

THE SAMI PEOPLE IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE

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1. General Remarks About The Sami in the Sagas

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Sami people in the Icelandic sagas taken as a whole, is the impression that they were highly skilled wizards and sorcerers.¹ Certain Sami individuals are presented not only as practitioners of witchcraft but also as teachers of the magic arts. Such knowledge and power earned them respect and admiration in some texts and fear and trepidation in others. In early Norwegian law, it was forbidden to believe in 'Finns' or witchcraft. Secondly, the Sami were regarded as accomplished skiers, archers, and hunters; the truistic expression *Finnr skríðr* "Sami goes on skis" in the ancient *Griðamál* shows how closely they were associated with the sport. Thirdly, they are depicted as wearing garments made of skin and living in huts known as *gammar*, (sg. *gammi*, one of very few Sami loanwords in Norse). Fourthly, the Sami are shown to have a strong predilection for butter and animal fat, and to be fond of tin. Fifthly, the Sami were ruthlessly exploited by Norwegian traders, and forced to pay tribute to the king of Norway. And, lastly, in certain texts there is a blatant racist element present, where the Sami are treated as if they were inferior to the Norwegians.

2. Ethnic Terms

To the Icelandic saga authors the Sami were a remote, enigmatic people to whom they alluded by different terms. In the Legendary Sagas (see below), vague memories of a distant past intermingled with myth, and the result was that the Sami were sometimes placed in purely imaginary situations and presented as semi-mythical

¹ The standard work on Sami influences on the magic arts in Old Norse literature is Dag Strömbäck, *Sejd. Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria* (Lund 1935). See also my study: *Ur landnordri. Samar og ystu rætur íslenskrar menningar* (Reykjavík 1997).

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beings. A tripartite glossary of relevant ethnic terms should help to clarify the situation.

I

Finni, Finn (m.), pl. **Finnar** 'Sami men, the Sami people'; **Finna** (f.), pl. **Finnur** 'Sami women'. The standard term for the Sami. It is very old and widely used, cp. Greek *Phennoi*, Latin *Fenni*, and Old English *Finnas*. It should be noted that in certain Icelandic texts the term *Finnar* is ambiguous, referring either to the Sami or the inhabitants of Finland.

búfinnr, 'a farming Sami'. (In *Sneglu-Halla þátr*).

Tyrfi-Finnar in Örvar-Oddr's *Ævidrápa* have been identified with the **Ter-Finnas** in Ohtere, who were supposed to live on the White Sea.

semsveinn (m.) 'a Sami lad'. (Only in *Vatnsdæla saga*, where three Sami wizards use the term about themselves). This is a unique and interesting hybrid noun, the first element being a Norse borrowing of the ethnic term *Sámi*.

Lappir (pl.) 'Sámi'. The earliest Icelandic instance of the term is in *Flateyjarbók* (c. 1387-90). The derivation of *Lappi* (sg.) is a matter for speculation. It is of some interest to note that Carl Linnæus associated the noun with Swedish *lapp* 'a patch', thinking that it related the Sami style of dressing. *Lappir* is probably a fourteenth century borrowing from Norwegian into Icelandic.

The brief legendary tale entitled *Fundinn Nóregr* 'The discovery of Norway' describes two brothers, Gór and Nór, who set out from their father's kingdom in Finland and Kvenland in search of their sister who had suddenly disappeared. Gór led his ships out of the Gulf of Bothnia into the Åland Sea and the Baltic, all the way to Denmark and beyond. "His brother Nór waited until the moors were under snow so that he could travel on skis, then he set out from Kvenland skirting the head of the Gulf, and so reached the land of the Lapps (*Lappir*) on the far side of Finnmark. The Lapps tried to bar their way and this led to a clash between them. But so great was the uncanny power and magic of Nór and his men that as soon as the Lapps heard their war-cry and saw them drawing their swords, they were scared out of their wits and ran

away. From there Nór and his men journeyed on westward to the Kjølen Mountains [...]."

II

The following nouns were used about people of mixed parentage:

hálfinnr 'a half Sami'. This term which occurs in early Norwegian law texts denoted a person who had a Norwegian father and a Sami mother. The fact that there doesn't appear to be a single reference to anyone with a Sami father and a Norwegian mother tells us something about the relationship between the two races.

halftroll 'a half troll'. This is used as the nickname of Hallbjørn of Ramsta in Namdalen, father of Ketill hæng, and ancestor of some of the settlers of Iceland, including Skalla-Grímr. In contrast to **half-finnr** which is a neutral term, **half-troll** has obvious pejorative connotations, and the same applies to

halfbergrisi 'a half hill-giant'. "In Hålogaland there was a man called Björgólfr, farming on Torget. He was a land-holder, rich and powerful, though he was a hill-giant (*half-bergrisi*) on his mother's side, as you could tell from his size and strength" (*Egils saga*). Here, as in certain other texts, it is implied that the Sami are taller than other people.

halfrisi 'a half giant', in *Heiðreks saga*.

III

Much more intriguing are unqualified mythical terms, such as those denoting giants, elves, and of dwarfs, which are used about the Sami people in certain texts. On the other hand there can be no doubt that various myths in Snorri's *Edda* and elsewhere about such mythical beings contain ancient memories of the Sami people.

troll (n.) 'a witch; giantess; monster'. The term *halftroll* (see above) serves to show that the total semantic range of *troll* must have included the notion of a Sami. When the witch Geirríðr in *Eyrbyggja saga* is called 'a troll', the term is evidently associated with the notion of witchcraft. But the situation in *Ketils saga hængs* is quite different; there the racist Hallbjørn halftroll (!) uses the term

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disparagingly about his Sami daughter-in-law Hrafnhildr, when he asks his son: "Why did you invite this *troll* to stay here?" There is no indication in the saga that Hrafnhildr was a witch.

trollkona (f.) 'a giantess; ogress; witch'. The recurrent image of a *trollkona* riding a wolf is reminiscent of the popular assumption that Sami witches and wizards could transform reindeer into wolves.²

skinnkyrtla (f.) 'a female wearing a leather tunic'. It is impossible to tell whether the title hero of *Áns saga bogsveigis* (ch. 6) is dealing with giantesses or Sami women in the statement that Án used to deal harshly with those *skinnkyrtlur* there in the north: "Án átti opt at berja um þær *skinnkyrtlur* norðr þar," Heiðr, Haraldr Fine-Hair's foster mother, who evidently was a Sami, is said to have been wearing a *skinnkyrtill* when Haukr visited her on the White Sea (*Hauks þáttr hábrókar*).

