated. Folkloristic enquiry and ethnography are furthermore applied in the study of narratives that themselves question ontological assumptions and established boundaries.

Keywords: Arctic coasts, driftage, naturculture entanglements, folklore and ethnography

Introduction

On the ever-changing interface of the seashore notions of the human and the non-human are often challenged with the uncanniest of results. Many narratives of human and non-human entanglements in the North Atlantic and Arctic regions present us with these dynamics of mobilities and morphing environments. In a West-Nordic context, examples can be found in a variety of forms from Old Norse poetry and prose to traditional folk narratives and contemporary legends. These narratives express both worldviews and local knowledge of land and seascapes as crucial to transnational networks, human and non-human. Whether it be driftwood, polar bears, whales, walruses, warships, or people, whatever washes ashore shapes various imaginaries of northern regions, positions them within, apparently disastrous, binaries of nature and culture but also may question established boundaries and ontological assumptions. This article explores these dynamics on Iceland's shores and engages with how the driftage of flora and fauna, the landscape of the shore, and the human experiences within it, are narrated and entangled with notions of the supernatural and the more-than-human.

Images 1 and 2:
Driftwood beaches in Strandir. *Brian Berg 2010*



Image 1



Image 2

Approaches to the *more-than-human*

In recent scholarship folklorists and ethnologists have drawn inspiration from approaches linked to posthumanism. They have played increased attention to the roles played by flora and fauna—not only as subjects but also as active participants (Mechling 1989; Thompson 2010; 2019; Magliocco 2018). This development reflects a broader trend in the social sciences and humanities, where posthumanist theories are being more widely adopted. Posthumanism challenges the notion of the human as a distinct and superior category, revealing how it has often served to separate man from nature.

This divide has frequently reinforced binaries, placing the European male on one side, and nature, women, or non-Europeans on the other (Plumwood 1993). Man is associated with reason and culture, while, in contrast, “the category of nature is a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature” (Plumwood 1993, 4).

A posthuman—or more-than-human—perspective explores how such distinctions are constructed, often aiming to uncover a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the world. These approaches—including new materialism and multispecies ethnography, and other more-than-human frameworks—offer ways to rethink epistemological, ontological, and methodological assumptions. They allow us to study life forms and materials as entangled in networks of relationships, or as *naturecultures*, rather than as opposites in a binary of nature versus culture.⁴⁷ From this perspective, humans do not exist in isolation from nature but live in constant relation with other forms of life and matter in a multispecies world. These relationships vary—some are based on kinship (Haraway 2008), others on dependence (Yong 2016), and still others involve struggle and contested power dynamics where humans may barely survive, if at all (Standley and Bogich 2013; Lorimer 2016). Within these frameworks, more-than-human beings are understood to possess agency and exert influence. However, consistent with Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory and what Jane Bennett (2007, 33) refers to as an *agentic assemblage*, they act in conjunction with a web of other actants. Edwin Sayes goes further, asserting that “non-humans do not have agency by themselves, if only because they are never by themselves” (2014, 44).

Nature-culture entanglements in Arctic and Subarctic coasts, can be explored in a multitude of ways. By looking at non-human actants present in specific myths, legends and personal experience narratives one may throw also throw light on human worldviews and belief systems.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Latour 1993; Ingold 2000; Barad 2002; Deleuze and Guattari 2004; Haraway 2008; and Braidotti 2017.

Image 3: A driftwood beach in Keflavík, Strandir. *Brian Berg 2010.*



Driftwood: transarctic flora

Gleaning into the narratives of the shore, and discerning what actants, and agentic assemblages are to be recognised there, is a particularly mercurial endeavour. The central features of the shore lie not least in the fluid state of what is brought and taken away by the sea. Through this natural phenomenon Iceland's shores, like many in the Arctic and Subarctic region, contain a trans-arctic flora that is somewhat lacking in Iceland's interior: trees. The oldest written source of Iceland's settlement *Landnámabók* [The Book of Settlement], describes woodlands ranging from mountain to coast some three to four centuries prior (Benediktsson 1933). But whatever woodlands may have met the settlers they are likely to have declined quickly through slash-and-burn agriculture and animal husbandry in a cooling climate. Fuel and building materials from indigenous wood were therefore scarce after the sun set on the Viking Age and Iceland became an increasingly isolated and marginalised island in the North Atlantic.

