

Alienness in *Heimskringla*: Special Emphasis on the *Finnar*

This article deals with alienness in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* with emphasis on the *Finnar*, which are a mysterious group of people, and who appear every now and then in the sagas. By choosing *Heimskringla* as a source we are able to look at alienness and the *Finnar* from Snorri's standpoint. Snorri represents a highly educated man of the beginning of the 13th century in Iceland. In the context of this study *Heimskringla* is thought to manifest Snorri's worldview, which consists of his knowledge and the Old Norse tradition. What do descriptions of the *Finnar* reveal of Snorri's world and thoughts? When examined against the historical background, do Snorri's accounts of the *Finnar* reflect historical facts?

The concept of alienness is based on the fact that there exists something familiar, which stands in contrast to an alien element. "This idea of "alienness" derives from the logocentric concept of "civilization" such as it had been elaborated by classical writers. The same concept was to remain dominant throughout the Middle Ages, and contributed, both in the West and the East of Europe, to distinguishing the so-called "civilized" peoples from those who were not."¹ In this case, the concept of alienness is looked at from the Icelandic-Norwegian standpoint. *Heimskringla* represents the Icelandic-Norwegian view on this matter, because Snorri himself belonged to this sphere of culture.

In modern Icelandic the word "*finni*" means an inhabitant of Finland. Nevertheless, this word must have had a different meaning in the Viking Age and in the Middle Ages for Icelanders, Norwegians, Danes and *Svear*. The words "*Finni*", "*Fiðr*" and "*Finnr*" (pl. *Finnar*) that are used in the sagas have caused much trouble for scholars. The sagas usually say that these *Finnar* live in *Finnmörk*, which is considered to be today's Finnmark in northern Norway, and which would mean that the *Finnar* would be Saami people. Some accounts suggest, however, that there were also *Finnar* who lived in a place called *Finmland*². To make things more complicated it is also necessary to refer to the word *Lappir*, which some East-Norwegian sources use when they mean *Finnar*. There are only a few examples of the word *Lapp* in the West-Norwegian sources and that is why it is impossible to say whether the word had the same meaning in both East-Norwegian and West-Norwegian.³ This unclear picture of the *Finnar* and the *Lappir* may indicate that the speakers of Old Norse knew there were two kinds of *Finnar* – Finns and Saami people – but that they had difficulties seeing differences between them. There may have been several reasons for this, but one could be lack of contact between the Finns and the Norwegians, which is understandable when taking into account geography.

In *Heimskringla* it is obvious that Snorri uses the word *Finnar* without further explaining its content. However, Finns and Saami people differed from each other in many ways (e.g. dressing, means of livelihood). The Finns and the Saami people speak languages that belong to the Finno-Ugrian group, but their languages began to differ from each other around 3000 years ago. Around this time the Finns left their hunter-gatherer culture behind and started to cultivate the land, while the Saami people continued their traditional hunter-gatherer way of life. Still, the Old Norse language did not distinguish between the Finns and the Saami but instead used the word *Finnar* for both⁴.

¹ De Anna 1992: p. 12.

² See, for example, Ólhelg 9.

³ Mundal 1996: pp. 97-116. By West-Norwegian sources Else Mundal means *Orkneyinga Saga* and *Fundinn Nóregr*.

⁴ Some Finnish scholars have tried to explain this confusion. Unto Salo suggests that the word *finni* had its roots in the prehistory. He based his theory on E. Itkonen's study, which suggests that the word *finni* is related to the verb *finna*.