risi (m.) 'a giant'. The statement in *Landnámabók* (S 111) that Hrafsi Ljótólfsson was descended from *risar* on his mother's side suggests that she was a Sami. *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* claims that Hálogi, the eponymous ancestor of the *háleyger*, was descended from *risar*, which also appears to imply Sami ancestry. Note also the compound *halfrisi* above.

bergrisi (m.) 'a hill giant'. There are good reasons to assume that the troll maidens in *Gróttasöngur*, Fenja and Menja, were originally thought of as Sami women, and they are explicitly associated with *bergrisar*.

jötunn 'a giant; wizard'. The sense 'giant' is very common in early texts, including both poetry and *Snorra-Edda*. The designation *Jötunheimar* suggests a land inhabited by giants, Þór's powerful enemies, but in certain texts the notion of wizardry and magic is certainly implied. The poem *Hyndluljóð* lists the ancestors of four types of people endowed with magical powers: *völur* 'prophetesses', *vitkar* 'wizards', *seiðberendr* 'sorceresses', and *jötnar* 'warlocks' (?). **eteninne**, the early Low German cognate of *jötunn* denoted 'a witch'. It has been suggested that *jötunn* is used ambivalently in *Völuspá*, when the prophetess claims that she

² See my forthcoming article "Vargur á tölti." *Heiðinn síður*. Útg. Baldur Hafstað & Haraldur Bessason (Reykjavík 1999).

remembers the *jotnar* who fostered her in bygone times: at one level the term appears to refer to the Sami wizards who taught her magic, and at the other to the primeval giants of ancient myth.³

alfr (m.) 'an elf; fairy'. Although the elves were essentially mythical beings, as in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, ch. 17, where an imaginary region called *Alfheimar* is said to be inhabited by the *ljósalfar* 'light elves', in certain texts the term could refer to the Sami. Thus in the Introduction to *Völundarkviða* where the hero is described as a great skier, a magician and the son of a Sami king (*sonr Finnakonungs*), the poem itself calls him the king of the elves (*vísir alfa*). The old personal name *Finnálfr* combines both elements.

dvergr (m.) 'a dwarf'. This is yet another mythical term which could indicate a Sami person. The dwarf Svási in *Haralds þáttr hárfagra* (*Flateyjarbók*) corresponds to the Sami called Svási who figures in *Ágrip* and *Heimskringla*. And in one version of the ballad of Valfríðr (*Valfinna*) *völufegri* the heroine is said to be fostered by two Sami men (*fæða hana Finnar tveir*), but elsewhere she is reared by a couple of dwarfs in a boulder (*Ala hana dvergar tveir í steini*). Two of the dwarfs in *Völuspá* are called *Finnr* and *Ská-Finnr*.

3. An Incident in Finnmark

Although the following account was evidently written for strictly Christian purposes, its principal interest lies in the description of a Sami *noaide*. The translator was the Rev. Einar Hafliðason (1307-93), a friend of Jón Hákonarson of Víðidalstunga, for whom *Flateyjarbók* was written (see below). Einar was the author of two books: *Laurentius saga* and *Lögmannsannáll*, which still survives in his own handwriting.

It happened in the days of his Majesty King Hákon, by the grace of God the Ruler of Norway, and Archbishop Ólafr of Nidaros that a wealthy priest in Hålogaland got a passage on a ship with merchants who sailed on a trading trip north to Finnmark. He had his own reasons for going there. They had a

³ See *Völuspá. The Sybil's Prophecy*. Ed. Hermann Pálsson (Edinburgh 1996), pp. 25-27.

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good and quick passage and brought the ship to the harbour of their choice, to which place a good many Sami people came to trade with the merchants, as usually happens. Each side had its own interpreter, because the Sami who live in the outermost part of Finnmark, all the way north by Gandvik (= the White Sea), are utterly heathen and speak a language different from the one we Norwegians speak.

Among the Sami there was a certain man who was so wise and skilled in witchcraft that all the other Sami revered him and called him the leader and prophet of them all, not only because of his sorcery but also for the fact that he could foretell the future.

It so happened one day that the above-mentioned priest was saying Mass in his tent, as there was no church anywhere near. All the Christians attended the Holy Mass ceremony, just as is right and proper to respect such a significant rite. The Sámi were also present and their wizard stood by the door of the tent. When the Mass had proceeded so far that the priest raised aloft God's sacred Body, the Sámi wizard ran suddenly away from the tent. The Christian interpreter noticed this and found it intriguing. A little later he set out to look for the wizard, as he wanted to observe and investigate his actions. Looking for the Sámi he found him lying on the ground, apparently unconscious, not far from the tent.

The Christian interpreter asked if something evil had happened to him.

The Sámi replied, 'I saw a terrifying sight. The person who is singing in the tent and you call your priest, raised his hands aloft holding between them a baby covered in blood, and yet shining so brightly that I could hardly look at it. Because of this manifestation I was seized by such great fear and fright that after I got out of the tent I fainted.'

After Mass, the priest came to the scene together with the other Christians and had this event verified with sworn statements. It is not mentioned in connection with this incident whether or not the Sámi wizard was converted to the true Faith.

After the priest came back home to his own estates, he wrote a report on this miracle to Archbishop Ólafr of Nidaros, supporting it with sworn statements. Afterwards The Most Reverend Archbishop made it public by announcing it from the choir of Nidaros Cathedral, with the chiming of bells and the chanting of *Te deum*. The priest lived in Nidaros for a long time afterwards.

