

CONCEPTUALIZING THE MULTICULTURAL ‘NORTH’ IN THE *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR*: PEOPLES, PLACES, AND PHENOMENA

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Abstract

Despite often being described as ‘desolate’ and ‘remote’ (especially in the *terra nullis* colonialism exercised by the Scandinavian nation states in early modern times), the northernmost parts of the Fennoscandian landscape complexes are described as already inhabited in several medieval Scandinavian texts, including the *Íslendingasögur*. Primarily, these texts explicitly assert that the ambiguous and distant ‘north’ of Fennoscandia was a special, preternatural place, simultaneously internal and external to what medieval Icelanders perceived as ‘Nóregi’. Whether enforced by the ‘othering’ of characters depicted with expressive features and abilities traditionally associated with the area or its indigenous inhabitants, by the descriptions of different landscapes and communities unequivocally ‘othered’ and distinct from that of the saga-writers’ reality, or by extraordinary phenomena connected to the two, ‘norðarliga í Nóregi’ is portrayed as somewhat distinct from that of the rest of the ‘national’ landscape. Encompassing an area extending further south than contemporary northern Norway, the notion of a supernatural north in the *Íslendingasögur* goes beyond an idea of a unified Nóregi. By discussing the portrayal of north Norwegian landscapes and geographical understandings in these texts, in conjunction with an examination of the depiction of the Sámi, this essay aims to demonstrate how north Norwegian spatial awareness in the *Íslendingasögur* can help enlighten cross-cultural relationships and liminal identities, and present fewer rigid contrasts between people and cultures in Fennoscandia than previously accounted for.

Keywords: *Norse-Sámi relations; Íslendingasögur; Liminal landscapes; Medieval spatial understandings*

Landscape is omnipresent. As a means of engagement in the world, human knowledge is produced, reproduced, and circulated through active relational involvement (Skandfer 2009, 92). Our contemporary perception and experience of the landscape is never similar to the way it was perceived or experienced in the past (Bergstøl, 2008), even though certain archaic features might remain: ‘The landscapes, with natural borders and diverse natural conditions, were fundamental for existence and for the establishment of industries in past societies, and might be a major factor in creating long-term historical development.’ (Amundsen 2017, 191) Because of this, the textual representations of landscapes presented in the *Íslendingasögur* can portray the ideological nature in which they occur, in a sense therefore presenting certain early medieval perceptions of the geopolitical and sociocultural situations in which they were written, as well as an understanding of the past they represent.

One of the most prominent conceptions of the north Norwegian landscapes from the medieval period onwards, particularly clear in the *terra nullis* colonialism of the early modern era but with roots in the early medieval period and even continuing in present-day portrayals (e.g. www.finnmark.no), is that of the last wilderness and its untouched nature (Ojala 2009, 64). In general, this conceptualization of the far north tends to enforce assumptions of an uncivilized, dark, and cold periphery, as expressed by the German chronicler Adam of Bremen in the eleventh century: 'Beyond Norway, which is the farthestmost northern country, you will find no human habitation, nothing but ocean, terrible to look upon and limitless.' (trans. Tschan 2002, 215) This conceptualizing of northernmost Fennoscandia as a distant and deserted place is also sometimes accompanied by negative stereotypes about its indigenous population, emphasized by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus in the late twelfth century: 'To the north it [Norway] faces an undefined and nameless territory, lacking civilization and swarming with strange inhuman races.' (ed. Friis-Jensen and trans. Fisher 2015, 17) However, regardless of their own assumptions of an area in northern Norway void of [civilized] people, both authors later assert the presence of a people known to them as *Scritefingi* and *Finni*, synonymous with the *Finnar* found in Old Norse texts, rumoured to be expert hunters and powerful magicians (trans. Tschan 2002, 212; ed. Friis-Jensen and trans. Fisher 2015). Predominantly, these historical exonyms are considered to correspond to the modern-day Sámi (Mundal 1996, 98), the indigenous population of the region now known as Sápmi.

An extract from the Icelandic family saga *Vatnsdæla saga* is particularly interesting both concerning the naming of the indigenous group in historical sources and in introducing some of the literary stereotypes associated with the Sámi in Old Norse sources. Here, the Norse chieftain Ingimundr invites three Sámi men 'from the north' to his farm on Hefni island in Hálogaland. In exchange for butter and tin, these three men agree to undertake a 'mind journey' across the sea to Iceland, in order to search for his missing amulet, hidden by a high-standing Sámi seeress earlier in the saga,¹ and report back about the lie of the land:

Þeir svara: 'Semsveinum er þat forsending at fara, en fyrir þína áskorun vilju vér prófa. Nú skal oss byrgja eina saman í húsi, ok nefni oss engi maðr', ok svá var gort. Ok er liðnar váru þrjár nætr, kom Ingimundr til þeira. Þeir risu þá upp ok vopuðu fast ǫndinni ok mæltu: 'Semsveinum er erfitt, ok mikit starf hǫfu vér haft, en þó munu vér með þeim jarteinum fara, at þú munt kenna land, ef þú kemr, af várri frásǫgn, en torvelt varð oss eptir at leita hlutinum, ok mega mikit

¹ Sveinsson 1955, 29. The description of the 'Finna ein fjölkunnig' is fascinating as the author has paid extreme attention to the 'othering' of the woman, however, it is not based on her ethnicity alone. The woman is presented as having magical powers and exercising the rites of the 'old heathen fashion', predicting the future and hiding Ingimundr's amulet, whilst dressed in splendid attire and placed on the high seat in the middle of the hall. The fact that she is portrayed as Sámi only enforces her 'othering' alongside these factors.

