
Original Article

The intersection of medieval studies and Indigenous studies: A Norse-Saami case study

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Abstract Medieval texts reveal the normalised presence of Saami peoples in medieval Fennoscandia, suggesting close interactions involving trade, relationships, rituals, and magic. Despite growing recognition of these relations, the Saami remain overlooked in general studies of the Middle Ages, often relegated to symbolic roles or footnotes. As a result, Saami characters are typically depicted as the exotic Other within Norse society, often being stripped of agency and humanity in historical narratives. To counter these biases and distorted narratives, an essential step is analysing exclusionary structures in medieval literature and critically reviewing existing research on Saami representation. This process challenges dehumanising portrayals and confronts present-day stereotypes. The present study aims to ‘re-humanize’ (as Paulette F. C. Steeves puts it) the medieval Saami past by using decolonising frameworks and perspectives offered by the so-called ‘Indigenous turn’ of medieval studies, bridging medieval studies and Indigenous studies within a Norse context.

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the land
is different
when you have lived there
wandered
sweated
frozen
seen the sun
set rise
disappear return
the land is different
when you know
here are
roots
ancestors
(Valkeapää 1997, 71)

Introduction

Although often disregarded, a wealth of written sources and archaeological material from the medieval period point to the seemingly normalised and substantial presence of Saami peoples living in or in proximity to Norse society.¹ The Saami are the Indigenous people of Fennoscandia, and the traditional Saami settlement area is called Sápmi/Sábme/Saepmie and is an ‘imagined’ nation that crosses the national borders of the nation states Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia (Ojala 2009, 25). Across this region, there is great cultural and historical diversity, and it should also be noted that many Saami people live outside of the present-day ‘borders’ of Sápmi. The Saami languages, traditionally and generally divided into nine ‘living’ (meaning *spoken*) languages today, belong to the Finno-Ugric language family and are both structurally as well as etymologically different from the Nordic languages. This variation is, as Carl-Gösta Ojala states ‘an important reminder that “the Saami” is not a homogenous entity, neither in the present nor in the past’ (2009, 73). Such a reminder is important for our understanding of the lived realities of the Saami peoples today and those in the past, realities that form the basis for the Saami characters that appear in the medieval texts we analyse.

Because of the wealth of surviving medieval evidence, the fact of close contact between historical Saami and Norse peoples is not shocking, and trade, personal relationships, alliances, and magic are common themes connected with Saami characters across medieval texts (Wang 2023, 74). Archaeological finds combining a mix of typical Norse and Saami identity markers, in spatial contexts stretching beyond the current cultural and political borders of Sápmi, demonstrate that medieval Fennoscandia was less monocultural than previously and often assumed (Amundsen 2017; Svestad 2017).² Despite an

1 For ‘Saami’ in English, rather than the more common ‘Sámi,’ I have adopted Spangen, Salmi, Äikäs, and Fjellström’s use of the former to emphasise the diversity of Saami societies (2020, 3). I use ‘Fennoscandia’ as a geographical term to refer to the Scandinavian and Kola peninsulas, mainland Finland, and Karelia.

2 The historical and cultural region traditionally associated with Saami peoples, often referred to as the ‘Saami homelands’ (Ojala 2009, 72), often mistakenly appropriated in English as ‘Lapland.’



increasing awareness of these aspects of Norse-Saami relations in certain academic milieux and the growing acceptance of more inclusive readings of medieval texts and archaeological material, the Saami tend to be neglected in general studies of the medieval period (DuBois 1999, 12) or are often only mentioned in footnotes (Bergstøl and Skalleberg Gjerde 2020, 170).³ Most often, when the Saami are discussed, they are almost exclusively treated as side characters who function as symbolic tools in medieval narratives, which represent them as magical and far-northern dangerous Others within Norse society. The Saami researcher Mikkel-Berg Nordlie states in his recent work on ‘Antisamisme’ (*antisámism/anti-Saamism*)⁴ that the ‘belief in the magical beliefs of the Saami is an exotification of the minority that is observable already in old saga texts’ (2022, 421).⁵ Consequently, Saami characters in studies of the Middle Ages are often side-lined as primitive and peripheral, and they are presented as static historical actors in the majority of the historiography that relates to them.

The study of such structures of exclusion and Othering in medieval literature, as well as a fundamental systematic and critical review of research that in various ways relates to medieval representations of these Saami characters today, is essential in order to move beyond the stereotyped images of Indigenous peoples both in general and in academic understandings (Olsen 2022, 105).⁶ Such a study relates to the active confrontation of popularised narratives that dehumanise the Saami or other Indigenous groups in the past, and consequently, also in the present (cf. Steeves 2023, xxiv). In the following, I aim to contribute to such a confrontation and seek to ‘re-humanise,’ in the words of the Cree-Métis scholar Paulette F. C. Steeves (xxiv), the medieval Saami past from a medieval-studies perspective.⁷ This confrontation will be achieved through an active incorporation of decolonising frameworks in the investigation of Saami representations within Norse texts, and more broadly, medieval studies. Accordingly, the article is framed as a glimpse into the intersection of medieval studies and Indigenous studies from a Norse perspective and hopes to contribute to the so-called ‘Indigenous turn’ in medieval studies (Andrews 2020).

Nordic colonialism and anti-Saamism

While the Saami are generally acknowledged as the Indigenous people of Fennoscandia, with varying political rights and sociocultural status across the four nation states of Sápmi, this has not always been the case (Gaski 2013; Porsanger 2014). Here, it should be noted that in using the term ‘Indigenous,’ I refer to its definition within a political context as set out in the United Nations’ International Labour Organization Convention 169 (henceforth, ‘ILO 169’) of 1989:

3 Archaeological research can be said to have been more progressive than historiography regarding the inclusion of the Saami in archaeologies of the medieval period, see for example Bergstøl and Reitan (2008), and Holberg and Dørum (2021).

4 The term encapsulates the complexity of the negative attitudes and actions about and directed to Saami people in Norwegian society (2022, 420).

5 My translation of the original Norwegian.

6 In this context, Othering refers to the textual tradition whereby the compiler(s) of a text accentuate the Otherness of a given character or group through set descriptions and allusions that set them aside from the majority group in order to enforce a perceived distance between the groups.

7 Steeves writes that ‘in order to rehumanize the Indigenous past, it is paramount to open discussions focused on decolonizing Western knowledge production’ (2023, xxiv), and that ‘rewriting and rehumanizing the past reflect positively on the future’ (176).

Peoples in independent countries who are regarded as Indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, cultural and political institutions. (International Labour Organization Convention 169).

One misunderstanding often reoccurring in the debate about the term ‘Indigenous’ revolves around the commonly accepted notion that the term implies that a group in question must have made up the first (or ‘original’) inhabitants of a given area.⁸ This notion is not supported by ILO 169, where Indigeneity is specifically determined by affiliation and belonging to a place at the time when the present-day state boundaries were established by *others* (i.e., the coloniser) and by the retaining of some or all of the people’s independent sociocultural and/or political institutions. As such, historicity—the notion of *having a history* or historical presence in an area, which I further discuss below—is the ultimate definable base for Indigeneity in a Saami context (Olsen 2022, 97).⁹ This notion accentuates the significance of reviewing historiography that relates to Saami people, in addition to the important factor that histories (and geographies) ‘provide the foundation for Indigenous cultural identities and sense of self’ (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, 598).