This miracle was written in Latin by Nikulaus Olafsson, a clerk in Nidaros, who sent it to Björn and Snorri monks at Mödruvellir, but the Rev. Einar Haflidason officialis of the Church of Hólar translated it into Norse. That was when 1381 years had passed since the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

4. A cursory Glance at The Icelandic Sagas

Although most of the Icelandic sagas appear to have been written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, several were composed in the twelfth, and saga writing continued well beyond A. D. 1400. The total range of the Icelandic sagas comprises hundreds of titles, including historical chronicles and fictitious tales; a good many sagas are a mixture of fact and fiction. It is customary to divide the entire saga corpus into several separate categories, depending on their historical relevance and the nature of the principal characters involved. In the present paper, however, I shall confine my remarks to only three saga types, viz. those which in Norwegian are called *kongesagaer*, *ættesagaer*, and *fornaldersagaer*. The corresponding terms in English are *Kings' Sagas*, *Sagas of Icelanders*, and *Legendary Sagas*.

The Kings' Sagas deal with the rulers of Norway from legendary times down to the second half of the thirteenth century. The outstanding example of this group is of course Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* which has been described as the secular scripture of the Norwegian people. It was probably composed c. 1230-35. This long chronicle of the kings of Norway begins in the legendary world of the *Ynglingar*, who were descended from Óðinn himself, and concludes with the Battle of Re in 1177. Snorri was to a large extent dependent on written sagas; the earliest of them were composed in the twelfth century. Broadly speaking, we can divide

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the Kings' Sagas into two groups: on the one hand those that deal with individual kings, such as Oddr Snorrason's *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, Karl Jónsson's *Sverris saga*, Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonar saga gamla*, and so on; secondly there are saga anthologies, such as *Ágrip*, *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla* which cover extended periods and include the lives of several kings. *Flateyjarbók* contains three major works: extended versions of *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Ólafs saga helga*, and *Saga Magnúss konungs góða ok Haralds konungs harðráða*;⁴ these three sagas contain many interesting *þættir* 'táttir' describing Icelanders or Norwegians who are antagonistic towards a ruling monarch. *Sverris saga* and *Hákonar saga gamla* are also included in *Flateyjarbók*.

For those whose primary interest in the Kings' Sagas and their attendant *þættir* lies in their information about the Sami people, two dates are significant. One is the winter of 1310-11, during which an Icelander called Gizur galli of Víðidalstunga (1269-1370) stayed in Finnmark as the agent of King Hákon háleggr to collect tributes from the Sami people. The other crucial time is the years 1387-90, when the so-called *Flateyjarbók* was compiled for Gizur galli's grandson, Jón Hákonarson of Víðidalstunga (born 1350). This huge codex, most of which is devoted to the Kings' Sagas, includes more references and allusions to the Sami than any other medieval manuscript. It seems to me fairly obvious that there must be a connection between Gizur galli's sojourn in Finnmark on the one hand and the contents of a book that was compiled at the behest of his grandson, on the other. It is by no means unlikely that Gizur, who was a highly gifted man and lived for more than a hundred years, may have written something about the Sami people. But there is no proof of that. On the other hand, he could also have acted as an informant to the compilers of the book.⁵

⁴ *The Saga of Magnús and Haraldr* is included in the fifteenth century extension to the original *Flateyjarbók*.

⁵ There are certain references to the Sami in early Icelandic sources that should be taken with a pinch of salt. *Nýi annáll* s. a. 1403 includes the following anecdote: "That same year it happened north in Hålogaland in Norway that a certain Sami called Feðmingr lay as if dead in a cleft in a mountain for three whole years; beside him were his bow and arrow-bag. Neither birds nor beasts bothered him all that time. Then he got up, and lived for many years afterwards." Immediately after this tall story, the annal mentions briefly that Herra Arní Ólafsson went to Hålogaland later that year, and there can be no doubt that the spoof

The Sagas of Icelanders are radically different from the Kings' Sagas, and essentially concerned with farmers and farmers' sons who belonged to the rural democracy of early Iceland. This unique type of government was created in 930 with the founding of the Althing, and lasted until 1262-64, when Iceland joined Finnmark as one of Norway's tribute-paying possessions. Incidentally, the King of Norway became the biggest landowner in Europe in 1261, with the acquisition of Greenland; he also owned more ice and snow than any other person at the time. Greenland was then supposed to extend all the way up to the North Pole.

The Sagas of Icelanders are set in the period from 930 to 1050, which is therefore called the Saga Age. Altogether, there are about forty sagas in the group; in addition there are some fifty much shorter *þættir* about Icelanders; some of these are set in Norway. Two Sagas of Icelanders, *Egils saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, include chapters concerning events that took place in the Age of Settlements and contain some interesting facts about the Sami. Closely related to the Sagas of Icelanders, and one of the most remarkable books ever to be written in Iceland, is *Landnámabók* "the Book of Settlements", it describes in some detail how some 430 settlers made their homes in Iceland in the period 870-930. Many of the sagas deal with the sons and grandsons of the original settlers.

The third saga type, the so-called Legendary Sagas, differs in various respects from the other two. On the whole the Legendary Sagas are set in a heroic age and suggest a remote period preceding the settlement of Iceland. The action described in these sagas invariably takes place outside Iceland, most frequently in Norway and elsewhere in Scandinavia, but occasionally in other parts of Europe, the Baltic, Russia, and the British Isles. Some of the settings are purely imaginary and not to be found on the map, including lands that were supposed to lie to the north of Finnmark. In many of the legendary sagas, the principal hero is an aristocratic warrior; often he is a great sea-farer and spends a lot of time fighting berserks, monsters, and other hostile elements.

came from him. Herra Árni (bishop of Skálholt 1413-25) appears to have had a strong sense of humour, and there are on record other wild stories which came from him.

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Four legendary sagas are associated with the island of Ramsta in Namdalen, but most of the action in two of them, *Ketils saga hængs* and *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, takes place in Hålogaland and Finnmark. The same applies to chapters 4-6 in *Órvar-Odds saga*. The fourth member of the group is *Áns saga bogsveigis*. The historical significance of the four Ramsta sagas is very dubious indeed, but their title heroes are supposed to have belonged to the ninth century, before the settlement of Iceland. Several settlers traced their ancestry back to Ketill Hængr who had Sami connections as will be shown later. An interesting feature of the Ramsta Sagas is that their title heroes belong to the farmers' class. However, the principal character of *Órvar-Odds saga* eventually becomes a king in a foreign land.⁶

5. Literary Roles

The first part of Snorri's *Heimskringla*, the legendary *Ynglinga saga*, includes two relevant anecdotes about Sami women. Both were shabbily treated by Swedish kings, and each of them takes a cruel revenge. One episode concerns King Vanlandi who spent a winter with the Sami leader Snjár ('snow') the Old and married his daughter Drífa ('fresh snow'). After enjoying Sami hospitality and marital bliss over the winter months, Vanlandi set off for Sweden in the spring, promising to come back in three years' time. But when his wife had been waiting at home for ten years without seeing any sign of her husband, her patience ran out and she hired a sorceress who was either to charm Vanlandi back to her, or else to kill him. The King was at Uppsala when he was seized with a sudden and powerful urge to go to the Sami people, but his friends persuade him to resist his desire, and he was suffocated in mysterious circumstances.

