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Encountering “Otherness” in the Heimskringla

The Kings’ Sagas (*konungasögur*) are a genre of Icelandic sagas, which were written at the end of the 12th century and in the first half of the 13th century. This genre concentrates on telling about the kings of Norway and they can be compared with other contemporary historiography in Europe. The Heimskringla is often called the top of the Kings’ Sagas because of its sophisticated style. It was written by an Icelandic, Snorri Sturluson (1178/79–1241), around the year 1230. Snorri himself was one of the leading Icelandic figures of his day: a highly educated chieftain, who had personal ties to King Hakon Hakonsson of Norway.

Historical anthropology is methodologically a good starting point for this topic, which is encountering “otherness” in the Heimskringla. Studying “otherness” is about studying mentalities. As Aron Gurevich has said:

One of the main tasks of historical anthropology is to reconstruct images of the world which are representative of different epochs and cultural traditions. This requires the reconstruction of the subjective reality which formed the content of the consciousness of people of a given epoch and culture.¹

“Otherness”, or “difference” as it is also nowadays called, as an object for study has just found its way into the field of history thanks to the French Annales-school and historical anthropology, which have emphasized new approaches to old themes in history. During the last decades historians have studied all kinds of marginal groups and phenomena, and in this sense studying “otherness” continues this trend by giving a somewhat new perspective.

Historical anthropology also emphasizes that it is possible to use narratives, like the Heimskringla, as sources for history. According to Sverre Bagge

... there must be some connection between the specifically medieval kind of narrative and contemporary actors’ intentions and decisions; which means that the historical narratives become important sources for how medieval people understood themselves, their actions, and their society.²

The authorship of Snorri has been widely debated³, but if we consider that the Heimskringla can be seen as an expression of Norse mentality during the first half of the 13th century, there is no need to further discuss the question of authorship here.

Because the Heimskringla is not a geographical treatise it does not have comprehensive descriptions about countries and peoples. That is why “the others”, or “strangers”, were not easy to find. The best way to find descriptions on “otherness” is to study all kinds of contacts between people by asking the following questions. What kind of contacts would there be? What forms of “otherness” can be found in the Heimskringla? In which situations would “otherness” appear? Could “otherness” be categorized? What kind of elements would be involved with the concept of “otherness”? All in all, it is important to remember that “otherness” in the Heimskringla is just a reflection of mentality. Ultimately, “otherness” can reveal something about the Norse worldview in the 13th century and how the Norse people would define themselves and the world outside. A few examples of “otherness” have been chosen for this article in order to give an idea of how it appears in the Heimskringla.

Defining “otherness”

The concept of “otherness” derives from social psychology. It is a concept that is used when group identities are studied. When people are trying to identify themselves and their group they tend to categorize. This is characteristic to all human beings. A human being identifies himself with a group, a so-called inner group, and creates a positive identity for this group. This positive identity can be created by dividing people into “us” and “them”, that is, “the others”. This also means that people are trying to create as great a difference as possible between “us” and “them” in order to achieve this positive group identity, and if it is possible they tend to exaggerate these differences.⁴

Ethnicity is one way of grouping people. It is typical for an ethnic group to have a strong feeling of togetherness, and “the others” stand outside the ethnic group. Without this juxtaposition ethnicity as a concept does not exist. But the definitions for ethnicity vary: common ancestors are often taken as a starting point, but this raises the question how many generations do we have to go back in time in order to be able to talk about common ancestors. We should also remember that although ethnicity is supposed to reflect cultural differences there is no clear connection or correspondence between ethnicity and cultural differences. All in all, ethnicity is a flexible concept.⁵ Ethnic groups may not be separated from each other territorially; the dividing boundary can also be a social one. In fact, there may not be a physical borderline that divides ethnic groups, and interaction and communication do exist between different ethnic groups.

