

Geographical mapping of *Sagnagrunnur*, a database of published Icelandic legends

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In 1999, professor Terry Gunnell at the Icelandic University started a project to create a database of metadata about printed legends from Icelandic folk tale collections. Information for each legend in this database includes among others a bibliographic citation, summary of the story, relevant keywords related to the legend, name and home of the informant, name and home of the collector and the place names mentioned in the legend.¹

Since 2012, the database, now containing more than 10.000 legends has been developed further with a transformation from a single table to a complex and well structured relational database where connections between legends, persons, places and keywords can be analysed. Furthermore, place names included in the database – places mentioned in the legends and homes of storytellers – have been unified and mapped geographically and to explore the data, a web-based interface has been created for researchers and others interested.² The interactive map can for example visualize the distribution of:

- legends told by individual informant
- legends with specific keywords
- legends from a specific collection
- homes of informants of a specific collection
- legends of a specific motif-index type (although type numbers have not been completely catalogued in the database)
- legends told by informants from a specific region

Furthermore it is also possible to mix several search methods which gives a unique opportunity to look into the connections between collectors and storytellers, storytellers and keywords and interrelations between different keywords.

¹ See Gunnell, Terry. Sagnagrunnur: A New Database of Icelandic Legends in Print. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 45, 151-162: <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol45/gunnell.pdf>

² See <http://sagnagrunnur.com/>

Folk legends are a vast resource of knowledge about the beliefs, worldview and behaviour of the 19th century and early 20th century society, especially put in a geographic perspective. Beginning with Jón Árnason in 1862–1864 and later in the nineteenth century with Ólafur Davíðsson, Sigfús Sigfússon and more collectors during the twentieth century, the Icelandic folk legends and fairy tales now fill more than nineteen collections. Among them the largest are the collections of Jón Árnason, Ólafur Davíðsson, Sigfús Sigfússon and *Gríma hin nýja*, published between 1862–1931. The distribution map can provide a macro view of the 19th century society of Iceland and micro view of lives of individual storytellers, for example the distribution of legends told by the postman Sumarliði Guðmundsson (1843-1919) who travelled regularly over long distances carrying mail and seems to have exchanged stories with local people on the way.

This project is richly inspired by the geo-semantic exploration of the legends from the Danish collection of Evald Tang Kristensen conducted by Timothy Tangherlini³ but an important difference is firstly that the material in *Sagnagrunnur* is from multiple collectors who each one had different methods of collecting, focused on different areas and talked to storytellers from different social classes. Secondly, while the landscape of Denmark is rather flat, the distribution in Iceland shows an interesting picture closely bound to the unique geography because the relativity of spatial distances is quite much if we put it in the context of the nineteenth century, when routes over mountains were much more dangerous than today, rivers were more difficult to pass and the fjords were much deeper.

Currently the database uses relational MySQL for storage and PHP for an API delivering data from the database to the interface using the JSON data format. The interface itself is browser based and is built using HTML and various JavaScript libraries. The database can be accessed at www.sagnagrunnur.com.

Project like Sagnagrunnur is an excellent example of how cultural archival data can be explored and disseminated in new ways using digital technology. In relation with other data about the history of Iceland, such as census data, genealogy data, data about individual storytellers and collectors and even spatial data from other sources this project adds a valuable layer. Furthermore, this project can be extended with the possibility of connecting the database to other databases for comparative research. This will for example be the case with a project currently in progress by the National Library of Iceland, The Arnamagnean Institute in Reykjavík and the University of Iceland about the folktale collector Jón Árnason and his social network in the mid 19th century. In that project, information about letter-writings between Jón and his collectors will be added to the database and visualized in the context of folklore collection and the role of early folklorists of the 19th century in the nation-building that was a part of the independence movement in Iceland.

³ See Broadwell, Peter M.; Tangherlini, Timothy R. *TrollFinder: Geo-Semantic Exploration of a Very Large Corpus of Danish Folklore*. In Proceedings of LREC. Istanbul, Turkey. 2012.

In the presentation the project will be discussed in the context of folklore research and the use of geographical mapping in the field. The technology behind the database and the development process will be described and an example of the visual results and possibilities that the project brings will be showcased. Finally, the project about the collector Jón Árnason will be discussed briefly as well as other visual possibilities that utilize the database in conjunction with other datasources.

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