To understand the lingering colonial remnants of historiography, the cruel colonial pasts and continuous colonial presents of the Saami must be accounted for. While a repetition of these processes can be criticised on the grounds of being performative or counterproductive, it has been noted on several occasions that ‘scholars tied to the field of Scandinavian Studies appear to have been particularly reluctant to engage with the field of Nordic colonialism’ (Höglund and Andersson Burnett 2019, 2). Likewise, Tiffany Boyle and Jessica Carden note that this reluctance can be said to be grounded in a general ‘cultural amnesia’ both inside and outside of academia regarding Nordic imperial projects in Fennoscandia (2021). They therefore argue that challenging the ‘common representations of untainted histories’ within a Nordic context is crucial for historiography moving forward. In a specifically Saami context, accounting for the historical colonial structures that permeate contemporary perceptions about the Saami is essential since a lack of knowledge about Saami historical pasts contributes to the structural invisibility, or rather the *making invisible* (Berg-Nordlie 2022, 430), of the Saami both historically and in the present. I therefore give a short overview of the colonial history associated with the Saami below.¹⁰

8 While indigeneity in a medieval context or framework has been discussed elsewhere (cf. Conklin Akbari 2022, 2-3), I use the term purely in its political sense as defined by ILO 169 here.

9 Although only one nation state within Sápmi, Norway, has ratified this convention and the Indigenous status of the Saami is controversial in Fennoscandia, I employ the political definition of ILO 169 as encompassing the whole of Sápmi in this text.

10 In the following, I do not summarise the Saami resistance fight or the so-called ‘Saami renaissance’ (and its ongoing forms) that took place in the early twentieth century and formed part of the Saami ethnopolitical movement. Excellent discussions can be found in Gaski (1993) and Fjellheim (2020).



With growing expansion into North-Saami settlement areas in the later medieval period, the emerging states of Norway, Sweden, and the Novgorod Republic had gradually colonised Saami areas by implementing institutions like churches and military forts from the twelfth century onwards (Hansen and Olsen 2014, 143–48). This expansion was rooted in desires to access the Saami fur trade and various natural resources in Saami areas, in a political power play between the emerging states to gain geopolitical dominance (and prominence) over the other states. The expansion occurred over several centuries and formed part of a multitude of different and complex processes that had various consequences for Saami communities (Bergman and Edlund 2016; Mulk 1996; Mulk and Bayliss-Smith 2019). In 1323 and 1326, mutual peace agreements were concluded between (what was then) Sweden and the Novgorod Republic, and between Norway and the Novgorod Republic, respectively. These agreements resulted in large Saami territories in the north being incorporated into the states' borders, with mutually overlapping rights to taxation of the Saami populations living there (Hansen and Olsen 2014, 357). The overlapping taxation areas meant that some Saami groups were double- or even triple-taxed. Due to the cultural diversity of the Saami, as well as the political diversity of the emerging nation states, it is difficult to assess the level of 'colonisation' in various regions. The political and religious structures varied between minimal intervention to outright imperialistic takeovers of land.

Scholars have not tended to regard Saami conversion to Christianity in the medieval period as especially colonial in nature. Textual and archaeological material demonstrate that some Saami individuals and groups converted to Christianity (with varying levels of conformity) either voluntarily or by force throughout this period (cf. Mundal 2018, 18; Spangen 2004, 103). However, it seems that missionary activity among the Saami on a larger and more organised scale was not intensified until after the Reformation. Following the shift to Lutheran Christianity, more state pressure, which can be said to have been colonial in nature was directed at Saami peoples.¹¹ This colonial pressure manifested in forced conversion and the prohibition of traditional Saami religious expressions, for example by means of the collection and frequent destruction of ceremonial drums used during rituals (Spangen 2016, 40–42; Willumsen 2020). This destruction was based on the idea that Saami religious expressions were inherently 'heathen' in nature and, as such, connected with the Devil.

These patterns continued into the nineteenth century. With the growing acceptance of social Darwinism, eugenics, and biological research on race in the late nineteenth century (Andresen et al. 2021), the Saami were increasingly understood by the majority population as a 'static nature people that would not survive the meeting with or benefit from a modern

11 By the term 'colonial', I refer to processes of domination that incorporate imperial land takings and the subjugation of a people due to their perceived inferiority from the majority culture.

“civilised” and industrialised life’ (Spangen 2016, 109). During this time and continuing into the twentieth century, ethnographic research grew, as endeavours among researchers to solve the mysteries of what they perceived as an un-evolved people from the east were popularised. At the same time, the need to distance the majority population of the nation states from those who were deemed Saami ‘foreigners’ was manifested in the creation of systematic categories of racial characteristics based on skull measurements in order to fully distance the (perceived) ‘superior’ ‘Nordic race’ from the ‘inferior’ Saami (Hansen and Olsen 2014, 12–14). This dehumanising research was conducted through skull measurements of living Saami individuals as well as human remains from both pre-Christian and Christian Saami burial sites (Hansen and Olsen 2014, 19)—often with the measurements being greatly over- or underexaggerated to serve the racist scientific agenda (cf. Hagerman 2016). It goes without saying, but needs to be emphasised, that this research and its results were offensive and degrading and served racist and colonial agendas (Olsen 2022, 98). This dehumanisation, demonisation, and Othering resulted in the perceived justification of harsher colonial practices directed at the Saami.

These practices were imposed using various strategies across the nation states and were a combination of segregationist and assimilative policies rooted in the belief that the Saami were primitive and un-evolved nomads who had migrated from the eastern steppes in the early modern period (Ojala 2009, 94, 96). The idea of recent migration from the east gained strong support through the public acceptance of Norwegian historian Yngvar Nielsen’s resilient ‘framrykningsteori’ (theory of progression) put forth in 1889, which declared that the Saami had been early modern settlers in regions south of Nordland in Norway (and adjacently in Sweden) (Hansen and Olsen 2014, 16). As the theory was popularised, the Saami population south of this imagined line of historical migration were seen as newcomers and foreigners to the region and therefore as without historical claim to the land.¹² Consequently, they lost legal rights or privileges regarding natural resources and herding areas (Andresen, Evjen, and Rymin 2021, 142–56).¹³ At the same time, strict colonial policies were imposed across Sápmi through extremely damaging measures such as forced relocation, schooling, and Christianisation, the prohibition of Saami languages in certain contexts, and the destruction of Saami religious items and symbols (Olsen 2022, 98). These processes questioned the very humanity of the Saami, and their somewhat contradictory goals were, simultaneously, to extinguish the Saami culture completely, domesticate the Saami population, and to preserve the ‘primitive’ culture as a way of conserving what was perceived as a dying uncivilised group (Olsen 2022, 98). The industrialisation of Saami land was also intensified in this period (Ojala 2020).

12 Prior to its adoption, the Saami had predominantly been regarded among the academic and general community as having been the original inhabitants of Fennoscandia (Hansen and Olsen 2014, 11).

13 While the theory has been debunked on multiple occasions (see below), it is nevertheless prevalent in public, and at times, academic, discourse—as discussed in Bergstøl and Reitan (2008).



Following the Second World War, theories of racial supremacy and biological research into race itself were gradually discredited in public and academic environments. Nevertheless, the notion that the Saami are physiologically *different* from the majority population of Fennoscandia, both past and present, still exists in general thought (Dankertsen 2019, 119; Olsen 2022, 103) and also forms the basis for scholarship that is still used in current research on the medieval Saami.¹⁴ These attitudes, while not accepted in society generally, prevail through continued anti-Saami discourses that survive in micro-aggressions that in some cases lead to physical violence (Berg-Nordlie 2022, 420, 423, 430). This anti-Saami discourse is also observable in macro-aggressions whereby certain Saami communities opposing state industrialisation are painted as ‘stand[ing] in the way of modern society’ (Engen et al 2023, 2). The latter is often connected with the transition to sustainable energy and the concept of so-called ‘green colonialism,’ or in Aili Keskitalo’s words (former *Sámediggepresideanta*, or president of the *Sámediggi*, the Saami parliament, in Norway), with ‘colonialism dressed up in green finery’ (Arctic Circle 2020).

