

Landtaking and Leavetaking: Rituals for Moving House

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Moving to a new home is a momentous event that involves literally coming to grips with the past as we plan for and dream about the future. The heathens of old recognized the significance of moving to new lands and had rituals for "taking", or claiming, a new homestead. In this article, some of the lore related to these rituals is discussed, and some perspectives on Landtaking today are offered.

Lore

By virtue of its remote location and pride in its heritage, Iceland has preserved the greatest amount of heathen lore. The island was settled late in the heathen period, and the "Age of Settlements" has traditionally been taken to be c. 870 - 930 CE. The Icelandic sagas, though recorded by Christians in medieval times, preserve earlier memories of heathen settlement rituals.

The most useful source of information about Landtaking is *Landnámabók*, an Icelandic compilation of information about individual settlers and their families. There are five extant versions in various stages of completeness and preservation; the earliest dates from the late 13th century. All, however, are thought to derive from a lost, 12th-century *Landnámabók* written (at least in part) by Ari Thorgillson the Learned. Some of the sagas provide additional detail about particular settlers, but the sources are not independent. As manuscripts were re-copied, they might incorporate material from other works, so that a story could accrete details over time.

Nonetheless, this body of interrelated work remains our best guide to heathen Landtaking customs, and I have tried to analyze those customs here. Three themes appear repeatedly: 1) bringing significant objects from the old home to the new; 2) claiming the new property by marking its boundaries; and 3) hallowing the new land or dedicating it to a particular god. There are also suggestions that certain sites on the land were perceived as inherently holy. Each of these ideas is discussed below. Unless otherwise stated, the lore cited comes from Pállson and Edwards' translation of *Landnámabók* (1).

1. From the old home to the new.

By far the most common example of bringing along objects from a former home is the practice of bringing the high-seat pillars. In most cases, the pillars were tossed overboard, and the new homestead was established wherever they washed ashore. Sometimes, it took several seasons to locate the pillars, and the settlers would stay with friends or in temporary settlements until the pillars were found. In some cases, the pillars had an explicitly religious significance. For example, *Landnámabók* (2) says of Thorolf Mostur-Beard:

...when he'd come west as far as Breidafjord, he threw his high-seat pillars overboard. They had an image of Thor carved on them. Thorolf declared that Thor would come ashore where he wanted Thorolf to make his home.

Thorhadd the Old, who had been a *goði* in Norway, established a new hof when he moved (3):

He had a great desire to go to Iceland, but before he set off, he dismantled the temple and took the pillars and some earth from under the temple with him. He put in at Stodvarfjord, and declared the whole fjord sacred.

One of the most intriguing "pillar stories" is that of Ingimund the Old (4). During his youth in Norway, the prophetess Heid foresaw that he would "settle in a still undiscovered country, west in the ocean." Ingimund scoffed at the prophecy, but Heid added that "something had vanished from his purse and wouldn't be found until he started digging for his high-seat pillars in the new country." Ingimund then found that he had lost a silver image of Frey. Years later, when he settled in Iceland, he discovered the amulet when he set up his pillars, just as Heid foresaw. This story suggests that Frey, like Thor, could lead his followers to a new home and bless a new settlement.

The story of Thorhadd, quoted above, mentions that earth from the old hof was carried to the new. A similar account is given of Thorolf Mostur-Beard in *Eyrbyggja Saga* (5):

[Thorolf] asked the advice of his friend Thor about what he should do, either make peace with the King, or leave the country [Norway]... As it turned out, Thorolf was advised to go to Iceland.. He dismantled the temple, and, along with most of its timbers, put aside some of the earth from under Thor's pedestal.

Eyrbyggja Saga also states that the high-seat pillars "with the figure of Thor carved on one of them", which are mentioned in *Landnámabók*, came from the hof itself. Perhaps the stories of Thorhadd and Thorolf have been conflated, but it may also be that taking earth and timbers from an old hof was the usual custom.

