

## Categorizing 'Otherness' in *Heimskringla*

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John Lindow was one of the first to introduce the concept of 'otherness' in saga studies with his article *Supernatural Others and Ethnic Others: A Millenium of World View* (Lindow 1995). More recently John McKinnell made a very thorough study of encounters with the 'other' in Old Norse myth and legend (McKinnell 2005). McKinnell's and Lindow's studies have made me question whether it is possible that the concept of otherness occurs in different ways. The title of Lindow's article clearly suggests that there may be at least two kinds of others.

After the Second World War, otherness was studied in sociology and anthropology; the concept was also adopted by the humanities. Interdisciplinary studies of the topic have become more popular, and this has encouraged scholars of one discipline to use terms and methods that had traditionally belonged to another discipline. In this examination of others in *Heimskringla*, I have applied the anthropologist, Thomas Hylland Eriksen's ideas about otherness. He has used the terms 'analogue' and 'digital' when categorising otherness. This categorisation is based on the assumption that people do not just categorise others by using the division 'Us – Them', but that there are perceived degrees of difference. If others can be categorised by using such terms as 'almost like us', 'not so different from us', etc., their otherness can be called 'analogue'. Analogue otherness therefore means that there are no clear-cut boundaries between the groups. Digital otherness, on the other hand, means that all outsiders are regarded as more or less the same, which means that the observer is unable to see degrees in any outsider's otherness (Eriksen, 2002, 66).

Because otherness is always a relative term and bound to the observer, we have to define from whose viewpoint it is being examined. We have this basic source problem with *Heimskringla*: does it represent only the author, Snorri Sturluson's ideas and opinions, or can we assume that to a certain extent it represents also the Norse-Icelandic view? Without going any deeper into this discussion I take the historian, Sverre Bagge's statement as a starting point: 'Snorri is [...] largely a product of a particular social and intellectual environment, and much of his basic assumptions may be regarded as the expression of common mentalité' (Bagge, 1991, 237). My conclusion is that if we consider that *Heimskringla* expresses the Norse-Icelandic mentalité of the thirteenth century, we can take the Norse-Icelandic community as the observer, who perceives the otherness.

In myths and legends it is not so difficult to recognise 'the other', as John McKinnell points out in his book. First, the representative of 'us' (i.e. This World), is nearly always male, whereas the representative of the 'Other World' is typically female. McKinnell explains this by pointing out that giantesses in Old Norse myth and legend were often associated with nature and the land itself (McKinnell, 2005, 7). Secondly, the representative of the Other World is supernatural (e.g. a giantess) or has something to do with witchcraft. Because Old Norse myths and legends are a different source material from the Kings' Sagas – in this case *Heimskringla* – we can not just apply these attributes (i.e. female, supernatural creature, connection with witchcraft) to

find out who is 'the other', although echoes of this representative of the Other World can also be found in some sagas of *Heimskringla* (e.g. Erik Bloodaxe's wife Gunnhild [Hárfr ch. XXXII]; King Harald Fairhair's wife Snæfríðr [Hárfr ch. XXV]).

*Ynglinga saga* is also an exception, because it is so different from the other sagas of *Heimskringla*, with its mythical stories about the ancient kings of the Svear. *Ynglinga saga* contains much that could be placed under the title 'fantasy', and there has been speculation as to why Snorri included it in *Heimskringla*. Snorri probably had to reconstruct and write *Ynglinga saga* from scanty sources (Whaley, 1991, 64-65). Here I have dealt solely with the supernatural others and the ethnic others, so I deliberately overlook *Ynglinga saga* because of its aforementioned features. In my opinion, otherness in the *Ynglinga saga* could be approached in the same way as John McKinnell has with myths and legends.

I begin my examination of otherness by looking at situations where Icelanders or Norwegians encountered people outside their own community. Encountering outsiders can be either positive or negative. Negative encounters are not that interesting because they show the others only in negative contexts (e.g. war, raids). Positive encounters are more fruitful to examine, and they can be divided into four categories in *Heimskringla*: marriage, trade and travel, hospitality, and religion (Aalto, 2005, 97-122). This does not mean that there would not have been other kinds of contact with the others both from other literary sources and in real life; the type of contact between the 'us' and the outsiders depends on the nature of the source text. Because *Heimskringla* concentrates on the kings and history of Norway, it is easy to understand that it includes plenty of stories of violent conflicts and marriage alliances, but fewer stories of merchants and trading voyages. After analysing the nature of the encounters with the others, it is possible to categorise others as analogue or digital.

