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The Sami Representations Reflecting the Multi-Ethnic North of the Saga Literature

ABSTRACT This article focuses on contextualizing the Sami (*finnar*) representations in Old Norse saga literature. The purpose is to show that the Sami representations reflect multi-layered Old Norse textual and oral traditions, and complex interaction between the Sami and the Norwegians in the Middle Ages. The stereotypes of the Sami tell us more about the society that created them than about real, historical events. We can be sure that behind them lie very mundane phenomena such as trade and marriages.

The ultimate goal of the article is therefore to reveal the multi-ethnic North that provided the background for the saga sources, a North whose history is not as homogeneous as sources suggest and quite unlike the modified version which found its way into the histories of nation states. The literary conventions of sagas are not just imaginary tales—their use in various contexts can reveal something essential in otherwise schematic images or configurations. Even researchers of the sagas have certain personal conceptions of what the “real” lives of the Sami were like at the time, and how the sagas depict this. In fact, they participate in a continuum of saga literature that generates representations of the Sami in history.

KEYWORDS the Sami, migration, the Middle Ages, saga literature, Iceland, multi-ethnicity

Among the manifold Nordic literary materials of the Middle Ages, from legal texts to fictional works, the saga literature includes a multitude of mentions and descriptions of the Sami (*finnar*) (see in particular Mundal 1996; Pálsson 1997; Pálsson, 1998; Aalto 2010; DeAngelo 2010; Kusmenko 2013). These representations have produced a wealth of literary, archaeological and historical research. The Sami lived at least as far south as the Dovre region, neighbouring the Norwegians from Trøndelag to Tromsø (Bergsland 1971; Bergsland 1996; Bergstøl 2008; Fjellheim 2007; Odner 1983; Skogheim 2014; Zachrisson *et al.* [eds.] 1997; Zachrisson 2004).

Recently, the view of the status of the Sami in history has become more complex as it has been studied in frameworks other than merely the colonial one, or without casting them solely as victims of the ruling populations in Scandinavian kingdoms. For instance, the self-government of villages in Swedish Lapland, the *siidas*, has been shown to have been more of an equal to the Crown in the 1500s and 1600s than previously thought (see e.g. Korpijaakko 1989; Lehtola 2002).¹ Similarly, power relations in the Viking era have been considered more multi-level than previously assumed. Research has emphasised mutual interaction and thereby a more equal relationship, in addition to hierarchies and distinctions in certain sectors of society (e.g. Hansen & Olsen 2004: 107; Äikäs & Salmi 2015: 103).

We argue that the colonial relations, or the Sami as “others,” for instance, are one perspective among others. In our article, we seek to contextualize the Sami representations in Old Norse saga literature in more diverse colours. We should consider Sami representations in the saga literature reflections of a multi-ethnic north in the Middle Ages. Instead of being satisfied with only one viewpoint, we should see the medieval Sami history—or generally the history of Fennoscandia—as being much more multi-layered and complex. There is no one history of Fennoscandia, nor is there only one people living there but several, and this history is polyphonic.

In recent decades, the research has shifted away from using the saga literature to produce clear historical evidence about the cultural forms of the Sami people in medieval times. The value of the sagas as sources of historical evidence is heavily debated, since they do not depict historical events or persons objectively (Jakobsson 2015: 21–22; Orning 2017: 32). Rather, they are narrative interpretations of past events; imageries which have their own traditions and which reflect more the general ideas of the authors than actual reality. What the sagas reveal or do not reveal often relates more to the

background and literary conventions of the people who wrote them than the actual reality of the Sami. Nevertheless, they may provide clues as to the mentality or social practices at the time of writing, which, in turn, may reveal something essential about issues such as the historical relations between the Scandinavians and the Sami. This is how archaeologists, for instance, have used the sagas, as an inspiration to find new traits or new ideas to expand their views on early medieval histories.

In addition to considering saga descriptions as reflections of the reality, there is also a temptation to examine the saga literature as representations of Sami “otherness,” a very different element in ancient Nordic society. This can, however, lead researchers to evaluate the past on the basis of their own preconceptions about how the representations of the Sami should be presented “in the right manner,” how the Sami “must have been” in the Middle Ages, or what their role was in the eyes of their Scandinavian neighbours. These assumptions can easily stem from later colonial history which may result in us looking for the medieval Sami to have the same kind of relations to the majority as later in history, with their neighbours oppressing or “othering” them in multiple ways.

At first, we will discuss briefly the use of different Sami ethnonyms in the sagas which reflect, as well as construct, the Sami representations of the multi-ethnic north. We will then examine with some examples chosen from the Kings’ sagas, the various stereotypes that they produce. In particular, we will concentrate on the connection between the Sami and magic. Our purpose is to shed light on the multiple nature of Sami representations, partly leaning on earlier research, and how the Sami are created as “others” in the saga literature. Thus, our aim to point out the diverse colours of Sami representations means that we need to see how the stereotypes are constructed, strengthened and renewed. We will exemplify how the Sami stereotypes sometimes resemble those of mythical creatures such as *tröll*, and how Sami agency may be hidden in the history of settlers in Iceland or mythical stories about marriages between Norse kings and Sami women. Finally, we will briefly compare the Sami representations of the sagas with those of the Celts, which are a close counterpart.