Historicity, historical revisionism, and green colonialism: A Saami absence?

While Nielsen’s *framrykningsteori* has been debunked on several occasions, it nevertheless lives on as a prevailing cultural notion and also affects historiography. Saami history is contested and fundamentally political in terms of its historicity, here defined as *having a history* or historical presence in a region. Saami historicity is directly tied to present-day conflicts related to Saami rights to land and water, questions of Indigeneity, and perceived Indigenous privileges (Keskitalo 1994). The pervasiveness of the idea that Saami are recent arrivals from elsewhere has meant that evidence for the premodern presence of the Saami has been neglected, suppressed, or treated as always unexpected and surprising. Ongoing conflicts sometimes rest on historicity, and the so-called ‘Saami absence’ is traceable in works of history, in ‘fiction that claims to portray reality,’ in political decision-making, and on maps (Berg-Nordlie 2022, 423).

A textbook example of this exclusion of Saami people comes in the three-volume history of the Norwegian region Trøndelag from 2005 (Bull, Skevik, Sogness, and Stugu). It highlights the issues associated with nation-state historiography that neglects to portray Indigenous history (Sem 2017). Critiqued both prior to and following its publication, the compilation neglected to include the Saami in the long *durée* history of the

14 For a problematisation of this perception, see Svestad (2017, 123–24). Skull measurements, for example, were still used in the 1980s to differentiate between Norse and Saami archaeological remains (cf. Stenvik 1980). Recent investigations into genetic data of medieval human remains raise similar ethical questions in research on Indigenous peoples.

region and also saw support among its editorial board of the *framrykningsteori* (Sem 2017). This exclusion is also typical of more general nation-state histories coming from the other nations within Sápmi, as discussed at the Society for Swedish Literature's seminar on minorities in Nordic historiographies in December 2022. Furthermore, it has been observed that when Saami persons are indeed discussed in medieval historiography, they are, as Jostein Bergstøl and Hege Skalleberg Gjerde write, 'almost always presented as an exceptional case, an outlier we should consider, again demonstrating that the world of the Vikings and Viking history [and by extension, medieval history] is primarily about bona fide Norse culture' (2020, 170).

Another damaging tendency also observable in historiography is so-called historical revisionism.¹⁵ Historical revisionism constructs new versions of history, which remove the presence of Saami peoples to discredit the historical claims of Saami ways of life. This tendency was previously especially relevant for the Sea Saami as a cultural group (Baglo 2019), and it is currently relevant for reindeer husbandry as an Indigenous industry. In the latter case, attempts to discredit the Indigenous history of the industry in specific areas are connected to ideas of the industry as less legitimate and as therefore not eligible to receive any state 'privileges' as an Indigenous industry (Berg-Nordlie 2022, 425). This type of historical revisionism is also observable in minority politics, for example in cases where the Kven Finn Association (*Kvensk Finsk Riksforbund*) reconstruct the medieval exonym *finnar*, most commonly associated and primarily accepted as denoting Saami peoples in medieval documents (Mundal 1996; Ojala 2009, 32), to refer to the present-day Kven people. By making this connection, the association claims that the Kven are the original Indigenous peoples of Fennoscandia and that the Saami should lose their current status and (perceived) privileges based on Indigeneity (Berg-Nordlie 2022, 433).¹⁶

Together, the creation of these 'historical truths' represent the many strong expressions of epistemological violence that have produced material and symbolic consequences for the South Saami (Åarjel-saemieh) people (Normann 2021, 80). Håkon Hermanstrand argues that the reluctance with which researchers as well as others acknowledge Saami historical presence south of the northern region has 'served as support for colonialism' in a South Saami context (2019, 50). A perceived lack of historical sources has therefore frequently been used to discredit Saami historicity. For example, medieval documents have famously been utilised in legal cases to argue for or against Saami rights to land, water, or privileges within an area (Brännström 2020). Indeed, the recent ruling in favour of the Girjas Saami village's claim to hunting and fishing rights in

15 See Svestad and Olsen (2023) for a discussion on archaeology and language in the question of Saami prehistory.

16 These discussions often include in the late ninth century account of the chieftain Ohthere, various references to *birkarlar* particularly prominent in Old Swedish documents, and Olaus Magnus' works, since these employ the Old Norse term 'Kvenir.'



their area in Jiellevárri in northern Sweden was made on the basis of Saami presence in the region ‘from time immemorial’ (Sveriges Domstolar 2020).

More recently, notions of historicity were used in the decision made by the Norwegian Supreme Court that the wind power development at Storhøya and Roan in Trøndelag had indeed been established contrary to and at the expense of the Indigenous and human rights of the Saami (Norwegian National Human Rights Institution 2023). Such industrial developments that contradict Indigenous rights are rooted in Saami claims to self-determination and are ‘embedded in a complex history of colonialism, marked by practices of dispossession, discrimination, assimilation, protectionism, cultural paternalism, and Saami resistance’ (Lawrence 2014, 1037).¹⁷ When Saami people oppose developments like wind farms, even with international human rights rules on their side, their opposition enforces a public perception of Saami reindeer herding as problematic since it is perceived as ‘against modernity’ (Engen et al 2023, 2). This perception again contributes to anti-Saamism among the majority population (Berg-Nordlie 2022) and has been proven to be grounded in knowledge gaps about the Saami and Saami culture within the state of Norway (Normann 2021, 86).

Historiography then, risks contributing to these knowledge gaps and to anti-Saami discourses, as historical documents and interpretations of them are employed in legal contexts related to Saami interests or are actively (or indirectly) employed to discredit the Saami. Carl-Gösta Ojala therefore asserts that it is essential that scholars working on times or places inhabited by the Saami, or studying the Saami specifically, are aware of this ‘complex history of colonialism’ (Lawrence 2014, 1037), and that they address this history, directly or indirectly, in their approaches and their research:

[We] must never forget that we are dealing with histories of conquest, violence, oppression, exploitation, relocation, assimilation, discrimination, racism, appropriation and erasure of culture, language, history and heritage—histories with very real consequences and effects on the social, cultural and economic lives and the well-being and health of Indigenous communities today. (Ojala 2019, 182)

Likewise, Claire Smith and Gary Jackson assert that a ‘proper acknowledgement of history is basic to an understanding of the present circumstances of our societies’ (2006, 311). This acknowledgement comes back to Johan Höglund and Linda Andersson Burnett’s call for a paradigm shift within research relating to the Nordic region:

17 I discuss colonial processes in a South Saami context in a forthcoming article with *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*; see Wang (forthcoming) for references.

We hope the reader who has previously not considered the Nordic region as a deeply diverse colonial or postcolonial space will be open to this theoretical paradigm shift even if it means abandoning some of the more comforting, and comfortable, ways of understanding Scandinavia. (2019, 11)

This abandonment can indeed be uncomfortable, and unsettling (see Tuck and Wayne Yang 2021, 3). The idea of the Nordic region's past as problem-free and characterised by 'untainted histories' (Boyle and Carden 2021) supports the moral standing of these countries as champions of welfare and social equality. The strong influence of historical revisionism and anti-Saami discourses within historiography and public consciousness also make it discomfoting for many non-Saami people to let go of their own accepted versions of history, versions that do not paint them in a bad (or colonial) light. Furthermore, this confrontation can also be unsettling in that it pertains to the giving back or acknowledgement of land, water, and hunting rights in a given region, which can be regarded as profound material losses for those affected, since the historical narrative up until now has predominantly worked in favour of non-Saami people.¹⁸

18 Similar to tendencies for the mentalities behind so-called *pretendians* and can also be said to be connected to what Lisa Aldred refers to as 'imperialist nostalgia' (cf. Aldred 2000, 334, 341).