atkvæði Finnunnar, því at vér höfu lagt oss í mikla ánauð'. (Sveinsson 1955, 34-35)²

This extract is particularly fascinating as it includes the first (known) written Sámi endonym, expressed in the Old Norse as 'semsveinum'. Only appearing in this extract in the Old Norse corpus, the term is used twice by the men, in addition to the more common exonym 'Finnar', mentioned above. The first component of the word, 'sem', is used by the Sámi men to describe themselves and is therefore probably related to the contemporary endonym 'Sámi', denoting the Sámi people (the Norwegian equivalent is 'same'). The term itself, alongside the name of the cultural region, Sápmi, is generally agreed by Finno-Ugric linguists to descend from the common Sámi-Finnic word 'šämä', which is related to the Baltic word 'zeme', meaning country or land (Hansen and Olsen 2017, 47). The second compound of the word is the Old Norse word for 'boy' or 'lad' ('sveinn'), in the plural dative indefinite form 'sveinum'. In general, the appearance of the word in the original text is crucial due to its nature as an endonym, being the earliest surviving written self-designatory act of the Sámi. On a more basic level, the term is of paramount importance as it indicates that medieval writers and their audience were familiar with and used Sámi endonyms and words, although 'translated' into Norse. Furthermore, it is indicative of the bilingual nature of Sámi people when expressing themselves during interaction with Norse people. It also reveals that language loans occurred on levels not isolated to majority influence alone and that words could consist of components from both languages. In addition to this, a literary narrative is introduced in the portrayal of the Sámi men. Alongside the emphasis on the men as capable finders with magical abilities is the postulation that they came 'from the north', somewhere not too distant but also external to the community on Hefni island.

Most often we see the introduction of a Sámi literary narrative in a text with introductory passages or descriptions of people deemed unique for their characteristics as a direct result of their descent. In the Icelandic family saga *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, written sometime between 1220 and 1240 with the action taking place in the years 850-1000, this is enforced from the introductory passages, where the ancestry and characteristics of Egill's paternal grandfather, the smith and *berserkr* Kveld-Úlfr Bjalfason, are emphasized: 'Úlfr hét maðr, sonr Bjálfa ok Hallberu, dóttur Úlfs ins óarga; hon var systir Hallbjarnar hálftröls í Hrafnistu, föður Ketils hængs.'

² 'They answered, "This is a hazardous mission for [Sámi]* messengers to undertake, but in response to your request we want to make an attempt. You must now shut us together in a shed and our names must not be revealed". This was duly done. And when three nights had passed, Ingimund went to them. They stood up and sighed deeply and said, "We [Sámi] messengers are exhausted and have had much toil and trouble, but nevertheless we have returned with these tokens so that you may recognize the land from our account, if you go there; but it was very difficult for us to search for the amulet, and the spell of the [Sámi] woman was a powerful one because we placed ourselves in great jeopardy".' (Wawn 1997, 17) This story is also known from *Landnámabók*, where it is stated that two, not three, 'Finnar' were called for by Ingimundr, undertook a 'mind-journey' to Iceland, and reported back about the lie of the land (Benediktsson 1968, 218). In both instances, no language conflict is reported and bilingualism seems to be the method of communication, unless a translator is involved but not mentioned in the text.

* Wawn translated the terms 'semsveinum' and 'Finnar' as 'Lapp', however, due to its contemporary nature as a derogatory term with colonial undertones, I have in this text chosen to substitute all such instances with the self-designating term Sámi.

(Nordal 1955, 3)³ Here, Kveld-Úlfr's maternal uncle, Hallbjörn of Hrafnista (the father of Ketil hængs, a legendary hero associated with a Sámi narrative in Norse literature),⁴ is nicknamed 'hálftrölls', indicating potential Sámi ancestry, as the portrayal of the Sámi in the literary narrative tends to be associated with 'othering'.⁵ This is achieved through connotations of magic and witchcraft, forest animals such as bears and wolves, and legendary beings and the otherworlds, in addition to allusions to winter weather, skiing, archery, and strong physical characteristics (Aalto and Lethola 2017, 12-16). It is also interesting to note that both Kveld-Úlfr's mother and uncle have names with the component 'bear', alluding to their 'othered' descent. The 'othering' of Kveld-Úlfr is further continued when he notoriously gains his nickname 'Evening Wolf' due to his nightly bad tempers and claims of shapeshifting, another feature sometimes connected to the Sámi tradition (Aalto and Lethola 2017, 13, 21; Scudder 2005, 113). Throughout the text, both Kveld-Úlfr and his grandson Egill are contextually 'othered', described as stronger, wilder and with swarthy complexions darker than most men,⁶ with Egill's appearance described as 'mikill sem tröll' (Nordal 1955, 143, 178).⁷ Another instance from the same saga sees the introduction of the Hálogalander Björgólfr hálfbergrísi, from Torget island in present-day southern Nordland (Nordal 1955, 16). As with the half-troll siblings, Björgólfr's nickname, literally meaning 'half mountain-giant',⁸ alludes to a multicultural background, with the northern location re-enforcing the notion of Sámi affiliation.

³ 'There was a man named Ulf, the son of Bjalfi and of Hallbera, the daughter of Ulf the Fearless. She was the sister of Hallbjorn Half-troll from Hrafnista, the father of Ketil Haeng.' (Scudder 2005, 8)

⁴ See the legendary *Hrafnistamannasögur*. The location of Hrafnista coincides with modern-day Ramstad in northern Trøndelag.