The accounts we have about the *Finnar* in *Heimskringla* are not great in number. The *Finnar* seldom play a major part in the story. They are mentioned mainly in the following contexts: magic or witchcraft, marriage, and trading. The *Finnar* were thought to possess magical skills and they could, for example, cause the wind to rise. The *Finnar*, who possess magical skills, are “stock figures of Old Norse-Icelandic literature”, as John Lindow puts it⁵. The characters in *Heimskringla*, who had learned the art of *sejðr* from the *Finnar* or had had something to do with the *Finnar* and their witchcraft, usually had a miserable fate⁶. There are some accounts where a king marries a *finnkona*. These marriages turn out to be disastrous. The wife causes the death of her spouse⁷, or she causes otherwise unlucky events for the family⁸ or even for the whole country⁹. The Norwegians traded with the *Finnar*¹⁰, although we may have suspicions about the nature of this trade. In addition to trading, the Norwegians presumably levied taxes on the *Finnar*, as Ottar’s account in King Alfred’s *Orosius* suggests¹¹.

Magic or witchcraft is associated either with gender or ethnicity in the Old Norse literature. This means that the practitioners of witchcraft tend to be either women or ethnic outsiders. The *Finnar* are an ethnic group that is frequently associated with witchcraft. They can also be described as an outsider-group, which existed on the outskirts of Norwegian society. The majority of practitioners of witchcraft whom Snorri describes in *Heimskringla* were male and were *Finnar*, or at least were connected to the *Finnar* in one way or another. Those magicians that were not ethnically *Finnar* were geographically marginalized. People who lived in the northern parts of Norway, such as in Hálogaland, for example, were more inclined toward witchcraft than people who lived in other parts of Norway¹². Snorri is very careful in not confusing the Old Norse paganism with the practice of magic. These practitioners of magic were portrayed as not only being pagan, but also as evil – a view that is totally Christian. The fact that these magicians were characterized as ethnically distinct also distinguishes them from the Old Norse pagan tradition.¹³ In fact, ethnic otherness seems to be closely connected with supernatural otherness. Strangers were outsiders of a certain society, who formed an “inside” social group. These outsiders represented alienness and that is why it is not surprising that supernatural powers were attributed to strangers. John Lindow suggests that by attributing supernatural powers to strangers, i.e. “other” groups, the “inside” social group could define itself. Lindow observes that what is striking about the description of strangers and other groups in Nordic tradition is “how closely they resemble attributes of supernatural beings”.¹⁴ Considering this statement, we can say that the *Finnar* with their supernatural powers and witchcraft definitely represent alienness or otherness in *Heimskringla*.

Finnar would have been related to people who were hunters. The Scandinavians could not distinguish between the Finns and the Saami, who were both hunter-gatherers in prehistoric times. Salo speculates that when the Finns settled down and began to cultivate the land, the word *finni* was still used for them, although their means of living was now based on agriculture and not on hunting. Salo, Unto 1981.

⁵ Lindow 1995: 11.

⁶ See for example Hhärf 34 and ÓI Trygg 76.

⁷ Yng 13 and 19.

⁸ Yng 14.

⁹ Hhärf 25.

¹⁰ Ólhelg 104, 170 and 193.

¹¹ Ross 1940: p. 21.

¹² Bagge 1991: p. 216.

¹³ Lionarons 1997: pp. 419, 421, 422.

¹⁴ Lindow 1995: pp. 19, 22.

As already mentioned, marriage between a Scandinavian king and a *finnkona* always turned out badly. There are two cases in *Ynglinga Saga* where a king marries a *finnkona*. King Vanlandi stayed one winter in Finland at Snjá inn Gamli. Vanlandi married Drifa, who was the daughter of Snjá. Vanlandi left Drifa in Finland and did not come back to her. So Drifa sent a witch called Huld to bewitch Vanlandi to return to Finland or otherwise be killed. As a result of Huld's magic, Vanlandi began to desire to return to Finland, but his friends and counsellors advised him not to do so. Then Vanlandi became drowsy and he fell asleep. While he was sleeping a *mara* killed him.¹⁵ The other unfortunate king was King Agni. He conducted raids in Finland and married Skjálfr, who was the daughter of chieftain Frosti. King Agni did not die because of witchcraft. He had apparently taken Skjálfr and her brother Logi against their will with him from Finland. Skjálfr asked Agni to arrange a feast in honour of her dead father. In the feast Agni got drunk and he went to bed. He slept in a tent, which was situated under a tree. While Agni was sleeping, Skjálfr and her men hanged him on the tree branches and fled away.¹⁶

