

Icelandic Culture and Concepts of the Æsir in Manitoba

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The Icelandic community in Manitoba continually translates its cultural heritage into a Canadian context. Like other settler-immigrant groups in Canada, the Icelanders in Manitoba brought traditions with them from their home country. To Manitoba they brought their rich literary tradition, including their interest in Old Norse mythology. Among the present-day place names in Manitoba is *Gimli*, which is a town of approximately 2000 inhabitants that is located along the south-west shore of Lake Winnipeg, nestled in Manitoba's Interlake region. This place name refers to a term that is central in Old Norse mythology, a mythology that is preserved largely in medieval Icelandic manuscripts. The mythical Gimli is often considered to represent a pagan version of heaven, presented as a place for fallen heroes to go after they die. This meaning has evolved through the process of cultural preservation and transformation in Manitoba's Icelandic community, and it is not only heroes in the origin myth of Gimli, Manitoba, who occupy this mythical place, but also the gods.

Gimli, Manitoba, is located in what is known as Treaty No. 1 Territory in Canada. This treaty is the first of the eleven *Numbered Treaties* negotiated between the government of Canada and the Indigenous population of the Canadian northwest. All eleven of these treaties were signed between 1871 and 1921, during the first fifty-four years after Canada's founding in 1867.¹ Treaty No. 1 was signed on 3 August 1871 at the Stone Fort (Lower Fort Garry), located north of Winnipeg on the Red River. These treaties served to restrict Indigenous land ownership and economic activity on the whole while simultaneously expand Euro-Canadian land ownership and economic activity across the region, a vast area formerly known as Rupert's Land (land used by the imperial Hudson's Bay Company and then sold to the Canadian government in 1869). The Icelandic settlement of Gimli affected the Indigenous occupants of the region with displacement and disease, as is a common feature of colonialism in any country.² Many Icelanders also suffered from disease during the early

years of the settlement. The origin myth of Gimli, Manitoba, is set in this context of Euro-Canadian colonialism. In 1881, six years after initial Icelandic settlement, this area of the Canadian northwest became part of Manitoba when the small province received a boundary extension. Today, Gimli is a centre of Icelandic culture in North America and members of the community are proud of their local as well as their European ancestry. The persistence of the community's national pride demonstrates a paradox of multiculturalism in Canada: as a minority culture within a cultural mosaic, Manitobans of Icelandic descent simultaneously belong to the majority culture of Canadians of European descent while identifying as uniquely Icelandic.

To reinforce their heritage culture, members of the Icelandic community in Manitoba have written modern sagas, adapting the medieval Icelandic institution to the Manitoba context. *Gimli Saga*, chapter 3, tells us about the conditions in Iceland at the time the emigrants left for North America:

Conditions there were extremely difficult. The country was under the rule of Denmark, not an independent republic as it became in 1944. Poverty was extreme, and natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions and blocking of harbours by polar ice created discouraging hardships.

The winter of 1874 was one of the severest of the century....

The following year, 1875, was one of the mildest of the century, but earthquakes and eruptions that had occurred intermittently in preceding years came to a climax with a tremendous eruption of Mount Askja and the neighbouring Dyngja Mountains. Tremendous volumes of smoke gushed up from Mount Askja, and a dreadful darkness spread wherever the ashes fell over communities stricken by the disaster. By noon it was as dark as in a windowless house while the volcanic ash fell....