It is impossible to examine all the aspects of otherness in a short article like this, so I will only concentrate on those I classify as digital others (i.e. those that are depicted as totally different from the Norse viewpoint). There are four clearly distinct groups that fall into this category: the Wends, the *Finnar*, the Bjarmians, and the 'blámenn' (Aalto, 2005, 128-129). Using Lindow's supernatural and ethnic divisions as a starting point, I examine what features or characteristics these groups have that make them others and whether the nature of their otherness is supernaturally or ethnically based.

*Heimskringla* does not contain many supernatural beings, but it describes encounters between Christians and heathens that may have supernatural 'elements'. For example the heathen Wends, who besiege the emporium of Konungahälla and its Christian inhabitants:

*Síðan veittu heiðingjar harða atsókn. Þá var sá einn af heiðnum mǫnnum, er svá nær gekk, at allt gekk at kastalahurðunni ok lagði sverði þann mann, er fyrir innan stóð hurðina, en menn báru at hónum skot ok grjótt, ok var hann hlífðarlauss, en svá var hann fjǫlkunnigr, at ekki vápn festi á honum. Þá tók Andréás prestur vigðan eld ok signaði ok skar tundur ok lagði i eld ok setti á örvarodd ok fekk Asmundi, en hann skaut þessi þru at inum fjǫlkunnga manni, ok beit þetta skot svá, at honum vann at fullu, ok fell hann dauðr á jörð. Þá létu heiðingjar illiga enn sem fyrr, ýldu ok gnisu (MblokkHg ch. XI).*

This is an extreme encounter between 'us' and 'them'; two sides meet in battle: 'us' being the Christians, 'them' the heathens. Even this short episode shows, that the opponents – the heathens – are described as having very negative attributes. What connotations are brought about, when we are told that the heathens howled? Howling is associated with wolves, and wolves with Scandinavian heathen beliefs and mythology (e.g. Fenris-wolf). One of the attackers is said to be '*fjǫlkunnigr*,' which is a common stereotype for an outsider in the sagas. We can conclude that the others during this episode are given attributes that are opposite to those of a Christian. The Christian element in this case is enhanced when the *fjǫlkunnigr* enemy is killed with a burning arrow that had been lit with fire blessed by a priest.

Wends play the role of the evil heathen also during other episodes (*Msona* ch. XXXI; *Hsona* ch. XXIV). In these cases Wends kidnap and torture innocent Christians, who are later saved by St. Olaf. There is an allusion to the heathen beliefs of the Wends in *Ólhelg* ch. LXXXVIII; Emund, a son begotten by King Óláfr Svíakonungr on the slave woman Edla, who is the daughter of a Wendish jarl, is raised in Wendland where he is described as having given up Christianity. Thus, we are indirectly told that Wends are heathen. However, in the former part of the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, there is no implication of heathenism when Olaf Tryggvason marries the Wendish princess Geira (*ÓlTrygg* ch. XXII). Yet Sven Forkbeard's sister Tyra refuses to marry the Wendish prince Burisláfr (i.e. Geira's father) because he is 'old and heathen' (*ÓlTrygg* ch. XCII). We must remember that these characterisations are not historical facts, but are most probably later inventions. For example, Lars Lönnroth has stated that romantic episodes like the one concerning the marriage of King Olaf and Geira do not belong to the earliest lore of King Olaf (Lönnroth, 1963, 90).

The case of the Wends is interesting because before Christianity starts to play an important role in *Heimskringla* it shows others labelled as heathens, an attribute that makes them different from the observer on one hand, while on the other they are quite neutral characters. It is worth deliberating why the Wends later play the role of the evil heathen, as demonstrated in the miracle episodes of the *Ólhelg*. Is it because they have been considered enemies for a very long time? A kenning of King Olaf Tryggvason is '*Vinda myrðir*' (i.e. enemy of the Wends) which supports the idea that there is a long history of enmity. There are also other sources that support this history of enmity, for example in Markús Skeggjason's *Eiríksdrápa*, King Eiríkr eygóðr is praised 'as a bold leader in war against the heathen Wends' (Clunies Ross, 2005, 129-130). There is also at least one historical event that may have affected the image of the Wends in the eyes of Christian writers like Snorri; the Danes and the Saxons joined forces in a crusade against some West-Slavic tribes in 1147 (Christiansen, 1997, 54-56). Rumours about this crusade may have spread all over Scandinavia and even to Iceland.