⁵ I employ the term 'othering' here in a postcolonial sense after Hillerdal et al. 2017 (34, 175).

⁶ Darker complexions are traditionally associated with indigenous characters elsewhere in the Icelandic family sagas. This is particularly clear in the descriptions of the brothers Geirmundr and Hámundr heljarskinni (dark-skinned) (Grettla: Scudder 1997, 50), whose mother Ljúfvinu was the daughter of a Bjarmian king, also mentioned in *Landnámabók* (Benediktsson 1968, 150). Bjarmarland was located somewhere around the White Sea, and its inhabitants are sometimes viewed to be the ancestors of one of the indigenous Permian-speaking Komi-groups or as ancestors of one of the later known native Finno-Ugric peoples such as Vepsians, Votes, or Karelians (Hansen and Olsen 2017, 158-159).

⁷ 'Much like a troll'.

⁸ The nickname is interesting because it alludes to both Björgólfr's multicultural descent and the literary trend of 'finding' the Sámi 'up in the mountains', as demonstrated below. This connection possibly mirrors actual interactions between Norse and Sámi groups in the medieval period, with the Sámi geographically connected to the mountainous regions of the inland, as mirrored in *Historia Norwegiæ* (Ekrem et al. 2006, 59-61).

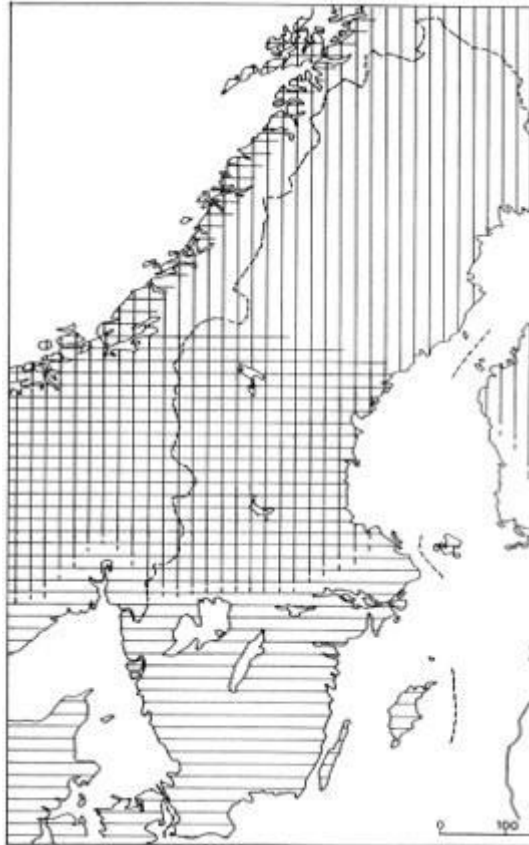


Figure 1. Spread of Sámi culture (vertical) compared to Norse settlement (horizontal) in the early medieval period (Zachrisson 2008, 33).

The majority of scholarship concerning the literary representations and cultural perceptions of the *Finnar* in the sagas predominantly prioritises the ‘othering’ of these characters, that which sets them apart from the Norse or how they diverge from the portrayal of (what are seemingly) Norse actors (Barraclough 2018, 28). However, as the extracts above exemplify, the actual texts represent a relationship far more complicated than a simple dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’, with the texts themselves indicating cross-cultural negotiations of identities (Barraclough 2018, 29). This is actually expressed in the short Latin chronicle *Historia Norvegiæ*, which states that the Norse and the Sámi in Hálogaland were extensively involved with each other and that this contact was normalized: ‘The fourth is Hálogaland, whose inhabitants dwell a good deal with the Finns, so that there are frequent transactions between them.’ (Ekrem *et al* 2006, 57) Despite some conflicting views in literary scholarship (Aalto and Lethola 2017, Barraclough 2018), the majority of archaeologists focusing on early medieval Fennoscandia agree that society was socially and economically stratified, and that extensive contact between Sámi and Norse cultural groups occurred on both the geopolitical and sociocultural levels (Zachrisson 2008, 32). Archaeological excavations that have found female burials with Nordic types of ornamentations in otherwise archaeologically typical Sámi areas and vice versa (Storli 1991, Scanche 2000, Zachrisson *et al.* 1997) have been interpreted as examples of exchanges of marriage partners between the groups, indicating that contact also occurred on personal levels.

Some archaeologists even suggest that certain multicultural and fluid societies based on an amalgamation of Sámi and Norse cultural groups cooperating in the same area can be seen in the archaeological material (Bergstøl 2008, Zachrisson *et al.* 1997). This would certainly support the idea of smoother cultural boundaries between the groups in the early medieval period than suggested by Saxo and Adam of Bremen, potentially providing a new outlook on the characters in later textual sources with nicknames such as hálftrölls and hálfbergrísi.



Figure 2. Northern Norway as imagined in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (Nordal 1955, n.p.). Notice how the cartographer has neglected to depict the saga voice.

