

Margin vs. centre: geopolitics in *Nitida saga* (a cosmographical comedy?)

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As in several other Icelandic *riddarasögur*, the princely quest for a *meykongr* ('maiden king') bride constitutes the storyline of the late-fourteenth-century *Nitida saga*. That quest, this paper will argue, is less an end in itself than the linchpin of a geopolitical fantasy, which, underscored by the discourses of medieval cartography and crusader history, redefines notions of centre and periphery.

The world as ordered by medieval *mappaemundi* had a designated centre, Jerusalem, and periphery (Akbari 2001, 21). The point of orientation in the world of late medieval chivalric romance was Constantinople (Heng 2003, 9-10). In *Nitida saga* it is neither: the centre of the world (*aunduegi heimsins*, p.3) is explicitly established from the outset as France and situated *j nordur haalfu veralldarinar* (p.3) ('in the northern region of the world'); that is, in Europe. Geopolitically, *Nitida saga* is a contest for global primacy, played out in the quest for the hand of Nitida of France by princes of Miklagarör (Constantinople), India, and Serkland ('Saracenland'), which occupies a substantial part of the continent of Africa in Old Norse cosmography.

The narrative action of *Nitida saga* is framed by assessments of global status. The story begins with a statement about France's standing and ends with another about Iceland's. France 'the good' is located at the centre of the world: Nitida dwells *j aunduegi heimsins j Fracklandi jnu goda* ('in the centre of the world, in France the good'); Iceland is positioned in its backwoods (*i utlegdumm veralldarinnar*, p.36).

Cartographically, though, the location of France seems slightly off centre. The golden eagle's wings on Nitida's crown are said to protect her face from burning by the sun (p.4), a threat more commonly associated in medieval cosmography with living in Africa than in the temperate zone of Europe. Paris itself is apparently situated on the coast:

*Jnga kongi . . . hlod sinum seglum framan fyrer Pääris borg. . .
meykongur säa þeirra sigling og gullskoten segl* (p.10)

'King Ingi . . . came with his ships to Paris . . . the *meykongr* saw their
fleet and sails shot with gold';

þeir komu j þær hafner er laagu vt vid Paaris borg (p.22)

'They came to the harbour which lay outside Paris'.

More significantly contrary to the cosmographical norm is the location of the fantastic and fertile island of Visio, which sits far to the North, beyond 'Sweden the cold' (Scythia), at the very edge of the known world:

*liggur vt vndan Suiþiöð jnni kaulldu. vt vnder heims skauted. þeirra landa
er menn hafa spurn af* (p.5).

In the saga's first episode, Nitida visits her foster-mother Egidia, queen of Apulia, and announces her desire to make a trip to Visio with her foster-brother, Hléskjöldr, because she has heard of its dazzling treasures of magic stones, apples and herbs. The narrator professes ignorance of their itinerary from Apulia:

*Hef eg ei heyrt sagt fra þeirra ferd ne farleingd fyr en þau take eyna
Visio* (p.6),

and, despite Egidia's reservations about the perils of the journey, Nitida and Hléskjöldr simply arrive at their destination one day and make a lightening raid on its resources.

Whereas in medieval cartography Europe is the northern part of the world, within Europe itself, and particularly in Scandinavia, the north represented danger and wildness: 'Just as south meant culture, civilization, and, in the context of pilgrimage, redemption, so the north had something like opposite connotations' (Lindow 1994, 214). According to the Prologue to Snorri's *Edda*, the extreme cold of the northern part of Europe makes it barren and uninhabitable (*svá kaldr, at eigi vex gras á ok engi byggvnr*, Simek 1990, 425). In biblical tradition the North was the realm of evil (Akbari 2001, 30). Hell is a place of glacial and teeth-rattling cold in, for example, the Old Norse *Elucidarius* (122-23), and the topography of Iceland is tainted in the *Konungs Skuggsjá* by infernal association:

Sliðkir hlutir eru oss sagdir frá þijshum heluigtis sem nu má síð j þeiri ey er ijsland heitir. þuiat þar er gnott ellds ofur gángs og ofur esli frosts og iokla. Vellandi votn og strijðleikur ijskalldra vatna (Konungs Skuggsjá 20:5-8).

'we hear exactly the same things about the tortures of hell as those which one can see on the island called Iceland: for there are vast and boundless fire, overpowering frost and glaciers, boiling springs, and violent ice-cold streams.' (*The King's Mirror* 1917, 131).

