

## Coexistence of Saami and Norse culture – reflected in and interpreted by Old Norse myths

Else Mundal

University of Bergen

In Old Norse sources, both Norwegian and Icelandic, we meet a consciousness of the fact that on the Scandinavian peninsula there lived two peoples, the Nordic people and the Saamis, who in the Old Norse sources are called *finnar*. Both were peoples with their own culture that in many respects differed considerably from the culture of the other people. They spoke different languages. The Nordic people were farmers while most Saamis lived a nomadic life. They had also before Christianization – different religions, but the religion of the Saamis may have been influenced by the religion of the Nordic people – and vice versa. After the Norwegians and the Swedes had converted to Christianity, the Saamis remained heathen for quite some time. The gender roles within the two cultures differed from each other, and many customs which were practised in one of the two societies, were probably seen as very strange in the other society.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A survey of Old Norse sources which mention Saamis is found in Else Mundal: The perception of the Saamis and their religion in Old Norse sources, in Juha Pentikäinen (ed.) *Shamanism and*

In spite of different cultures with different languages, different ways of living and different religions the contact between the Nordic people on the Scandinavian peninsula and their Saami neighbours must have been rather close. We use to think of the Saamis as people who lived in the North, and according to Old Norse sources, the Saamis primarily lived in the North, in the territory named after them, Finnmörk, which according to the sources was a much larger area than the territory we call Finnmark today and extended – in the inland – as far south as to the border between Hålogaland and Trøndelag. But the Saamis also lived in Southern Norway, in Trøndelag and in the inland of Eastern Norway. Quite a lot of Old Norse texts, both Norwegian and Icelandic, place Saamis in this area. Even the two laws from Eastern Norway, the Eidsivathing law and the Borgarthings law indicate that Saami people lived within the territory of these laws. The laws forbid Christians to have contact with *finnar*, to go to them to ask for prophecies or for medical help.

When we take into consideration that the Saamis did not live only in Northern Norway, but also in the inland of Southern Norway, we see that the Norwegians and the Saamis met along a very long borderline, and probably the borderline between the two people was not sharp.

The large number of sources which mention contact with the Saamis and the fact that they lived on a very large territory which was partly shared with their Scandinavian neighbours make it reasonable to think that the Nordic people knew their Saami neighbours and their culture rather well. This impression is also confirmed by some of the pictures of the Saamis in literary sources which may be characterized as close-up. Even though the Saamis most often appear in rather stereotyped literary motifs, some texts – and understandably enough – especially Norwegian texts – give a picture of Saamis and Saami life which reveals an intimate, first-hand knowledge.

One example of this we have in a scaldic stanza made by the Norwegian scald Eyvindr Finnsson who himself lived in the southern part of Hålogaland in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. When describing the cold summer weather during the bad years in the reign of King Haraldr gráfelldr, he turned to a picture from the Saamis' life. "We have to keep our goats in stalls during the summer, just as the Saamis," Eyvindr says.<sup>2</sup>

Another example is found in the Norwegian Latin chronicle *Historia Norwegiæ*. Here the author gives a very intimate description of a shamanistic séance which took place in the hut of a Saami family.

In the Old Norse oaths called *gríðamál* and *trygðamál* a picture from Saami life is used in an interesting context. These oaths are found in different versions in *Grágás* (Konungsbók ch. 115 and Staðarhólsbók, chs. 387 and 388) and in

---

*Northern Ecology*, Berlin and New York 1996, pp.97–116.

<sup>2</sup> Lausavísa nr. 12, in Finnur Jónsson: *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, IB: 65, København 1912–15.

two Icelandic sagas, *Grettis saga*, ch. 72, and *Heiðarvíga saga*, ch. 33. But a little fragment is also found in the Norwegian *Gulathingslaw* (ch. 320) and the contents of the oath point to Norwegian origin. Here, among other things it is said that an enemy shall have peace as long as the falcon flies, the pine grows, rivers flow to the sea, children cry for their mother and the Saamis go skiing. The Saamis being there skiing is mentioned among all the normal things.