Furthermore, several instances in the *Íslendingasögur* allude to notions of a shared cultural landscape in Hálogaland, where strong Norse chieftaincies and their power elites (potentially given power through multi-cultural co-operation) are asserted (*Egils saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga* as already mentioned here, *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 7, *Grettis saga*, ch. 20, *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 1, *Finnboga saga ramma*, chs. 10, 12, 35, *Heiðarvíga saga*, chs. 42-43, *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, ch. 7). This idea is further elaborated in *Egils saga*, when Gunnhildr konungamóðir is introduced to the narrative, meeting her husband and later king Eiríkr blóðøx somewhere in Hálogaland on his way back from a battle in Bjarmarland: ‘ok í þeiri ferð fekk hann Gunnhildar, dóttur Qzurar tóta, of hafði hana hem með sér; Gunnhildr var allra kvenna vænst ok vitrust ok fjölkunnig mjök’

(Nordal 1955, 94).⁹ Although *Historia Norvegiæ* views her as the daughter of the Danish king Gormr gamli (Ekrem *et al.* 2006, 81-83), it is interesting to note that most of the sources mentioning her view Gunnhildr as the daughter of the Hálogalandian chieftain Qzur tóti (Perabo 2016, 150), demonstrated in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*:

Þá er hann kom apr á Finnmörk, þá fundu menn hans í gamma einum konu þá, er þeir höfðu enga sét jafnvæna. Hon nefndisk fyrir þeim Gunnhildr ok sagði, at faðir hennar bjó á Hálogalandi, er hét Qzurr toti. 'Ek hefí hér verit til þess,' segir hon, 'at nema kunnostu at Finnum tveim, er hér fróðastir á mörkini. (Aðalbjarnarson 2002, 135).¹⁰

Alongside being the daughter of a chieftain from northern Norway and marrying the king-to-be of Norway, Gunnhildr is described as a beautiful but evil woman, skilled in magic and with the ability to shapeshift, attributes possibly granted to her by medieval writers hoping to accentuate the claim that she was of northern descent. In *Egils saga*, she is presumably given to Eiríkr somewhere between the Bjarmian coast and her father's dwelling somewhere in Hálogaland, and in *Heimskringla* she is found by Eiríkr's men in the hut of two Sámi men somewhere, probably along the coast, in Finnmörkr. Interestingly then, the entire coastal strip from Hálogaland (which in the *Íslendingasögur* includes the area north of Hrafnista in Naumdælafylki, from Torget island in the south to Trondenes and Bjarkarey in the north) via Finnmörkr and then to Bjarmarland, is viewed as populated (see images 2 and 3). This is also the case in the descriptions in literary sources, particularly Icelandic, of King Háráldr hárfagri's sometimes violently persuasive acquisition of land in late ninth and early tenth century Norway, which led people to flee the country in order to escape his alleged tyranny. As explained by *Egils saga*, these people went to settle various 'uninhabited' parts of many places, such as modern-day Jämtland, Hälsingland, the Hebrides, the shire of Dublin and Ireland, Normandy, Caithness, Orkney, Shetland, the Faroe Islands, and even Iceland (Nordal 1955, 12). It is interesting in this context that there is no mention of migration northward internally in north Norwegian Hálogaland or into Finnmörk, and that despite later conventions, both these areas are viewed as already inhabited. The writer of *Egils saga* imagines the area as remote, up in the mountains, with large forests and even mountain settlements, beyond Hálogaland's imagined borders:

Finnmörk er stórliga víð; gengr haf fyrir vestan ok þar af firðir stórir, svá ok fyrir norðan ok allt austr um; en fyrir sunnan er Nóregr, ok tekr mörkin nálíga allt it efra suðr, svá sem Hálogaland it ýtra. En austr frá Naumudal er Jämtaland, ok þá Helsingjaland ok þá Kvenland, þá Finnland, þá Kirjálaland;

⁹ 'and on the same journey he married Gunnhild, daughter of Ozur Snout, and brought her back with him. Gunnhild was outstandingly attractive and wise, and well versed in the magic arts' (Scudder 2005, 59).

¹⁰ 'When he [Eiríkr] returned to Finnmark [from Bjarmalandi], his men found in a hut a woman so beautiful that they had never seen the like of her. She gave her name as Gunnhild and said that her father dwelled in Hálogaland and that his name was Ozur Toti. 'I have dwelt here', she said, 'to learn sorcery from two Finns who are the wisest here in Finnmark' (Hollander 2015, 86).

en Finnmark liggir fyrir ofan þessi öll lönd, ok eru víða fjallbyggðir upp á mörkina, sumt í dali, en sumt með vötnum. Á Finnmark eru vötn furðuliga stór ok þar með vötnunum marklönd stór, en há fjöll liggja eptir endilangri mörkinni, ok eru þat kallaðir Kilir. (Nordal 1955, 36)¹¹



Figure 3. A map of Fennoscandia with relevant place names informed by saga accounts (Perabo 2016, 41). Notice Finnmark.

¹¹ 'Finnmark is a vast territory, bordered by the sea to the west and the north, and all the way to the east with great fjords, while Norway lies to the south of it. It extends as far south along the mountains as Halogaland does down the coast. East of Naumdal lies Jamtland, then Halsingland, Kvenland, Finland and Karelia. Finnmark lies beyond all these countries, and there are mountains settlements in many parts, some in valleys and others by the lakes. In Finnmark there are incredibly large lakes with great forests all around, while a high mountain range named Kjolen extends from one end of the territory to the other'. (Scudder 2005, 25)