Wends are labelled with the heathen image, but the real archetype heathen group is the *Finnar*. This is not surprising, since they were the nearest example of heathens to Norwegians. The *Finnar* often appear in the sagas, so they have been studied more than other outsiders (Aalto 2003; Mundal 1996; Hermann Pálsson 1997). The description of the external appearance of the *Finnar* is not detailed in the *Heimskringla*. Finnir litli was 'short and swift of foot' ('*allra manna minstr ok allra manna fóthvatastr*,' *Ólhelg* ch. LXXXII), and Harald hárfagri's spouse Snæfríðr was

said to be 'a most beautiful girl' ('*kvinna fríðust*', *Hhárf* ch. XXV). This is not very multi-dimensional material on to which to make conclusions. We know, however, from other sources that the image of the *Finnar* has been influenced by Old Norse myths, so that attributes connected to the giants were transformed and transferred to the *Finnar* (Steinsland, 1991, 212). It is clear that the pagan beliefs of the *Finnar* made them strange and dubious in the eyes of the Norse people. The pagan beliefs of the *Finnar* were considered a threat to Christianity by the Church in Norway; the Church therefore wanted to minimize all contact with the *Finnar* by making it illegal to visit them or to follow their beliefs (Mundal, 1996, 102). This campaign would seem to have been successful, since the Sami people were second class citizens not only in Norway, but also in Sweden and Finland, until the twentieth century.

In *Óihelg* ch. CXXXIII, Þórir hundr leads a group of Norwegians to the land of the Bjarmians where they intend to engage in trade. After the trading is concluded the Norwegians decide to plunder a Bjarmian graveyard when night falls. In the graveyard there is a statue of Jómali, a Bjarmian god, that is decorated with treasures. Þórir warns the others that they should not take anything from the statue, but he himself takes a silver goblet from it. Karli, another of the Norwegians, sees this and he decides to take Jómali's necklace. He tries hitting the statue's neck with an axe to get the necklace, but the blow is so powerful that the head of the statue falls off. The Bjarmian guards hear the resulting noise, so the plunderers have to flee. The Bjarmians begin to chase them, but Þórir is prepared for this. Two of his men trail the group with a sack full of something that resembles ash that Þórir spreads on their tracks. The Bjarmians are right behind the Norwegians, but for some reason they do not see them. Þórir and his men escape with the booty. However, the treasure seems to bring bad luck, because later the crew begin to quarrel and Þórir kills Karli.

Not much information is actually given about the Bjarmians in *Heimskringla*: only that they trade furs and that they have a graveyard full of treasures with a statue of their god Jómali. Nothing is said about their appearance. The Bjarmians seem to fall into the same category as the *Finnar*: they live somewhere in the far north, and they are linked with paganism, because they worship Jómali. We know from the account of Ohthere in King Alfred's Orosius that Ohthere thought that the Bjarmians spoke the same language as the '*Finnas*,' probably a Finno-Ugric language, this also connects the Bjarmians to the *Finnar* (Ross, 1940, 18-21).

In the middle ages Muslims were considered as bad or even worse than heathens, because they worshipped Muhammad, who was an Antichrist to Christians. There are not many episodes in *Heimskringla* that concern Muslims, or '*blámenn*' as they are called in the sagas. King Sigurd Jorsalafar is said to have fought heathens in Spain on his way to Jerusalem. He plundered with his crew on the island of Formentera, where there was a '*herr mikill heidinna blámanna*'. Sigurd's men win the battle of course (*Msona* chs. V-VI). *Heimskringla* does not mention anything about Muslim beliefs, but obviously there was no need to clarify the evilness of the *blámenn* to the audience since the word '*blár*' reveals that these men were very different from the heroic King Sigurd and his men. Even though *blár* means 'blue,' in this case it signifies 'black.' These 'blue men' lived in Spain or the south Mediterranean. '*Blámenn*' refers not only to literally black men, but also to Arabs and Moors. The use of the term '*blámenn*' indicates that the writer wanted to stress that they were of

different ethnic origin than the Norse people. We should also remember, too, that in the *fornaldarsögur* the term 'blámenn' refers to earthly creatures of evil (e.g. 'blámenn ok berserkir' Lindow, 1995, 13-14). This ethnic implication was probably more important to the intended audience of the saga than any, rightly omitted, information about the religious beliefs of the *blámenn*.