King Haraldr hárfagri had better luck. He met a *finnkona* called Snæfríðr who was the daughter of a certain Svási. Svási was a *Finnr* and he had invited Haraldr to visit his hut. In the hut Snæfríðr gave King Haraldr a cup of mead. The saga implies indirectly that the mead was love potion because King Haraldr immediately wanted to take her to his bed that very night. Svási wanted King Haraldr to make Snæfríðr his lawful wife. That was done and King Haraldr loved Snæfríðr so passionately that he forgot to take care of his kingdom. Then Snæfríðr died, but her corpse did not change and it looked like as if she was still alive. King Haraldr mourned over Snæfríðr's death for three years and his people mourned over his delusion. Then Þorleifr spaki suggested that they should change Snæfríðr's dress. But as her body was exhumed a terrible smell came from it and it had to be burned. The body turned blue and all sorts of ugly animals – reptiles, worms, paddocks etc. – came out of it. The spell broke and King Haraldr came to his senses and ruled his kingdom as before.¹⁷

Marriage between "ordinary" men and *finnkonur* is a common motif in the sagas. Ynglinga Kings, in particular, are bewitched by these women. But why do these marriages turn out to be disastrous? According to Lars Lönnroth, this is due to the fact that the *finnkonur* are "evil and practiced the art of seiðr".¹⁸ This means that the concept of a *Finnr* is (automatically?) connected to evil and to pagan witchcraft. Gro Steinsland, who has studied marriages between kings and giants or *finnkonur* in the sagas, has come to the conclusion that this kind of marriage presents *hieros gamos*, which has its prototype in Scandinavian mythology (the marriage between Skadi and Njord). Steinsland suggests that this kind of extreme exogamy presents a geographical suspense between "*hjemlig og fremmed*". Haraldr hárfagri's and Snæfríðr's marriage would be the best example of this in the Kings' sagas. Snorri did not compose the story of Haraldr and Snæfríðr himself, as Steinsland points out. He was familiar with *hieros gamos* – a type of marriage, which he knew from Ynglingatal and which he used in his *Ynglinga Saga*. For the story of Haraldr and Snæfríðr Snorri used Ágrip as a source. Apparently the giants of Scandinavian mythology were transformed into *finnkonur* in the historical works of the Middle Ages.¹⁹ Steinsland concludes that the meaning of this *hieros gamos* was to symbolize the political power of the king and the fact that he was united with the land²⁰. It seems clear that Snorri uses the Old Norse mythology and tradition

¹⁵ Yng 13.

¹⁶ Yng 19.

¹⁷ Hháf 25.

¹⁸ Lönnroth 1986: pp. 81-82.

¹⁹ Steinsland 1991: pp. 207, 209, 212.

²⁰ Steinsland 1991: p. 307. Female giants were also often mythical progenitrix of a royal dynasty. p. 308.

when he writes about the marriages between "ordinary" men and *finnkönur* and when witchcraft is associated with the *Finnar*.

The Norwegian king could not control the northern parts of the country before the end of the 12th century. Before that the king had to give the right to levy taxes (*finnkaup*) on the *Finnar* to some chieftain of Hálogaland. This way the king could at least have indirect control over the northern part of the country. These "taxes" had the character of tribute, which certain individuals collected for themselves, not for the state. This *finnkaup* is also mentioned in *Heimskringla*²¹. As Wallerström points out, Ottar from Hálogaland may have considered the "tax" as a payment he required for transporting and selling merchandise.²² Like everything else having to do with the *Finnar* in *Heimskringla*, trading with them could also have negative aspects. Þórir hundr is a good example of this. He traded with the *Finnar* and asked them to make him twelve reindeer skins that had magical qualities: they would protect their bearers better than a mail corset²³. Þórir wore such a skin in the battle of Stiklestad where Saint Óláfr died.