Decolonising methodologies and alternative readings: *The Indigenous turn of medieval studies*

Research, as Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith cautions, and as the above makes clear, 'is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions' (2022, 5). In a medieval Saami context, present-day historiographic interpretations have direct consequences, be it political, legal, or cultural, for Saami communities. For medievalists, factors such as historical revisionism, anti-Saamism, debunked myths about the Saami past, and the structural invisibility (rather, the *making* invisible) of the Saami in general have to be confronted when conducting scholarship. Paulette Steves touches on such a confrontation when she states that 'rewriting the Indigenous past creates space from which to decolonize the public consciousness in the present' (2023, 2).

Indeed, as Brenna Duperron (Métis) and Elizabeth Edwards elaborate, 'decolonizing requires a rigorous investigation of the colonizing gaze within medieval studies, and its complicity with racist and imperialist ideologies' (2021, 101). Decolonisation is notably not an uncontroversial concept. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang famously note, the ease with which the concept has been made into a metaphor within the social sciences encourages a 'set of evasions,' or so-called 'settler moves to



innocence' (2012, 1–3). As such, the concept of decolonizing needs to be distinguished from superficial projects that only re-establish colonial or settler power and authority (Duperron and Edwards 2021, 95). In order to avoid such *metaphorisation* of the concept, it 'specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life' (Tuck and Yang 2012, 21).¹⁹ An approach where repatriation is in focus seems especially potent for a re-reading of the Saami in medieval texts since 'history is important for understanding the present and *reclaiming* history is a critical and essential aspect of decolonisation' (Tuhiwai Smith 2022, 33; italics mine). Reclaiming history, echoed in Paulette Steeves' rewriting of history (2023), can therefore be an act of repatriation, as the below section on *thinking Saami* demonstrates. Recognising the colonial bias in previous and present historiography on the Saami in the medieval period and rewriting history through an inclusive (and Indigenous) lens are integral to decolonisation. Duperron and Edwards indeed relate that such an approach 'can open our eyes to the Indigene who was already there' (2021, 101).

This repatriation through rewriting also means acknowledging 'Indigenous agency and Indigenous strategies for resistance and survival through great pressure and change' (Ojala 2019, 182). Here, it should therefore be highlighted, that there is an active positive change taking place across research fields, where the position of Saami characters or peoples as active agents in their own right is becoming increasingly emphasised. These developments are the direct results of the growth of Indigenous studies and Saami Studies as independent fields and the contributions of Indigenous and Saami scholars who have actively sought to decolonise historical narratives (Virtanen, Keskitalo, and Olsen 2021, 7–8). Nevertheless, these changes are mainly occurring in subfields of research and more inclusion in general and large-scale historical compilations is, naturally, essential for these positive foundations to continue to take root.

This positive change also forms part of the increased call to dismantle the oppressive and racist systems to which the field of medieval studies has historically contributed (Lomuto 2020; Miyashiro 2019). This need has been significantly aggravated by the rise of the far right and white supremacy movements that 'obsess over the myth of a monolithic white Middle Ages and use it to justify their violence' (Ramos 2020, 493). The misappropriation of the term 'Indigenous' by these groups as a tool to enforce their perceived uniqueness, as recently discussed by Suzanne Conklin Akbari (2022, 18), poses a dangerous distortion that not only erases Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty but also perpetuates a harmful narrative of cultural theft and exploitation. Therefore, distancing the field of medieval studies from, and actively confronting the misappropriation of medieval material by, such movements are crucial

19 Scholars should also be aware of and avoid the so-called *oops*-discourse referred to by Torres Strait islander Martin Nakata: 'oops, sorry, we were wrong but we've rethought this and, here, we think this is a better explanation for you and your predicament' (2007, 361).

factors for the continuation of the field (Rambaran-Olm, Leake, and Goodrich 2020). This distancing and confrontation also pertain to the core of decolonisation as a concept that is (or more so, should be) anti-racist in nature (Lomuto 2020). In a Saami context, this confrontation is clearly necessary due to the anti-Saami discourses that prevail across public consciousness, genres, and disciplines.

The Indigenous turn: Thinking Indigeneity, thinking Saami?

In the introduction to the ground-breaking October 2020 special issue of *English Language Notes* titled ‘Indigenous Futures and Medieval Pasts,’ Bitterroot Salish scholar Tarren Andrews states that ‘Medieval studies is experiencing an Indigenous “turn”’ (2020, 1). This turn, at the intersection of Indigenous studies and medieval studies, involves accountability and reclaiming histories. Andrews asks several reflective questions, primarily based on the premise (and challenge) of embracing an epistemically different discipline like Indigenous studies where ‘medievalists must first attend to the lived reality of Indigenous peoples’ (1). In this reciprocal turn, Indigenous studies scholars can then therefore also ask ‘what kind of future is gained when the medieval past is Indigenous?’ (2).

Prior to and following the special volume, numerous medievalists have initiated substantial contemplation regarding matters pertaining to Indigeneity and Indigenous thought, theory, and methods (cf. Cleaves 2020; Miyashiro 2019; Otaño Gracia 2022; Price 2022). Among these contributions are Brenna Duperron and Elizabeth Edwards’ reflective challenge to medieval studies on ‘Thinking Indigeneity’ in the journal *Exemplaria* in 2021. Here, they call all scholars (and teachers) to *think Indigeneity* by re-examining current and historical knowledge regimes and ask what this examination implies for medievalists (94). They write, personally and from the heart, that:

First, and most importantly for us, Indigenous theory and practice may resituate our understanding of medieval studies in the context of new epistemologies and non-Western concepts that will show us alternate ways to understand medieval text. Such an orientation will participate in undoing what Mi’kmaw scholar Marie Battiste calls ‘cognitive imperialism.’ (Duperron and Edwards 2021, 95)

The Indigenous turn in medieval studies represents a transformative shift, as medievalists increasingly centre the perspectives, experiences, and contributions of Indigenous communities in their exploration of the medieval period. This transformation should not be a quick pitstop on the



road to symbolic decolonisation, and as Andrew's cautions, *slowing down* medievalist engagement with Indigenous studies and Indigenous scholars is necessary for arriving at a kinder and more thoughtful foundation in the continued work to contribute to the intersection of the fields (2020, 2). Such an approach, grounded in respect, highlights the productivity of challenging the internalised episteme of the majority society (the 'Western episteme') by reflecting and confronting power relations and incorporating Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous ways of doing research in an academic context (Duperron and Edwards 2021, 100).²⁰ A key component of this interdisciplinary way of thinking therefore becomes to 'identify and explore alternative histories' (Spangen et al. 2015, 3).

Before I continue with my analysis, I want to 'slow down' for a moment. In the introduction to this article, I cite Saami artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's (Áillohaš) poem on the land (eanan) from the English translation of his book *Beavi, áhčážan* (*The Sun, My Father*; see Volk 1997). Here, Áillohaš refers to the deep connection between humans and the land long-lived-on, and how 'the land is different when you know here are roots ancestors' (eanan lea earálágán go diehtá dáppe máttut máddagat). This poem resonates with me in both my personal life and in my work because it so beautifully reflects how people experience and feel connections to the land where we have roots, or ancestors. To me, it reflects vividly how I feel about the valley where my mother grew up in Troms (Romsa) and where I spent my summers as a child. It makes me think about those who built the farm, why they built it, who they were, and where they came from.²¹ More so, it makes me envision the valley and its mountains. On a professional level, it reminds me of the connections between Indigenous peoples and the land. It also, in this moment, reminds me to position myself, as a female Norwegian interdisciplinary scholar of the medieval north (that was a mouthful), born in Oslo (Oslove),²² having studied in Aberdeen, Scotland, and currently working in Greifswald, Germany. My background and position as a researcher in a predominantly non-Indigenous academic context affect how I read and understand Saami histories, regardless of how I personally relate to these histories.²³ This article, and the work I have conducted for it, is written from where I stand, with the echoes of the recently submitted Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Norway's report on the Norwegianisation policy and injustice against the Saami, Kven, and Forest Finns in mind—which asserts that Norway, and the rest of Fennoscandia for that matter, 'has *always* been a multicultural society' (*italics mine*) (Sannhets- og forsoningskommisjonen 2023, 15).