Yet, Iceland already had a transarctic source of wood originating in natural erosions and lost lumber from the northern rivers of Russia and

Siberia. Crucially, driftwood is dependent on ice to carry it past the transpolar drift and to destinations on Svalbard, Iceland, Greenland and even Baffin Bay. According to latest research, most of the Icelandic driftwood originates from the Yenisei catchment in central Siberia and is anything but stable. An abrupt decline in the amount of Icelandic driftwood supply occurred in the 1980s, and due to predicted sea-ice loss, is likely to cease by 2060 CE, (see Kolář et al. 2022.) However, Icelanders are already reporting a cessation in driftwood arriving in the Strandir region, of Northwest Iceland as early as 2017 (Reynisson 2025).

(Super)natural origins

The origin of driftwood, and its transarctic journey, will have alluded Icelanders for centuries, although they did have certain beliefs. In his annals the 17th Century bishop, Gísli Oddson, stated that “some imagine that enormous forests grow somewhere on the ocean floor – this, someone, has put forth with considerable persuasion”. (Oddson 1942, 58). In a scientific and cultural survey conducted between 1752 and 1757, Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson, perhaps in the spirit of Enlightenment, see reason to correct the “total fabrication that [driftwood] grows on particular shallows of the sea.” (Ólafsson 1975, 300)” Rather they state that its likely points of origin are the rivers and woodlands of the Americas and Northern Tartary, a historical name for Siberia. Yet another century later, folk narratives, collected 1858, still indicate a belief in driftwood originating from underwater forests. In a legend collected by Konrad Maurer, who inspired the extensive Icelandic collection of Icelandic folk narrative by Jón Árnason and others, tells of a “discovery” made in the Strandir region by a well known 16th Century priest and sorcerer, Hálfðan Narfason: “Out from Hornstrandir they say that he [Hálfðan] had put out a line with a hook to measure the depth of the sea, then he drew up a leafy shrub and from this men understood that there in the deep grew a forest” (Maurer 2015, 117).⁴⁸

Agentic assemblages of the driftfarm

But whatever its origins, the so-called ‘driftfarms’ (Icel. *rekjardir*) in Iceland are farmlands rich in this much sought-after resource and have been a

⁴⁸ Translated by author from Steinar Matthíasson’s Icelandic translations: “Út af Hornströndum er sagt að hann hafi sett út línu með krók til að mæla dýpt sjávarins, þá dró hann upp hrís laufgað og af því töldu menn að þar í djúpinu yxi skógur.” (Maurer 2015, 117).

defining feature in some areas, such as the beforementioned Strandir (Icel.: the Shores) in Northwest Iceland. Well into the 21st Century, local communities in these areas have retained *relationships of dependence* on driftwood, to use Yong's terminology (2016). Driftwood was, through the centuries, a valuable resource for humans not least as housing material, for utensils and crucially boats. Boatmakers had some preferences and beliefs related to driftwood as material, that are even preserved to this day. Goat willow (lat. *Salix caprea* Icel. Selja), for example, is considered too soft for boatmaking. Rather more elaborate is the belief that if the first wood shaving from a driftwood log fell to the ground arching up, like an upside-down boat, then the log was not safe for use as this would cause the boat to sink (Benediktsson 2010).

**Image 4: Valgeir Benediktsson
in his woodshop in Árnes, Trékyllisvík**



Photo: Brian Berg 2010

Image 5: Driftwood shavings in Trékyllisvík, Strandir

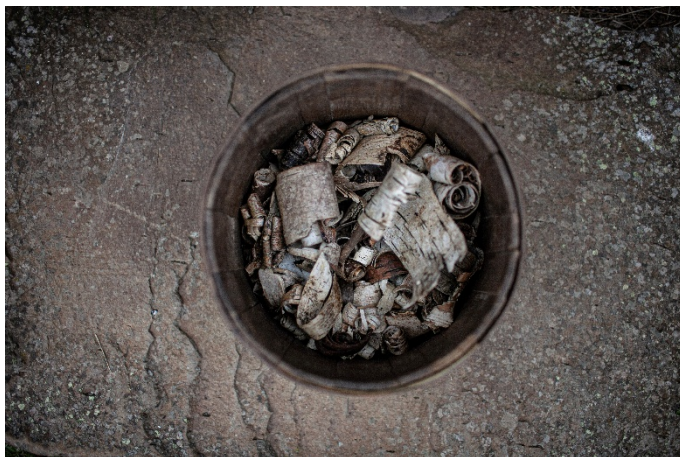


Photo: Brian Berg 2010.