In toponymical terms, Finnmørk suggests a defined geographical area, as perceived by the Norse. Consisting of the components ‘Finn’, meaning Sámi, and ‘mørkr’, denoting a border, forest, border forest, or periphery, it defines the area as ascribed to Sámi groups or on the periphery of Norse culture. However, interpreting the place name in terms of a border, margin, or periphery is unhelpful as it introduces the risk of falling back to a simplistic understanding of the area and its inhabitants as something more static than dynamic (Barracough 2018, 30). Instead, the term should rather be perceived as a frontier, where colliding worldviews interfere and norms are challenged, in turn dissolving stricter cultural identities and creating space for more hybrid identities (Barracough 2018, 30). Despite Saxo Grammaticus’s declaration of this area as an undefined and nameless territory with no civilization, *Egils saga* states the opposite. Describing the area as ‘up in the mountains’, separated from Norway but stretched to the east of it as far as the Hálogalandian coast following the Kjølén mountain range (the geological border between Norway and Sweden), the author emphasizes the large lakes and great forests of the territory, also including the detail that the area is not uninhabited but has mountain, valley, and lake settlements. It is probably one of these settlements that Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, Egill’s uncle, trades with somewhere in Finnmørk, ‘up in the mountains’ from Sandnes, in an earlier chapter:

Þórólfr gerði um vetrinn ferð sína á fjall upp ok hafði með sér lið mikit, eigi minna en níu tigu manna; en áðr hafði vanði á verit, at sýslumenn höfðu haft þrjá tigu manna, en stundum færa; hann hafði með sér kaupskap mikinn. Hann gerði brátt stefnulag við Finna ok tók af þeim skatt ok átti við þá kaupstefnu; fór með þeim allt í makendum ok í vinskáp, en sumt með hræzlugæði (Nordal 1955, 27).¹²

Þórólfr’s journey ‘up in the mountains’ to trade with and collect tax from the Sámi is mirrored in the later *Finnboga saga ramma*, where the protagonist Finnbogi, named after a trader from Hálogaland, meets the traveller Álfur afturkempa en route to Finnmørk to collect tax (Kennedy 1997, 234). Similar to Þórólfr’s acquisition of the right to ‘finnferð’ and ‘finnkaup’ after the death of his companion, inheriting both his widow and farm in Sandnes, Finnbogi inherits the right to trade with and tax the Sámi after the death of Álfur, marrying his daughter (Kennedy 1997, 240). Reserving the rights to ‘finnferð’ and ‘finnkaup’, land, female (or male) relatives, and other privileges for kin (also including close companions), seems to be closely connected to the ambitions of the Hálogalandian power elite, a feature of maintaining power in the area and building stronger networks, as well as strengthening it against southern outsiders.

Journeys to Finnmørk made by this power elite, and others, usually take place in the winter (perhaps with the exception of maritime journeys along the coast), conceivably

¹² ‘That winter Thorolf went up to the mountains and took a large band of men with him, no fewer than ninety in number. Previously the king’s agents used to take thirty men with them, or sometimes fewer. He also took a great quantity of goods to sell, soon arranged a meeting with the [Sámi], collected their taxes and traded with them. All their dealings were cordial and friendly, partly because the [Sámi] feared them’. (Scudder 2005, 20)

due to easier overland travel access granted by the snow and frozen rivers and lakes, a polar opposite to most other saga journeys and events, which usually take place during the summer months. This type of arranged trade seems according to the sagas to occur quite often, at least several times during the winter months, as addressed, again, in *Egils saga*: 'Þórólfr fór þann vetr enn á mörkina ok hafði með sér nær hundraði manna; fór hann enn sem inn fyrra vetr, átti kaupstefnu við Finna ok fór víða um mörkina'.¹³ The relationship between Þórólfr and the Sámi groups he traded with was so good that they collaborated against a common enemy, the Kylfingar:

Þórólfr fór víða um mörkina; en er hann sótti austr á fjallit spurði hann at Kylfingar váru austan komnir ok fóru þar at Finnkaupum, en sumstðar með ránum. Þórólfr setti til Finna at njósna um ferð Kylfinga, en hann fór eptir at leita þeira ok hitti í einu bóli þrjá tigu manna ok drap alla svá at engi komsk undan, en síðn hitti hann saman fimmtán eða tuttugu. Alls drápu þeir nær hundraði manna ok tóku þar ógrynni fjár ok kómu aptr um várit við svá búit (Nordal 1955, 27-28).¹⁴

Once again, the main route consists of large forests and mountains. Here, on the other hand, we meet a new people, the Kylfingar, whose origins and locations are unknown, but who were probably of Eastern Fennoscandian origin (Lind 2009, 31-32). In a later incident, news of the collaboration reaches the Kvens, an ethnic group associated the Bothnian coast and Finland, who seek out Þórólfr in Finnmark, requesting his help against the Kirjálár (Karelians: a modern-day Baltic-Finnic ethnic group) in return for great a bounty split with their king:

En er hann sótti langt austr ok þar spurðisk til ferðar hans, þá kómu Kvenir til hans ok sögðu, at þeir váru sendir til hans, ok þat hafði gjört Faravið konungr af Kvenlandi; sögðu, at Kirjálár herjuðu á land hans, en hann sendi til þess orð at Þórólfr skyldi fara þangat ok veita honum lið; fylgði þat orðsending at Þórólfr skyldi hafa jafnmikit hlutskipti sem konungr, en hverr manna hans sem þrír Kvenir. En þat váru lög með Kvenum at konungr skyldi hafa ór hlutskipti þriðjung við liðsmenn ok um fram at afnámi bjórskinn qll ok safala ok askraka (Nordal 1955, 35-36).¹⁵

¹³ 'That winter Thorolf went to Finnmark again, taking almost a hundred men with him. Once again he traded with the [Sámi] and travelled widely through Finnmark' (Scudder 2005, 24).