It may be that also a stanza in *Hávamál* gives a picture from Saami life. This stanza is stanza 90 where a false woman's love is compared to many difficult tasks:

/.../  
 sem aki jó óbryddum  
 á ísi hálum  
 teitom, tvévetrum  
 oc sé tamr illa,  
 eða í byr óðum  
 beiti stíormlausu,  
 eða skyli haltr henda  
 hrein í fláfjalli.

The limping man who catches reindeers in the mountain is not necessarily a Saami, but it is likely, especially since the word *henda*, 'catch by the hands', is used.

The skiing Saami in the oath shows that the Saamis are part of their neighbours' world view. They are as necessary as pines, rivers flowing to the sea and children crying for their mother to make the picture of the known world complete. The comparison made in *Hávamál* – provided that this is a scene from Saami life – shows again that the Nordic people had a tendency to include their Saami neighbours and their culture in their own conceptions of life.

The consciousness among the Nordic people of this "other people" who were so different from themselves, gives reason to ask whether the relation between the two people may have been interpreted and understood in the light of mythic patterns, and perhaps is reflected in the myths themselves.

When Saami people and their world and the relation between the Saami and the Nordic people is described in Old Norse texts, the parallels to patterns in the mythic world are sometimes striking. A detail in the text – or in the literary motif – which shows that the parallel is not accidental is the choice of certain words when Saamis are described. In some texts – or in some motifs – the Saamis are called *jötmar*, 'giants', or a few times *dvergar*, 'dwarfs'. In the text the Saami man – or woman – may be called Saami and *jötunn* alternatively, or in some texts Saamis and *jötmar* are presented as members of the same family. At first sight it seems strange to call the Saamis, who were shorter than their Nordic neighbours *jötmar*, but tall or short is not the point. When the Saamis are called *jötmar*, 'giants', I think it is obvious that the intentions behind this choice of words are to activate the imagination of certain mythic patterns.

In the following I will draw attention to ideas connected to the Saamis and

their world in which parallels to mythic patterns – at least sometimes – are strengthened by the use of the word *jǫtunn*. Such emphasizing of the parallel to mythic patterns call for an interpretation in the light of the myths. Thereafter I will examine one Old Norse myth which I think may reflect an intimate knowledge of Saami culture. This myth is the one about how Skaði came to the gods to avenge her father's death, and as compensation was offered to choose herself a husband from among the gods. What I am going to suggest here is that the giantess Skaði is to some extent modeled on a Saami woman.

The otherness of the Saamis and their culture and the fact that they mostly lived outside the areas where the Nordic people lived, especially in the North, but farther south also in the border areas between Norway and Sweden and in the inland of Eastern Norway, conformed to the pattern of Midgarðr–Útgarðr. According to the mythological map the Saamis became the Útgarðr people. The Miðgarðr–Útgarðr pattern was close at hand even if the Saamis were not called *jǫtnar*, and may be seen as a basic pattern to describe the relation between the two people. In addition to the associations with Útgarðr, the descriptions of Saamis in many texts seem to focus on certain parallels with giants, and it is especially when these characteristics or qualifications which are typical of giants are connected to Saamis, that the Saamis are called *jǫtnar*.

According to Old Norse myths the gods' most precious possessions had their origin in the world of giants or dwarfs. When a precious thing with magic power belonging to a hero in an Old Norse text is said to be a gift from a Saami, such a motif must of course be understood in connection with the Saamis' reputations as great sorcerers. But in some cases where a precious thing has its origin in the Saami world, the Saamis are mixed up with giants in the Old Norse text. This is for instance the case with Ketill hængr's magic arrows which he got from the Saami king Gusir, the brother of the giant Brúni.

The most interesting motifs where the Saamis replace giants in the mythic pattern are, however, the motifs where a Saami replaces a giant – or rather a giantess – in the end of a genealogical line. According to Old Norse myths the marriage between a god and a giantess resulted in a son who became the forefather of the royal family, the *Ynglingar*, or the family of the earls who were called *Háleygjajarlar* and *Hlaðajarlar*. According to *Ynglinga saga*, which builds on *Ynglingatal*, the *Ynglingar* are descendents of the god Freyr and the giantess Gerðr. According to *Háleygjatal* the *Háleygjajarlar* are descendents of the god Óðinn and the giantess Skaði.<sup>3</sup> For the earls there must in the tradition also have existed an alternative line leading back to the giants. Þorgerðr Hǫlgabrúðr is in many Old Norse texts presented as a foremother of the earls, and her father Hǫlgi is mentioned as early as in *Haraldskvæði* as a forefather of