The anticolonial medievalist Basil Arnould Price writes that 'despite the perceived recency of the "Indigenous turn," medieval Scandinavian

20 See also Martin Nakata (2007), Carl-Gösta Ojala (2019), and Torjer Andreas Olsen (2022).

21 On the often messy, and sometimes painful family identities of northern Norway (Sápmi), see Olsen's 'personal narrative' in his article on privilege, decentering, and the 'challenge of being (non)Indigenous in the study of Indigenous issues' (2017, 207).

22 *Oslove* is the suggested South Saami word for Oslo, the capital of Norway, made by the city council in 2022 in cooperation with several Saami institutions such as Oslove Noereh and Sámiid Searvi, and awaiting formal confirmation by the state (per August 2023).

23 By reflecting on my position, I write in the spirit of hoping to avoid the 'potential pitfall' (Olsen 2017, 207) of making this narrative an awkward confession or apologetic anecdote (Land 2015: 22–23).

Studies has a longer—if not deeper—history with Indigeneity’ (2022, 267). Price is here referring to the considerable medieval textual material that relates to interactions between the Norse and the Saami. As mentioned in the introduction, these Saami characters, denoted most commonly by the Old Norse exonym *finnar* (pl.), tend to be discussed in scholarship as representations of the far-northern and magically ambiguous or even dangerous Other (Wang 2020, 249). As a result, the focus in historiography on the medieval Saami tends to be on ‘what sets them apart from the Norse’ (Barraclough 2017, 28).

Price argues that because this scholarship centres on imaginings of the Saami characters as shamans or supernatural beings, the significance of the Saami as Indigenous ‘has often been neglected’ (2022, 267). Building on archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen’s emphasis on the tendency in scholarship to present the Saami as ‘not Indigenous enough’ (2016, 217–19), Price argues that this tendency has engendered a discipline that is inherently suspicious of approaching Norse-Saami relations within frameworks suggested by Indigenous studies (2022, 265). Generally, across studies that relate to the medieval world, there tends to be little acknowledgement outside of certain academic milieux that the Saami were important social, cultural, and political players in the medieval Fennoscandian world (and beyond) and active agents in their own right (Wang 2023, 18–27). This seems also to have been the case so far in the Indigenous turn of medieval studies, where the *finnar* are yet to be completely incorporated (of course with some exceptions; see Price 2022).

The marginal attention to the medieval Saami in this turn can probably be attributed to several factors, particularly pertaining to the fact that the Indigenous turn has, in my experience, mostly prioritised a North American context.²⁴ This geographical prioritisation naturally shapes the result of the studies, due to the vast diversity in historical contexts, Indigenous communities, and colonial experiences. For the inclusion of the Saami (and Saami studies) in this ‘turn,’ it is important to emphasise the notion of long-time Saami presence in the Fennoscandian region and understand medieval Fennoscandian landscapes as inherently *shared*, with variation, between Saami, Norse, and other groups. The region therefore needs to be understood in its own context.

Two goals seem to be at the foreground when we *think Saami* in the Indigenous turn of medieval studies. Primarily, this would involve committing to efforts to reclaim and revitalise Saami heritage, language, and cultural practices that were suppressed by colonial policies. Such efforts could be achieved through the deconstruction of the often-colonial readings of medieval texts and thereby allow for alternative readings that effectively decolonise the narrative and acknowledge the agency of Saami people in shaping their own history. Secondly, land rights and the

24 There has, nevertheless, been a growing interest in Saami studies among Scandinavian studies scholars; see Storfjell (2003).



connections to ancestral landscapes are central themes. Discussions could therefore revolve around how spatial belonging is described in medieval texts. After all, the textual acknowledgement of such belonging can be a crucial factor for present-day land-back fights and repatriation cases. Together, these efforts can rectify the previous omission of Saami peoples in the study of the medieval world and bring Saami histories and perspectives into the forefront of medieval studies.

Thinking Saami: Deconstructing the Saami Other in medieval studies

Across medieval documents, the Saami tend to be depicted in a manner associated with Othering. Here, Othering refers to the accentuation of a character or group's Otherness by the compiler of a text, through set descriptions and allusions that set them aside from the majority group in order to enforce a perceived distance. This Othering is primarily achieved through textual allusions to magic; to forest animals like bears, wolves, and sometimes reindeer; to 'supernatural' beings; and to hunting, archery, and winter weather (and all things associated with it, such as skiing). These associations form part of what I have called the 'Saami Motif Cluster' elsewhere, and suggest Saami identity, descent, or affiliation in medieval texts (Wang 2023, 73–74). The characterizations are not negative, but function as Saami identity markers in the texts, as the motifs are predominantly associated with the Saami and in relation to the various motifs. Furthermore, these characterizations are not exclusive to the Saami, and Saami characters are also at times described without allusions to this motif cluster. Nevertheless, scholarship tends to perpetuate a dogmatic view on the Saami that more often than not encapsulates Saami characters solely within this framework of Othering. In the following, I problematise some general trends within present-day research on the medieval Saami, specifically in a Norse studies context, and demonstrate how these trends often unconsciously (but very effectively) perpetuate colonial structures. In this confrontation, I investigate whether these trends (or assumptions) have any grounding in the primary sources, and I instead offer a re-reading based on what I call *thinking Saami*, by reinterpreting selected medieval texts in a way that counters colonial bias, explores alternative readings, and emphasises Saami agency.

In her work on the representation of the *finnar* in Heimskringla, a collection of *konungasögur* (sagas of kings, predominantly Norwegian) that are presumed to have been composed by the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson in the early thirteenth century, Sirpa Aalto argues that the Saami appear as an 'outsider group' that 'invariably represent a negative aspect'

(2003, 6). Further, she argues that the Saami ‘seem to have a position as a marginal group’ (2003, 6) within Norse society—a society that Phil Cardew (2001), Jeremy DeAngelo (2010), and Lyonel Perabo read as founded in the medieval Icelandic desire to ‘create’ a northern Other ‘worse off than themselves’ (Perabo 2016, 69). More recently, Arwen Thyse argues for a tendency in Norse literature to depict the Saami in ways that distinguished them as different from the Norse; on this account, Saami characters therefore were ‘frequently cast in a negative light, if only by association’ (2022, 3).