2. Claiming and hallowing.

The Icelandic settlers often marked their land-claims by putting up boundary markers. There were many ways to do this; *Landnámabók* mentions a "tall pole", "a freshly-cut birch pole", an arrow-shot, and a cairn (6). A man named Nattfari "marked his claim on trees." (7) Two brothers, Vestmann and Vemund, were apparently Christian, but their Landtaking recalls heathen practice (8):

They put up an axe on Reistar Peak and called the fjord Oxarfjord ["axe-fjord"]. In the west they put up an eagle, and called that place Arnarthufa ["eagle-mound"];

and at a third place they raised a cross and called the place Kross Ridge after it. This is how they hallowed Oxarfjord and claimed the whole of it for themselves.

The story of Vestmann and Vemund combines claiming the land with hallowing it. They used a cross, but the usual heathen method was to hallow the land with fire, as did Helgi the Lean (9):

Helgi's faith was very much mixed: he believed in Christ but invoked Thor when it came to voyages and difficult times. When Helgi sighted Iceland, he consulted Thor as to where he should put in... [Helgi] took possession of the whole of Eyjafjord, between Sigluness and Reynisness. He built fires at every estuary to hallow his land claim."

When Jorund the Priest claimed land to build a hof, he "carried fire around it and dedicated it to the temple." (10) According to *Eyrbyggja Saga* (11), that great Thorsman Thorolf Mostur-beard "carried fire round the land he claimed," where he later built his hof.

3. "Holding sacred".

Several of the settlers in *Landnámabók* are said to have "held sacred" certain natural features on their land and to have named their farms for these holy sites. Thorir Flap "made his home at Lund ["grove"], and held the grove sacred" (12). Thorstein Red-Nose, who farmed at Foss ["waterfall"], "used to make sacrifices to the waterfall and all the left-overs had to be thrown into it." (13) Eyvind, son of Lodin Fishing-Hook, "took possession of Flateyjardale up to Gunnsteinar ["battle(?) -rocks"], and held the boulders there sacred" (14).

The most famous example is again Thorolf Mostur-Beard, who held sacred an entire mountain (Helgafell, "holy mountain") (15):

He held the mountain on that headland so sacred that he called it Helgafell and no one was allowed even to look at it unless he'd washed himself first. So holy was the mountain, no living creature there, man or beast, could be harmed until they left of their own accord. Thorolf and his kinsmen all believed that they would go into the mountain when they died.

It seems that here, people were not hallowing the land or *making* it sacred; rather, they recognized and honored holiness when they encountered it. Moreover, this was not a vague or passive reverence; the verb translated by Pállson and Edwards as "hold sacred" is *blótaði*, defined in Cleasby-Vigfusson (16) as "to worship with sacrifices." That is, people offered blots to the sacred places on their land.

A Tale of Two Landtakings

The lore surveyed above certainly contains a lot of information about how to move from Viking-Age Norway to an uninhabited fjord in Iceland, but how does this apply today? How can the ancient customs be adapted for 20th-century heathens?

I had to consider these questions in late 1996. My husband and I had just moved to a new house, and I wanted to celebrate the move and hallow the new property. Part of what follows is my own experience in carrying out that ritual and encountering the land. In 1997, I was honored to be a guest at a Landtaking hosted by Gladsheim Kindred; with their permission, I have described their ritual, also. I hope these two different stories with a common theme will provide others with ideas about how to adapt the lore in their own lives.

When we moved into our new house, Thor moved first. We don't have high-seat pillars, but I do have a Thor idol that sits on my home altar. The big move (i.e., the furniture) did not occur until a couple of weeks later, but the first meal we ate in our new home was Thanksgiving dinner. That evening, I installed Thor in his place on the new altar and asked him to bless our home and land.

Two weeks later, four heathen friends - Bob Stine, Gary Asmussen, and my Kinsman Dirk Mahling and his young son Hendrik- honored us by joining in the actual Landtaking. The heart of the ritual was "carrying fire around the land". We started at one of the eight corners of the property. There, we lit a candle lantern and also dug a little hollow in the ground, where we placed a lighted "tea-light" candle. We then carried the lantern around the borders of the land. At each corner, we lit another tea light and left it burning there. As we completed the circuit and returned to the first corner, daylight was fading. Bob was the first to reach the candle we had placed, and he called out, "It still burns!" Some of the candles continued to burn for hours afterwards, and Bob and Dirk reported that they could see them as they drive home. Late that night, under a sky ablaze with stars, Gary and I poured out a silent blot on a large boulder that stands near the front door.