The other tale in *Ynglinga saga* is about King Agni who kills the leader of the Sami people, takes his daughter Skjálf captive, makes her his wife and brings her with him back to Sweden as a part of his booty. Then she asks him to hold a memorial feast in

⁶ For a perceptive view of the Ramsta Sagas, see Vésteinn Ólason, "The marvellous North and authorial presence in the Icelandic fornaldar-saga." *Contexts of Pre-Novel Narrative. The European Tradition*. Ed. Roy Eriksen (Berlin - New York 1994), pp. 101-33.

honour of her dead father; he obliges, and after he becomes drunk her servants help her to kill the king. The fact that the king was killed at a feast and hanged like a criminal serves to strengthen the impression that he became a sacrificial victim.

The appearance of King Haraldr Fine-Hair marks the first dawn of Norwegian history in the course of *Heimskringla*. However, *Haralds saga hárfagra* contains some legendary stuff which Snorri got from earlier written sources. Elsewhere in Old Norse literature there are references to beautiful Sami witches who gain power over kings and princes by sheer magic. Some of these temptresses bear names denoting 'snow' or 'brightness'; the best known of them is Snæfríðr. She figures in *Ágrip*, *Heimskringla* and *Haralds þáttur hárfagra* in *Flateyjarbók*. In *Ágrip*, the Sami king Svási invites Haraldr Fine-Hair into his GAMMI and makes him fall so passionately in love with Snæfríðr at first sight that he marries her. Snorri also presents her as the daughter of the Sami king Svási. Haraldr wants to take her to bed when they first meet, but her father objects strongly, telling Haraldr that he must keep away from the girl unless they are properly married; Haraldr willingly agrees to make her his lawful wife.

He loved her so wildly that he would sit by her side day and night as long as she lived, neglecting affairs of state. Loving Snæfríðr became his principal occupation. Then she died one day, and for the next three years her beauty remained undimmed and she appeared to be alive, showing no sign of death or decay. All that time King Haraldr sat by her bedside. Finally, an old wise man advised Haraldr to change Snæfríðr's bed-clothes; after this was done the magic lost its effects and her body all its unnatural beauty. The shock of this discovery brought the king back to his senses. *Heimskringla* and the *Flateyjarbók* include some interesting variations on the basic tale. Fragments of a beautiful love poem from the twelfth century about Snæfríðr still survive.

Haraldr hárfagri had four sons by Snæfríðr, and after he discovered how she had deceived him he became so angry that he drove those *halffinnar* away and wouldn't have anything to do with them. His principal poet told him that his sons would have

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wished to have had a better mother, if their father had provided them with one, and after that he treated them with proper respect.

Seductive, deceitful Snæfriðr is the outstanding but by no means the only Sami lady of the kind. Other WICKED BRIDES, as they are called, include a woman called HVÍT ('white'), an illegitimate daughter of a Sami king; she marries the king of Oppdalene in Norway according to *Boðvars þátr bjarka*⁷ and then tries to seduce her stepson Björn (whose name means 'a bear'); when he rejects her immoral advances, she resorts to her uncanny magical powers, lays a curse on him and transforms him into a bear. Later he is hunted down in his ursine form and killed by his father's men. At a feast celebrating the killing of the bear,⁸ Queen Hvít forces Björn's pregnant girl friend Bera ('a female bear') to eat some of the bear meat, with terrible result. Bera gave birth to triplets, and two of them were deformed: one was human above the waist, but like an elk below; the second had feet like dogs. The third son was normal and became the great warrior *Boðvar bjarki*.

Yet another attractive but potentially dangerous lady is MJQLL ('fresh snow'), the daughter of King Snær ('snow') of Finnmark in *Sturlaug's saga starfsama*, but on the advice of an old wise woman she is disposed of before she can cause any trouble.

The third woman of the kind is Grímhildr from Finnmark who marries a chieftain in Oslo Fjord and afterwards, in spite of her great external beauty, turns out to be a monstrous witch, as is related in *Gríms saga loðinkinna*. The wicked stepmother is of course an international folklore motif, but what is interesting about the Old Norse situation is that so many women of the kind are said to have been Sami witches.

6. Students of Sami Magic

According to Snorri, Eiríkr who later became known as 'Bloodaxe' led an expedition to Permian or Bjarmaland when he was still a young man. On their way back to Norway, Eiríkr and his men went

⁷ *Boðvars þátr bjarka* constitutes a section of *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

⁸ The feast celebrating the killing of the bear is reminiscent of a Sami custom described by Odd Mattias Hætta in his *Samene: historie, kultur, samfunn* (Oslo 1994), p. 59. There he discusses among other things the role of women in such a context. "Bjørnemåltidet var også en rituell seremoni som var innviklet og nøyaktig, men med meningsfylde og fornuft for deltakerne."

ashore somewhere in Finnmark, and two of them came to a certain *gammi* where they found a striking young woman, more beautiful than any other they had ever set their eyes upon. She told them her name was Gunnhildr and that she was the daughter of Özur toti an important man in Hålogaland. "I've been here for some time," she said, "learning witchcraft from two Sami wizards, who are the most knowledgeable persons in the whole of Finnmark. Now they are out hunting. Each of them is eager to make me his wife, and both are so sharp that they can track footsteps as readily as dogs, both in snow and in thaw. They are such great skiers that nothing, neither man nor beast, can escape them, and whatever they try to shoot at they never miss their mark. That is how they have killed every single man who has come near the hut. And when they become angry, the surface of the earth is turned upside down by their gaze alone, and any living creature that is sighted by them drops down dead. You must on no account be in their way, so I'm going to hide you here in the *gammi*. Then we must try to kill them." The Norwegians agreed, so she concealed them somewhere in the hut. She got hold of a linen bag which seemed to contain ashes. She dipped her hand into the bag and scattered the contents around the *gammi*, outside and inside.⁹

A little later the two Sami wizards came back home to their *gammi* and asked Gunnhildr who had come there; she said nobody. The Sami thought this very strange, as they had traced footsteps all the way up to the hut, and then found no one inside. Then they lit a fire, and cooked a meal. When they had finished their supper, Gunnhildr made her bed ready for the night. On the three previous nights what had happened was that after Gunnhildr fell asleep, each of the Sami was so jealous that he stayed awake all night to keep an eye on the other.