The sources in this article comprise Old Norse Kings’ Sagas *Ágrip af Noregs konungasögum* (c. 1190), *Morkinskinna* (c. 1220), *Fagrskinna* (c. 1220) and *Heimskringla* (c. 1230).² It is not our intention to cover all the passages dealing with the *finnar* in the saga literature, since they have been covered quite thoroughly earlier (see for instance Mundal 1996; Pálsson 1997; Sterling 2008; Aalto 2010; DeAngelo 2010). Because of our thematical and straitened examination, the passages from the Kings’ sagas are especially used in this context. In addition, we will highlight some cases with examples from *Landnámabók*.

Researchers have differing views as to whether the above mentioned Kings' sagas can be seen to reflect either Norse or Icelandic view to the past (Jakobsson 1997; see also Aalto 2017). Our starting point is that it is unnecessary to reconstruct the Norse or Icelandic view of the Sami in the sagas; we prefer to see them as Norse-Icelandic. This can be reasoned with the following points. Of all the four Kings' sagas used here as sources, only *Ágrip* seems to have been written in Norway and possibly by a Norwegian. *Fagrskinna* was possibly written by an Icelander in Norway, and perhaps also *Morkinskinna*. Snorri Sturluson, the author of *Heimskringla* is the only author known by name and he was Icelander (Einarsson 1993: 5–6; Andersson & Gade 2000: 77; Finlay 2004: 15).

The four sagas also have a connection to each other because of interpolations—being the youngest saga, *Heimskringla* in particular, leans on the earlier Kings' sagas. Last but not least, as there are not many passages where the Sami are mentioned, there is not much material for comparisons between these four sagas in order to establish whether something is “Icelandic” or “Norwegian”—after all, they often contain the same passages.

Methodologically, we approach the sources by using close reading of the sagas. This approach is suitable when looking at descriptions that are remarkably similar in the different saga sources, which is often due to intertextuality. The method is admittedly subjective because we rely on our own perceptions: we choose the examples, analyse them based on our previous knowledge, and interpret them. As researchers, we acknowledge that our own subjectivity and possible bias may affect the ways we think that the Sami “should be presented.” Thus, the role of the research on Sami representations is also discussed in our conclusions.

Ethnonyms as Representations

Saga literature contains stories based on oral traditions, which were mostly recorded in Iceland, and some in Norway, from c. 1100 to the 1400s. Researchers have divided sagas into different genres, depending on the choice of theme and attitude to the past. However, the sagas rarely represent only one genre, but are a mix of various traits. For instance, the so-called legendary sagas are considered to be fictional, even mythical, while the Kings' sagas and Icelandic family sagas, are regarded as somewhat more reliable historical records of the time (Clover & Lindow [eds.] 1985; Clunies Ross [ed.] [2000] 2009; Mundal 2013: 31–54; Jakobsson 2015). As Orning points out, discussions about genre have often overshadowed more interesting themes in the sagas (Orning 2017: 25).

According to Ármann Jakobsson (2015: 21–22), the sagas are difficult to

categorise as either fiction or fact. Due to the multi-layered nature of the sagas, their historical and ethnographic traits always consist of a “selected reality” which is filtered through traditional knowledge and mythical narrative. For instance, the characters in the sagas transformed into textual representations—types representing different things in different contexts in accordance with the authors’ aspirations—as the sagas were written. This is very much true of the descriptions of the Sami in saga literature.

The Sami in the sagas are generally referred to by the ancient Germanic term *finn*, in its Norse form *finni*, *finnr*, or *finnar* in the plural. All in all, we can say that the ethnonym *finnr* is an exonym, meaning that it was given by outsiders: it is an ethnonym that cannot be found among the Sami or Finnic peoples. The etymology of the word remains uncertain, but in fact it is not relevant for the purposes of this article. It is sufficient to say that *finnar* denoted first and foremost people who were neighbours of Scandinavians and who seem to have differed markedly from them. A clear linguistic and cultural boundary between speakers of Scandinavian languages and those whom they called *finnar* must have been the reason why Scandinavians did not adopt an ethnonym that these groups used of themselves (Koivulehto 1995; Grünthal 1997; Aalto 2015: 204–205).

Sources such as the Latin *Historia Norwegiæ* (c. 1170–1190), *Ágrip af Noregs konungasögum* and Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* refer to Sami settlements in the Viking Age and the early Middle Ages reaching all the way down to southern Norway, including Hadeland (*Historia Norwegiæ* 2006: 80; *Ágrip af Noregs konungasögum* 1985: 5; *Heimskringla* I 1941: 91–92). Bergsland (1971: 18–27; 1996: 43) states that there were several “Sami wilderness woods” or *finnmørk* (i.e. ‘finnmarks’ in the plural) in Norway.³ For example, in the 1270 border agreement between Norway and Sweden, there was a *lappmørk* in Ångermanland, in the region of the subsequent Åsele Lappmark. The concept of *finnmark* as the Sami residential area was therefore not limited to the distant north alone.

According to the most ancient provincial laws of eastern Norway (*Borgartingsloven* and *Eidsivatingsløven*; see *Norges Gamle Love* I [1846]), Norwegians were forbidden from travelling to *finnmørk*, “to ask for predictions.” These laws are dated to the 1100s, but the provisions of the laws most likely stem from early Christian times. Mundal believes that the *finnmørk* had to be located in the vicinity of the lawmakers, since it is hard to imagine people making months-long excursions to northern Finnmark. She also draws attention to the fact that in western Norway, which was not inhabited by the Sami, no similar provisions were included in the Gulathing law; however, such provisions existed in south-east Norway, where by all accounts the Sami lived (Mundal 1996: 102–103; DuBois 1999: 129; *Norges Gamle Love*

I 1846: 350, 389–390). Archaeological research has been able to verify this conjecture with some certainty (Mundal 1996: 101–102; Zachrisson *et al.* [eds.] 1997: 158–174; Bergstøl 2008).