There are also degrees of difference inside the concept of ethnicity. When people categorize ethnicities they also have an impression that there are different degrees of “otherness” inside the concept of ethnicity. This means that the categories stretch from people that are “almost like us” to those, who are “very different from us”. In other words this degree of difference can be called analog. It is also possible that everybody outside one’s own group is an alien without any category. That is, they are more or less outsiders and they may be spoken of as digital. Both these terms, analog and digital, which I use in this study, derive from ideas of Thomas Hylland Eriksen, who has studied ethnicity and identity in history.⁶

The concept of stereotype is closely connected to ethnicity and identity. Stereotypes help individuals create order in their social world. Quoting Thomas Hylland Eriksen, “they [i.e. the stereotypes] make it possible to divide the social world into kinds of people, and they provide simple criteria for such a classification”⁷. So, the meaning of stereotypes is to define the boundaries of one’s own group. The negative sides are that stereotypes simplify and do not reveal the truth (because they are created by someone or some group) and they can be used to justify, for example, position and power of a dominating group in a society.⁸

Who encounters “the Other”?

To find out who is “the Other” in the *Heimskringla*, it had to be decided first who is the subject, who encounters “the Other”. Because the *Heimskringla* concentrates on Norway it would be natural to look at those who were seen as “others” in Norwegian society. However, it is not easy to define Norwegian society, which was still in the process of becoming a state during Snorri’s time in the 13th century. And what about Snorri’s society, the Icelanders? What was their part? I decided that it would be best to call the subject *Norse society* without defining its physical boundaries, which would have been an impossible task as for example Norway was only just on its way to becoming a state. The concept of Norse society includes both Norwegians and Icelanders, so it is very convenient to use it in this context.

Nevertheless, I also studied the relationship between these two groups in the *Heimskringla*. The question of when the Norwegian settlers became Icelanders has been debated by scholars. I think that Gunnar Karlsson has convincingly proved in one of his articles⁹ that the Norwegian settlers who came to Iceland at the end of the 9th century could not identify themselves as Norwegians – they identified themselves with the region they came from, for example Sogn, Møre or Hordaland. This regionalism is

also emphasized by Snorri, who often tells which part of Norway a character was from. The children and grandchildren of the settlers, however, could not use these names, and they began to call themselves Icelanders. But as Karlsson points out, Icelandic self-awareness did not arise immediately, but would come into being gradually during the next centuries. The relationship between Icelanders and Norwegians was close because Icelanders had relatives in Norway and they were also dependent on the trade with the Norwegians.

In the beginning of the 13th century the relations between Icelanders and Norwegians became tense. The Norwegian kings were annoyed that they could not subjugate the Icelanders. The situation became so critical that the Norwegian, king Hakon IV, was about to attack Iceland, but it is said that Snorri Sturluson succeeded in convincing the king that this was unnecessary. How then does the *Heimskringla* describe the relationship between Icelanders and Norwegians? On one hand Snorri describes how the Norwegian kings try to subjugate the Icelanders: for example King Olav Haraldsson demanded that Icelanders should accept the laws he had made and pay him tribute.¹⁰ On the other hand Snorri shows that some kings appreciated and even helped the Icelanders: for example King Harald Hardruler helped the Icelanders during the famine.¹¹ But the *Heimskringla* does not reveal much about the ordinary relations between Icelanders and Norwegians. We only have sporadic accounts of Icelandic merchants who came to Norway to sell furs¹², we know that Icelandic skalds were highly esteemed in the Norwegian court, and some Icelanders acted as kings' envoys according to the sagas¹³.

To conclude, it seems that by the beginning of the 13th century Icelanders had developed a feeling of self-awareness and they did not identify themselves as Norwegians. Their close relations with the Norwegians – shared culture and religion – are reflected in their own way in *Heimskringla*, but not in the level of ordinary men. If Norwegians were considered strangers by Icelanders, they would have been categorized as “those who are almost like us” according to the terms of analog difference.