Now Gunnhildr said to them: "Come over here, and you are to sleep on either side of me."

⁹ The scattering of ashes for magical purposes is also mentioned in the *Bjarmalandferð Þóris hunds*; Þórir uses this method for protection when he and his men are being chased by the Permian host. In his description of the bear feast, Hætta states what happens after the ritual is over and all the men have gone outside. "Bjørnejegerens hustru og de andre kvinnene kastet aske etter dem. Asken fordrev de farlige kreftene". See note 8 above.

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The wizards were very pleased, and did as she told them. She put her arm around the neck of each of them, and they fell immediately asleep. But then she woke them up, and soon they fell so soundly asleep again that she could hardly rouse them at all. Once again they fell asleep, and this time so fast that she could by no means wake them up. She made them sit up in bed, and they still kept on sleeping. Then she took two seal skin bags, put them over their heads, and tied them securely below the armpits. Next she beckoned the Norwegians. They reacted sharply, attacked the two Sami with weapons, and managed to put them to death. During the night there was such a terrible thunderstorm that they could not go anywhere, but in the morning they brought Gunnhildr down to their ship and handed her over to Eiríkr, who then sailed with his men south to Hålogaland, where he summoned Özur toti to him, telling him that he wanted to take his daughter for a wife. Özur gave his consent, so Eiríkr married Gunnhildr and took her with him south.

The *Fagrskinna* account of Gunnhildr is different, in so far that there she is said to have been in fosterage and tutorship with Mottul King of the Sami, who was the greatest wizard of them all.

Gunnhildr figures as a powerful witch elsewhere in the sagas, using her witchcraft against Icelanders in *Egils saga* and *Njáls saga*. There is no need to discuss this most famous student of the Sami magic arts in early sources, except that she appears to have been the most ungrateful pupil in the history of Norse learning, and according to *Flateyjarbók* she was duly punished for her wickedness. This source states that King Haraldr Gormsson of Denmark lured her to Denmark by sending her a proposal of marriage in writing. She readily accepted, and as soon as King Haraldr heard that she had arrived, he dispatched his own men and some slaves to meet her. They seized her with much shouting and clamour and drowned this horrible queen in a quagmire. This is how she was punished for her cruel betrayal of the Sami, her former masters.

Modern historians who tend to be keener on historical accuracy than on artistic truth have rejected the account in Snorri's *Heimskringla* and other sources in the vernacular and preferred the

words of the Latin chronicle *Historia Norwegiae*, where Eiríkr Bloodaxe is said to have married a daughter of King Gormr of Denmark; in fact Eiríkr's Queen is supposed to have been the sister of the Danish king who brought about Gunnhildr's death according to *Flateyjarbók*. If that is a fact we must ask ourselves where did Snorri and his sources get their information about Gunnhildr? She is far too great a character to have been created out of nothing.

Gunnhildr is not the only person in the sagas to be trained in the magic arts by Sami wizards. See the account of Þórir hundr below. And in the fictitious *Orvar-Odds saga*, King Hárekr of Permia had a son called Qgmundr. "When Qgmundr was three years old he was sent over to Finnmark where he learned all sorts of magic and sorcery, and as soon as he had mastered the arts, he went back to Permia. By that time he was seven and already as big as a full grown man, immensely strong and very hard to cope with. His looks hadn't improved during his stay with the Sami. He was dappled black and blue, with long black hair, and had a rough tussock hanging down over the eyes where his forelock ought to be." The Permians were supposed to be great sorcerers, no less so than the Sami, and they had Qgmundr "strengthened with witchcraft, so that ordinary weapons couldn't bite him, then they carried out their rituals over him and turned him into a proper troll."

Various fictitious tales refer to young lads being taught witchcraft by their fostermothers, including the sons of Þvari in *Bósa saga* (ch 2): "There was an old woman called Busla, who had been Þvari's concubine, and fostered his sons for him. Busla was highly skilled in magic. She found Smiðr more amenable than his brother and taught him a great deal. She offered to tutor Bósi in magic as well, but he said he didn't want it written in his saga that he'd carried anything through by trickery instead of relying on his own manhood." According to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, the sorceress Gróa reared Grímr Ægir as her fosterson. "She taught him so much about witchcraft that no one in Scandinavia could rival him [...]" He

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would often change himself into the forms of various creatures and could do it so quickly that the eye could hardly see it" (ch. 2).¹⁰

7. Eyvindr Split-Cheek

From the sorceress Gunnhildr we move on to the missionary kings Ólafr Tryggvason, who ruled Norway from 995 to the year 1000, and Ólafr the Saint who reigned from 1015 to 1030. Both met strong opposition from heathen Hålogalanders, who were to some extent supported by the Sami and their magic powers.