The emphasis of discussions of the medieval Othering of the Saami centres on their perceived geographical placement in a northern, peripheral, and dangerous wilderness; their powerful magical abilities and association with the supernatural through their non-Christian beliefs; and their (assumed) physical differences. The notion of the radical alterity of Saami in the Norse worldview is reflected in Saami scholar Troy Storfjell’s statement that the Saami ‘geographic proximity to and paradigmatic connection with the *jötnar* (...) served to strengthen the association of both with an existence in the chaotic, wild periphery (*útgarðr*) beyond the boundaries of civilization’ (2013). Here, Storfjell points out the scholarly habit of understanding the depiction of the Saami in medieval texts as placing them somewhere outside of civilised society and as being comparable with the *jötnar*, the giants of Norse mythology. Indeed, the Saami are often understood by scholars as either representing or being represented by giants, trolls, and other supernatural creatures, since, as Sirpa Aalto and Veli-Pekka Lehtola suggest, both the Saami and (in this case) *jötnar* ‘lived somewhere between the known civilized world and the unknown periphery’ (2017, 14). Arwen Thyse peripheralises the *finnar* further, seeing the conflation of the Saami with the *tröll* (trolls), another mythical creature from Norse mythology, as being grounded in the ‘questionable humanness’ of both (2022, 20):

The blurring of boundaries between the human and the troll relates to the Norse perception of the Saami as subhuman. Trolls and trollishness were perceived as a challenge to humanity – not only were trolls perceived as primitive and monstrous, but they were also perceived as being steeped in magic, and in particular shapeshifting magic. (Thyse 2022, 13)

As I suggest below, these scholarly perceptions of medieval sources are not entirely accurate. Scholars’ preconceptions of the Saami stereotype tends to colour how their perception of the evidence.

Another, particularly harmful, interpretation of medieval Saami characters focuses on physiological features. In 1982, Hilda Radzin describes the portrayal of thralls (enslaved peoples) in the Eddic poem *Rígsþula*



from the 1200s ‘as having black hair, and an unsightly countenance, thick ankles, coarse fingers, and as being of a low and deformed stature; these are physiological traits characteristic of the [Saami]’ (179).²⁵ While this statement is from the eighties, when skull measurements were still executed on historical remains to categorise them as either ‘Norse’ or ‘Saami’ (Stenvik 1980, 129), similar remarks on the physiology of the Saami are still perpetuated in contemporary scholarship. For example, on the portrayal of a group of Saami people in the *Hrafnistamannasögur*, a collection of four texts belonging to the *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas), Arwen Thyse writes that ‘the very gaze and bodies of Sámi people have threatening potential’ (2022, 10) and that they ‘display (...) uncertain humanness as represented through their bodies’ (13).

With these readings in mind, the question remains as to what the medieval texts actually relate about the Saami. What happens, then, when we *think Saami* in an effort to deconstruct the predominant idea of the Saami Other in medieval texts? In the following, I will pay particular critical attention to scholarly conceptions of the Saami that emphasise 1) a location in a wild, northern periphery, 2) a conflation with supernatural beings, and 3) the notion that the Saami are physiologically different to the Norse.

Assumptions about the automatic association between the far north and the Saami in medieval Norse culture are nearly ubiquitous in scholarship (DeAngelo 2010, 272; Price 2019, 193). These assumptions result in a general inattentiveness to the medieval texts that locate Saami characters in the south as well as an incapacity to confront the previously mentioned colonial claim (as expressed in the so-called *theory of progression*) that the Saami have been recent migrants into the more southerly regions of Fennoscandia (Hermanstrand 2019, 50–51). While the position of the Saami as a ‘northern’ people is not debatable, copious archaeological as well as written material demonstrate that the Saami area was significantly larger in terms of geography (and populations) in the medieval period (Bergstøl and Reitan 2008; Gjerde 2015; Hermanstrand 2019). An abundance of incidents from the sagas or other Old Norse texts attest to Saami presence in the south (Wang forthcoming).

In fact, clear evidence of the presence of a Saami population in southern regions in the medieval period is found in the two eastern Norwegian thirteenth-century law codes of the *Eiðsifaving* and the *Borgarþing*, covering the Oppland- and Viken-regions respectively, in their prohibitions against seeking out the Saami for ritual purposes (Skalleberg Gjerde 2015, 48–49). In the *Borgarþingslög*, one of the violations of the moral commandments is stated as seeking out Saami people for divinatory purposes: ‘it is unlawful for persons to travel to the Saami to ask for divination.’²⁶ Likewise, in the law for the *Eiðsifaving*: ‘no person should

25 Radzin uses a derogatory term for the Saami here, and I have therefore added ‘Saami’ in square brackets. The usage of this particular derogatory term in English instead of the Old Norse *finnar* in recent translations like the 2014 edition of *Heimskringla* demonstrate the need to decolonise our field.

26 The original Old Norse can be found in Keyser and Munch (1836, 372). Translation mine.

believe in [the power of] the Saami, or sorcery, or [their] drum, or sacrifice, or root, or in that which belongs to heathendom, or seek help there. And if a person seeks out the Saami, he is an outlaw and an unlawful person' (Mundal 2018, 12).²⁷ Else Mundal argues that due to the explicit placement of the Saami in these two law codes, which represent the southern regions of medieval Norway, they are the hardest sources to discount when medieval southern Saami presence is discussed (1996, 102). The inclusion of the term *finmarkr*, a placename associated with the Saami, in the *Borgarþingslög* is also a strong indication for the presence of Saami peoples in the relatively southern region encompassing the law code. This 'Saami' toponym is also located in a southern context in the *foraldarsaga* (legendary saga) *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*, dated to the fourteenth or fifteenth century, when it is directly associated with the same landscapes as encompassing the *Eiðsifabinglög* during the listing of a dowry: 'Eysteinn got from her [his wife's] dowry the provinces of Finnmörk, Valdres, Toten, and Hadeland.'²⁸ The southern localities of the other toponyms strengthen the placement of this particular province of 'Finnmörk' as being located in the same spatial context.

Across the saga corpus, several Saami characters appear in southern contexts (Wang forthcoming). In Heimskringla's *Hálfðanar saga svarta*, King Hálfðan invites (or coerces) a Saami man to attend his banquet in Haðaland (Hadeland, just north of Oslo), to solve the mystery of the vanished banquet food:

But in order that the king might ascertain what was behind this event, he had a [Saami man]²⁹ brought who had knowledge of many kinds, and tried to compel him to tell the truth and tortured him and yet got nothing out of him. The [Saami man] turned insistently to Hálfðan's son Haraldr for help, and Haraldr begged for mercy for him and it was not granted, and yet Haraldr got him away in spite of the king's opposition and himself went with him. (Finlay and Faulkes I 2014, 91–92)

A colonial reading of this episode, whereby the Saami are understood as inferior and as not belonging to the southern landscapes in which the instance takes place, would focus on the coercion of the Saami man and his 'knowledge of many kinds.' However, the extract seems to indicate that the king's treatment of the Saami man is wrong and instead emphasises Haraldr's opposition to his father through the fact of him helping the Saami man. While Geraldine Heng has argued that unprovoked violence against the Saami was perceived as justified among Norse audiences, due to a perceived racialised difference between the groups (2018, 274), neither racialised difference nor the act of violence is narratively justified in the above case. Indeed, Else Mundal has stated that

27 See Keyser and Munch (1836, 389–90) for the original text.

28 The original Old Norse can be found in Schröder (1917, 91).

29 I have altered the translation here (and below) to remove a derogatory term for the Saami. The alteration does not change the meaning of the extract; the original Old Norse can be found in Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (1941, 92).



‘in all the literary texts in which the Saami are badly treated, those guilty of such bad treatment are the villains in the story or are being punished for their crimes against the Saami’ (1996, 106). Instead, the extract seeks to glorify Haraldr, who later becomes king of an (imagined) unified *Nóregi*, also to some extent including Saami groups.