Driftwood beaches were subject to a complicated form of ownership and harsh judgements were passed on theft, determining if driftwood had been shaped by human hands, making them, at one point in history, the property of the king of Denmark, Iceland and Greenland. Driftfarmers could also mark driftwood and thus collect it later if it drifts off again (Kristjánsson 1980–1982, I:291–92, 299, 304–5; II:113). Driftwood was also carried throughout the land, as lumber to areas far from the currents’ reach or as crafted objects. Household items carved from driftwood by the craftsmen of Strandir were, according to twelfth- and thirteenth-century sources such as *Sturlunga saga* well-known throughout the land (Grímsdóttir 2021, II:244). The ‘Strandamenn,’ who were frequently associated with magic, were known to have sold their products in Alþingi, as late as the eighteenth century (Finnbogason 1943, 365–66, 368). Going well beyond practical use it is safe to assume that driftwood has been part of Iceland’s cultural history, imagination and folklore since its settlement. Driftwood’s legal significance is witnessed in the oldest Icelandic legal works, such as *Grágás*, *Járnsöða* and *Jónsbók*, which include codices remaining largely valid into early modernity.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ On the archaeological, and other, evidence for the significance of arctic driftwood in the medieval period and beyond see Lísabet Guðmundsdóttir 2024; Mooney et. al. 2023; and Egeler 2024.

Images 6, 7 and 8: In addition to buildings and boats, many household items such as food storage barrels and utensils, were made from driftwood in Iceland. Utensils carved by the craftsmen of Strandir, were well-known throughout the land. The utensils photographed are made in Bjarnarfjörður, Strandir.



Image 6 - Photo: Brian Berg 2010



Image 7 - Photo: Brian Berg 2010



Image 8 - Photo: *Brian Berg 2010*

Image 9: As Iceland's oldest legal works state driftfarmers would mark driftwood and thus collect it later if it drifts off to other areas



Photo: Brian Berg 2010

Image 10: In Norse mythology the first humans, Ask and Embla, were created from two driftwood logs found on the beach.



Photo: Brian Berg 2010.

Genesis and apocalypse on the shore

The oldest sources bring us back to Eddic poetry. With its roots in oral tradition, it attests to driftwood playing a significant role in the Old Norse worldview, even before Iceland's settlement. Both the mythological Eddic poem *Völuspá* and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* tell us how the first male and female humans, Ask and Embla, were created from two driftwood logs found on the beach. Óðinn and his brothers stumble upon them and bring them to life. Similarities can of course be drawn from features of creation myths in the Abrahamic faiths: Adam and Eve breathed into life from the earthly character of clay, as compared to driftwood; the significance of the biblical Tree of Life and the World Tree of *Völuspá*, Yggdrasill. The latter, is, in *Völuspá*, described immediately following the creation of Ask and Embla, standing evergreen upon the water of destiny at its roots (*Eddukvæði* 2014, 6–7).⁵⁰ It is not unlikely that Christian influence is at play here, although more visibly in Snorri's work, where a pre-Christian worldview is put down in written form, at least two centuries after it was dominant. But,

⁵⁰ The Icelandic folk belief and use of „birthing stones“ (Icel. lausnarsteinn, literally meaning *releasing stone*) is worth mentioning in this context. It was traditionally used to ease women's labour, and was by many believed not to have been a stone at all but rather driftwood. Iceland's most prolific folk narrative collector, Jón Árnason, attributes this view to the 18th Century natural scientist Eggert Ólafsson (Árnason 1954, I: 647–648.)

as Gísli Sigurðsson (2013, 100) has pointed out, when taking oral tradition into account, *Völuspá* can be considered the culmination of a continuous literary tradition from long before the Christianisation of Scandinavia.