---

<sup>3</sup> The son of Óðinn and Skaði was Sæmingr. His name has been seen in connection with the same root as we have in the word *saami*, but the etymology is uncertain.

the Háleygjajarlar.<sup>4</sup> From many of the sources it is obvious that these figures are looked upon as giants. Some saga characters are presented as descendents of a man with the nickname *hálf troll* or something of the sort. It is not always clear who these *trolls* from whom the children got the nickname *hálf troll* were, but according to the definition of the word *hálf troll* in the dictionaries the mother or the father of a man with such a nickname was a *troll*, a giant. At least in one example where a Old Norse hero has a giantess for mother, the mother's *troll* family is mixed with Saamis. This hero is Grímr loðinkinn, whose mother was Hrafnhildr, the daughter of the giant Brúni, but Brúni's brother was Gusir Finna konungr, king of the Saamis, and Brúni later took over his kingdom. This could perhaps indicate that the nickname *hálf troll* could be given to children of mixed Norwegian and Saami blood. Some people in Old Norse society seem to have traced their family back to a Saami king, and that was something they took pride in. According to *Landnámabók* some Icelanders could trace their family back to Grímr loðinkinn (S 135, H 107 og 202, M 48), and as we have seen, his mother is both presented as a giantess and as a Saami princess. Other Icelanders and Norwegians could trace their family back to a certain Mottul Finnakonungr, a Saami king whose granddaughter according to *Landnámabók* (S 43, H 31) was married into a very prominent Norwegian family, she was married to a great-grandson of Bragi skáld inn gamli.

A god and a giantess produced according to Old Norse myths the proto-king.<sup>5</sup> A human hero and a giant's daughter were of course not so prominent ancestors as a god and a giantess, but I think that these genealogies on a smaller scale signal the same as the genealogies of kings and earls. To bear the nickname *hálf troll* is in fact very promising. The idea seems to be that the giantess, who in the world of men may be replaced by a Saami woman, infuses new blood which makes their offspring born leaders in society.

We have the clearest example of this in the story about the Norwegian king Haraldr hárfagri who married Snæfríðr, the daughter of the Saami king Svási. The function of this story in the kings' sagas is probably to strengthen and underline the original mythic pattern, in which the god Freyr and the giantess Gerðr produced the proto-king.

King Haraldr hárfagri, the king who united Norway into one kingdom, was married to many women. In his old age he married Snæfríðr, the daughter of the Saami king Svási. The story about King Haraldr and Snæfríðr is first told in the Norwegian king's saga *Ágrip*. Snorri later used the *Ágrip* text. The story is also mentioned in *Flateyjarbók*, in *Páttir Haralds hárfagra* and in *Páttir Halfdanar svartar*. The story says that once upon a time when the king stayed at Dovre, the Saami king visited him and invited King Haraldr to his turf hut. The king did

<sup>4</sup> A survey of all the sources is found in Halvorsen, E. F. "Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr" in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder XX*, 382–384

<sup>5</sup> See Gro Steinsland: *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi*, Oslo 1991, especially ch.VIII.

not want to go, but Svási was very persuasive, and at last the king gave in and followed the Saami. When he arrived in the turf hut, Svási's daughter Snæfríðr stood up and offered the king a welcoming drink. All of a sudden the king was struck by blind love, and he wanted to make love to her the same evening. But Svási insisted on a proper marriage. And the king married her and loved her so dearly that he never departed from her as long as she lived, and after she was dead he sat by her dead body for three years.