As related in both *Haralds saga hárfagra* (also from *Heimskringla*) and *Ágrip* (a collection of sagas of kings most likely written at the end of the twelfth century), King Haraldr hárfagri (the same Haraldr as above) meets his Saami wife in Dofri (Dovre) – a mountainous region located in mid-Norway (Driscoll 2008, 5–6; Finlay and Faulkes I 2014, 124). Neither episode questions this southern presence and instead focuses on the social relations between the king and his new wife. Snæfríðr, his wife, is described as the daughter of Svási *finnkonungr*. This term directly translates to ‘king of the Saami’ and also appears elsewhere in Old Norse sources such as *Landnámabók*, *Morkinskinna*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Ketils saga hængs*, and in the prose introduction to the Eddic poem *Völundarkviða*, as well as in an entry in the *Icelandic Annals* dated to 1313 (Wang 2023, 274). Here, the term refers to powerful Saami men (or descent from them), and it seems to signify authority and high social rank. In itself, it is an important reminder of Saami social stratification and hierarchization independent of the Norse. As such, it is a significant acknowledgement of Saami sovereignty in an Old Norse text. The marriage between the Norse king and his Saami wife is often read as representing Norse hostilities towards the Saami (Barraclough 2017, 45; DeAngelo 2010, 264). I would argue that what we instead can read from this episode is the legitimization of Saami hierarchy and authority through the acknowledgement of Svási’s royal title, the normality of Saami presence in more southerly regions (and also shared landscapes), and the normality of social relations between the groups even at the highest level of society.

Heimskringla is not shy of Saami portrayals, and in its version of *Ólafs saga helga*, the Saami man Fiðr (Finn) *litli* (the small) is said to be from the region of Upplönd (Oppland), the area incorporated into the *Eiðsifabingslög*:

There is a man called Fiðr litli, a man from Upplönd, [and] some say that he was [Saami] by descent. He was the smallest of all men and the fastest runner of all men, so that no horse could catch him up when running. He was the most skilled of men with skis and the bow. He had long been a servant of King Hrærekr and often gone on errands for him that needed to be confidential. He knew the routes over the whole of Upplönd. He also knew many important men there to speak to. (Finlay and Faulkes II 2014, 77)³⁰

30 The original can be found in Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (1945, 120).

Here, Fiðr is described in terms associated with the Saami Motif Cluster, and is specifically said to be from Upplönd, a more southerly region of Norway. Likewise, in the monk Oddr Snorrason's late twelfth-century *Ólafs saga Tryggvassonar*, King Óláfr requests the help of a Saami man living near Agdenes in the present-day Trøndelag region of Norway (Andersson 2000, 187–90). In the early fourteenth-century *Ólafs saga Tryggvassonar en mesta*, Finn Eyvindarsonar, who 'some say was Saami,' (Munch 1825, 230) is reportedly from Härjedalen, a valley in mid-west present-day Sweden. As these few, among other (Wang 2023, 225–40), examples demonstrate, the scholarly assumption that the Saami 'are never associated with towns or southern locales in the sagas' (DeAngelo 2010, 272) can therefore be rejected.

It is often assumed among scholars that certain unqualified mythical terms connected with supernatural beings and otherworlds such as elves, dwarves, giants, and *tröll* could be symbolically linked to the Saami by association (Aalto and Lehtola 2017, 14–16; Mundal 1996, 29–30). For example, Hermann Pálsson interprets the two nicknames *hálftröll* (literally meaning half troll) and *hálfbergrísi* (loosely translated as half hill giant/creature) in the early thirteenth-century *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* as indicating Saami parentage; on that basis, he then argues that the whole semantic range of *tröll* must have included allusions to the Saami (1999, 31–32). In Pálsson's account, then, the nicknames are interpreted as representing Saami parentage on one family side, since the nicknames include both the notion of cultural hybridity through the 'hálf'-designation and specifically perceived Saami descent through the connection with the supernatural (Aalto and Lehtola 2017, 15). This reading is reminiscent of the postcolonial analytical idea of *hybridity*, where the meeting between two different spaces is encapsulated in the creation of a third so-called 'in-between' space (Bhabha 1994, 1–2). This concept of the *third space* has since been extended as a tool for analysing social relations, specifically in cross-cultural relationships, where the coming together of two different cultural entities creates a new, third (or a *half*) entity.

There are several issues with this interpretation. On the one hand, the concept of cultural hybridity is problematic since it perpetuates an idea of cultural (or even racial) 'wholeness' (cf. Andersen 2014, 38). As Chris Andersen asserts in his book *Métis*, the construction of Indigenous peoples as hybrid and racially mixed is denigrating and supports racial essentialism and undermines claims to humanity (2014, 39). Nevertheless, a report on border agreements between the Norwegian and Russian realms from 1330 states that such cultural hybridity could be understood in Old Norse in such *halves*. The report states that tax could be collected 'any place where there were 'half-Karelians (*halfkarelar*) or half-Saami (*halffinnœr*) who are



born of a Saami mother' (Keyser and Munch 1849, 153–4). The designation *halffinnr* (sg.), although only extant in this report indicates that there was indeed a word for people who had one parent from the Saami community. If the people whose nicknames include the 'half'-designation were believed to have a parent from the Saami community, it seems more likely to me that *halffinnr* was used than *hálftröll*. *Halffinnr* does not seem to have been a common designation for people with parents from both Saami and Norse communities though, as this parentage is usually referred to by simply stating that a parent was Saami, rather than relating to any 'hybrid' identity of the child.³¹ In either case, it is unlikely that Saami descent was ever represented by such half-designations beyond its one appearance in the report from 1330. Given the essentialised nature incorporated into the notion of these 'halves,' we need to be wary when employing or repeating them in Saami contexts in order to avoid deterministic claims of racial inferiority or hybridity.

On the other hand, doubts arise about the claim that these nicknames indicate Saami descent, as there is no tendency in the medieval source material itself to describe Saami characters as trolls. Neither of the characters in *Egils saga* are directly described as having Saami descent or as having intimate relationships with the Saami on a direct family level. Furthermore, the Saami characters that are encountered in this text, specifically the trading *finnar* met with during the influential *finnkaup* (trade with the Saami), are described in normalised and positive language: 'Þórólfr [the protagonist] took a great quantity of goods to sell, soon arranged a meeting with the Saami, collected their taxes and traded with them. All their dealings were cordial and friendly' (Scudder 1997, 43).

Moreover, the term for 'troll' is primarily connected with magic in the source material and is therefore not as straightforward as often assumed. For example, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the magical performer Geirríðr is called a troll and the term here refers to her magical powers (Sveinsson, Þórðarson, and Halldórsson 1985, 28–29). Nevertheless, in the legendary saga *Ketils saga hængs*, the Saami woman Hrafnhildr's father-in-law, named Hallbjörn hálftröll, calls her a troll (Hrafn 1829, 123). This is the only time across the saga corpus where a Saami character is specifically called a troll (Wang 2023, 87–88). However, while this coinage may seem to be a direct reference to her Saami descent, it is not as straightforward as is often assumed. The disapproval of Hrafnhildr's father-in-law should instead be regarded as representing his suspicion of her bewitching his son into falling in love with her, comparable to the sceptical remarks of the advisors of Vanlandi and Haraldr concerning their Saami wives and their reported love spells in Heimskringla's *Ynglinga saga* (Finlay and Faulkes I 2014, 29) and *Haralds saga hárfagra* (2014, 126). As such, her father-in-law's troll-comment is therefore not directly connected to her Saami affiliation in this

31 Cf. *Drauma-Finni*, whose mother Leikny is described as being 'finska' (Saami) in *Finnboga saga ramma*, or potentially for Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnson, whose father Finnur enn skjálgi (the cross-eyed) may have been Saami (see Poole 2012, 195–96; Wang 2023, 67).