With perhaps a residual trace of the satanic North, Visio's all-knowing custodian, 'Virgilius' is said to be *fiolkunnigur* (p.5) ('skilled in the black art'), although Nitida and Hléskjöldr make an easy getaway when he goes in pursuit of them, thanks to a purloined Visio stone, which renders them invisible.

But Visio itself is more reminiscent of paradise. Like paradise in the Old Norse biblical translation *Sjórn* (Simek 1990, 522), there is a large lake in its midst. The lake contains an isle called *Skógablomi* ('Flower of forests'), which is reputed to have the world's greatest number of stones with supernatural qualities, apples and curative herbs:

huergi j heimum meigi finnast naaturu steinar epli og læknis graus fleiri en þar . . . þar voru margar eikur með fagri fruct og aagietum eplum (pp. 5-6).

According to the *Konungs Skuggsjá*, in the midst of Paradise there is a beautiful tree -- the tree of knowledge -- whose lovely apples are the fruits of wisdom:

Tre þat hit fagra . . . imiðri paradiso mæðr girniligum æplum. þat hætir visænnda tre En allðin þat er tre þat bærr þa heita þau froðleics æpli (p.75:23-5).

The magic apples of Visio, too, have powerful properties which provide Nitida with the means of circumventing the attentions of her various suitors. Visio is also the source of global knowledge, inasmuch as its magic stones provide the viewer with a visual panorama of the deeds and whereabouts of all the earth's inhabitants: people (*þioder*), monsters (*þioder*), and other creatures (*ymislegar skepnur*) (p.6).

From a broader geopolitical perspective, *Nitida saga* is a narrative in which the West is threatened by the Saracen East. And it is in that respect that crusader history becomes relevant to my argument. The sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204, the culmination of the tensions and mutual distrust between eastern and

western Christendom simmering since the First Crusade, constitutes what Geraldine Heng calls the key event of the 'crusade drama' of late medieval European romance. Even after its reconquest by the Byzantines in 1261, Constantinople was irretrievably weakened and dependant upon Western Europe (Heng 2003, 151). Those tensions are, it has recently been argued (Wilcox 2004, 224-25), resolved in Anglo-Norman and Middle English romances such as *Gui de Warewic* and *Guy of Warwick*, where Constantinople is rescued from both Saracens and an incompetent Byzantine emperor. Vestiges of that conflict are, I will suggest later, obliquely addressed by *Nitida saga*.

In the meantime, Nitida, heir to emperor (*keisari*) Rikon of France, finds herself in the same position as many rulers of the crusader states, where high infant mortality led to the outnumbering of heirs by heiresses: '[f]ief after fief fell into the hands of an heiress, whose inheritance might lure gallant adventurers from the West; but too often great estates lacked a lord at the hour of crisis, and every marriage was a matter of dispute and of plotting' (Runciman 1952; cited Heng 2003, 376). The kingdom of Jerusalem was particularly liable to female succession, most notoriously in the case of Melisende, heir to Baldwin II, whose alleged cuckolding of her older consort, Fulk of Anjou, with the young and dashing lord of Jaffa, Hugh le Puiset, may have influenced Chrétien's *Lancelot* (Heng 2003, 329, n.59).

Nitida's empire is under 'viking' (and the term appears in the saga to be more or less synonymous with 'Saracen') threat from the outset. Her wisdom, which has given her a worldwide reputation for outsmarting all kings -- *hyn vt leikur alla konga med sinni spekt og vizsku* (p.22) -- is dedicated to its defence. Strategic military metaphor, whereby Nitida fences out others with walls constructed by brain power, underlines her intellectual might. She could, it is said, build the strongest city walls over and above the wit of other men with her intelligence and thereby foil their plans:

hinn sterkasti borgarveggur maati hun giora med sinu viti yfer annara manna vit og byrgia suo vti annara raad (p.4).

Magic stones which she takes from Visio reinforce this armoury of intelligence and serve as a form of radar which keeps track of viking movements (pp.14-15).

In its account of the competition for her hand by princes of Miklagarör, Serkland, and India, the saga initially raises expectation of a France-Miklagarör union -- in other words, a classic case of *translatio studii et imperii* -- with the early introduction of Prince Ingi, son of the king of Miklagarör. When Nitida spurns his suit because, she says, her wealth and empire are greater than his, he abducts her with the aid of a sorcerer, Refsteinn ('Foxstone'), and whisks her off to Miklagarör, where she is received with pomp and splendour:

Listalin gengur j moti brodur sinum og meykonginum kærlega og aull rikisins raad. er drottning nu leidd j hallina med miklum heidri og pris. verdur nu skjott buist vit agiætri vezlu og brudlaupi og þangad bodit aullu rikisins raadi. er dyrast var j landinu. (p.12)

'Listalin and the entire council of the kingdom greet her brother and the meykongr warmly, and the queen is led into the hall with great honour and state. A splendid wedding feast is quickly prepared, to which all the worthiest counsellors in the land are invited.'