Snæfríðr gets a lot of attention in the kings' sagas, more than the other wives of the king. The reason for this is obvious. Eiríkr blóðøx, who became king after Haraldr hárfagri was the son of Queen Ragnhildr, the Danish princess. Eiríkr's sons were pretenders to the Throne, and his son Haraldr gráfeldr reigned together with his mother, Queen Gunnhildr, for some years, but he had no son to succeed him. Hákon inn góði, one of the youngest sons of King Haraldr, who also became king, was the son of Þóra mostrstong. He had no son who succeeded him. Óláfr Tryggvason became king for a few years. He was a descendent of Óláfr, son of Haraldr hárfagri and his wife Svanhildr, but Óláfr Tryggvason had no son who succeeded him. Some years later Óláfr inn helgi became king. He was a descendent of Björn, another of Haraldr's sons by Svanhildr. Óláfr inn helgi was succeeded by his son Magnús inn góði, but he had no son who succeeded him. But thereafter Haraldr harðráði became king. He was the half-brother of King Óláfr inn helgi on the mother side, but his father was Sigurðr sýr, son of Hálfðan, son of Sigurðr hrísi, and Sígurðr hrísi, was one of Haraldr hárfagri's sons by the Saami woman Snæfríðr. From this time on the kings of Norway could trace their family back to King Haraldr hárfagri and the Saami woman Snæfríðr.

During the reign of Haraldr harðráði, the interest in Snæfríðr probably started to grow, and the foremother who made the ancestors of Haraldr harðráði's branch of the royal family conform to the mythic pattern based on the story about the god Freyr and the giantess Gerðr, was made the most of.

In *Ágrip* Svási is presented as a Saami, he is called *finnr* and *Finnkonungr*. Snorri calls him both *finnr* and *jötunn*, and strengthens thereby the associations with the mythic pattern. In all the texts which tell the story about King Haraldr hárfagri and Snæfríðr, this story is linked up with a story told earlier in the text about how Haraldr as a young boy helped a Saami who was taken prisoner by his father to escape, and Haraldr himself ran away with the Saami. In the *Flateyjarbók* text this Saami operates together with Dofri, who takes care of the young Haraldr and becomes his fosterfather. Dofri is called *jötunn* and *troll*. In this version of the story the Saamis are placed in a mythological setting from the very beginning. The fact that the Saamis are called *jotnar* or operate together with *jotnar* makes the Miðgarðr–Útgarðr pattern explicit.

But there are also other parallels with the story about Freyr and Gerðr. The god and the king are struck by blind love much in the same way. Freyr found it very hard, but had to wait nine nights for Gerðr. The king wanted to make love

to Snæfríðr at once, but had to wait so that formalities could be taken care of. Both women are pretty at first sight, but in the descriptions of the two women there is one little detail which I think indicates that the model Snæfríðr is drawn from was Gerðr – and perhaps other young giantesses whom the gods desired. In the myth Freyr fell in love when Gerðr lifted her arms, and light was shed from her arms over both sky and sea, and all worlds were made bright by her. In an anonymous scaldic stanza from around 1200 the scald says about Haraldr and Snæfríðr: *h num þótti sólbjört sú*, ‘he thought she was bright like the sun’. The same adjective, *sólbjört*, is also used about the giantess Menglǫð in *Fjolsvinnsmál* (42). The giantess *Billings mær* in *Hávamál* (97) is described as *sólhvít*, and a giantess with whom Óðinn had an affair is in *Hárbarðsljóð* (30) described as *gullbjört*. I think these examples show that the description of young desirable giantesses has served as a model for the description of Snæfríðr’s beauty.

If the Saami people were part of their neighbours’ world view to the extent that the Nordic people interpreted and understood their relation to the Saamis in the light of their own myths, we should perhaps also expect to find reflections of contact with Saamis and knowledge of Saami culture in the Old Norse myths themselves.

One broad field of interest here is of course the shamanistic elements in Old Norse mythology and the *vǫlur*. In *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 10 a *vǫlva* described in a Norwegian setting is in fact presented as a Saami woman. Here I will, however, limit myself to the discussion of one particular myth and one mythological figure, the giantess Skaði and the myth in which she arrives in Ásgarðr to avenge her father’s death, and as compensation was offered to choose herself a husband from among the gods.