The world of the Christians

The connection between the inhabitants of the British Isles and the Icelanders/Norwegians is a good example of how Christian people are described in the *Heimskringla*. The Norse culture spread to the British Isles with immigrants who came from Denmark and Norway in the 9th and 10th centuries. The contacts were not peaceful at the beginning, when the raiders, who were called Vikings or heathens by the Anglo-Saxons, plundered and sacked the Isles. But some raiders brought their families with them

and settled down mostly in the eastern part of England. Norwegians had also settled down on Shetland, Orkney and other small islands. In Ireland these Norse raiders and merchants founded new market places and got involved with the internal affairs of the Irish. The *Heimskringla* mentions some Norwegians who made trading voyages to England and that there were some English merchants living in Viken¹⁴. The case of the Norwegian King Magnus Barefoot, who raided Scotland and Ireland, tells of less peaceful contacts. After he had died and his son, Sigurd, was king of Norway, a man came from the Hebrides. His name was Harald Gille and he claimed to be son of King Magnus Barefoot. Harald Gille is described as having had dark eyes and dark hair. He was dressed in Irish style.¹⁵ This indicates that he was very different from Norwegians because his appearance is emphasized.

Christianity brought a new connection between the English and the Norwegians and the Danes. In the *Heimskringla* it is mentioned that during the reign of Harald Gille, the bishop of Stavanger was an Englishman¹⁶. There is also a story of an English priest, who was manhandled by two Norwegians and whose tongue was cut off. The priest prayed for Saint Olav after which he could again speak.¹⁷ This last story does not, however, emphasize that the priest was an Englishman. The point is to underline the miracle done by Saint Olav. In reality there was quite a strong English influence on the Norwegian church: English priests and missionaries came to Norway, English saints were popular and the Old Norse language adopted loanwords from English concerning Christianity and the church.¹⁸

We do not have an overall picture of the inhabitants of the British Isles in the *Heimskringla*, but they seem not to have been very strange. This may be due to the fact that there were Norse immigrants in the British Isles and that there were trading contacts between Norway and England. Perhaps the main difference between the inhabitants of the British Isles and the Norwegians or Danes was the language and their way of dressing, as is shown in the case of Harald Gille. Because there were many Norse settlements on the British Isles and there were contacts due to trade and missionary work, the Norwegians and the Danes may have seen the inhabitants of the British Isles as quite familiar. Most importantly, the inhabitants of the British Isles were Christians and they belonged to the same sphere of Christianity as the Icelanders and the Norwegians.

The heathens – the real strangers

My next example is the West Slavs, called the Wends in the *Heimskringla*. It is not surprising that the Wends in the *Heimskringla* are not described in detail; Snorri rarely does. It is understandable that

because of their geographical position, the Norwegians did not have as close contacts with the West Slavs as the Danes, who were neighbours of the West Slavic tribes. But it is surprising how negative an image the *Heimskringla* gives of the Wends. The only positive – or neutral account – is in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. The saga tells us that King Olav, before he became king, was married to a Wendish princess, but that she died few years after they were married.¹⁹ After that Snorri concentrates on the bad side of the Wends. We get an image of a heathen tribe that tortures the innocent Christians with raiding and pillaging. The Wends attacked for example the trading place Konungahälla, which is situated on the present west coast of Sweden. The saga tells how the Wends tried to use magic against the Christian inhabitants of the town, how they ‘howled as dogs’ as they besieged the town and how they finally conquered it and took the inhabitants as slaves.²⁰

Creating contrasts between the Christians and the heathens is characteristic for the European medieval tradition of historiography. In this sense, the episodes concerning the Wends seem to repeat this tradition. So, heathenism is the main feature that characterizes the Wends in the *Heimskringla*. Knowing the historical background, it is possible that the Wends got their heathen label in the *Heimskringla* because of the crusades against the West Slavs in the mid-12th century, to be exact in 1147. At the time the Danes united with the Saxon army and they attacked a West Slavic tribe, the Abotrites.²¹ It would have been no wonder if Snorri had heard about these events and that they would have influenced his image of the Wends. All in all, the Wends could be characterized strange and different in the eyes of Norwegians or Icelanders according to the *Heimskringla*.