Such terrors of nature, combined with many other hardships, caused many people to leave Iceland.³

Leaving the hardships of their home country, many Icelanders eventually migrated to Manitoba and settled a section of land set aside for them by the Canadian government, which the settlers coined "New Iceland." As noted above, this land was home to Indigenous people of the region, and the creation of the land reserve for the migrants was a Canadian colonial act, done to attract European settlers to the Canadian northwest to develop land. This settlement of large areas of land by Europeans necessitated the taking of lands from the Indigenous people. The Icelandic colony was one of several of these land grants set aside for settler communities. In Manitoba, for example, Russian and German Mennonites were also granted land, places where the settlers could practice their traditional culture while also cultivating land. This practice of creating ethnically homogenous land reserves in Canada was meant to attract

settlers who wanted to keep their native traditions intact in a new country.⁴ Many Icelandic immigrants sought to keep their culture intact and the relatively isolated location of the land reserve made this possible. Ryan Eyford writes that “many of the Icelanders’ intellectual and spiritual leaders framed the search for a colony in nationalistic terms and emphasized the goals of cultural autonomy and ethnic homogeneity.”⁵

Although Indigenous people inhabited the land in the settlement area, it was not developed for agriculture. When the Icelandic settlers arrived in 1875, the land was a wilderness, and the Icelanders settled this uncultivated land as their ancestors had done during the settlement period of Iceland’s history, in the latter part of the ninth century and into the early part of the tenth century. These nineteenth-century settlers might have viewed themselves as engaging in a mythological process of creation or re-creation, that of turning chaos into order, turning the uncultivated land into an ordered Icelandic settlement. This interpretation links these Icelandic settlers in Canada with their medieval ancestors who colonized Iceland in the ninth century, themselves recreating the primeval act of turning chaos into order.⁶

Gimli in Old Norse mythology

A stanza coming late in the eddic poem *Völuspá* tells us about Gimli. After the poem’s version of the cataclysmic Ragnarok concludes, narrated to us as a prophecy, and the cosmos and most of its inhabitants have been destroyed, the prophetess foresees that there will be a rebirth and a new earth will rise from the ocean. Some descendants of Odin will survive, and the golden age once enjoyed by the old gods, who are now dead, will return. Only one of the old gods, Hoenir, a rather timid god who the prophetess also states was involved in the creation of the first humans Ask and Embla, will survive. Then in the sixty-second stanza of the poem the prophetess speaks about Gimli: “Sal sér hon standa / sólu fegra, / gulli þakðan, / á Gimle; / þar skulu dyggvar / dróttir byggja / ok um aldrdaga / yðnis njóta.”⁷ (A hall she sees standing, fairer than the sun, / thatched with gold, at Gimlé; / there the noble fighting-bands will dwell / and enjoy the days of their lives in pleasure.)⁸ The description is of a beautiful hall, covered in gold or more beautiful than gold, where “good people” will live a good life in the future.⁹ There is no indication of Gimli being a place in the afterlife, but rather it seems to be a place on earth where people will live in the future.

Gimli is also mentioned in *Snorra Edda* by the thirteenth-century Icelandic chieftain and writer Snorri Sturluson. In the third chapter of the part of that work titled *Gylfaginning*, while describing great achievements of All-father, most likely Odin, the character named Third says the following: “Ok

skulu allir menn lifa þeir er rétt eru siðaðir ok vera með honum sjálfum þar sem heitir Gimlé eða Vingólf, en vándir menn fara til Heljar ok þaðan í Niflhel, þat er niðr í inn níunda heim.”¹⁰ (All men who are righteous shall live and be with him in that place called Gimle or Vingolf. But evil men go to Hel and from there into Niflhel [Dark Hel], which is below the ninth world.)¹¹ In this source Gimli is clearly associated with heaven, a place where good people will go, as opposed to Hel, which, though not said to be a place for evil people in this text, it is associated with the Christian concept of Hell, a place for those who are not good. It is also said that righteous people may go to Vingolf, which is described as a palace for the goddesses in *Gylfaginning* chapter 13, although in *Gylfaginning* chapter 20, Vingolf is equated with Valhalla, a place where dead warriors live alongside Odin before Ragnarok.