When Skaði arrives armed and dressed like a warrior, she is acting like an Old Norse *skjoldmær*, and when she wants to avenge her father herself, we get the impression that she was the only child. If she was her father’s only child, her behavior would to a certain degree be expected according to Old Norse gender rules since such a woman, a *baugrýgr*, would take a son’s position in the family. But it was hardly expected – in the real world – that she would take revenge herself by her own hands. Before Snorri in his *Edda* tells the story about Skaði’s arrival in Ásgarðr, he has, however, already introduced Skaði, and she is introduced in a way which foreshadows an uncommon female behavior from an Old Norse point of view. This woman went skiing and hunted animals! This behaviour does not conform to Old Norse female gender roles. In Old Norse society her behavior is much more in accordance with male gender roles. But people who lived in the Old Norse society knew – or at least knew about – a society where women could behave like Skaði. As early as in the so called Ottar’s Report from late in the 9th century, Ottar who claimed to live farthest north of all the Norwegians, told King Alfred in England about the Saamis who lived from hunting, fishing, bird-catching and reindeer herding,

and both men, women and children went skiing faster than the birds. Also within the Saami culture the male and the female gender roles of course differed from each other, but the border between the two systems of gender roles were drawn up along other lines than in Old Norse society. The fact that women in the Saami nomadic culture seem to have shared outdoor activities with the men to a much higher degree than in Old Norse culture, may have given rise to the opinion among the Nordic people that Saami women often behaved as if they were men.

I find it very likely that Saami female gender roles served as a model for the skiing and hunting Skaði, and since these activities in Old Norse society were seen as typically male, it is very logical – also when we leave Skaði's wish to avenge her father's death out of account – that she should arrive in Ásgarðr with the most masculine manner Old Norse female gender role would allow, as a *skjöldmær* and as a *baugrýgr*. Even her name lays emphasis on Skaði's masculinity. The female name *Skaði* is declined as a weak masculine. Only very few female names in Old Norse are declined in this way, names ending in an /i/ are masculine names. But also among the very few female names with this declension, the name Skaði is special; this name is in fact also used as a masculine name (*Völsunga saga*, ch. 1).<sup>6</sup>

In addition to Skaði's masculine appearance as a skiing and hunting woman there is also another element in this myth which I think could reflect knowledge of Saami culture. This element is the scene where Skaði is offered to choose herself a husband.

When the gods offer Skaði, who is seeking revenge, marriage as compensation for her dead father, this is an act in full accordance with the norms of Old Norse society. Marriage and fosterage were often used to settle a conflict between two families. However, there is something in this strange story which could point at the Saami culture.

In a few Old Norse texts we find a motif where a man is offered, or enters into, a short-time sexual relationship on his arrival in a place outside his own environment. The sexual relationship, or marriage limited in time, is meant to last for as long as the man stays. The most typical example of this motif we have in the Eddaic poem *Rígsþula* where Rígr stays for three nights in three places, and every place he takes the husband's place in bed. This motif has been seen as a result of Irish influence, and the name Rígr has been seen as a loan from Irish. A custom which implied that a distinguished guest was offered sexual relations with the wife of the host, is known from Irish sources from the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> In *Qrvar-Odds saga* the hero during a stay in Ireland entered into marriage with an Irish princess. The marriage was stipulated to last for

---

<sup>6</sup> See also E.H. Lind: *Norsk-Isländska Dopnamn från Medeltiden*, Uppsala 1905–1915, sp. 906.

<sup>7</sup> See Jean I. Young: Does Rígsþula betray Irish influence? *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 49, 1933, pp.101–102.

three years. The fact that these two motifs can be associated with Ireland, makes it plausible that the Irish custom, whatever the exact substance of this custom was, was known in the viking world.

However, there is reason to believe that the Nordic people in Scandinavia knew a custom, more or less similar to the Irish, from a culture that was closer to them than Ireland. This culture was the Saami culture.

In the Old Norse sources from the Middle Ages we have no good evidence for the existence of this custom among the Saamis. In many *fornaldarsögur* we find a motif in which the human hero on his arrival in the world of the giants is invited at once to the bed of the beautiful giant's daughter. This motif could very well be the result of the male author's fantasy and imagination. It is noteworthy, however, that this motif also is found in texts where giants and Saamis are presented as members of the same family. When the hero Ketill in *Ketils saga hængs* arrived at the farm of the giant Brúni who had a Saami king for brother and later became a Saami king himself, Brúni offered Ketill his daughter the first evening.