It is difficult to get a picture of the appearance of the *Finnar* from *Heimskringla* because they are poorly described. The only account where there is a description of a *finni* is in Ólhelg 82. It describes a man called Finnr litli, who was from the Uplands (Upplönd) and was said to be of "Finnish" descent ("finnskr at ætt"). He was small, "so swift of foot that no horse could overtake him" and skilful in skiing and shooting with a bow.²⁴ This account clearly refers to the fact that Finnr litli was – at least partly – a Saami. He could not have been a Finn if he was from the Uplands. Finnr was in the service of King Hrœrekr, who was the opponent of Saint Óláfr²⁵. The case of Finnr litli shows well that the *Finnar* had a negative image in *Heimskringla*: they can be described as evil and deceitful. We have practically no other account of the *Finnar* in *Heimskringla* which might describe their appearance. Snæfríðr, who was Haraldr hárfagri's wife, was said to be *kvinna fríðusi*²⁶. Otherwise we have no descriptions of the appearance of the *finnkönur* in *Heimskringla*. However, we must bear in mind that Snorri rarely describes things that are irrelevant to the main story. He concentrates on the main characters and scenes. That is why it is not a striking feature in *Heimskringla* that the *Finnar* are not described in detail.

Heimskringla gives little information on how the *Finnar* lived. In Hháf it is twice mentioned that the *Finnar* lived in Lapp huts ("gamma"). Svási, who was a "*Finnr*", had gotten permission from King Haraldr hárfagri to set up his hut "on the other side of the ridge"²⁷. Eiríkr, son of Haraldr hárfagri, found his future wife Gunnhildr in *Finnmørk*, where she was staying with two *Finnar* who taught her witchcraft. She hid Eiríkr and his men in a hut ("gamma") before the *Finnar* could find them²⁸. *Gamma* is mentioned again in Hsona 6 when Sigurðr slembidjákn made the *Finnar* construct two boats for him. He stayed with the *Finnar* while they were making the boats. In the poem, which is mentioned with the account, the word *gamma* occurs again.²⁹ These above mentioned accounts refer clearly to the Saami

²¹ Ólhelg 104, 170 and 193.

²² Wallerström 1995: pp. 187, 210.

²³ Ólhelg 193.

²⁴ "Maðr er nefndr Flðr litli, upplenzkr maðr, en sumir segja, at hann væri finnskr at ætt. Hann var allra manna minstr ok allra manna fótvatnast, svá at engi hestr tók hann á rás. Hann kunnr manna beztr við skó ok boga." (Ólhelg 82). There is also another account that mentions a *finni* who was skilful with bow. (Ólfrugg 108)

²⁵ Ólhelg 83.

²⁶ Hháf 25.

²⁷ Hháf 25.

²⁸ Hháf 32.

²⁹ "Sigurðr var með Finnum, þá er þeir gerðu skátturnar, ok höfðu Finnar þar mungát ok gerðu honum veizlu. Síðan kváð Sigurðr þetta: Gótti vas í gamma, es vér gláðir drukkum ok gláðir grams sonr gekk meðal þekja..." (Hsona 6).

people, because the Finns did not live in huts. They had begun to build houses made of timber during the Iron Age.

