Forest Lost and Paradise Regained
Hervé Brunon

To cite this version:

HAL Id: halshs-00822860
https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00822860
Submitted on 17 May 2013

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.
Skrúður, Núpur
The xxiv International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens

publication edited by
Patrizia Boschiero, Luigi Latini, Domenico Luciani

Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche
Treviso 2013
The International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens 2013 to Skrúður, Núpur

The 2013 Prize, the xxiv in the series Skrúður, Núpur Dýrafjörður, Iceland public events

- Tuesday 26th March Milan, La Triennale first press conference, with Brignolifio Jonsson (Chairman of the Skrúður Project Fund).

- Thursday 9th May Treviio, Spazi Bomben second press conference, with Vígilds Finnbogadóttir (President of the Republic of Iceland from 1980 to 1996), Brignolifio Jonsson (Chairman of the Skrúður Project Fund), Abstraktn Eyrkorss (Secretary of the Skrúður Project Fund).

- Friday 10 May Treviio, auditorium of Spazi Bomben Lecture on the landscape of Iceland, given by Brynjólfur Sæmundsson (landscape architect, Landslag Streykviði, and the opening of the exhibition dedicated to the xxiv Carlo Scarpa Prize, open to the public in Fondazione Benetton Studi Ericka), Spazi Bomben until 30 June. Amongst those present was Vígilds Finnbogadóttir, President of the Republic of Iceland from 1980 to 1996.

- Saturday 11th May Treviio, auditorium of Spazi Bomben Meeting/Concert Vígilds Finnbogadóttir, Reykjavik: Icelandic songs of epic and nature performed by Steindór Asgeirsdóttir and Hílmar Örn Hilmarsson.

Cultural initiative under the aegis of the Italian Ministry of the Cultural Heritage, the Veneto Region, the Province of Treviso, the City of Treviio.

There is something extraordinary, almost miraculous, about Skrúður. Certainly this is the initial impression that strikes the first time one comes across this small garden on the shore of Dýrafjörður, one of the innumerable inlets in the Westfjords peninsula – finis terrae linked to the rest of Iceland by an isthmus which is so narrow that it seems almost an island in the middle of an immense ocean – very close to the Arctic Circle, where the traveller feels on the very edge of the world.

Such was also my first immensely moving experience shared by my friend José Tito Rojo (here, pp. 158-165) – it was probably because it reminded me of the beginning of the xii century, states Íslendingabók (The Book of Icelanders), written in Iceland by Ari Þorgilsson at the end of the “Period of Settlement”, that the Saga of Gísli Súrsson, for example, the hero, denounced and banished from the community after the killing of his brother-in-law, spends part of his long exile hiding in thick woods. These texts, however, were written three centuries after the “Period of Settlement” (Iceland in 1692, 874-930) and some scholars consider such quotations to be suspect.

In 1987, Régis Boyer, writing of the Westfjords where the Saga of Gísli Súrsson is set, mentions that “the region was heavily wooded and our saga confirms this at several points; immediately after, however, he adds that “we must not distort the sense of what is specifically translated for this dossier.”


1.1. Four views showing the relationship between the enclosed garden of Skrúður and the surrounding landscape: at the foot of Mount Núpur, September 2012.

1.2. See Born Trautmann-Acher Sokolowski 2008.

2. Saga de Gísli Súrsson, xvi, in Sagas islandica, 1987, p. 617: “He runs through the woods, for there the trees have encroached into many parts; here as in similar cases, quotations from editions in languages other than English have been specifically translated for this dossier.”

3. Saga de Gísli Súrsson, xvi, in Sagas islandica, 1987, p. 617: “The Book of Icelanders”, written in Iceland by Ari Þorgilsson at the end of the “Period of Settlement”, states that: “I Punn tóð var Ísland visti vaxit á milli fjalls ok fjöru; (= At that time, Iceland had woods growing between the mountains and the shore.). As we know, woods often play an important role in the sagas in the late-xii century.”
5. Piles of driftwood thrown up on the shore of Blossom Bay between Hvannasungur and Billanork.