32 Hallbjörn's comment could therefore also be interpreted humorously or ironically, since he uses a term associated with himself.

episode. Furthermore, the fact that Hallbjörn carries the nickname *hálftröll* himself without having any other intimate association with the Saami in the text, strengthens the notion that the comment is not related to Hrafnhildr being Saami.³² This incident is the only direct reference between a Saami character and the designation *tröll*, and as the reference is not connected to the Saami affiliation, it is fair to say that there exists no connection between the two identities in the medieval material. The same can be said for other unqualified mythical terms, as I argue elsewhere (Wang 2023, 86).

The underlying and ultimate issue of this scholarly conflation of the Saami with the troll, or other mystical beings, lies in the essentialising nature of the comparison which ultimately dehumanises the Saami. Indeed, Thyse grounds this conflation in a Norse perception of the Saami, and the trolls, as *subhuman* (2020, 20). Presenting the Saami as subhuman, without any actual foundation in the source material as demonstrated above and further discussed below, removes the Saami from the historical narrative and enforces a colonial notion of Indigenous peoples as static historical actors (Deloria Junior 1992, 597; Shepherd 2017, 35). Furthermore, it reinforces demeaning notions of hybridity that can, in Métis-scholar Chris Andersen's words, 'unwittingly reproduce the colonial logics that stabilize colonial classifications of Indian-ness and white-ness' (2014, 44).

Arwen Thyse argues that in their portrayal of the Saami, the Norse employed race-making tools essentialising the Saami as racially different through descriptions of physical monstrosity, primitivity, and shapeshifting (2020, 14), in order to position themselves as superior (16). This race-making, formed from a 'set of essentialized physical and cultural differences,' she argues, 'in turn created a "structural relationship" that manifested itself through societally acceptable relationships and law codes' (3). In her analysis, Thyse investigates the aforementioned *Hrafnistamannasögur*, a group of four legendary sagas that include the only two episodes where Saami characters are physiologically Othered across saga corpora.³³ While this work may be conceived as sympathetic to the Saami, it (perhaps unwittingly) strengthens and exaggerates stereotypes.

33 Being *Ketils sagas* *hængs*, *Gríms saga lóðinkinna*, *Orvar-Odds saga*, and *Áns saga bógsveigis*.

Let us consider the evidence. *Orvar-Odds saga* relates that during the conception of Grímr, the presence of Saami characters during his conception leads to him being born with a hairy birthmark on his cheek (granting him the nickname *lóðinkinna*) (Hrafn 1829, 161). Significantly, none of the Saami characters present during the conception of the hairy-cheeked baby are described as physiologically different. Furthermore, the other episodes concerning Grímr in the other *Hrafnistamannasögur* simply mention that he has a birthmark on his cheek, and this appearance is not connected with the Saami whatsoever. In the earlier *Ketils saga*



hœngs (in terms of chronology; Grímr is Ketil's grandson), the above-mentioned Saami character Hrafnhildr is the protagonist's love interest. She is described as having a 'face as broad as an ell,' and following this description, three Saami visitors are similarly portrayed as 'not narrow-faced' (Rafn 1829, 118). These two descriptions form somewhat of an enigma to me, since they represent the only incident where Saami characters are portrayed in a physiologically essentialised way across the saga corpus.³⁴ While Thyse does indeed assert that this description forms part of an overarching essentialising of the Saami as physiologically different as a social-group in a manner of race-making, I cannot read it as such. There is no recurrent or expected connection between Saami characters and broad faces in the overarching source-material and therefore the above descriptions represent a textual anomaly (Wang 2023, 110). Instead, I would argue that these descriptions should be seen as exception and should be interpreted in connection with the late composition of the texts that form part of the *fornaldarsögur*-genre, in addition to this genre's frequent rewriting and their continental influence. As Ralp O'Connor has claimed, fictional tendencies become more apparent and persistent in later sagas as the genre develops (2017, 88), and these tendencies are not connected with ethnicity or cultural affiliation.

The fictional tendencies of later sagas could be reflected in these two descriptions, insofar as the traits of the characters, being broad and wide, are common in stereotyped descriptions of supernatural characters within the genre of legendary sagas.³⁵ This latter interpretation also offers support for the suggestion that Hrafnhildr's coinage as a troll by her father-in-law is not an allusion to her Saami identity but rather to her assumed practise of magic in the form of a love spell. Indeed, the most commonly attributed feature associated with Saami characters in terms of physiological appearance is beauty, probably a result of the wealth of stories that describe Saami women marrying Norse men (Wang 2023, 112).

The foregoing analysis has sought to argue that we should be wary and, specifically, critical towards secondary literature that unconsciously reinforces colonial attitudes related to physiological differences between Indigenous peoples and the majority population. Medieval portrayals of the Saami often employ tools of Othering, particularly by associating them with magic practices, forest creatures, supernatural beings, hunting, archery, and winter weather. These associations, forming the Saami Motif Cluster, are frequently utilised to depict Saami identity in medieval texts. However, while such associations are not exclusive to the Saami, scholarly perspectives often tend to rigidly confine Saami characters within this framework of Othering. This rigidity, unconsciously but effectively

34 It has been suggested that the Saami 'were shorter than their Nordic neighbours' (Mundal 2000, 348). However, this reading does not hold ground, as Saami characters are described as both unusually tall (Hrafn 1829, 118) and particularly small (Finlay and Faulkes II 2014, 120).

35 See for example the descriptions of supernatural characters in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* and *Hjálmþés saga Ölvís*.

perpetuate colonial structures that in turn dehumanise the Saami both in the past and in the present.

Conclusion

This article, framed as a glimpse into the intersection of medieval studies and Indigenous studies from a Norse perspective, critiques prevailing trends in research on the medieval Saami, highlighting how these tendencies unwittingly perpetuate colonial structures, and questions whether these assumptions find any support in the primary sources. In doing so, it also challenges the common understanding of the Saami as exclusively northern and peripheral in their portrayal, revealing instead abundant evidence of their presence in southernly regions. Moreover, the article disputes the common linkage of Saami characters with mythical creatures like trolls, highlighting the absence of direct evidence for this association in the source material. Underscoring the dehumanising impact of essentialising the Saami as subhuman or racially different in current research, the article emphasises the need for a more complex and historically accurate portrayal that avoids reinforcing colonial stereotypes that dehumanise the Saami as inferior to the majority population.

Such a re-reading advocates for a rectification of historical injustices perpetuated by colonial policies and their (continued) aftermath, aiming to instead emphasise Saami identity as a neutral or varied expression in the medieval source material and in turn to contribute to the ongoing revitalisation of Saami history. This revitalisation necessitates a deliberate effort to challenge established norms within academia, enabling alternative interpretations of history that validate the agency of the Saami in shaping their own narrative and looks beyond the previously tendency to read the Saami as negative symbols in the texts. The concept of *thinking Saami* in this re-reading encapsulates a transformative process that holds significant implications both for the past and the future. As Paulette Steeves aptly suggests, ‘rewriting and rehumanizing the past,’ not only rectify historical injustices but also shape a more positive trajectory for the times ahead (2023, 176). By embracing the Indigenous turn in medieval studies (Andrews 2020), a profound shift is ignited for future research on the Saami in medieval studies—one that challenges the limitations of Eurocentric narratives and works to amplify Saami voices both in medieval texts and within the present day. In the broader context, then, the *thinking Saami* approach signifies more than a mere academic exercise of re-reading medieval texts. Rather, it is a call to action that dismantles the distortions of colonial narratives and demands a more comprehensive understanding of history that embraces diversity, challenges biases, and cultivates a more



inclusive future. By holding ourselves, as researchers of the medieval world but also as individuals, accountable for the diverse futures we want to imagine (Andrews 2020, 2), we recognise that our readings of the medieval world matter for the present. In the words of Áillohaš, ‘the land is different when you know here are roots ancestors’ (1997).

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