The Sami and the Norwegians thus lived side by side in a long zone from the Tromsø region to the Oppland area in central Norway. Oppland was the home area of a man called *Fiðr litli* [‘little’] in *Óláfs saga hins helga* in *Heimskringla*. This devoted King’s man was also known as *Finnr*, which even the saga assumes indicated his ethnic background. According to the saga, *Fiðr* is so fast on his feet that not even a horse can beat him. Of course, you may ask whether this referred to summer or winter conditions, because he is also said to have been a well-practised skier (*Heimskringla* II 1945: 120).

As the ethnonyms indicate, the image of the Sami in the saga literature is almost entirely the creation of outsiders. Although the number of references is relatively high, the Sami mainly feature in minor roles, which is typical: foreign minor characters are often literary constructions in the sagas (Sterling 2008: 5). Therefore, the sagas have an established way of referring to the Sami, using specific Sami imagery. The accumulation of “information” about them in the saga literature was already following the model typical of later descriptions of the Sami: each author read previous sources and took advantage of the descriptions in them. For instance, in *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson tells the legend of King Harald Fairhair and *Snæfriðr*, a Sami chieftain’s daughter, in almost the same words as those found in *Ágrip af Noregs konungasögum*, written around 1200 by an unknown author (*Heimskringla* I 1941: 125–127; *Ágrip af Nóregis konungasögum* 1985: 5–6; Mundal 1997; Kusmenko 2013: 173).

Sami Sorcerers

Authors of saga literature viewed the Sami through the framework of their own culture and ideals. According to Knut Odner (1983: 22–31), the peasant Ottar’s description of the land of the *finnar* in the late 800s as a “wilderness” and those of the “Northmen” and Bjarmians as “inhabited,” reflects this. There are many stereotypes of winter and cold associated with the Sami. Similarly, the Sami are always thought to go on skis: *finnr skriðr*. An Old Norse oath assured that peace would last “as long as the falcon flies, the pine grows, the rivers run into the sea, the children cry for their mothers and the Lapps go on their skis” (*Tryggðamál/Gríðamál*).⁴ Also the personal names of the Sami often refer to coldness, snow or skiing (Aalto 2010: 169).

In the saga literature, interest in the Sami is divided into three main elements: economic relations, that is, taxation and trade; paganism and

witchcraft; and marriages (Aalto 2010). Taxation and trade were controlled to some extent as early as the Viking Age and the Middle Ages, because they were a source of wealth for Norwegian chieftains and kings. The Norwegians protected their exclusive right by the force of arms, for example against the *kylfings*, i.e. Karelians and Kvens, who came from the east to trade with the Sami and to loot (Hansen & Olsen 2014: 152–155; Tjelmeland, Lähteenmäki & Golubev [eds.] 2015: 30).

Witchcraft is the predominant feature associated with the Sami in the saga literature (Orning 2017: 114). The Sami were known as skilled sorcerers, clairvoyants and teachers of witchcraft skills as far afield as in the Shetland Islands and Iceland. In general, the Scandinavian kingdoms were Christianised by the 1100s, but the old faith persisted among the Sami throughout the Middle Ages. There are still differing views as to how quickly the Sami were actually converted (Steen 1954; Bergsland 1971; Rydving 1993; Mundal 1996: 97; Mundal 2007; Broadbent 2010: 161). Although witchcraft was forbidden, ordinary Norwegians—and their chieftains—were attracted to it. According to Mundal, since Sami witchcraft had much in common with Old Norse paganism, it was familiar to the Norwegians. As the sagas were written during the Christian era, the fact that the Sami practised a pagan faith was emphasised (Mundal 1996; Mundal 2004; Kusmenko 2008: 112–113).

Sami sorcerers were sometimes described with admiration in the sagas: they are described as being able to “track footsteps as readily as dogs, both in snow and in thaw,” and their skills in skiing and shooting with a bow are often mentioned. In the sagas, a Sami sorcerer is able to influence the weather and raise a storm at sea. Likewise, he is able to help women conceive “immaculately” with the help of a spirit conjured into them (Pálsson 1999: 41; *Heimskringla* I 1941: 323). Shamanism is also connected to Sami witchcraft. A description of a spiritual journey is included in *Historia Norvegiæ*. The story concerns a group of merchants who visit the Sami to witness a spiritual journey, apparently made by a shaman in order to cure a sick woman (*Historia Norvegiæ* 2006: 62). In Olaf Tryggvason’s saga in *Heimskringla*, the Danish King Harald Bluetooth, when angered by the Icelanders, sends a wizard (*kunnigr maðr*, a ‘knowing man’) to find out whether he should attack Iceland. The man travels to Iceland in the shape of a whale (*Heimskringla* I 1941: 271). It is not directly stated in the saga that the man was a Sami, but he is often interpreted as one—particularly since spiritual journeys and transformation into an animal have been associated with the shamanistic faith of the Sami at a later date (Clunies Ross 1998: 34; see also Jackson & Podossinov 2003).