Interestingly, *Völuspá* iterates a distinct lack of agency in the driftwood trees that are to become the first humans. They are found by the Æsir in a state without destiny (Oícel. *örloðglausa*) or as Ursula Dronke states: “Their inert state of impotence, like that of the empty primordial world is itemized in negatives. All the elements of life that Askr and Embla do not possess the Æsir punctiliously supply” (Dronke 1997, 39). The idea of fate and fortune drifting ashore through godly intervention can be found throughout the sagas. *Landnámabók*, as well as many Icelandic sagas, presents us with narratives of settlers guided by the gods to the most preferable farmlands by the drifting of ships and various objects thrown overboard, such as *high seat pillars*. In one case a settler worships the god Þórr, as is common in the Sagas, asking for his own high-seat pillars. Þórr rewards the settler with a great driftwood boulder which washes upon his shore providing the material for pillars for many households in the vicinity (Benediktsson 1933, 164).⁵¹ The currents can in these examples be seen as a way for the gods to speak through a divine language of sorts. They may also provide other boons such as beached whales, walrusses or seals, crucial to human survival in periods of hardship. But as mythological poems, local narratives and legends attest to it is not only the gifts of the gods that wash ashore. The image of the *náströnd* or ‘corpse shore’ is, for example, also conjured up in *Völuspá*, where the seeress shows us a glimpse of apocalyptic hell:

- | | |
|--|--|
| 37. Sal sá hún standa
sólu fjarri
Náströndu á,
norður horfa dyr.
Féllu eiturdropar
inn um ljóra,
sá er undinn salur
orma hryggjum | A hall she saw standing
remote from the sun
on Dead Body Shore.
Its door looks north.
There fell drops of venom
in through the roof vent.
That hall is woven
Of serpents’ spines. |
| 38. Sá hún þar vaða | She saw there wading |

⁵¹ The tree is also mentioned in the longer version of *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (Þórólfsson and Jónsson 1943) as well as in *Gull-Þóris saga* (Nordal and Jónsson 1938).

þunga strauma	onerous streams
menn meinsvara	men perjured
og morðvarga	and wolfish murderers
og þann er annars glepur	and the one who seduces
eyrarúnu,	another's close-trusted wife.
þar saug Níðhöggur	There Malice Striker sucked
nái framgengna,	corpses of the dead,
sleit vargur vera.	the wolf tore men.
Vituð ér enn, eða hvað?	Do you still seek to know? And what?
39. Austur sat in aldna	In the east she sat, the old one,
í Járnvíði	in Iron Wood,
og fæddi þar	and bred there
Fenris kindir	the broods of Fenrir.
Verður af þeim öllum	There will come from them all
einna nokkur	One of that number
tungls tjúgari	To be a moon-snatcher
í trölls hami	In troll's skin

(*Eddukvæði* 2014, 11–12) (Dronke 1997, II:17)

These stanzas curiously depict the same kind of landscape presented as the birthplace of humanity, as a beach of death, where a great dragon sucks and tears apart the corpses of the dead in the North of *hel*. It is perhaps significant that the next stanza moves from beach to woodland, or the Ironwood. This mirrors a similar juxtaposition where the previous stanza, describing the origin of Askr and Embla, is followed by a description of the great tree Yggdrasill: positive and negative reflexions of birth on the one hand and destruction on the other. This movement has also taken us from the north to the east of *hel* where we are introduced to the wolfish kin of Fenrir, one of which will eventually rip apart the moon. That he is in the troll's skin or guise (Oícel. *hamr*), as the 39th stanza concludes, perhaps adds a sense of horror or uncanniness to the apocalyptic vision.

Image 11: Debris from maritime industry, and remnants of the Second World War, also drifts ashore. Djúpavík, Strandir.



Photo: Brian Berg 2010.

Later legendary super-natural assemblages

This amalgam, and in some cases merging, of supernatural creatures and animals, is not an uncommon feature of later Icelandic legends. The beach also serves as a backdrop of legends of supernatural beings, sea and lake creatures. Narratives of mermen, mermaids and selkies reflect an integrated oral tradition in the North Atlantic, connecting Iceland, the Faroes, Ireland and Scotland. Another group of legends, those of washed-up bodies, have the true-to-life qualities of experience narratives and memorates. As the Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko (1989, 23–39) pointed out, memorates often reflect the moral and religious life of communities. Often legends seem to have the purpose of mapping the world with its place names. Legends of washed-up corpses are an interesting case in point. A search through over ten thousand legends on a geographically mapped database of the main published collections of Icelandic folk legends, shows close to fifty local legends of bodies washed up on beaches across Iceland's coastline.⁵² The database can also help us to see the relation of this group of narratives with other aspects of folk narratives such as ghosts, apparitions, sorcerers,

⁵² See <http://sagnagrunnur.com>. Terry Gunnell, professor emeritus of folkloristics at the University of Iceland, started the legend database 1999. The database has been restructured in close cooperation with Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir and Trausti Dagsson at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík and now includes geographical mapping of a large number of the place names.

dreams, burial, weather, seafaring and travel but also surprising keywords like love, the devil, births and humour.