In *Gylfaginning* chapter 17, another character in the frame narrative, High, says the following about Gimli: “Á sunnanverðum himins enda er sá salr er allra er fegrstr ok bjartari en sólin, er Gimlé heitir. Hann skal standa flá er bæði himinn ok jörð hefir farizk, ok byggja þann stað góðir menn ok réttlátir of allar aldir.”¹² (At the southern reaches of heaven’s end is a hall, the most beautiful of them all and brighter than the sun. It is called Gimle. It will remain standing when both heaven and earth are gone, and good and righteous men will inhabit that place through all ages.)¹³ Gimli is said to be in heaven, but to be even more durable than heaven. Gimli is the most enduring residence in the mythological narrative presented in this source.

Gimli is mentioned one more time in *Snorra Edda*. In *Gylfaginning* chapter 52, Third, this time describing the post-Ragnarök cosmos, states: “Margar eru þá vistir góðar ok margar illar. Bazt er þá at vera á Gimlé á himni.”¹⁴ (There will be, at that time, many good places to live. So also there will be many evil ones. It is best to be in Gimle in heaven.)¹⁵ This final mention of Gimli confirms once again its place in heaven in the context of *Snorra Edda*, framing it as a place for humans to live in the future in the afterlife. This interpretation fits well with the Christian context for the composition of *Snorra Edda*, for although it describes the pagan gods and goddesses of the medieval Nordic area, it does so within a Christian frame narrative set up by the prologue, which precedes *Gylfaginning*.

There are two primary interpretations for the meaning of Gimli in these two medieval sources. First, as presented in *Völuspá*, after Ragnarok concludes in the mythological future (also the narrative future) Gimli will be found in the world that is reborn and it is a place for good people to live following this rebirth. At Gimli these people will be able to live an ordinary life. In the *Gylfaginning* of *Snorra Edda*, the second interpretation, there is an emphasis on the heavenly nature of the place. Gimli is said to be a place where good people will go to live with the All-father, in heaven, or, if we focus more on the

Odinic nature of All-father, perhaps this passage refers to Valhalla, the hall where Odin's warriors wait for Ragnarok. Interestingly, in *Gylfaginning* chapter 20, as High describes the god Odin, he says that along with the einherjar (his fallen warriors), he manages Valhalla and Vingolf: "Óðinn heitir Alföðr, þvíat hann er faðir allra goða. Hann heitir ok Valföðr, þvíat hans óskasynir eru allir þeir er í val falla. Þeim skipar hann Valhöll ok Vingólf, ok heita fleir flá einherjar."¹⁶ (Odin is called All-Father, because he is the father of all the gods. He is also called Father of the Slain [Val-Father], because all who fall in battle are his adopted sons. With them he mans Valhalla and Vingolf, and they are known as the Einherjar.)¹⁷ In *Gylfaginning* chapter 3, Gimli and Vingolf are equated with one another (see above), a place where righteous men will join All-Father. This added meaning is applied within the context of *Gylfaginning*, an ironic presentation of Old Norse mythology from a Christian perspective, and Odin is clearly associated with the Christian God. This same connotation does not apply to the first example of Gimli given from *Völuspá*, for although that poem is transmitted to us through Christian manuscripts, Odin is not associated with the Christian God in the poem, although in another poem, *Hávamál*, there is a penetrating parallel between Odin and Christ.

In sum the medieval mythological sources tell us that Gimli is a place or earth or in heaven that will survive the destruction of the cosmos at Ragnarok. It is described as the best place to live, a place where good people will gather. In these sources Gimli is not said to be the home of the gods, but rather a future home for humans.¹⁸

Interpretations of the sources have been problematized in the popular imagination, and even though the two medieval sources which describe Gimli situate it as a place where good people will go, either on earth after the rebirth or in the heavens in the afterlife, meaning has been added to this definition. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason have recently commented on the confused nature of the mythological Gimli:

Flestir hafa þó talið að Gimlé sé einhvers konar sælustaður fyrir góða menn. Einkennilegt væri að nota dróttir um goðin, og Snorri hefur talið að átt væri við menn. Vel má hugsa sér að átt sé við einhvers konar hirð guðanna, dugandi mannfólk sem fær bústað með goðunum og nýtur þar yndis, unir sér vel alla daga sína, sbr. einherja í fyrri heimi. Auðvelt hefur verið fyrir kristna menn að túlka þetta sem mynd at eilífri sæluvist á himnum.¹⁹

(Most people have thought Gimli is a kind of happy place for good people. It would be strange to use dróttir [good, worthy] to refer to gods, and Snorri has thought that it was men. It may well be thought of as a kind of court of the gods, capable people who have a dwelling with the gods, enjoying their love, enjoying themselves all day long, cf. the

einherjar [Odin's warriors] in the former world. It has been easy for Christians to interpret this as a picture for eternal bliss in heaven.)²⁰

Even though it is clear from source interpretation that the medieval meaning of Gimli is that it is a human dwelling, there is a persistence in associating the place with the pagan gods. This has been the case in the discourse surrounding Gimli in Manitoba. This evolved meaning of the place helps the community to define its cultural heritage.

Gimli, Manitoba, Canada

The name for the town site on Lake Winnipeg was chosen before the Icelandic settlers arrived, while they were on their difficult journey down the Red River from Minnesota. Guðjón Arngrímsson tells the story of how it was during the difficult voyage, before they reached their destination, that the settlers decided on the name Gimli for their new home: “Það mun hafa verið á hinu vikulanga ferðalagi á Rauðánni sem einn ferðalanganna, Ólafur Ólafsson frá Espihóli, stakk upp á því að bær Íslendinganna sem standa átti við Íslendingafljót skyldi heita Gimli.”²¹ (It was during this voyage that Ólafur Ólafsson of Espihóll suggested that the name of the new settlement should be Gimli.)²² After their stop in Winnipeg, the settlers never made it all the way to their intended landing site near to where the White Mud River enters Lake Winnipeg, north of where Gimli is now. Instead, the Icelandic settlers reached land south of their intended site. Guðjón Arngrímsson describes their first days at the settlement:

Morguninn eftir komuna á Víðirnestangann fóru íslensku landnemarnir að litast um í nágrenninu og skoða framtíðarland sitt. Nokkrir gengu í norðurátt í fjöruborðinu inn breiða víkina ofan við Víðirness. Þar var gróskumikill asparskógur sem hentaði vel til húsagerðar. Auk þess virtist mun skjólsælla þar innfrá en úti á nesinu og allgott skipalægi úti á víkinni. Þarna leist mönnum vel á landkosti og ákváðu að hér við víkina skyldi rísa bærinn Gimli.²³

(The morning after their arrival at Willow Point, which they quickly renamed *Víðirnes*, the Icelanders began exploring their new surroundings. To the north, a broad bay lined with heavy stands of poplar offered not only the prospect of building materials and shelter in plenty, but also a fine natural harbour. Such were its attractions, in fact, that it was chosen as the site for a town the Icelanders decided to name *Gimli*.)²⁴

By naming their new town site Gimli, which has mythological and possibly even prophetic connotations, the Icelandic settlers drew on their medieval literary heritage, although as we have seen the meaning of the term Gimli has evolved from its medieval origins.