¹⁴ 'Thorolf travelled at large through the forests, and when he reached the mountains farther east he heard that the Kylfing people had been trading with the [Sámi] there, and plundering too. He posted some [Sámi] to spy on the Kylfing's movements, then went to seek them out. In one place he found thirty and killed them all without anyone escaping, then found a group of fifteen or twenty more. In all they killed almost one hundred men and took enormous amounts of booty before returning in the spring. Thorolf went back to his farm at Sandes and stayed there for some time' (Scudder 2005, 20).

¹⁵ 'As he advanced farther east and word about his travel got around, the Kven people came and told him that they had been sent to him by their king, Faravid. They told Thorolf how the Karelians had been raiding their land and gave him a message from the king to come there and give him support. Thorolf was offered an equal share of the spoils with the king, and each of his men got the same as three Kven. It was

On their way to where the Karelians had been raiding the Kven, Þórólfr's group along with three hundred Kven are said to have taken the highland route through Finnmörk, presumably into Kvenland, before reaching the Karelians and attacking them. It is explained that despite being fewer than the Kvens, the Norwegians had stronger shields than them and attacked fiercely, leading to the defeat of the Karelians. After this, it is stated that Þórólfr travelled back to Finnmörk, parting with the king in great friendship, descending the mountains at Vefsna and reaching his farm at Sandnes (Scudder 2005, 25). Although ethno-cultural terms such as 'Kven', 'Karelian', and 'Kylfingar' are very much still debated in scholarly research (for example, on 'Kven' see Hansen and Olsen 2017, 162-164), the care attended to distinguishing these groups in the text is interesting.

Despite this emphasized distinction between cultural groups, the text describes cross-cultural travel as mainly unproblematic, accentuating the notion that borders between people were not sharp (Zachrisson 2008, 33), particularly between the traditional Sámi Finnmörk and the fluid Norse Hálogaland. As noted by Eleanor Barraclough, 'frontiers and borderlands are not absolute lines in the landscape with two discrete cultural groups standing on either side. Rather, they are areas where identities are contested, adopted, and reformed, regions where fringe players step centre stage to be recast as the chief protagonists' (Barraclough 2018, 51). This is particularly clear in the weighted threat that the unification of the two areas imposed, as claimed by the jealous Hildiríðar brothers who envied Þórólfr's success in trading with the Sámi, assuming the royal privilege themselves by slandering him. The brothers complained to the Norwegian king that Þórólfr, despite losing his royal privileges to do so, had traded with the Sámi and decreased the brothers' revenue:

Hafði hann kaup ǫll; guldu Finnar honum skatt, en hann bazk í því at sýslumenn yðrir skyldi ekki koma á mörkina. Ætlar hann at gerask konungr yfir norðr þar, bæði yfir mörkinni ok Hálogalandi, ok er þat undr, er þér látið honum hvetvetna hlýða (Nordal 1955, 43).¹⁶

What is interesting here is the weighted threat of the unification of the 'northern territories' of Hálogaland and the mörkinni (Finnmörk) as a separate unity or even kingdom independent from Norway. The threat imposed by the consolidation of the two spatial areas demonstrates the geopolitical importance of the landscape, and the sociocultural significance of its peoples, their strategies, and special abilities. It also highlights the abundant resources found in the northernmost part of the land, including hides, ermine, squirrel skins, and other furs, alongside artefacts imported from the east, all of which are factors that led to strong and extremely rich chieftaincies in northern

a law among the Kven people that their king received a third of his men's plunder, but reserved all the beaver skins, sables and martens for himself' (Scudder 2005, 24-25).

¹⁶ 'He took all the trade there and the [Sámi] paid him tribute, and he gave them a guarantee that your collectors wouldn't enter the territory. He intends to proclaim himself king of the northern territories, both Finnmark and Halogaland, and it is astonishing that you let him get away with everything he does' (Scudder 2005, 29).

Norway in this period.¹⁷ The threat also demonstrates the kind of separateness Hálógaland long held in Norwegian sociocultural and geopolitical affairs, as it was neither fully part of the Norwegian kingdom nor part of Finnmörk. Instead, Hálógaland represents something in between both: a less defined and more fluid, and possibly multicultural, area that seeks to strengthen its place as a sort of frontier land rather than a border, where cultural connection is more crucial than cultural delineation. In a later chapter, we are told that the more remote tributary lands were harder to govern and that there was little supervision of places such as Hálógaland in Norway and Varmland in Sweden in King Haraldr's old age: 'var þá lítt sét eptir um skattlöndin, þau er fjarri lágu' (Nordal 1955, 220).¹⁸