Indeed, many narratives on bodies washing ashore on driftfarms take the form of humorous anecdotes. The following, translated by the author, but published in collection of “Icelandic humour”, is an excellent example of the importance of context, i.e. cultural and situational, in gleaning what actual humour there is to be found.

Some years ago a farmer in the district of Gnúpverjar was suspected of sheep theft. He had left the country before the matter was investigated. Some suspected that Gestur, of the farm Hæll, was complicit in his departure. A while later Gestur met a farmer from the lower regions of Árnes county. He lived on a driftfarm and was known to gather, rather boldly, driftwood and other objects even though they belonged to others. The farmer asks Gestur about the man’s disappearance and where he might be found. „Oh, I really couldn’t say“, says Gestur, „but perhaps you’ll collect him if he drifts onto your shore” (Sigurðsson 1938, II., 3)⁵³

Image 12: Driftfarmers in Iceland commonly farm sheep. The breed has grazed on coastal vegetation since Iceland’s settlement. Trékyllisvík, Strandir.

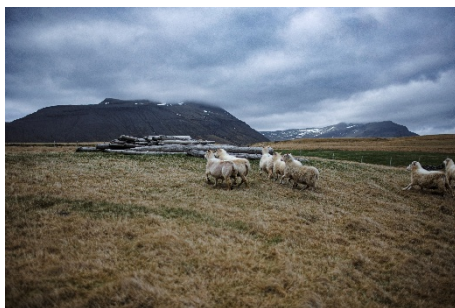


Photo: Brian Berg 2010.

⁵³ Author’s translation from Icelandic: “Bóndi einn í Gnúpverjahreppi var fyrir allmör- gum árum grunaður um sauðapjófnað. Hann fór af landi burt áður en rannsókn hófst í málinu. Sumir grunuðu Gest á Hæli um að vera í vitorði um burtför mannsins. Nokkru seinna hitti Gestur bónda úr neðri hluta Árnessýslu. Hann bjó á rekajörð og lék orð á, að hann væri djarftækur á vogrek og aðra muni, er á reka kæmu hjá honum, þótt annarra eign væri. Bóndi fer að svara Gestu um mannhvarfið og spyr hann meðal annars, hvar hann haldi að maðurinn sé niður kominn? „Og ég veit það nú ekki,” segir Gestur, „en þú hirðir hann kannske ef hann kemur á rekana hjá þér?”

Image 13: Driftwood fencepoles were commonplace well into 21st Century Iceland. Pictured is Jón Loftsson, a farmer in Steingrímsfjörður, Strandir.



Photo: Brian Berg 2010.

Images 14 and 15: Small local sawmills were crucial in remote driftwood farms. Pictured is driftfarmer Sigursteinn Sveinbjörnsson.



Image 14 - Photo: Brian Berg 2010.



Image 15 - *Photo: Brian Berg 2010.*

Images 16 and 17: Driftwood is still a feature of modern buildings. Pictured is Patricia Burke in Bjarnarfjöður, Strandir, where she designed and built her house supported by driftwood pillars.



Image 16 - *Photo: Brian Berg 2010.*



Image 17 - Photo: Brian Berg 2010.

Embedded in the material culture and cultural context of 19th Century driftfarmers the back-and-forth dialogue reflects the complicated ownership of driftage. On the one hand it entails suggestive and subtle accusations of aiding in the escape of an alleged criminal. On the other hand, the driftfarmers greed and thieving is alluded to with the bold image of the escapees' body washing ashore only to be claimed by the greedy driftfarmer. As Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir points out in her analysis of the collection the humour lies not least in the audacious, yet hidden, accusation of thievery (Valdimarsdóttir 2024, 46).