Snorri Sturluson's primary source for the life of Ólafr Tryggvason was the *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* of Odd Snorrason, which he wrote in Latin c. 1190. The original text is now lost but two translations into Icelandic are still extant. One of the pagan chiefs of Hålogaland at the time was a man called Eyvindr kinnrifa ('Split-Cheek'), who stubbornly refused to become a Christian. The king had him arrested and subjected to torture in order to force him to accept baptism. Just before he died, Eyvindr explained why he was unable to embrace the Christian faith. "My parents lived together as husband and wife for a long time, without being able to have children. And when they grew older they found the idea of dying without issue very hard to bear. So they went to the Sami people with a great deal of money asking them to get them an heir by magic. The Sami summoned the chief of the spirits that inhabit the air, because the air is teeming with evil spirits, just like the earth. The chief spirit sent one particular evil spirit into the dark dungeon that truly may be called my mother's womb. I'm that very same spirit, and I became incarnate in this manner, acquiring a human form, and that's how I was born into this world. Because I am not human I cannot be baptized."¹¹

8. Þórir Hundr

One of Snorri's principal sources for *Ólafs saga helga* was *Lífssaga Ólafs helga* by his friend Styrmir Kárason (d. 1245), who was

¹⁰ *Eyrbyggja saga* has an interesting reference to a sorceress who taught magic to a young man. One of the women settlers from Hålogaland had a grand-daughter called Geirriðr: "Gunnlaugr, the son of Þorbjörn digri, had a passion for knowledge. He spent much time at Mávahlíð learning witch-craft from Geirriðr, for she was skilled in magic."

¹¹ In one of the versions of the tale of Valfinna (Viðfinna) völufró, her parents couldn't have children until they got help from a völvu. *Þjóðsögur Jóns Arnasonar* IV (1956), p. 475.

somewhat older than Snorri and appears to have written his book about 1220. This work doesn't survive in its entirety, but selected passages, which Snorri omitted in his *Heimskringla*, are included in the fifteenth century extension to *Flateyjarbók*. One of the stories that are fuller in *Flateyjarbók* than in *Heimskringla* deals with Þórir hundr of Bjarkøy, who was a friend of the Sami, a great sorcerer, and one of Ólafr the Saint's fiercest enemies. According to Styrmir, Þórir went to see King Mǫttul who was then the ruler of Finnmark; he was a pagan sacrificer and full of sorcery and witchcraft. Þórir appealed to Mǫttul for help against King Ólafr. At first, the Sami leader was reluctant to accede to his request, but when Þórir pointed out that Mǫttul's knowledge greatly surpassed that of other men, he relented and invited Þórir and eleven men with him to stay with him in Finnmark. So they spent the winter there with King Mǫttul, learning witchcraft.

This is supposed to have been the winter of 1029 to 1030, the last year of St. Ólafr's life. Before setting out in the spring, Þórir went to Mǫttul asking him for advice and blessings, "because I trust your wisdom in every respect." Mǫttul gave him as a farewell present twelve reindeer pelts which had been charmed and strengthened with spells, so that no weapon could bite them.

Snorri makes no reference to Þórir hundr's stay with King Mǫttul in Finnmark, but he states that Þórir was in charge of the Sami trade for two years and that he spent most of the time up in the mountains making a great deal of money. "Þórir had many dealings with the Sami. He had twelve reindeer pelts made with so much magic that no weapon could bite into them [...]."

In a verse describing the Battle of Stiklarstead, the poet Sighvatr, who was not present at the event but evidently depended on accounts of eyewitnesses, refers to the reindeer pelts: "The generous king found out how powerful was the mighty witchcraft of the sorcerous Sami who saved Þórir's life when the king struck at Þórir, and the sword failed to bite."

9. Sami People in Egils Saga

Next we consider the *Book of Settlements* and the Sagas of Icelanders. According to the *Book*, nine of the settlers were

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associated with the island of Ramsta in Namdalen. Some of these people had Sami connections. One of the early inhabitants of Ramsta was Hallbjorn half troll, whose mother must have been a Sami. Every Icelander is descended from that lady, and there are references to other settlers who were connected with the Sami. *Egils saga* mentions a farmer called Björgólfr who lived on Torget in Hålogaland; he is described as a half-bergrisi, so his mother must have been a Sami.

Egils saga includes the following description of Finnmark:

Finnmark is a vast country, with great fjords cutting deep into it right down to the western seaboard, as well as to the north and all the way east. To the south lies Norway, but Finnmark stretches southwards through the mountains as much as Hålogaland does by the coast. East of Namdalen lies Jamtland, then Helsingland, Kvenland, Finland, and finally Karelia. But Finnmark, lying beyond, is more mountainous than any of these other lands and there are plenty of highland settlements there, some in the valleys and others along the lakes. In Finnmark there are some amazingly big lakes with vast forests between them. A high mountain range called Kjølen stretches right through the country.

The saga describes in some detail how the Norwegians exploited the Sami. First, by forcing them to pay tribute to the King of Norway. Second, the Norwegians traded with the Sami on very favourable terms, selling them butter, animal fat and other commodities and getting in return valuable furs and pelts, which they could sell on the English market with large profits. Thirdly, enterprising Norwegians kept raiding the Sami, who proved easy victims of armed attacks.

Egils saga describes how King Haraldr Fine-Hair made Þórólfr, who was farming at Sandnes on Alsten, his steward over the mountain regions and gave him permission to trade with the Sami. The following account gives an impression of the way the Sami and other people in the north were treated:

That winter Þórólfr set out with a large following, at least ninety men, and travelled north to the mountains. The custom had been for stewards to take only thirty men with them, sometimes even fewer. Þórólfr had plenty of goods to sell and it wasn't long before he had arranged a meeting with the Sami to collect tribute and to do business with them. His business with the Sami passed off in a quiet and friendly enough way, though there was a touch of intimidation about it.

Þórólfr journeyed widely throughout Finnmark. When he reached the mountains to the east he learned that the Kylfing tribe had travelled west to trade with the Sami and pick up some loot on the side. Þórólfr appointed several Sami to keep an eye open for the Kylfings' movements, and set out himself in search of them. At one place he came upon a group of about thirty Kylfings and killed the lot. Not one of them got away. Later he came across more of them in a group of some fifteen or twenty. All in all, he and his men must have killed a hundred of them and taken a fair amount of plunder as well.

10. Three Sami in Vatnsdæla Saga

Vatnsdæla saga describes a man called Ingimundr the Old who was brought up in the north of Hålogaland. When he was a young man, his foster father held a great feast where a Sami prophetess (*Finna ein fjölkunnig*) was placed in a prominent position and splendidly arrayed. Men came forward, each from his own seat, to ask her about their destinies. She made prophecies for each man in turn, all of which came true without an exception. The *völva* told Ingimundr that he was destined to emigrate to Iceland, which had then been recently discovered. Ingimundr told her that he had no intention of settling in a foreign land, and then she said that a certain object - a tiny image of the god Frey - had vanished from his purse, and that he would find it when he dug a hole for his high-seat pillar in the new country.