An interesting exception to this type of fluidity, and to the dynamic societies presented in particular in *Egils saga*, are the literary portrayals of the mysterious and otherworldly Dofrafjöll that appear in some of the *Íslendingasögur*. In these instances, despite the general semi-normalcy offered by the saga descriptions mentioned above, we find semi-legendary stories of men with 'troll kin' visiting giants that inhabit great halls located inside the mountains of Dofri, similar to the story of Peer Gynt and Dovregubben in Ibsen's work from 1867. In the relatively late *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, a fantastical narrative is established from the very beginning of the text with the introduction of the protagonist Bárðr's family background. His father, king Dumbr of Helluland (a semi-mythical place located somewhere north of Greenland), is said to have been the son of female giants and male trolls. By abducting Bárðr's human mother, Mjöll, the daughter of Snœr the Old from Kvenland (Anderson 1997, 239), Dumbr consolidates power in Helluland.¹⁹ However, due to a conflict between the king and the *þursar*, a type of entity contrasted with the Norse gods, Dumbr sends his son south to Norway, deep into the mountains of Dofrafjöll, to be fostered by the *bergbúi*, or mountain-dweller, Dofri. After the death of Bárðr's first wife and Dofri's daughter, Bárðr marries Herþrúðr in Hálógaland. Their daughter Mjöll marries Rauðfeldr the strong, the son of the giant Svaði from a place north of Dofra (Anderson 1997, 239). Settling somewhere in Salten, in Hálógaland, Bárðr and his family integrate into a Hálógalandian power elite, with the story ending with his son fighting a giant residing in a mound somewhere north of Finnmörk.²⁰ With its heavy supernatural theme, *Bárðar saga* differs from the sources previously mentioned. However, a Sámi literary narrative is clearly present, firstly with the portrayal of Bárðr's ancestry, which focuses on his otherworldly ancestry through his half-giant/half-troll father, and his north-eastern Fennoscandian descent through his mother named after fresh, powdery snow (possibly

¹⁷ This is probably one of the main reasons behind the power elite's wishes to maintain strong bonds within the kin groups of the area.

¹⁸ 'There was little supervision of the more remote tributary lands' (Scudder 2005, 135).

¹⁹ Both their names refer to winter weather, fine blowing snow, and snow respectively. Dumbr's name is interesting in connection to Dovrefjell (as it is called today) and the nearby village Dombås. The place name is made up of the words for mute and is probably a description of a quiet river, and 'ássr', the Norse term for the Norse deities. Potentially, then, Dumbr is named after the area he was associated with, and might have formed parts of a creation myth in the area of Dombås and Dovrefjell.

²⁰ The literary motif of travelling north of or into Finnmörk to fight giants or dead Vikings is found in several other sources. In *Gull-Þóris saga*, the Icelandic settler Þórir travels to Finnmörk from Trondenes in Hálógaland, where he fights three dragons and gains their bounty, also described in *Landnáma*: 'he got much gold in Finnmörk' (Benediktsson 1968, 154).

named after her father, a man from Kvenland literally called snow). Secondly, the location of Dofrafjöll and its *bergbúi* on the fringe of society alludes to a differentiated sociocultural area inhabited by ‘others’. Despite this, the relations between Bárðr and the *bergbúi* are good and mutually beneficial.

Similarly, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, the Icelander Búi Andriðsson is challenged by King Haraldr hárfagri in Þrándheimr to travel to his foster father Dofri in Dofrafjöll and collect his old board game. Waiting to travel until winter, Búi ventures north, at one point staying with the farmer Rauðr on ‘ofanverðri byggðinni’ (‘the fringe of the inhabited area’ ((Halldórsson 1959, 29, trans. Cook and Porter 1997, 319)). Entering after befriending Dofri’s daughter, Búi receives an audience with the mountain dweller Dofri, who exclaims that ‘Fáir koma slíkir ór Mannheimum nema Haraldr konungr, fóstri minn’ (‘not many such people come here from Manworld, except my foster son King Harald’ (Halldórsson 1959, 29, trans. Cook and Porter 1997, 321)). Búi is successful in his mission, travels to see the king in Steinkjer, and presents him with his board game. The fostering of king Haraldr by Dofri is also mentioned in *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum* and *Flateyjarbók*, both of which narrate the beginning of the so-called foundation myth of Norway as a result of Norse-Sámi fostering arrangements (Mundal 2009, 31-32). Here, King Haraldr is fostered by Dofri, whom the texts imply is a Sámi chieftain, after a conflict with his biological father, King Halfdán svarti. Whether or not the stories have any basis in actual real-life events, expressing the relationship between the Norse and the Sámi in terms of foster child and foster parent creates strong literary images that enforce a clear symbolic meaning (Mundal 2009, 32). As the foster son of the Sámi people in these literary texts, King Haraldr emerges as a symbolic expression of community, a literary motif which could also be used to enforce medieval Norwegian stately claims or rights in more traditional Sámi areas. However, as Else Mundal states: ‘as long as learned people and authors belonging to the Nordic culture expressed their view of the relationship between Sami and Nordic people in terms of family relations, whether they believed the stories or not, their attitude towards the Sami must have been predominantly positive’ (Mundal 2009, 35).



Figure 4. Norwegian stamp design based on a painting from the farm Tofte, Dovre. The stamp depicts the first meeting between spouses King Haraldr hárfagri and the Sámi woman Snæfríðr in Dovre, with her father Svási finnakonungs (king of the Sámi) in the background (Hermanstrand 2018).

The literary expressions denoting the area just south of Dofrafjöll as 'on the fringe of the inhabited area' and 'Manworld', alongside the interpretation that the inhabitants beyond these areas were Sámi, supports the literary assumption of two distinct areas marked by the borderlands of Dofrafjöll. Nevertheless, as we have seen, both geopolitical and sociocultural relations are maintained between characters from either side of these fringes, which again supports the idea of cultural connection rather than cultural delineation. With archaeological excavations asserting Sámi presence in the area during the Viking Age (Bergstøl 2008), and so-called fluid societies as far south into Østerdalen as the Elverum area (Bergstøl 2008), the instances in the literary texts with Dofrafjöll as a meeting place for Norse-Sámi contact and expressions of cultural exchange might actually connect to the very concrete reality of actual interactions which took place in the early and later medieval periods.