Óláfr Haraldsson's plundering expedition to Finland is the only account in *Heimskringla* that seems to deal with Finland and the Finns and not *Finnmörk* and the Saami, if we do not take into account the two kings Agni and Vanlandi in *Ynglinga Saga* and their dealings with the *Finnar* in Finland³⁰. Even this account is quite poor. The only thing mentioned is that the *Finnar* fled to the forest and that they surprised Óláfr and his men there. The *Finnar* attacked them from all directions. Óláfr and his crew had to flee to their ship and they lost many men. In the night the *Finnar* conjured up a storm on the sea using their witchcraft, but the king's luck prevailed against the witchcraft of the *Finnar* and he and his crew sailed away.³¹ In the previous chapter Óláfr Haraldsson had raided Eysýsla and he seems to have been on the Baltic Sea. This gives reason to believe that *Finnland* in Ólhelg 9 is Finland. There are two place names mentioned in this account: Herdalar and Bálagarössiða. Some scholars have tried to identify Herdalar but in vain. Bálagarössiða has been explained to mean lines of pyres on the coast. These were used to warn that the enemy was approaching.³² On the whole, the account in Ólhelg 9 does not give any detailed information on the *Finnar* (their appearance, means of living, dwelling) or on Finland. Witchcraft is mentioned though, as it nearly always is when a description of the *Finnar* is given. The fleeing of the *Finnar* to the forest is interesting in the sense that during the Iron Age Finns had built small fortresses on top of hills, and they would flee to these when an enemy attacked. Usually these fortresses were situated close to nearby waterways.

All in all, the *Finnar* seem to be stereotyped in *Heimskringla*. This aspect is enhanced when the names of the *Finnar* are studied. The *Finnar* had names like Drífa ("Snowdrift"), Snær ("Snow"), Gísl ("Ski-pole") or Qndur ("Ski"). They referred to Finnish/Lappish origin in the sagas.³³ These names indicate that their purpose was to refer to the nature and origin of these characters. It is not possible to give a thorough and exhaustive study on names of the *Finnar* in this article, but there seems to be every reason to assume that most of the names of the *Finnar* were made up and they have no connection to real Finnish or Saami names³⁴.

The picture of the *Finnar* in *Heimskringla* is negative and unclear. In most of the cases the term *Finnar* refers to the Saami people but at least in one case (Ólhelg 9) the *Finnar* can be identified with the people living in Finland. This confusion can be explained with geography: the Norwegians obviously had more contacts with the Saami people than with the Finns. It is possible that they had so little information on Finland and the Finns that they could not distinguish between a Saami and a Finn. This, however, does not explain the negative image of *Finnar* in *Heimskringla*. It is possible that the *Finnar* were connected with the giants of Old Norse mythology, where they represent alienness³⁵. The connection between the *Finnar* and the giants seems also probable when considering Gro Steinsland's study on marriages between Scandinavian kings and a giantess or a *finnkona*. This marriage, *hieros gamos*, would produce a prototype of a king.³⁶ The descriptions of the *Finnar* reveal that they had qualities that were connected to the giants in the Old Norse tradition, but there were also other elements in the descriptions. It would be too simple, however, to assume that the *Finnar*

³⁰ Vanlandi and Agni represent mythical figures and their historicity is impossible to verify, and that is why their stories are not taken into account here.

³¹ Ólhelg 9.

³² Gallén: p. 256. In my opinion, it is extremely difficult to identify these places after 1000 years. Certain speculations can be made but it is hardly possible to prove these to be completely watertight.

³³ Lönnroth 1986: p. 82.

³⁴ On Baltic-Finnish names, see Stoebe 1964.

³⁵ Clunies Ross 1994: p. 164. Giants were aliens, especially in the world of the Norse gods.

³⁶ Steinsland 1991: pp. 103, 308.

would have been seen as giants in the mythology. Else Mundal has suggested that Christianity may have affected the attitudes of the Norwegians towards the *Finnar*, i.e. the Saami people. Before the Norwegians were converted to Christianity the relationship between the Norwegians and the *Finnar* may have been natural. But when Christianity had established its position in Norwegian society, it forbade contacts with the pagan *Finnar*. Mundal refers to *Borgarþinglag* and *Eidsiváþinglag*, which prohibited Christians from having any contacts with the *Finnar*. It was illegal to travel to see them, ask them to foretell the future or even to believe them. According to Mundal, this refers to a very close relationship between the Norwegians and the *Finnar* because it had to be prohibited by law.³⁷ Why did the laws have such a negative attitude toward *Finnar*? It is probable that the church wanted to control its members: it would not tolerate dealings with pagans. During the 12th and 13th centuries a wave of intolerance toward dissimilarity began to emerge in Europe³⁸, and the Norwegian laws may well reflect this attitude.