Is being supernatural linked to otherness in *Heimskringla*? If 'supernatural' means witchcraft, then yes. For example, witchcraft is linked to the *Finnar*, and this association is not specific only to *Heimskringla*. This is possibly because the *Finnar* were the nearest example of heathens to Norwegians (and Icelanders). The Bjarmians are not directly linked to witchcraft, but because they lived in the far north and worshipped their god Jómali, they were probably considered 'very different' (i.e. digital others) by the Norse people. The *blámenn* are not linked with anything supernatural, but the inference made about their skin colour and the indirect (and deliberate?) association of 'blámenn ok berserkir' is enough to make them others. Wends have an ambivalent image when compared with the previously mentioned groups. They are not labelled different in any way in the sagas that take place before Christianity was introduced in Scandinavia. However after Christianity is established, they are labelled fierce heathens; they especially play the role of the evil heathen in the *Óthelg*. There is not much information in *Heimskringla* as to how any of these heathens practised their beliefs, but this was not essential for the audience. It was far easier for medieval authors to label some group of people as heathen within a broad categorisation, than to learn or even completely fabricate their rituals.

We know that *Heimskringla* was composed during a Christian period and that it is affected by Christianity. It is not relevant here to discuss Snorri's personal relationship to Christianity and how it appears in *Heimskringla*. Still, there is no denying that the saga writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries projected Christian concepts onto the past, and that they had to come to terms with the otherness of their pagan ancestors (Harris, 1986, 199-200). The relationship between Christians and pagans is crucial. This is due to the medieval Christian concept of the world, where Christians form the *corpus Christianorum* or *Christianitas*, which is the same thing as civilisation. Those who are outside of this community of believers are automatically considered outsiders, others, and barbarians (Bartlett, 1993, 19, 23).

One of the conclusions Lindow made in his article was that what was 'striking about these emblems of contrast assigned to other groups and to strangers in Nordic tradition [...] [was] how closely they resemble attributes of supernatural beings.' This would mean that a division between supernatural others and ethnic others could not be made, and that is in fact another of Lindow's conclusions. The distinction between natural and supernatural is something that we in modern times insist upon, but 'it was not terribly important in the relatively fixed stable system of [the] Scandinavian [...] world view.' Moreover, there was a thin line between supernaturally and ethnically different enemies (Lindow, 1995, 16-21). The other in Old Norse myths and legends is clearly supernatural, but that is not the case in the Kings' Sagas where the otherness of some groups or individuals must be stressed by connecting them to supernatural features.

As a comparison to the Kings' Sagas, we can take both *Graenlendinga saga* and *Etriks saga rauða*, where Norsemen meet *skrælingjar*. As Sverrir Jakobsson has

stated, the Norsemen had difficulties describing the different appearance of the *skraelingjar*. One reason for this was that the Norsemen 'lacked both the vocabulary and ideology to categorise the peoples of the world in terms of race' (Sverrir Jakobsson, 2001, 92). The term 'race,' as we understand the word, was invented in the nineteenth century, but in the Middle Ages people would have understood 'races' from the perspective that different groups of peoples have different progenitors (e.g. Noah's sons). Because the Norsemen were unable to describe the appearance of the *skraelingjar*, they used another 'tool': they could see that the *skraelingjar* were not that developed when it came to technology, and what is more important, they were heathens, and thus could be connected to witchcraft (Sverrir Jakobsson, 2001, 98).

Basically, otherness based on ethnic difference plays an insignificant role in *Heimskringla*. Extreme otherness (i.e. digital otherness) means primarily deviation from Christianity. This is enhanced by associating the others with supernatural elements and these are sometimes intertwined with attributes of ethnic difference. It seems that supernatural features are important when the author wants to create as great a difference as possible between 'us' and 'them.' There is no better example of this in *Heimskringla* than in the previously quoted *MblokHg* ch. XI, where the heathen Wends besiege Konungahälla. It is clear from the description that this is the ultimate battle between good and evil – Christians and heathens, where the evil heathens are equated with such terrible animals as wolves. We can definitely say that digital others in *Heimskringla* are first and foremost non-Christians.

*Heimskringla* provides one aspect of how otherness was perceived in the Norse society of the thirteenth century. To confirm that this image of otherness is consistent we would at least need to take other Kings' Sagas as source material. In the end, the question is not about otherness, but the Norse world-view that is mediated through the image of otherness.

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