In *Magnúss sona saga* (ch. 6) King Sigurd makes a journey to the Holy Land. On his way he fights with the “heathen *blámenn*” on the Spanish Isles of Menorca and Ibiza. These so-called “blue men” in the saga are Moors. The word *blár* means here ‘black’ and *blámenn* referred to the inhabitants of *Blálönd* – Black Lands, which was an undefined, far-away geographical area in the minds of the learned medieval Scandinavians. As the word itself reveals, it was the black skin that mattered. In the *fornaldarsögur* *blámenn* were associated with forces of evil. Nevertheless, *blámenn* referred later not only to black men but also to Moors and Saracens. So, here we have the thin line between the supernatural and ethnically different enemies, which is by no means a deviating feature in the *Heimskringla* (or in other Old Norse sources).²² As the giants of the Old Norse mythology became the *Finnar* in historical writings, so did the *blámenn* of the *fornaldarsögur* become the enemies of Christianity: black men, Saracens, Moors. As John Lindow has pointed out, it must have been difficult to draw a line between the supernatural and the natural in these contexts. Lindow has also observed that what is striking about the description of strangers and other groups in Nordic tradition are “how closely they resemble attributes of supernatural

beings”.²³ In fact, in the Middle Ages there hardly existed a division between the supernatural and the natural. In people’s minds angels were as real as demons.

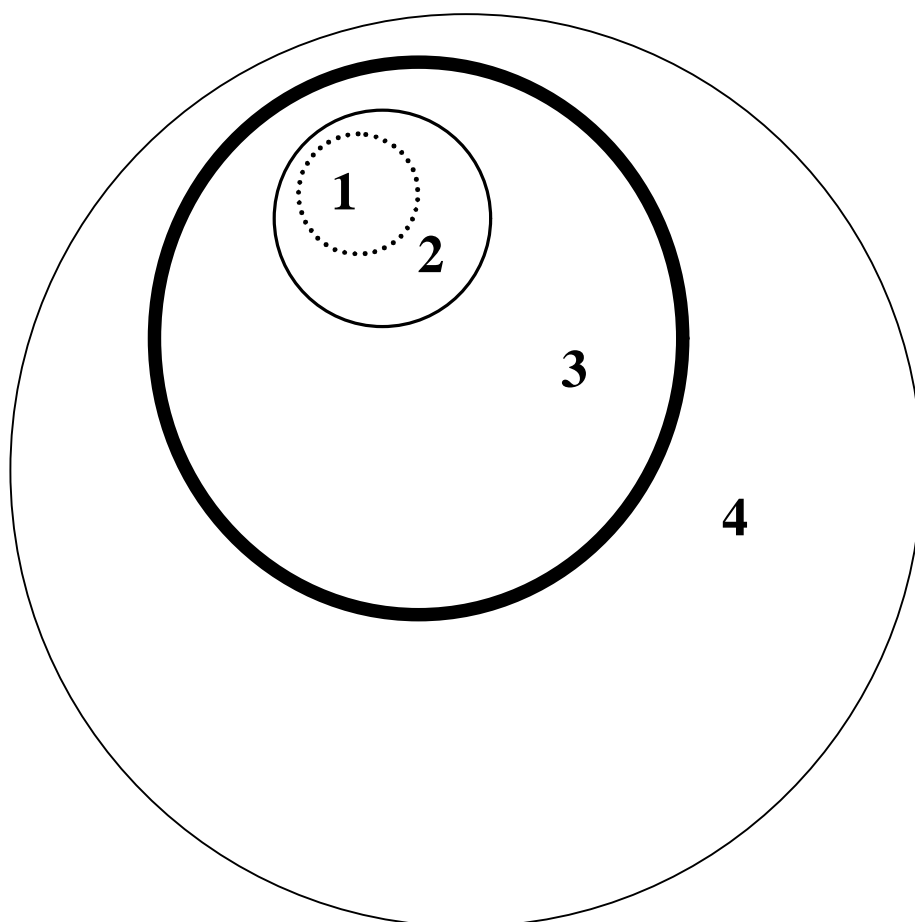
It is obvious that in the Middle Ages Icelanders and Norwegians must have had a faint understanding of far-off places that they knew only by name: Spain, Sicily, Jerusalem, Byzantium. But it seems that the geographical distance had less importance than religion when regarding the “otherness” of people. Namely, the Christian concept of the world was that it consisted of Christian peoples. Heathens and heretics did not belong to their world: they were outside of Christendom. It seems that this Christian world-view is perceptible also in the *Heimskringla*, as strangers are those who stand outside the Christian community. These outsiders are described as extremely different. “Otherness” based on ethnic difference does not seem to play a major part in the *Heimskringla*. In the case of *blámenn* it is obvious that skin colour that differed from the standard is one factor that makes them different, but I would see the skin colour only as a feature that emphasises that *blámenn* were evil and enemies of Christianity as were also the Wends. All in all, heathens in the *Heimskringla* seem to be strangers without any category, which would mean that their degree of difference is digital.