In sources from after the Reformation we have more reliable information about this custom among the Saamis. However, the sources are not rich and detailed. The custom is perhaps known mostly because the sources deny its existence. This has to do with the nature of the sources. The oldest sources with information about Saami culture were written down by Swedish clergymen in the period after the Thirty Years War. During the war the Swedes had been accused of making use of Saami witchcraft. The well organized collection and writing down of Saami culture had the intention to clear the Swedes of suspicion by describing the Saamis as good Christians.

In spite of this there are enough hints in the texts to tell us that a custom more or less similar to the custom reported in Irish sources from the Middle Ages existed among the Saamis,<sup>8</sup> and if this custom existed in the time after the reformation, we can be quite sure that it also existed in the Middle Ages.

Now we can return to Skaði's arrival in Ásgarðr. This scene has been analysed thoroughly earlier, for instance by Margaret Clunies Ross.<sup>9</sup> My analysis will hardly be inconsistent with earlier analysis. But if we consider it likely that Saami women served as a model for the skiing and hunting Skaði, and keep in mind that a distinguished guest in the Saami society perhaps would expect to be offered a sexual partner on his arrival, that will throw new light on the myth which makes it possible to see other aspects of it.

When the gods line up on Skaði's arrival and offer her marriage they probably try to ward off her anger by showing her honour and offering her the

---

<sup>8</sup> See for example Johannis Tornæi: *Berättelse om Lapmarckerna och Deras Tillstånd*, Uppsala 1900, p.46.

<sup>9</sup> Why Skaði laughed. Comic seriousness in an Old Norse mythic narrative, *Maal og Minne*, pp. 2–14.

same hospitality which they suppose she knows from her own environment. In fact we do not know from the sources that women were treated in the same way as men with regard to the custom in question. But in Skaði's case that does not matter much since Skaði arrives as if she were a man in a man's gender role. The fact that she arrives as a man, forces the gods into the female gender role. As we know, Skaði had to choose one of the gods without seeing any more of him than his feet and legs. I agree with Margaret Clunies Ross when she suggests the explanation that when feet or legs are marked in Indo-European myth, they usually stress the sexual nature of the hero.<sup>10</sup> But I also find it a interesting question why their faces are covered and with what. Since Skaði acts in a male gender role and is engaged in choosing herself a spouse, the gods are in fact lining up as potential brides. Could their faces be covered by bridal veils, and are the gods hiding behind bridal veils from shame? Probably their position in this scene is not much better than Þórr's position in *Þrymskviða*.

The next scene in the myth, the tug of war between Loki and the goat, is perhaps even more peculiar than the first scene. To make Skaði laugh, Loki ties a cord round his testicles and the other end to a nanny-goat's beard, and they drew each other back and forth and both squealed loudly. Margaret Clunies Ross has pointed out a suitor test from folk literature, to make a sorrowful princess laugh, as the model for this scene, which I find quite convincing. But the function of this strange tableau within the myth is, in my opinion, to illustrate the power struggle between the gods and Skaði. Loki is not normally a good representative for the gods, but at this occasion the childbearing Loki is well-chosen. His pain illustrates the gods' wounded masculinity. The nanny-goat with a beard, which normally is an indication of masculinity, is well-chosen to represent the giantess who acts in the male gender role. Her position is not extremely good either. She has lost her father and is on her own among enemies. But the gods' position is worse, their position is dishonouring.

As I have tried to show, the Nordic people interpreted their relation with the Saami people in the light of their own myths, and their familiarity with Saami culture may be reflected in the myths themselves. This indicates that the relation between the two people was seen as important within Old Norse society. The fact that Saamis replace giants in mythic patterns certainly demonstrates an ambiguity felt towards the Saamis. However, it is noteworthy that Saamis most typically replace giants in what can be called a marriage pattern. The Saami woman Snæfríðr replaced Gerðr, and Skaði may be modeled on a Saami woman. Neither the mythic nor the mixed Nordic-Saami marriages were normal marriages, and they were not necessarily happy marriages. But the main symbol in Old Norse myths and in Old Norse literature of the relation between the Nordic people and the Saami people is after all a marriage – with its ups and downs.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.p.6.