5. Botter 2002, p. 25. Boyer does acknowledge, in connection with the statement quoted above, which occurs at the beginning of The Book of Icelanders that: “It is possible, and archaeology would tend to offer confirmation” (p. 72); but elsewhere he speaks of the “somewhat fanciful tradition” according to which “Iceland was thinly wooded at the time of its colonisation” (p. 82).


being said, for it is probable that Iceland has never known real forest coverage. At the most, there will have been woods, but however many trees they contained they will not have grown above average height, probably because of the winds that lash the island throughout the year5. Returning in part to this point in his overview of L’Histoire naturelle, published in 2001, the great historian continues to be doubtful or at least wary: “It is not impossible that the country once had extensive woods, as legends recount and as the ancient texts affirm, but close reading of them reveals clear echoes of the Bible and the discovery of the Land of Canaan, and the wind, which prevails over everything in those parts, cannot have helped the growth of large woods6.” The information provided by archaeology over the last few years, however, has banished almost all doubt in the matter. Prior to the last glacial periods of the Pleistocene, Iceland was covered by mixed boreal forests consisting of conifer (Pinus, Picea, Abies, Larix) and broad-leaved species (Betula, Acer, Alnus). At the end of the last glacial episode, around 10,000 years ago, the Betula pubescens, the main surviving forest species, became predominant all over Iceland and at the time of Scandinavian colonization about a quarter of the island’s surface was covered with forests. But the trees all but disappeared during the XII and XIII centuries. Erasing the factual and often laconic style typical of the genre, a passage from one of the earliest Sigurðas þína þáttr – tales of expeditions to North America, – based on an oral tradition, conveys the amazement of the Icelandic explorers when they reached apparently virgin lands: “The country seemed to them to be beautiful and tree-covered and the forests came almost down to the sea-shores.” When these lines were committed to parchment, Iceland must have looked quite different. Although the population of Iceland in the Middle Ages amounted to no more than a few tens of thousands, it was human pressure that lay at the origin of this radical and perhaps brutal change to the landscape. The new inhabitants – as in all rural societies of the time – started to cut down trees to lay in stocks of firewood and building timber and to till the soil to create more fields and pasturage. Sheep-breeding, for wool and meat, became fundamental in an economy which, apart from fishing, could count on only meagre resources; the resulting over-grazing prevented any regeneration of the forests. In the 1600s, the need for charcoal, which was indispensable for metallurgy, led to the over-exploitation of the dwarf birch (Betula nana), a shrub that does not reach more than 50 centimetres in height. Once the trees were gone, the porosity of the volcanic-origin soil, the high rainfall and the violence of the winds combined to hasten erosion. The process of deforestation was stopped only as late as 1950. The almost religious care with which the inhabitants still collect and stockpile driftwood borne by sea currents from Siberia testifies to the implications for society of the absence of forests in a land which is so isolated and unfertile. It was only on the threshold of the XX century that measures began to be taken to reverse this phenomenon and encourage reforestation – or rather, the last victim has been the forest11. The indefinite expansion of the clearing is not only a symbolic image but links up with a geographical reality. Harrison notes how the process of “mindless deforestation” seems to be an inevitable by-product of the expansion of the Greek and Roman civilizations in Antiquity: with the advance of the great empires from east to west, the forests disappeared from around the Mediterranean and towards Northern Europe; by causing erosion, he suggests, deforestation was one of the factors that precipitated the decline and fall of some of the richest and most important cities of Antiquity, places such as Ephesus, which was abandoned by its inhabitants as a result of the gradual silting up of its natural harbour12. Harrison thus raised an issue that since then has been widely studied and debated in the context of global environmental history13: the more or less crucial impact of the poor management of the forests. Following the suggestion of Giambattista Vico’s Scienza nuova (1744) – “This was the order of human institutions: first the forests, after the huts, then the villages, next the cities, and finally the academies” – Robert Harrison, in a stimulating reflection on forests and the western imagination, suggests that the history of civilization should metaphorically be seen as the gradual expansion of a clearing. In its constant quest for more light, society, through its dominant institutions, gradually pushes back the “edge,” the frontier that separates it from the forest, and thereby takes its place; thus the forest becomes symbolically its “shadow” in the cultural memory, the otherness that defines the very idea of civilization. “This gradual loss of an edge of opacity, where the human abode finds its limits on the earth, is part of the global story of civic expansionism. In the West its first and last victim has been the forest”14. Deforestation is part of this effort to “reconquer the desert.”