The sorcerers typically have magical spears and arrows, but they are also able to protect themselves from such weapons (Heide 2006). In *Ólafs saga*

hins helga, the Sami made twelve magical reindeer skin hauberks for Þórir (Tore Hund) which spears could not penetrate and which were therefore superior to the Vikings' iron (*Heimskringla* II 1945: 345). The Sami are sometimes also associated with blacksmiths: in the Edda poem *Völundarkviða*, the father of the wonderful blacksmith Völundr was a *finnakonungr*, whose brother's name was *Slagfiðr*. In fact, the description of the brothers in the poem follow the stereotypical description of *finnar*, because they "skied and hunted animals" (*Edda* 1927: 112; Kusmenko 2013: 175). In the sagas, some Norwegians travelled to the Sami to learn about sorcery. Snorri tells about Gunnhildr from Hálogaland, who studied sorcery alongside the most skilled sorcerers in Finnmark. Since Gunnhildr's character represents evil of all kinds, she could also be associated with sorcery (*Heimskringla* I 1941: 135–136; Pálsson 1999: 41).

Dwarfs, Giants, and *finnar*

In addition to witchcraft, the mixing of the Sami with other legendary characters is a noteworthy element of the image of the Sami in the sagas. The term *tröll*, which in the sagas means a supernatural phenomenon, or a person who deals with the supernatural, can be connected with the Sami. The term is used as a metaphor for anything beyond the limits of normality, to indicate the strength or size of a character, for example. The word can also refer to malicious spirits or ghosts. It is even associated with the Berserks, who metamorphose in battle, turning from a human into a bear or wolf. A metamorphosis naturally involves magic. *Tröll* is often translated into English as 'troll,' but it does not mean a troll as such, but rather a sorcerer (Jakobsson 2013: 118).

Jötunn literally means a giant, but in Scandinavian mythology giants are not only large in size, but form a diverse group and are ambivalent characters. Giants are often presented as the enemies of the Æsir gods, but on the other hand they also had highly valued qualities, such as wisdom. The fact that the Æsir gods could marry giants' womenfolk, while a giant could not have an Æsir goddess as a wife, is indicative of the ambivalent role they played in Scandinavian mythology. Giants were seen as *Übergangscharakteren*, as they were human-like characters who lived in a zone between the human world and that of the monstrous races. This connotation suited well the image of the *finnar* in the sagas, who lived somewhere between the known civilized world and the unknown periphery (Steinsland 1991; see also Vestergaard 1991: 21–34; Schulz 2004: 231, 235).

The Sami are comparable to giants in Scandinavian mythology, since similar characteristics are associated with them: they live outside the "cen-

tre,” on the edge of the world and often in the north; snow is their element (as it is for the northern giants) and they know how to ski, shoot with a bow, predict the future and perform magic. Although Christianity and its negative attitude towards pagan magic are clearly visible in the sagas, magic and its use are not always depicted as negative. According to Gro Steinsland, the Scandinavian kings’ marriages with the women of the *finnar*, as described in the sagas, repeat the literary *topos* found in mythology: Æsir kings marry the womenfolk of giants. Although these unions often ended unhappily, they resulted in a hero: the union of opposing forces created something new and unprecedented (Steinsland 1991: 311).

Kusmenko has analysed the relationships between the giants and the *finnar*, that is, Sami characters in saga literature. According to him, many common characteristics are associated with these figures: both are able to control natural phenomena, raise storms and bad weather, they may have magical powers to transform themselves into birds, and they have the skill to heal by magic. They may be the forefathers of kings and heroes, both the giants and the Sami live in the mountains, and some of the giants even have the same professions as the Sami. The features of giants and the Sami may be mixed, for instance in the mythological character of Skaði the giant, who moves around on skis and shoots accurately with a bow. Skaði’s brothers live by skiing and hunting—activities that are associated with the *finnar* (Kusmenko 2013: 174–184; Hirvonen 2000).

Purs is another name for a seemingly supernatural character. It is a slightly problematic term: it seems to mean a *tröll*, some sort of a witch or sorcerer. This creature takes human form, but is still a negative being, a kind of sub-human. The Prose Edda,⁵ which describes Scandinavian mythology, mentions giants and *pursar*, more specifically *hrimpursar*, which can be translated as ‘frost giants,’ for example. In general, the word *tröll* and its synonyms *jötunn* and *purs* have negative connotations. The term *tröll* can be considered pejorative, even hostile. As Ármann Jakobsson has stated, regardless of what the equivocal term *tröll* actually referred to, it at least meant strange (Jakobsson 2008b: 111). In this sense, it is understandable that all these names are from time to time associated with the *finnar* in the sagas.

Tröll, *purs* and *jötunn* strongly suggest otherness: they are never “here,” but somewhere “out there” (Jakobsson 2013: 96–106). However, it would be simplistic to claim that all designations of *tröll*, *purs* or *jötunn* were associated with the Sami only. Although the sagas refer to the Sami as giants, there are examples to the contrary: the appellation dwarf (*dvergr*) or simply little (*litli*) was sometimes also used.⁶ Various types of dwarves feature in the saga literature. The so-called Poetic Edda⁷ mentions dwarves both by name and anonymously. Dwarves also feature in ancient sagas and folk tales (Horn

2010). According to Ármann Jakobsson (2008a: 183–206), dwarves in the sagas are usually small men who may be good or evil, have magical powers and often covet women who are above them in status. The reason for these various connotations is to define the nature of the Sami—their otherness—in relation to the Scandinavians. In addition to sorcery, divination and the interpretation of dreams are strongly linked to the Sami in the sagas.