Ingimundr's next step was to send a messenger north to Finnmark for two Sami wizards. When they came, Ingimundr offered them butter and tin for going on a magic ride to Iceland, fetching the Freyr image and describing the landscape. The Sami

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wizards agreed to go, and they were locked securely in a house. Three nights later, Ingimundr went to see them, and then they rose up and complained of their difficult mission; they had failed to get hold of the Freyr image, but could describe the landscape: three fjords, and great rivers flowing into one of them. Then there was a deep valley, and between two hillocks at the foot of the mountain there was a pleasant dell, which later became the site of Ingimundr's farmstead, and there he found the Freyr image. He rewarded the Sami wizards handsomely for what they had done.

The description of the Sami *völva* in Hålogaland and her magic performance of *seiðr* has several analogues in the sagas, in particular *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Orvar-Odds saga*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar*, and there can be no doubt that we are dealing with actual pagan practices which the Norwegians learned from the Sami. In his important study *Sejd*, Dag Strömbäck has demonstrated the close affinity between the saga accounts and actual Sami practices in recent times. As far as Iceland is concerned the *seiðr* ritual must be regarded as a part of the Sami legacy.

11. The Ramsta Sagas

Three members of the Ramsta family who lived on the island and were mentioned above appear as the title heroes of *Ketils saga hængs*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna* and *Áns saga bogsveigis*; Collectively, these sagas should be regarded as a part of the legendary history of the Icelanders. *Áns saga bogsveigis* is reminiscent of the Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson episode in *Egils saga*: Like Þórólfr, Án's brother, Þórir, is a royalist and becomes a retainer of the king of Namdalen; they fall out, and the king has Þórir put to death. More interesting for our purposes here are the other two sagas mentioned above. Like the first part of *Bárðar saga*, they are set entirely in the North; from their farm on Ramsta the heroes make extended trips north to Finnmark, even as far as the White Sea. The reason for these trips to the north is a shortage of food in Hålogaland and Namdalen.

On one of his expeditions to the north Ketill hængr meets a Sami called Brúni, who is the brother of Gusir, king of the Sami. Gusir, it should be noted, occurs elsewhere as a name for a giant.

Brúni apparently saved Ketill's life when he wrecked his boat off the coast of Finnmark. Brúni was married and invited Ketill to stay the winter with him and to sleep with his daughter, Hrafnhildr. Significantly, during the winter, Ketill practised archery and went hunting with Brúni. In the spring, Ketill set off for home, leaving Hrafnhildr behind. Brúni gave him some arrows when they parted, including one with magical properties.

Soon afterwards, Ketill met someone driving a sledge which was pulled by a couple of reindeer; this was Gusir, the king of the Sami. They agreed to test each other's skill at archery, by exchanging arrowshots. First they shot twelve arrows, and their aim was so good that every time the arrows met in mid-air, and dropped to the ground. Then each of them had only one arrow left. When Gusir put his arrow to the bowstring, it seemed to him not quite straight, so he stepped on it to put it right. Next Ketill shot the magical arrow from Brúni, and this time the two arrows didn't meet; Ketill's arrow struck Gusir in the chest killing him instantly. Gusir had an exceptionally fine sword called Dragvendill, and Ketill took it with him. He used it later in single combat. This is the same sword that is mentioned in *Egils saga*; it had once belonged to Egill's uncle "who in turn had been given the sword by Grímr Hairy-Cheek, the son of Ketill hængr. Once the sword had belonged to Ketill hængr who used it in single combat, and there wasn't a sharper edge." Ketill went back to Brúni to tell him the news, and later he guided Ketill to a settlement.

Ketill got back home, and some time later his Sami wife Hrafnhildr turned up with their infant son Grímr. Ketill welcomed them but his father Hallbjørn half troll wouldn't tolerate her. "Why did you invite this troll to stay here?" he asked. Evidently, his own nickname must have slipped his memory. He drove his daughter-in-law away, and she went back to Finnmark, leaving the little boy behind with his father and saying that she would be back in three years time. Hallbjørn urged Ketill to find a new wife, adding that it was a shame that he wanted to love that troll. Hallbjørn had his way and found a farmer's daughter for Ketill, but he showed no interest in the woman. After a splendid wedding feast, he and his new bride went to bed, as the custom is, but he wouldn't take off his

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clothes. In spite of that, he relented and soon they started living properly together as husband and wife.

Three years later Hrafnhildr came back from Finnmark, as she had promised, and Ketill invited her to stay. But she wouldn't accept, accused him of fickleness, and went back north broken-hearted. The fact that Ketill and his Norwegian wife had a daughter called Hrafnhildr, suggests that he must have been in love with his Sami wife, whom his father had forced him to abandon.

The title hero of *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, who is a 'half-troll', just like his paternal grandfather Hallbjörn, betrothes a girl called Lophæna, the daughter of a hersir in Oslo Fjord, where the nuptials were to take place soon afterwards. But when Grímr came to the wedding, there was no bride waiting for him; she had vanished suddenly seven days earlier, and no one knew what had become of her. To begin with, the reader is kept in the dark as to what happened to her, although a hint is dropped already in chapter One. Five years before the planned wedding, Lophæna's mother died, and then her father married a woman from Finnmark; she was called Grímhildr, and caused plenty of trouble; she was particularly nasty to her stepdaughter, Lophæna. What emerges as the story unfolds is that her stepmother had turned her into an exceptionally ugly troll witch and she could escape from that spell only if a young man agreed to kiss her; and that is precisely what Grímr does. So the spell is broken and the tale has a happy ending. The final chapter of the saga gives a list of those of his descendants who emigrated to Iceland. And since both Grímr's mother and great-grandmother were Sami women no one can deny the fact that his descendants were not of pure Norwegian stock.