By emphasizing geopolitical landscape relations, most often without any specific intent to actually do so, descriptions highlighting spatial awareness in the *Íslendingasögur* enlighten shared sociocultural landscapes, liminal frontier societies and borderlands, hinterlands, peripheries, and meeting places. As the extracts show, particularly in the Hálogaland-heavy *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, frontiers and borderlands are never demarcated spaces to be monitored or managed, but rather emerge as culturally fluid spaces to be lived in (Barracough 2018, 51). Although not as extensively 'othered', remote, inhuman and uncivilized as suggested by medieval chroniclers such as Saxo Grammaticus and Adam of Bremen, the north of Nóregi and its ambiguous population is undoubtedly associated with a literary supernatural motif or phenomenon. Particularly dominant in the stories connected to Dofrafjöll, this motif possibly stems from both its connection to the unique geopolitical and sociocultural situation of societies based on cross-cultural negotiations of identities, contacts, and exchanges, and an overall literary trend associating the north with the preternatural. Characters with multicultural backgrounds are nicknamed accordingly and awarded with specific characteristics and abilities following a literary pattern associated with magic, shapeshifting, strong features, swarthy, smithery, winter weather, and hunting. Nevertheless, the characteristics and abilities awarded to these characters are predominantly positive, albeit quite mysterious, such as in the example of Kveld-Úlfr and his descendants. The associations welcomed by these descriptions indicate an awareness of distinct groupings in society, as represented by the Sámi people encountered through trade and exchange in *Egils saga*, and overlapping cultural and religious conceptions connected to magic and folklore, as with the Sámi magicians visiting the Norse chieftain Ingjaldr in *Vatnsdæla saga*. The descriptions also introduce notions of fluid societies, demonstrated by characters such as Björgólfr hálfbergrísi, Hallbjörn and Hallbera hálftrölls, and Dofri bergbúi.

The weighted threat of the unification between the spatial power complexes encompassing the 'northern territories' Hálogaland and Finnmark point to their geopolitical and sociocultural importance, demonstrating that, at least in the eyes of the learned elite, the areas were sometimes understood together. Hálogaland, however, is viewed as a sort of liminal space, not fully part of either Nóregi or Finnmark. As recognized in the source material, this empowered the Hálogalandian power elite, who through kin privileges were able to cultivate strong relationships with different Sámi groups, based on personal, cultural, and economic strategies, with the exotic objects gained from the *finnkaup* boosting both their power and prestige in the Norse market-

trade, differentiating them sociopolitically from their southern neighbours. The fact that cross-cultural travel is mainly unproblematic enforces this assumption and demonstrates that borders between the people inhabiting northern Norway were not absolute. However, the portrayal of the multiethnic north in literature, as well as the actual reality of it, was not without conflict, as expressed by the first meeting between Þórólfr and a Sámi group in *Egils saga*, emphasising that despite the cordial and friendly dealings, the potential for conflict is nevertheless present (Scudder 2005, 20).

Rather than focusing on the delineating features of the texts, which quickly results in falling into the trap of embracing early modern colonialist views on medieval history (Ojala 2009, Spangen *et al.* 2015, 1, 3), a more fluid and flexible understanding of the northern peripheries and their inhabitants must be stressed. Nevertheless, it is crucial to highlight that the texts clearly assert that the Norse and the Sámi were two distinct cultural and ethnic groups, with different societies, subsistence strategies, ways of life, and cultures. The texts quite explicitly distinguish the different cultural groups, however, there is a stronger distinction drawn between the Bjarmians, Kvens, and Karelians and the Norse than between the Sámi and the Norse. Nevertheless, dynamic societies can never be without conflict, and the relationship between the Norse and the Sámi is portrayed as far more complex than a simple dichotomy based on ‘us’ versus ‘them’. It is also paramount to stress that the extracts from the *Íslendingasögur* are external observations of Sámi ways of life, kin groups, and economy, and they are heavily laden by the value perceptions of a learned Icelandic elite. As stressed before, this notion does not take away from the fact that the texts have much to say about cross-cultural negotiations of identities and a liminality evident in northern Norway, a liminality that is also expressed in the archaeological material. Furthermore, it is crucial to move the scholarly focus away from an excessive emphasis on the stereotypes presented in the literary narrative, which tends to enforce an idea of Sámi society as static and unchanging (as in Pálsson 1999). Instead, the relationships and cross-cultural negotiations of identities these stereotypes might narrate are crucial for our understanding of Norse-Sámi relations in the medieval period.



Figure 5. ‘Sámi man presenting Norse man with vair’ (Bjørklund 2014, 1).

As demonstrated in this article, landscape descriptions and the portrayal of spatial understandings can help enlighten cross-cultural relationships and liminal identities, and present fewer rigid contrasts between people and cultures in Fennoscandia than previously accounted for. The several allusions to cross-cultural personal relations, communication, and settlements point to a less stratified society in medieval northern Norway than often assumed. When removing the focus from the archaic accentuation of the literary stereotypes connected to the scholarly emphasized 'othering' of Sámi characters in the source material (Pálsson 1999), portrayals of Sámi characters, relations with the Norse, fluid cultures, and personalities, as well as Sámi allusions in general, become clearer and less static, demonstrating a clear Sámi presence which enforces the assumption that 'the Sámi and the Norse of early Scandinavia cannot be understood in isolation, only together' (Price 2000, 25).

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