Multiple Roles of the Sami

When speaking of the mixing of characters, a prominent motive is repeated in saga literature: the marriages of kings or chieftains with Sami women or giants. In many cases, these are associated with witchcraft. For instance, the wife of King Haraldr Fairhair is Snæfriðr, daughter of the Sami chieftain Svási. The number of royal marriages with Sami witches or their daughters is so high in the saga literature that, according to Kusmenko's ironic comment, one might conclude that the Sami are the ancestors of the royal families of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. He suggests that when *Heimskringla* and *Gesta Danorum* were written in the 1200s, it was still possible to imagine that a Scandinavian king had a Sami wife (Kusmenko 2013: 173–178).

However, as Kusmenko also proves, similar marriages are common between royals and giants in mythology. Mundal notes that the mixing of giants and the Sami is typical evidence of the unreliability of the sagas as an historical source. Yet, she notes that, among the ancient Norse people, the kinship of the Sami with Norwegian kings reflects a certain sense of unity with the Sami, or even appreciation of them. A common family background bound the king of Norway to the Sami and gave him the legitimacy to rule over them (Mundal 1996: 110–111).

This could be viewed as the construction of the legend of a state formed by two peoples. Gro Steinsland assumes that, according to the ancient Norse perspective, a king had to be a descendant of giants or gods, the result of a marriage between two opposite sides, a Norwegian chieftain and a mythical character. When the sagas moved from the mythical to the historical level, people in the real world, such as the Sami, could stand in for the giants. The key point was that the marriage was between high-ranking individuals, which is why the wives of kings were almost without exception daughters of “Sami kings,” *Finnakonungar* (Steinsland 1991).

Sami kings may appear also as forefathers among Norwegian immigrants whose lineage is described in *Landnámabók* (discussed further in the next section). For instance, a man called *Hrosskell* married a woman named *Jóreið*, of whose family background it is said that she was the daughter of *Ql-vir*, who, in turn, was the son of *Mottull Finnakonungr* (*Landnámabók* 1968:

82; see also *Fagrskinna* 1985: 79). The name *Møttull* also appears elsewhere in the saga literature in connection with the Sami. The name cannot be regarded as historical but rather mythical; it literally means a cloak (Zoëga [1910] 2004: 307). The moniker *Finnakonungr* indicates that Møttull would have been the “king” of the Sami, that is, their leader. It is possible to consider this as the tendency of the Scandinavian cultural elite to interpret other cultures from its own perspective, thus being inclined to call any leader *king*. Other “kings of the *finnar*” also feature in written sources. For instance, an entry in an Icelandic annal dating back to 1313 describes how the “king” of the Sami, Marteinn, came to meet the king of Norway (*Flatøbogen annaler* 1888: 393; Bratrein 2001). This means that the use of the name *Finnakonungr* was not limited to sagas only.

The sagas may not describe single, historical events, but how to combine and interpret information from two sources (a saga from around 1235 and an annal from the beginning of the fourteenth century), which both mention a Sami king? The sources do not reveal what kind of hierarchies there lay behind the scenes—whether the Sami king was summoned to the Norwegian king or whether he arrived of his own will (Mundal 2006: 99). The point is that we do not know this background, but our assumptions lead us to make conclusions. If the Sami were later oppressed, surely the Sami kings were not independent actors? The latest suggestions that the Sami—or at least part of them—were active in northern trading networks would pose the Sami as actors and not bystanders (Hansen & Olsen 2014).

All this emphasizes that the picture of the medieval social structure in Norway, as well as the relations of the Sami to it, has proved to be much more complex than previously believed. Some scholars have referred to a symbiotic relationship between the Sami and the Norwegians, even a cultural creolisation between two different cultures (Zachrisson *et al.* [eds.] 1997: 218; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 107; Hansen & Olsen 2014; Tjelmeland, Lähtenmäki & Golubev [eds.] 2015: 43). Such a symbiosis is a reference to interaction that produces mutual benefit. Both parties have an economic specialism and cooperate in order to benefit from this. Creolisation, in turn, refers to a borderland culture where cultural influences and bloodlines are exchanged through mutual interaction.

Cultural borrowings, including the high number of Scandinavian loan words in Sami languages, as well as certain grammatical and phonological features borrowed by Old Norse, are an indication of close relations of this kind (Svonni 2010). Kusmenko also refers to close relations in aspects of religion and folklore (Kusmenko 2013: 171). Cultural influences probably transferred from the Sami to Norwegians, but it is still debated to what extent this took place (Simonsen 1967; Price 2002).

On the other hand, a certain hierarchy based on asymmetric power relations is obvious. Some researchers of the sagas have regarded the viewpoint they represent as colonial, purveying the exclusive medieval Christian view of the world, where lines were drawn between Christians and non-Christians as groups. *Landnámabók* (and *Íslendingabók*), as well as *Íslendingasögur*, only described the settlement of the island from the viewpoint of the men who conquered the land (Sterling 2008). On the other hand, the sagas are not considered “purely colonial” since they do not, for example, create a clear myth of legitimation in favour of Scandinavians. It is thought that neither group had the mission of converting the other, or judged the other on a religious basis (Fríðriksdóttir 2015).