More sombre variations of these legends recount how the drowned appear to their loved ones through dreams directing them to their remains for burial within the bosom of their community. They express the sorrow of those who are left behind and the burning uncertainty of losing someone at sea. Another focuses on the moral and costly obligation of burying the deceased. Terry Gunnell (2018) has pointed out that they exemplify how moral mapping may run into murky waters expressing ambiguities through a remarkably effective experience. He writes that legends “provide a kind of map of how one should behave in this landscape: what is right, what is wrong, when are they right or wrong, and how punishment is likely to

descend on you if you transgress the largely unwritten moral rules imposed by society” (Gunnell 2018, 27). Gunnell also points out the different dynamics expressed when the deceased is of foreign origin. The otherness of the foreigner is well demonstrated in the case of the legend known as the *Hairy man of Skarð*. It tells of how a strange man’s body was found washed ashore on the Meðalland beach, naked, but covered in hair, and had claws. Some claimed two identical bodies were found. Though unsettling, the body was taken to a farm, placed in a coffin, and brought to Skarð for burial. At the funeral, strange things occurred: letters in the hymnals turned into blasphemies, and the priest’s blessings turned to curses. Despite this, the body was buried in consecrated ground.

“Many guesses were made about who this washed-up man might have been: that he might have been one of the Hound-Turks, an evil spirit incarnate, or an ape. Whatever it was, it was not long after this funeral that people started noting ghostly activities taking place in the vicinity of the Skarð church. These got so bad that it was considered impossible to travel around there after dark. People saw the “hairy man” – as the recently buried body was called – pounding the church with planks from his coffin. Various other strange things also happened there [...]. Since the time of the funeral, people say it has been very easy to get lost in this area.”⁵⁴

In the liminal space of the beach, the locals, presented with the moral dilemma of ethical respect for the deceased’s belongings, pitted against the survival instincts of the living in a place where everything that washed ashore was utilised, the added layer of foreign uncanniness expresses racist and xenophobic attitudes and a deep-set fear of the unknown.

⁵⁴ Translation by Gunnell 2017, 3-4 from the original Icelandic text in Einar Guðmundsson 1932, I:12–17.

Image 18: Guðjón Kristinsson, from Drangar, Strandir, recounts narratives of Icelanders, fishermen and wartime combatants.



Photo: Kristinn Schram 2020.

Contemporary legends washing ashore

An interesting comparison may be drawn from more contemporary legends and personal experience narratives from recent fieldwork in the Strandir region of Iceland. One group of narratives, told by Guðjón Kristinsson recounts the interactions between remote Icelandic farmers and fishermen and the combatants of the Second World War struggling off the Northwest Icelandic coast. These regional and familial tales were also artfully narrated Guðjón and others to storytelling participants as a reflection of the character of communities now largely abandoned in the northern Westfjords. One story begins with a German-speaking farm worker observing ship movements on the horizon. Days later, after flashes of light and distant blasts, soldiers' bodies and supplies wash ashore. Among the goods are “biscuits and pills” later used for all-night cliffside egg-collecting but are later revealed to be amphetamines from military medical kits.

Out of fear of ghosts, especially that of a naval captain, the bodies are left untouched. When British forces learn of this, they compel locals to retrieve the remains. In their panic, the Icelanders mistakenly gather whalebones, prompting laughter over the Germans' supposed adaptation to marine life (having grown fins). A humiliated sheriff ensures proper burial, only to be interrupted by a German warship. The admiral demands the bodies, but the sheriff insists that Icelandic law grants him ownership of anything that washes ashore. He holds his ground until he is compensated with the equivalent of several farmsteads.⁵⁵

The presentation of the foreign bodies has much in common with the “Hairy man of Skarð,” including a sense of fear of the supernatural, particularly the corporeal ghost, a sense of xenophobia and human-animal hybridity, although the latter is an instrument of jest. Indeed, the whole narrative can be interpreted as a parody of moral ambiguity and parochialism. An integral part of the humour also lies the incongruity that parochial regulations on property (that all that washes ashore on the drift farm belongs to the farmer) also apply to human remains. These can also be seen as characterisations of the region's men, which a local narrator called with some warmth: “these wild beasts.” These wild, archaic and masculine heroes, or antiheroes, retain control, or rather some sort of communion, with their wild northern landscapes successfully outmanoeuvring a foreign military presence.