Results

Based on the results²⁴ we have formed a model that presents the Norse worldview in the first half of the 13th century conveyed by the *Heimskringla*. The model consists of circles that are inside one another. In the centre are the Icelanders and the Norwegians. There is a dotted line that divides them and it reflects the close relation between them. In the next sphere are the other Christian countries. In this article the inhabitants of the British Isles were taken as an example how the Christians were depicted. They are more or less alien, but as they belong to Christendom, they are not totally strange. The thick line divides the Christian world from the non-Christian. The case of the Wends and *blámenn* show clearly, that heathens were described as extremely different in the *Heimskringla*.

The question is, does this model represent Snorri’s worldview or does it reflect the Norse worldview in the beginning of the 13th century? Snorri was an educated man and he visited Norway twice. Undoubtedly, he had more information of the outside world than many of his contemporaries on Iceland or in Norway. But I suppose it is not too far from the truth to suggest, that also the ordinary, uneducated people shared Snorri’s world view in its main features: Icelanders considered Norwegians to be “almost like us”, Christians formed the world of the saved ones and outside were “the damned souls” of the heathens.

Figure 1.



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1. *Iceland*
 2. *Norway*
 3. *The Christian world*
 4. *Heathens*

List of Abbreviations:

Hgráf	Haralds saga gráfeldar
ÓlTrygg	Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar
Ólhelg	Óláfs saga helga
HSig	Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar
Msona	Magnússona saga
MblokHgMagnúss	saga blinda ok Haralds gilla
Hsona	Haraldssona saga

Published sources:

Heimskringla I-III (ÍF XXVI-XXVIII). Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson gaf út. Hið íslenska fornritafélag, Reykjavík MCMLXXIX.

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Notes

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- ¹ Gurevich 1992, p. 4.
² Bagge 2002, p. 14.
³ See for example Whaley 1991, pp. 17, 19; Gurevich 1992, p.103; Lönnroth 1965.
⁴ Liebkind 1988, p. 73.
⁵ Hylland Eriksen 2002, pp. 34–41, 58.
⁶ Hylland Eriksen 2002, p. 66.
⁷ Hylland Eriksen 2002, p. 25.
⁸ Hylland Eriksen 2002, pp. 24–25.
⁹ Karlsson 1988.
¹⁰ Heimskringla II, Ólhelg ch. CXXXVI.
¹¹ Heimskringla III, HSig ch. XXXVI.
¹² Heimskringla I, Hgráf ch. VII.
¹³ Heimskringla II, Ólhelg ch. LXX.
¹⁴ Heimskringla II, Ólhelg ch. LXIV.
¹⁵ Heimskringla III, Msona XXVII.
¹⁶ Heimskringla III, MbloKHg ch. VIII.
¹⁷ Heimskringla III, Hsona ch. XXV.
¹⁸ Roesdahl 1998, p. 260.
¹⁹ Heimskringla I, ÓlTrygg ch. XXII.
²⁰ Heimskringla III, MbloKHg ch. XI.
²¹ Christiansen 1997, pp. 54–56.
²² Lindow 1995, pp. 14–16.
²³ Lindow 1995, pp. 19, 22.
²⁴ The preliminary results are based on my PhD-thesis under process.