It is difficult to obtain an accurate picture of the (social) status of the Sami in medieval Norway. Mundal thinks that they did not occupy the lowest rung in the social hierarchy, but were not particularly elevated either, except perhaps the *búfinnar*, who had settled in one place, for example as fishermen who lived as freeholders (Mundal 1996: 99–100; see also Bergsland 1971; Odner 1983: 26–27; Pálsson 1999: 30–31).⁸ The status of the Sami as subjects was problematic because they were heathens, which, by all accounts, meant that they were not entitled to full “subjectship.” However, the Sami were valuable as taxpayers, whose interests were emphasised both in certain legal texts and by special measures taken by the king and local chiefs (Mundal 1996: 106–109).

Sami Immigrants in Iceland?

In 1990s, Hermann Pálsson, an Icelandic professor, made an intriguing suggestion that interestingly exposes the borderland between mythological and historical interpretations of the saga literature, as well as the role of the Sami in Nordic history. Pálsson proposed that the Sami could also have emigrated to Iceland along with Vikings leaving northern Norway. He focused on *Landnámabók*, written in Iceland in the first half of the 1100s, which mentions a total of 430 people who emigrated to Iceland, and even their countries of origin or residences are mentioned (Pálsson 1997: 62–84; see also Benediktsson 1993: 373–374).

Pálsson noted that *Landnámabók* does not contain many direct references to *finnar*, but he suggested that the immigrants originating in the north of Norway were connected to the Sami in one way or another. He also assumed that everyone whose appellation was *þurs*, *jötunn* or *tröll* had a Sami background (Pálsson 1997: 62–84). He did not, however, specify the purpose of these appellations in the saga literature in general, despite the fact that they are highly ambiguous. That is the reason why Ármann Jakobsson, for

example, has criticised Hermann Pálsson for being too ready to connect all giants and trolls to the Sami, despite the fact that there may be other explanations for them in the source texts (Jakobsson 2013: 147).

It is true that the names *jötunn* and *þurs* are often associated with immigrants, especially from northern Norway or Trøndelag. For instance, one of the ancestors of an immigrant named Ketill is said to be Jǫtun-Björn, a native of northern Norway (*Landnámabók* 1968: 217: “Jǫtun-Bjarnarsonar norðan ór Nóregi”). Another immigrant, Þorsteinn, who was from Namdalen, married a woman named Hild, whose father was Þráinn *svartaþurs* [‘black-troll’] (*Landnámabók* 1968: 252). Both examples suggest that the mere fact of originating in northern Norway was enough to be associated with magic. This is reflected in the monikers used.

The most famous Icelanders whose origins the sagas connect to northern Norway and possibly the Sami were Egill Skalla-Grímsson’s father Skalla-Grímr and his father Kveld-Úlfr. The latter is mentioned at the very beginning of *Egils saga*, stating that his parents were Bjálfi and Hallbera, sister of Hallbjörn *hálftröll* (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* 1933: 3). Again, *hálftröll* refers to Hallbera’s brother being half *tröll*, i.e. possibly Sami, but as Ármann Jakobsson has pointed out, the saga does not reveal the extent to which Hallbjörn was a *tröll* or his nature in general.⁹ This feature is probably connected generally to the connotations of the north. In the north, both magic and bestiality tended to be associated with the Sami (Jakobsson 2013: 144).

Another example of a possible Sami background in *Landnámabók* is the case of Finni the Dream Interpreter. A Norwegian called Þorgeir moved to Iceland and had illegitimate sons called Þorgrímr and Finni the Dream Interpreter (*draumspaki*). Finni’s mother was said to be a foreigner called *Lekny*. It is impossible to deduce the woman’s ethnic or linguistic background solely from her name. However, the facts that Finni had been given the name *Finni* and that his appellation was *Dream Interpreter*, are a strong indication of his Sami family background (*Landnámabók* 1968: 275; Finni is also mentioned in *Finnboga saga ramma* and in *Ljósvetninga saga*).

Landnámabók also mentions other people originating in Hálogaland or northern Norway, and the ability to perform magic is associated with many of them. Numerous references to “otherness” especially in the designations *jötunn*, *tröll* and *þurs* do not, as such, prove the individuals’ links to the Sami in the way that the word *finnar* would. It is noteworthy, however, that Pálsson could identify even a small concentration of place-names in Iceland possibly referring to the Sami, including a region called *finnmörk*. Moreover, Pálsson mentioned local traditions involving wizards and sorcerers (Pálsson 1997: 61; Pálsson 1998: 41–43).

Pálsson's suggestion about the Sami in Iceland has not been considered much in research. Ísaksson (2013: 50–52) has made a preliminary attempt to outline the “Sami cultural landscape” in Iceland by means of environmental archaeology, and has proposed a more in-depth study of names. Based on Pálsson's notions on place-names and on studies on Celtic influences in Iceland (discussed in the following section), it would be interesting to know whether the Sami language is in some way reflected in Iceland and the Icelandic language (Willson 2011: 267–281; Willson 2014: 322).