The descriptions of the *Finnar* in *Heimskringla* consist of many elements: Old Norse mythology and Christianity have influenced them, but they also contain grains of truth. The Norwegians knew how the Saami people lived and that is why the descriptions contain references to, for instance, Lapp huts or skiing. When we look at the contexts where the *Finnar* appear in *Heimskringla* we can conclude that they invariably represent a negative aspect and that they seem to have a position as a marginal group. Snorri's accounts do not reveal that he could see a difference between the two kinds of *Finnar*. His sphere/world could not reach as far as the area of today's Finland, which is no wonder considering the circumstances. Even though Snorri had visited Norway, his possibilities of obtaining knowledge of peoples living in the distant north or east were limited. That is why Snorri's descriptions of the *Finnar* – whether they were Finns or Saami people – are only partially realistic. If Snorri had had contacts with the *Finnar*, it must have been with the Saami people. Nevertheless, we cannot know for sure whether Snorri himself had had personal experiences with the Saami people or whether he had to rely on others' accounts of them. The *Finnar* are characterized with total alienness in *Heimskringla*, but it must be stated that *Heimskringla* is not the only medieval source which does this³⁹.

Works Cited

- De Anna, Luigi. 1992. The peoples of Finland and early medieval sources. The characterization of "alienness" (In: *Suomen varhaishistoria*. Studia Historica Septentrionalia. Jyväskylä. Toim. [ed.] K. Julku)
- Bagge, Sverre. 1991. Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* (University of California Press. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California)
- Clunies Ross, Margaret 1994 Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse myths in medieval Northern Society. Volume 1: The myths. (The Viking Collection. Volume 7. Odense University Press)
- Gallén, Jarl. 1984. Länsicurooppalaiset ja skandinaaviset Suomen esihistoriaa koskevat lähteet (In: *Suomen väestön esihistorialliset juuret*. (Bidrag till kännedom av Finlands natur och folk. Utgivna av Finska Vetenskaps-Societeten, H. 131, Helsinki).
- Heimskringla* by Snorri Sturluson. Ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnason. Íslenzk fornrit 26-28. Reykjavík 1979 [1941].

³⁷ Mundal 1996: pp. 97, 102-103.

³⁸ Wallerström 1995: pp. 169-170.

³⁹ De Anna 1992: p. 19.

- Lindow, John. 1995. "Supernatural Others and Ethnic Others: A Millenium of World View" *Scandinavian Studies* 67 no:1
- Lionarons, Joyce Tally. 1997. "Gender, Ethnicity, and Pagan Magic in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*" (In: "*Sagas and the Norwegian Experience*". 10th International Saga Conference. Trondheim, 3.-9. August 1997)
- Lönnroth, Lars. 1986. "Dómaldi's death and the myth of sacral kingship" (Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature. Eds. Lindow, J., Lönnroth, L. & Weber, G.W., Odense University Press)
- Mundal, Else. 1996. The Perception of the Saamis and their religion in Old Norse Sources. (In: *Shamanism and Northern Ecology*, ed. by J. Pentikäinen. Religion and Society 36)
- Ross, Alan. 1940. The Terfinnas and Beormas of Othhere (*Leeds School of English Language, Texts and Monographs: Number VII*)
- Salo, Unto. 1981. Satakunnan pronssikauden kuva. (*Satakunnan historia* 1,2)
- Steinsland, Gro. 1991. Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi. En analyse av Hierogami-myten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal och Hyndluljóð. (Solum Forlag)
- Stoebke, Detlef-Eckhard. 1964. Die alten ostseefinnischen Personennamen im Rahmen eines urfinnischen Namensystems. (Hamburg)
- Wallerström, Thomas. 1995. Norrbotten, Sverige och Medeltiden. Problem kring makt och bosättning i en europeisk periferi. (*Lund Studies in Medieval Archaeology* 15:1)