Two present-day accounts of the origin myth of the Icelandic settlement in Manitoba help illustrate this evolution of the meaning of the place name Gimli. Eyford provides the following account: “The first group of about 250 settlers arrived at Willow Point near the southern end of the reserve on 21 October 1875. They dubbed their colony Nýja Ísland (New Iceland) and soon founded the village of Gimli, named for the paradise where, according to ancient Norse myth, the gods and heroes would live after the end of the world.”²⁵ This account states outright that gods and heroes would live together in Gimli in the medieval sources, but as our survey of the medieval sources reveals it is either a place for humans after Ragnarok (*Völuspá*) or is a heavenly place through all ages for people to live in the afterlife (*Snorra Edda*). Eyford continues: “When the Icelandic immigrants arrived in the Northwest in 1875, they too drew on the *Völuspá*: they named their first village, Gimli, after the paradise in which the gods and heroes would happily retire following a cataclysmic battle at the end of the world, as a statement of their hopes about their future progress and happiness.”²⁶ The sentiment Eyford describes in relation to the naming is appropriate, for it is one of hope. This sense of hope accords with the meaning of the place name in the medieval myth: there is hope because humans will have a place to live in the future after Ragnarok, or there is a place called Gimli waiting for them in the afterlife. However, in the mythological sources all the gods die at Ragnarok, other than Hoenir and some of the younger generation (some children of Odin and Thor, depending on which source is consulted), but they are never said to reside at Gimli. According to *Vafþrúðnismál*, another cosmological eddic poem, the humans who will repopulate the earth will descend from Life and Lifthrasir, the lone human couple who will survive Ragnarok by hiding in the hollow of a tree. In the medieval sources Gimli is not a place where the gods will live in the future, and it is not a place where gods and heroes will retire after Ragnarok. This is one example of how the myth is still evolving, taking on an enhanced or evolved meaning in the multicultural context of Manitoba. To live in the home of the gods and heroes has unique connotations, and the Icelandic community in Manitoba has drawn on this evolving myth in order to define its uniqueness.

The origin myth of Gimli can take on nationalistic tones, a feature which represents how a minority culture identifies its uniqueness in a multicultural setting. David Arnason describes Gimli’s origin myth as follows:

The myth of beginnings is important to understanding the experience of the Icelandic community. Other prairie communities were named after people (MacGregor, McCreary) or old-country places (Balmoral, Sans Souci) or Indian place names (Winnipeg, Pinawa). Gimli, the site of the first settlement was named for the great Hall of Gimli in Norse mythology. The elder Edda tells us that after Ragnarök ... all the universe will

return to fire and sea. Out of that will arise an island on which will be situated the Great Hall of Gimli. All the best of men, of giants, of gods and the creatures of outer darkness will be gathered here.²⁷

In this example, Gimli, Manitoba, is defined in opposition to other Manitoba communities, the uniqueness of the settlement is emphasized, and information from mythological sources is transformed. In the medieval sources Gimli is not an island that rises out of fire and sea but the whole earth is reborn, and there are many good places to live, not just a single island; Gimli is not said to be the home for the superlative “best” of men but a place for “good” people; no giants are said to survive Ragnarok in any source; and, as argued above, gods are not said to populate Gimli, only people, and perhaps Odin or the goddesses before Ragnarok, depending on the specific source and the interpretation.

Arnason goes even further, however, naming other communities which have not carved out a defined space:

Where later immigrants to Manitoba such as Norwegians, the Swedes and the Germans have largely been so integrated that there is little sign of their cultural presence, the Icelanders continue to form a significant cultural group. The source of this cohesiveness is the myth of beginnings, a myth shared by Icelandic-Canadians and Icelandic-Americans as well. We look backward, not to some lost haven across the sea in Iceland, but to our roots as a people in a new land.²⁸

The Icelandic community in Manitoba does look back to Iceland, however, and rightfully so. The community which descends from the Icelandic settlers in Manitoba draws on their heritage country’s medieval traditions and their mythological sources to construct the origin myth of Gimli. This myth is an exclusive one, but as the examples included here demonstrate the myth is an evolving one that draws on the medieval version of Gimli but also changes it.

The Icelandic community in Manitoba is unique, as are all minority cultures in a multicultural society, even after many generations of integration. All groups other than the Indigenous people have settled in or immigrated to Canada in the past few centuries, and thus all settler-immigrant populations have their origins elsewhere. The demands of multiculturalism lead ethnic groups to define their culture in some way, and the Icelandic community in Manitoba continues to draw on medieval Icelandic cultural heritage, as did their ancestors when they settled on the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg.