Comparison. Sami and Celtic Forefathers of Icelanders

Hermann Pálsson's notions are especially interesting when suggesting that certain immigrants from Norway had a “non-Nordic” or non-Germanic background or were of “mixed origin,” although this is only hinted at by vague references and pieces of information in the *Landnámabók*. It is good to remember that the author/s of *Landnámabók* were members of the Icelandic-Norwegian elite, whose interpretations of Icelandic history reflected the need of the aristocracy to legitimise its claims on the land and privileges. Hence, in their works, literate men belonging to the social elite modified ideals related to the backgrounds of Icelanders—particularly the upper class. The “better side” was emphasised, while the background of the Sami, associated with witchcraft, was not necessarily a subject of pride (Aalto 2012: 12).

As Sterling has pointed out, being seen as equivalent to the Sami was not genealogically or nationally prudent for Icelanders, and it may well be one reason for writing the Sami out of Icelandic history (Sterling 2008: 128–129). According to Willson, with respect to language and, to some extent, even history, the ideal of historical “purity” has been cherished in Iceland. This has meant that Icelanders, in their own opinion, have preserved the ancient Norse culture in a purer form than other Scandinavians (Willson 2011: 278; Kristinsson 2003; Sigurðsson [1988] 2000). Acknowledging that there could be other ethnicities among the forefathers would mean questioning the sources.

The role of the Celts in forming the Icelandic conception of history offers an interesting point of comparison in the study of how the sagas shaped the Icelandic past. The Celtic background and heritage are barely visible in the Icelandic sagas. However, scientists have estimated that up to 14–40 per cent of Iceland's first immigrants would have been of Celtic background, but only around two per cent of the names mentioned in *Landnámabók* are of Celtic origin. The Celts have left their mark on the Icelandic language in the form of a few borrowings and proper names, and have possibly

influenced the Icelandic saga literature, for example through motifs borrowed from traditional Celtic legends (Sigurðsson [1988] 2000: 19–22, 27, 118; Humphrey 2009: 99–101; Ísaksson 2013: 25–26; Brady 2016: 61).

William Sayers, who has studied the Celtic background of Icelanders in *Landnámabók*, has pointed out that: “Foreign cultural goods are rejected although a residue is recognized, just as non-Norse names are incorporated in toponyms” (Sayers 1994:136). This is in coherence with the assumptions that Hermann Pálsson made about Icelandic toponyms and the *finnar*. Celtic names in toponyms are, however, more obvious than Sami ones in Icelandic. As Sayers and Sterling say, the Celtic background of the immigrants was worth mentioning when they were of noble or royal birth, but unsuitable forefathers such as slaves are not mentioned. This could be applied to the Sami as well—Móttull *Finnakonungr* is worth mentioning as forefather. If slaves are mentioned, they do not possess patronymics and they bear names, “often imposed nicknames, connotive of their social or physical condition.” All in all, we should recognize the bias of the thirteenth-century Icelandic saga writers and that they wrote out any unwelcome foreign taint from the Icelandic past (Sayers 1994: 136; Friðriksson & Vésteinsson 2003; Sterling 2008: 237; Humphrey 2009).

Strong, repetitive stereotypes about the *finnar* in the sagas show, according to Thomas DuBois, that they are part of Old Norse social memory (DuBois 2013). The Sami stereotypes of the thirteenth-century Kings’ sagas were not history anymore, but they had become, in DuBois’ words, “epitomizing events.” We may speculate that perhaps those “epitomizing events” such as marriages between two groups reflect some of the interaction that existed in the pre-Christian era. The saga authors had to compromise with this tradition and with their knowledge that interaction with heathens was bad. Therefore, the image of the *finnar* in the sagas is anything but simple—it contains different levels and the final level is labelled by the saga authors’ own world view.

The purpose of the stereotypes in the sagas was to show what the proper Scandinavian was not: heathen. This raises the question whose views we are talking about. John Lindow has stated that emblems that were assigned to outsiders—Scandinavian folklore in general—can tell us something about the views of those who tell the stories (Lindow 1995). In the case of the Kings’ sagas, the stereotypes of the Sami reveal that they are shaped by the Christian authors of the sagas.

It could be added that the viewpoint in the sagas seems to be also that of the elite. Although it is not possible to cover the matter in detail in this article, several archaeological studies suggest that still in the thirteenth century and even later, the Norwegians who lived close to the Sami people had everyday contacts with them, which means that it was hardly possible

to exclude the Sami in any way. Archaeological studies show that interaction between the Sami and Norwegians took place on many mundane levels (Hansen & Olsen 2014; Zachrisson 2004). This is in no way showing in the sagas, in which the “[s]tereotyped foreigners on the one hand suit the formal narrative purpose of the sagas” (Sterling 2008: 112).

According to Knut Odner, stereotypes were prerequisite for interaction between the Sami and the Norwegians (Odner 1983: 31). This may be true to certain extent, as group identities and group boundaries are maintained through stereotypes. However, the negative stereotypes of the Sami reflect perhaps the view of the elite and especially the Church, which considered it harmful that Christian Norwegians were in contact with the heathen Sami. Therefore, the provincial Norwegian laws that forbade any contacts with the Sami seem to be in line with this view (Aalto 2010).

John Lindow has pointed out that supernatural abilities were very often ascribed to those who were somehow different, “others,” in the saga literature (Lindow 1995: 22). This certainly holds true with the Sami who are associated with *tröll* or *jötnar*, shape-changing and the use of magic. As researchers, we tend to take this for granted because this is the way the Sami were depicted also in later historical accounts: very peculiar, different, “others.” The true activity of the Sami is hidden between the lines, and not even archaeological studies can reveal it as it was, because the cultural traits of the Sami are not discussed as Sami activity but merely as “representations” of the Sami culture (Schanche 2000: 93).