Both *Ketils saga hængs* and *Gríms saga loðinkinna* describe famine in Hålogaland, fishing, duels with undesirable wooers, trips north to Finnmark, and dealings with hostile trolls and giants, who appear to be semi-human. In *Gríms saga loðinkinna* the Sami lady Grímhildr turns out to be the sister of the giant Hrímnir who lives in a cave near the White Sea and is such a powerful sorcerer that he can control the movements of the fish in the sea. One of the most memorable encounters in *Ketils saga hængs* takes place on Skrova in Lofoten where Ketill meets a *trollkona* who was on her way to a

troll assembly. Other expected participants were Skelkingr, the king of the trolls, from the Arctic Sea in the north, Ófóti of Ófótansfjörðr, Þorgerðr Hörgatröll, and other *stórvættir* from the north.¹²

Grímr's son, the title hero of *Örvar-Odds saga*, was brought up in Jæderen, where a sorceress at a *seiðr* ritual prophesied that Odd would live for three hundred years. Later he sailed north to Ramsta to see his father, and then joined his brother and nephew on an expedition to Permia. On their way there, his brother Guðmundr went ashore in Finnmark with his crew, raiding every hut and robbing the Sami women; for this, they were punished later on and forced to surrender all the loot they had taken. In Permia they broke into a burial mound, making off with plenty of silver. Like the Sami, the Permians were full of magic and witchcraft; they could even bring back to life all those killed in battle.

12. The Mythical North

Beside Finnmark and Permia, both of which belong to actual geography, the sagas refer to various other regions in the North. In *Heiðreks saga*, JÖTUNHEIMR is supposed to be located near the White Sea, and ÝMISLAND to the south of it. RISALAND was believed to lie somewhere in the Arctic Sea (*Bárðar saga* and elsewhere). A fanciful account in *Flateyjarbók*, entitled *Fundinn Noregr* 'The Discovery of Norway', states that a certain king called Fornjótr ruled over Finland and Kvenland and Jótland,¹³ "the countries stretching to the east of what we call the Gulf of Bothnia, which lies opposite the White Sea." He had three sons: Hlér

¹² Ófóti was originally a fjord name; cp. Ofoten in Nordland. For Þorgerðr Hörgatröll (also Hølgabrúðr, Hørdabrúðr, etc.) see Gro Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi* (Larvik 1991), pp. 220-26.

¹³ See the note on the term *Lappir* on p. 30 above. In *Flateyjarbók*, Fornjótr (= Forn-Jótr) is said to have ruled over "Jótland which is called Finland and Kvenland". Some editors have changed *Jótland* to *Gotland* which makes little sense. Considering where Jótland is located according to *Flateyjarbók*, it seems reasonable to assume that the underlying tribal name *Jótar must be a corruption of the Sami term *tjuder*. At this point it is tempting to quote Odd Mattias Hætta again (Op. cit., p. 63): "I den samiske sagnverden finner vi også en rekke beretninger om tjuder. Tjuder er en samisk betegnelse på bander som kom østfra, og gjorde innhugg i samiske hjem og bygder. De opererte i grupper når de overfalt samene. Sagnene kan ha sin rot i historiske forhold som fant sted på 1200-1400-tallet, da samene ble utsatt for røving og plyndring av grupper som kom østfra." -- It is by no means unlikely that *Fundinn Noregr* and *Hversu Noregr byggðisk* derive from information brought to Iceland by Gizur galli and his men from Finnmark and Norway early in the fourteenth century.

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(another name for the sea-god Ægir), Logi ('fire'), and Kári ('the wind'), who was the father of Snær ('snow') the Old, the father of Þorri, who had two sons Nór and Gór, and a daughter called Góí.

One winter Góí disappeared, and three years later her brothers set out in search of her, Gór sailing down the Baltic, and Nór going on skis west to Finnmarken. The Lapps tried to bar his way but Nór's superior magic thwarted their attempts, and he reached the west coast of Norway. He travelled south from Trondheim and met his brother Gór at a place called Norumfjord, but there was still no word of their sister. The brothers divided the country between them in this way: Nór was to have all the mainland, and Gór all the islands. In a different, though related text, *Hversu Nóregr byggðisk* "The Settlement of Norway" also preserved in *Flateyjarbók*, it is stated that before the brothers met again, Gór had sailed up to the Arctic and claimed possession of all the islands on his way down south. Their agreement was that Nór was to have all the mainland from Jötunheimar in the north to Álfheimar¹⁴ in the south. Góí's abductor and husband turned out to be King Hrólf of Hedemark.

Norwegians in the sagas going to visit Jötunheimar travelled north, and something similar happened in myth. In the tale of Gefjun in *Gylfaginning* she had been staying in Sweden when 'she took four oxen from Jötunheimar in the north, her sons by a certain *jötunn*. 'Loki 'flew north to Jötunheimar' in order to rescue Iðunn from the giant Þjazi (*Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 3). Freyr was in Hliðskjálf and looking to the north when he saw Gerð. And so on.

The idea of the North is a powerful element in *Völuspá* particularly stanzas 35 - 38; this section includes several place names which are evidently borrowed from Norwegian toponymy. First, there is the river SLÍÐR which runs from the east through Eitrdalar (stanza 35). SLÍÐR appears to be a river name denoting 'a sheath', which alludes to the course of the river; the river itself is seen as the blade of a sword running through a sheath (NSL, pp. 287 - 88). In view of the reference in line 3 to knives and swords (*søxum og sverðum*), this interpretation seems better than

¹⁴ The geographical term Álfheimar covered the region between the rivers Gotaelv and Glom.

associating the river name SLÍÐR with Gothic SLEIÞS 'dangerous'. The first element in Eitrdalar is probably a river name *EITRA which may denote either 'the poisonous one' or, more probably 'the extremely cold one' (NSL, p. 98). The notion of *cold* is present elsewhere in this part of the poem. ÓKÓLNIR 'the excessively cold one' <-- *Ofkólnir appears to be the name of a fjord. But the most interesting name here is NÁSTROND 'corpse-strand', which reminds us of the place name NÁNES 'corpse-headland' on the White Sea. The reference to the north facing door (NORÐR HORFA DYR) of a hall on the White Sea needs no comment. The first element in NIÐAVELLIR and NIÐHÖGGR is probably NIÐ 'the wane of the moon', suggesting the long darkness of the Arctic winter.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Völuspá*, pp. 29-33. See note 3 above.