A stark contrast in narrative style, experience, and apprehension of this landscape can be found in a recent account of a local woman's youth on the shores of Strandir. In an interview in 2011 Jóna Þórðardóttir gave a rich account of life, with her parents, on these northern beaches but stressed that “the shore gave us many things but during the war, it gave us mostly terror.”⁵⁶ So while remembering various materials washing ashore, she mostly associated the beach during the Second World War with personal anxieties and particularly her mother's fear of coming across washed-up corpses. Her mother in fact would only collect driftwood from the shores when accompanied by her daughter, often firmly clasping young Jóna's hand.

⁵⁵ Guðjón Kristinsson's narration of this legend was first recorded in 1999 by Kristinn Schram (KS 99:8) (see also Kristinn Schram 2002) and again in 2022 as part of the Visitations project (BS/KS/MW:01).

⁵⁶ The audio-visual recorded interview by Kristinn Schram and Katla Kjartansdóttir took place in the summer of 2011 at Jóna Þórðardóttir's home in Hólmavík (KS/KK 22).

Washed up sea mines were also common in these parts at the time and she was warned not to touch strange objects on the beach. Once a mine had washed ashore in a bay further north. Jóna remembers meeting two soldiers arriving, from the occupying allied forces, who had been sent to disarm it. When they arrived on horses she was working in the field with her father who gave the soldiers directions as well as his own pair of woollen mittens. She reminisces how miserable and out of place the soldiers looked, as they rode away, hunched up over their horses in the cold while holding the reigns, each with a single mitten. This everyday personal experience narrative, while describing a comparable landscape in the same region and historical backdrop, differs in many ways from Guðjón's narrative. Not least for the fact that the shore is presented in from the perspective of local women. It presents us with the beach as a border region between the familial domestic space on the one hand and a war-torn otherness on the other.⁵⁷

Image 19: Jóna Þórðardóttir recounts wartime memories from her childhood in Strandir during the Second World War II.



Video still: Kristinn Schram 2011

⁵⁷ This fearsome uncanniness is only accentuated when this contact zone is extended into the sea ice of historically cold winters. As attested to in sagas, medieval annals, traditional as well as modern legends the frozen fjord was known to forebode polar bear arrivals and was also ventured by humans (See Bower & Schram 2021, 66-68). An examination of the associations made between bears and other beings helps us further understand the space they have occupied in the cultural imagination over the years. In sources collected during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we see bears occupy the same imaginative and real spaces as supernatural creatures of land and sea. (See Bower and Schram 2025)

Conclusion

The landscape described in the narratives discussed here presents us with nature-culture entanglements that run far back to the beginning of human settlement in Iceland and even before it. While the recent ethnographic examples are taken mostly from remote northern Strandir regions in Iceland, where currents have brought their various *flotsam* and *jetsam*, they are clearly part of transnational and transarctic human and non-human networks. Within them, flora and fauna, macro and micro, are mobile agentic assemblages that influence courses of events over a large area ranging from Siberia to Iceland, Greenland and the Baffin Bay. While these assemblages do not ‘respect’ national borders, the shore, in the human imaginary, is apprehended as a border zone.

Within it we find the cultural, ecological, and mythological entanglements of driftwood. Carried from Siberian and Russian rivers this vital resource shaped settlement, subsistence, and craft traditions. Driftwood’s uncertain origins fostered supernatural explanations, from underwater forests to divine gifts, while Old Norse mythology casts it as the material of human creation. Legal codes, folklore, and lived experience further attest to driftwood’s enduring role in Icelandic worldviews and everyday life, where it appears as a boon and a commodity. By tracing these narratives, driftwood emerges as both natural phenomenon and cultural agent.

The liminal (foreign) body washed up on the shore is, on the other hand, trapped between different worlds. Furthermore, it is enmeshed in the landscape, from which it takes its supernatural and nature-cultural attributes. Within this local environment, supernatural and natural threats are met with creative reactions which include storytelling, folkloric and religious practice and other human attempts to control what they perceive as manifestations of the forces for chaos.

As mentioned earlier the arrival of driftwood to Iceland’s shores will likely cease under predicted loss of sea-ice, crucial to driftwood mobility, by 2060 CE (see Kolář et al. 2022). Furthermore, it has, reportedly, ceased arriving in the Strandir region. This development places driftwood firmly in the discourse of cultural heritage. What creative reactions might be employed by agentic assemblages, human and non-human, to meet this this callosal shift is difficult to predict. However, as these examples show, narratives that themselves question ontological assumptions and established boundaries have had its uses, not least in times of flux and climate emergency on the ever-changing shore.

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