Shortly after moving into our present house, we prepared to sell our old home, and cleaning it for the last time served as a way of saying goodbye and thanking its wights for the good years we spent there. To complete this "leavetaking", I carried out a final blot and sacrifice at the mighty hickory tree where I worshipped the gods on our old land. I also took away a little of the earth from its roots, and, as the vé and the hof on our present land have been hallowed, a little of the earth from our former home has mingled with the earth of the new.

In the three years since our Landtaking, I have come to know something of the wights who inhabit our new home and to "hold sacred" certain trees and sites. The process of learning about the local land-wights and building a relationship with them continues; it is a process that I expect will continue over all the years we will spend in this place.

Another example of a Landtaking ritual comes from my experience as a guest of Gladsheim Kindred. They created a ceremony to hallow the new home of two of their members, Joe and Vicki Marek. Before the guests arrived, members of the Kindred set up a vé-pole at each of the four corners of the land and decorated the poles with ribbons and

symbols. The day of the Landtaking itself was blessed by Skadhi, who sent a gift of snow (rare in southern Maryland) that fell throughout the day.

The Landtaking was held as part of a regular blot. The intent of the Landtaking itself was, in Vicki's words, "to dedicate each corner, with its vé-pole, to a God or Goddess that means a lot to us." The blot began as usual, and when the time to claim the land arrived, we trooped outside. Joe blew three mighty blasts on a horn, then we went to the first vé-pole. Vicki invoked Frigga and asked her blessings on their new home, then her Kinswoman Robin Dial tied a key to the pole as an offering to the goddess. At the second pole, their Kinsman Bill Dial invoked Thor, and a straw doll was offered to the Thunderer.

The third pole was in a grove of evergreen trees. Joe and Vicki wanted not only to claim their land, but also to dedicate this grove to the worship of the gods. They invoked their patrons, Odhin and Freyja, and asked all the gods to bless the holy site. An offering of mead was poured out on the vé-pole, and a hand-woven cord hung with runes carved by Joe was tied to a nearby tree in the grove.

At the fourth pole, Joe invoked the landvaettir, asked for their friendship, and promised to honor them in return. Bread was left at the vé-pole as an offering to the land wights. We then returned inside, where the blot continued, and many toasts were raised asking the gods and wights to bless Joe and Vicki's new home.

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I hope this glimpse of Landtakings recent and ancient will be helpful to other heathens who are moving to a new home. Each family or individual will develop a unique approach to such a personal celebration, but, for what it's worth, here is what seems to me essential: Bring what is sacred to you from the old home to the new. Claim the boundaries of your space, whether they be apartment walls or the edges of far fields. Hallow your home, with fire or offerings or whatever seems fitting to you, and honor the holiness you find indwelling there. And, though it's not in the lore, my experiences suggest this addition: invite your friends and kin, and their goodwill will be a blessing on your home and a joy to your heart.

Endnotes

1. *The Book of Settlements: Landnámabók*. Pálsson, Hermann and Edwards, Paul, transl.; University of Manitoba Press: Manitoba: Manitoba, Canada; 1972.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.
5. *Eyrbyggja Saga*. Pálsson, Hermann and Edwards, Paul, transl.; Penguin Books: London; 1989, p. 28.
6. *Landnámabók*, pp. 87, 89-91.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

8. Ibid., p. 108.
9. Ibid., p. 97.
10. Ibid., p. 131.
11. *Eyrbyggja Saga*, pp. 29-29.
12. *Landnámabók*, p. 103.
13. Ibid., p. 134.
14. Ibid., p. 104.
15. Ibid., pp. 45-46. The account in *Eyrbyggja Saga* (pp. 29-30) is nearly identical.
16. Cleasby, Richard; Vigfusson, Gudbrand; and Craigie, William A.. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. Oxford University Press

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