Conclusion: Toward a rhetoric of settlement

There is a certain irony in the use of the term Gimli by the Icelandic settlers to name their new town site in Canada in the 1870s. The apocalyptic conditions

they were themselves leaving behind in their own country also apply to the conditions experienced by the long-standing inhabitants of the Lake Winnipeg region in Manitoba: the Indigenous people who during the Canadian settlement process signed away much of their lands in the treaties signed with the government of Canada, and during this process they were often denied permission to settle where they intended.

In this study of concepts of the Æsir in Manitoba, it can be seen that the place name for Gimli, Manitoba, draws on a myth of exclusivity, framing the town site as a home of the gods. Interestingly the two examples examined near the end of the present essay indicate that Icelanders in Manitoba can apply an even more exclusive meaning to the name. In the medieval sources, the place name Gimli refers to a location where humans will live together in the future, either in the world as it is reborn after Ragnarok or in the afterlife. In the multicultural discourse in Manitoba, the meaning of Gimli has evolved into a place where the gods and the heroes will live together. Presently, Gimli is a multicultural municipality, and people from many backgrounds live there. Canadian colonial policy in the late-nineteenth century excluded the people who had used the lands for the longest period of time, the Indigenous people. In the twenty-first century, this process is being critically evaluated and more accurately understood, and a process of decolonization is underway but by no means concluded.

Footnotes:

1. Frank Tough, *'As Their Natural Resources Fail': Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870–1930*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996, pp. 75–98. Treaty No. 1 was signed on 3 August 1871 at Stone Fort, slightly north of Winnipeg.
2. James Daschuk, *Clearing the plains: Disease, politics of starvation, and the loss of Aboriginal life*, Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013, p. 104.
3. *Gimli Saga: The History of Gimli, Manitoba*. Gimli Women's Institute, 1975, pp. 8–9.
4. Ryan Eyford, *White Settler Reserve: New Iceland and the Colonization of the Canadian West*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016, p. 53.
5. Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 2016, p. 54.
6. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History*, Bollingen Series 46, New York and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954, p. 10.
7. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds. *Eddukvæði: Goðakvæði*, Reykjavík: Íslensk fornrit, 2014, p. 307.
8. Carolyne Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda*, revised edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 12.
9. Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press and the Medieval Academy of America, 2004, p. 99.

10. Anthony Faulkes, ed. *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, by Snorri Sturluson, 2nd ed., London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005, pp. 8–9.
11. Jesse L. Byock, trans., *The Prose Edda*, London: Penguin, 2005, p. 12.
12. Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, by Snorri Sturluson, 2005, p. 20.
13. Byock, trans., *The Prose Edda*, 2005, p. 28.
14. Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, by Snorri Sturluson, 2005, p. 53.
15. Byock, trans., *The Prose Edda*, 2005, p. 76.
16. Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, by Snorri Sturluson, 2005, p. 21.
17. Byock, trans., *The Prose Edda*, 2005, p. 31.
18. See also Rudolph Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, translated by Angela Hall, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993, p. 109.
19. *Eddukvæði: Godakvæði og Hetjukvæði*. Íslenzk fornrit. 2 vols. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014, 1:124.
20. My translation.
21. Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja ísland: Örlagasaga vesturfaranna í máli og myndum*, Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1997, p. 128.
22. Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja ísland: Saga of the Journey to New Iceland*. Trans. Robert Christie. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1997, p. 128.
23. Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja ísland: Örlagasaga vesturfaranna í máli og myndum*, 1997, p. 137.
24. Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja ísland: Saga of the Journey to New Iceland*, 1997, p. 137.
25. Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 2016, p. 7.
26. Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 2016, p. 33.
27. David Arnason, “The Icelanders in Manitoba: The Myth of Beginnings,” in David Arnason and Vincent Arnason (eds.), *The New Icelanders: North American Community*, Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1994, p. 4.
28. Arnason, “The Icelanders in Manitoba: The Myth of Beginnings,” 1994, p. 8.