Conclusion

A lot of references to the *finnar* or Sami people are to be found in the saga literature, but their role is “sieved” through saga authors. We do not know for certain whether the authors had first-hand experience of the Sami. Therefore, it is understandable that the role of the *finnar* remains on the half-mythical level. As repeatedly stated, the saga literature does not constitute historically reliable material on the pre-medieval period because it was not recorded until later, in the strongly Christian period. Instead, as emphasised in this article, the sagas reflect the Norse-Icelandic elite’s way of thinking and values in the 1200s and 1300s.

Based on our analysis, the varied image of the Sami in the sagas seems to reflect the complex interaction between the Sami and the Norwegians in the Middle Ages. Their depictions reflect the different textual levels that the sagas contain, and there is no one “right” depiction, stereotype or story about the *finnar*. On the one hand, the equal relationship is conveyed through *topos* concerning the marriage between a Norse king and a Sami

woman, which may stem from earlier, oral tradition. On the other hand, we see reflections of medieval Christian prejudice in passages in which the Sami way of life, sorcery and paganism are described. Instead of one-lined interpretations, the Sami representations in sagas reveal many kinds of relations and attitudes which emphasize the polyphonic nature of both the saga literature and the Middle Age society. Even if the stereotypes tell us more about the society that created them, we can be sure that behind them lie very mundane phenomena: marriage, trade, seeking specialists for healing etc. On the ground of this, the image of the Sami history is not as grim and colonial as previously assumed.

For its part, the saga literature continued and renewed documentary descriptions of the Sami, which go back to the ancient period and with which the sagas share numerous themes and motifs (cf. Fjellheim 2007: 28–29). These themes of Sami representations have been continuously elaborated even after that. Ironically, we could even say that researchers of the sagas have their own tradition on Sami representations when conceptualizing what the “real” life of the Sami was in the relation to how the sagas depict it.

This was also reflected in Pálsson’s suggestion that there may have been Sami people among the Norwegian settlers in Iceland: it did not receive wide acceptance among scholars. In our opinion, it is only by widening our understanding of the multi-ethnic nature of Middle Age societies that we can consider these kinds of assumptions more seriously. It would mean reconsidering our own ideas about the Sami agency or their activities in Nordic history, as well as their role in a multi-level medieval society.

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NOTES

¹ For instance, Kaisa Korpijaakko’s study (1989) on the land rights of the Sami people in the 1600s and 1700s proved that the way in which Sami *siidas* used their lands corresponded to Nordic peasant concepts of land ownership. The fact that even the *siidas* can be considered “permanent settlements” in the same way as peasant settlements, places the early history of the Sami in a new light, but no definitive conclusions have been drawn in this regard. Korpijaakko’s results have also been disputed (see e.g. Lehtola 2015).

² Original sources are used and translations are given, when necessary.

³ *Mark*, pl. *mørk*, meaning ‘boundary mark’ or ‘forest’ (Zoëga [1910] 2004).

- ⁴ “En sá ykkar er gengur á gervar sáttir eða vegur á veittar tryggðir, þá skal hann svo víða vargur rækur og rekinn sem menn víðast varga reka, kristir menn kirkjur sækja, heiðnir menn hof blóta, eldur upp brennur, jörð grær, mögur móður kallar og móðir mög fæðir, aldir elda kynda, skip skriður, skildir blíkja, sól skín, snæ leggur, Finnur skriður, fura vex, valur flýgur vorlangan dag, stendum honum byr beinn undir báða vængi, himinn hverfur, heimur er byggður ...” (*Grágás* 1992: 457).
- ⁵ The Prose Edda, or Snorri’s Edda, a work written by Snorri Sturluson around the 1220s, was named so by later generations to distinguish it from the Poetic Edda, a collection of ancient poems about gods and heroes. Many of the expressions used in the poems, and their background, are explained in the Prose Edda.
- ⁶ A Sami known as Svási is referred to as a *dvergr* in *Flateyjarbók* I (1860: 582); and *Finnr litli* in *Heimskringla* II (1945: 120).
- ⁷ The Poetic Edda is a collection of poems about the gods of Scandinavian mythology and the mythical heroes of Germanic culture. *Codex Regius*, the manuscript of the Edda poems, originates in the late 1200s. The poems were composed over the course of several centuries, perhaps beginning in the 800s, with the latest not being written until the 1200s (see Hallberg 1993: 149–152; on Eddic poetry, see Larrington, Quinn & Schorn [eds.] 2016).
- ⁸ According to Bergsland, in the early 1100s, *búfinn* Sami lived in Hinnøy in Vesterålen, and were even referred to as *þegnar*, ‘free men.’ The mention they are given in the *Flateyjarbók*—“... vær hnuskum Bufinna edr fiskimenn”—is the only reference made in saga literature to the group of *búfinnar*. At least one legal text from the era states that the Sámi had settled permanently (Mundal 1996: 99–100, 109; *Flateyjarbók* III 1868: 422).
- ⁹ *Ketils saga hængs*, on the other hand, suggests that Hallbjörn and his family are a different breed, perhaps more beast than human. Still, in the same saga, Hallbjörn himself refers contemptuously to the “giant woman” that his son Ketill brought from Finnmark, calling her “that troll” (*tröll þat*) (*Ketils saga hængs* 1950: 123).

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