12. HARRISON 1990, pp. 55-56. See, amongst others HAKONSSON 2001; KÖSTER 2009, pp. 73 ff. However, KATKOV 2005, pp. 131-136, calls this historiographical model into question: archaeology has shown that in some parts of Greece deforestation and erosion were already underway in the Neolithic, while the rapid, large-scale deterioration of Mediterranean eco-systems in mountainous areas dates from the XIX and XX centuries.
13. For this line of research, see the analyses of LOCKER & QUÉSENE 2000.
of territorial resources on the "collapse" of certain societies – a subject that has attracted the attention of the public at large thanks to the success of Jared Diamond's Collapse. How societies choose to fail or succeed, published in 2005, which also relates the theory to the colonization of Iceland and Greenland14. Without entering into detail concerning these extremely complex problems, I wish simply to stress that in the case of Iceland, the history of forests involves stakes that are amongst the most critical in the contemporary world and of the planet-wide ecological crisis. Though scientists continue to wrangle over the starting point of the Anthropocene, i.e. the current, post-Holocene geological era, during which human influence over the terrestrial system has become predominant – the industrial revolution? the Neolithic revolution? – it can be argued that on this island, where latitude, isolation and geology combine to make the vegetation especially vulnerable and weaken the resilience of the ecosystems, the Anthropocene began around the year 1000, more or less around the time of colonization and at the latest a few generations after the arrival of the earliest inhabitants. As far as forests are concerned, Iceland in a certain sense offers a speeded up picture of human history on the Earth15. It should not be forgotten, in fact, that according to the estimates in the latest FAO report on the state of the world's forests, «about half of western Europe's forests are estimated to have been cleared prior to the Middle Ages»16 and before the sharp decline in the continent’s population in the XIV century. And in the long term, global deforestation, whose trajectory «has more or less followed the global growth rate of the human population», would appear to be «one of the most widespread and important changes that people have made to the surface of the earth. Over a period of 5,000 years, the cumulative loss of forest land worldwide is estimated at 1.8 billion hectares, an average net loss of 300,000 hectares per year»17. According to the United Nations Organization and its programme Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), half of the forests, this time of the whole world, were felled during the XX century alone18. And the consequences affect not only the soil, the water cycle, biodiversity and greenhouse gas emission, but also the productivity of economic activities, the quality of life conditions, the transmission of lifestyles, memory and culture. To what point can the “clearing” of human civilization continue to expand? Is not the extreme “insularity” of Iceland, which accentuates the fragility of ecological balance, perhaps a sort of synecdoche for the finiteness of the biosphere? In this case, the image of Skrúður as an oasis in the middle of the desert becomes immensely significant. The Reverend Sigtryggur Gúlíngsson's achievement takes its place on the horizon of hope, of which Jean Giono's short story L’Homme qui plantait des arbres (1953) – the tale of a simple shepherd who set out to reforest his region of Haute Provence – is a parable. It could also bring to mind Osgood Machenrie (1842-1922), who in 1862 inherited a vast estate of desolate moorland on a wind-swept coast at Wester Ross in Scotland; nothing grew there but a single twisted willow, yet he managed to transform the place by creating Inverewe, a botanical garden with thousands of different species19. Or in our own time, Wangari Maathai (1940-2011), who led the struggle against deforestation in Kenya through the Green Belt Movement (which she herself had set up in 1977) and caused millions of trees to be planted, creating employment and raising the profile of women in African society; her efforts and achievements were acknowledged by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. And like these there are many, many others all over the world. Like Yacouba Sawadogo in Burkina Faso,
whose efforts focus on stopping the advance of the desert and on “greening the Sahara” by improving the traditional technique of sowing in zeri holes, which retain rainwater and use organic matter to attract termites whose tunnels improve the soil structure; since 1984 he has planted trees on dozens of hectares and encouraged the sharing of knowledge and seeds by organizing twice-yearly “market days” that bring together farmers from around a hundred villages. Or like Jaiak Payeng, an Indian farmer who has, since 1979, with his own hands, planted an entire forest on a huge, empty expanse of sand in the middle of the Brahmaputra River, at Jorhat in the state of Assam. At the dawn of the third millennium Skrúður, the Uy rectangular garden with its simple orthogonal pathway, more archetypal than archaic, humble and tenaciously teaches us of the sense of responsibility to everyone surrounding us that we must bring to all our actions.

In another book, in this case devoted to the gardener’s work as an emblem of the human condition, Robert Harrison starts from a famous quotation from Voltaire and goes on: “It is because we are thrown into history that we must cultivate our garden. In an immortal Eden there is no need to cultivate, since all is prefigured there spontaneously. Our human gardens may appear to us like little openings onto paradise in the midst of the fallen world, yet the fact that we must create, maintain, and care for them is the mark of their postlapsarian provenance. [...] The gardens that have graced this mortal Eden of ours are the best evidence of humanity’s reason for being on Earth.”

This conviction was shared by Annick Bertrand-Gillen (1949-2012), a gardener who spoke of the place she and her partner Yves had created in Brittany at the edge of the Grande Brière marshes, a garden that enabled them to live an ecological and libertarian ideal, as a modest paradise. “I like to believe that elsewhere on Earth there are other cases of peace which bear out my profound conviction that man is not made to destroy but to sown.”

Bibliography


KÖSTER 2009 HANS-JOERG KÖSTER, Storia dei boschi.