But another of Nitida's Visio stones proves to be more powerful than the cloak of invisibility which Refsteinn has given Ingi, and she outfoxes him by swinging it over her head and reappearing in Paris the next day.

Apples from Visio, which transform a servant woman into a simulacrum of Nitida, counter Ingi's next attempted *raptus*. Ingi is the most becoming of men (*allra manna sæmlegastur*), a superb athlete (*og best at j þrottum buen*), a killer of robbers and vikings, and a friend to men of peace (p.8); but this prince of Miklagarör lacks those extra qualities that would rank him as peerless. Eventually Livorius defeats him in ritual single combat, and they reach an amicable accord. The real threat to Nitida and her empire comes from the 'other'.

That other is Serkland, the Saracen East. This time it is not a question of an honourable proposal but of a hostile takeover bid by King Soldán and his hideous sons Velogi and Heiðarlogi. The detailed description of Heiðarlogi -- black hair and beard, long chin, hollow cheeks, twitching mouth, and crossed eyes; he is also skilled in witchcraft (*fullur vpp af gollðrum og giorningum* [p.8]) -- bears out the notion of the Saracen East as 'masculine: threatening, militaristic and physically overwhelming' (Wilcox 2004, 229). Heiðarlogi delivers an ultimatum that Nitida marry either him or his brother or suffer the devastation of her empire (p.19). She repels the attempted invasion with technology and cunning. Velogi goes down in a hail of missiles and liquid pitch and Heiðarlogi ends up dead at the bottom of a moat.

Nitida is also sought in marriage by Livorius, son of King Blebarnius of *Indiáland hit mikla* ('Greater India'). The saga implicitly subscribes here to the medieval notion of three Indias -- Nearer or Lesser India, Further or Greater India, and Middle India -- well known in Iceland through the martyrdoms of the apostle Thomas and Bartholomew in Nearer (*india land er hingat ligr nest*) and Further India (*hit yzta Indiáland*) respectively (Simek 1990, 155-7, 429).

Motivated by the promise of the fame he will attain if wins her, and provided with magical aid by a dwarf, Livorius whisks Nitida off to a splendid reception in his homeland, where she is greeted by the best that it has to offer. The heightened parallel with the sequence of events which attended Nitida's arrival in Miklagarör -- greeting by the suitor's sister, reception by notables, a procession, and a feast -- suggests that anything Miklagarör can do, India can do better:

kongs dotter. Syialin. gengur j moti sinum brodur og meykongi. og allur Indialandz her med allri megt. Þää voru haurpur og gigiur og allra hannða streingfæri. Aull stræti eru þar þukt med skarlat og dyra vefi. En koronader kongar leiddu meykong til skemmu drottningar Syialin. Er nu best vit virdulegri veizlu og bodit til aullum Indialandz haufdingium.
(p.24)

'The king's daughter, Syalin, welcomes her brother and the *meykongr*, along with the entire army of India in all their might. There were harps and fiddles and all kinds of stringed instruments. All the streets are adorned with scarlet and costly fabrics. And crowned kings led the *meykongr* to Queen Syalin's apartment. And now a noble feast is prepared and all the nobles of India invited to it.'

Resolutely unmoved, Nitida spirits herself back to France with another stone from Visio.

In the meantime, Soldán of Serkland has delivered Nitida a second ultimatum: unless she marries him, he will devastate France to avenge his sons. This time the stones of Visio reveal the march of the hideous and terrifying Saracen army of *blamonnum og bansettum hetium og allz kyns öþjod og jll þydi* (p.25); ('black men and all kinds of monsters and scoundrels'). A finer force, of all the kings and able-bodied men of Nitida's empire, meets the invading fleet near the island of Kartagia, a place said to be much frequented by vikings (p.26) and probably the port of Cartagena in southeast Spain, which was known in the Middle Ages for its pirate attacks. The forces of Livorius ride to the rescue of the beleaguered French forces, and he kills Soldán.

Livorius has already demonstrated his credentials as a world leader through his command of all languages. It is only a matter of relatively short narrative time before he defeats Ingi in single combat, wins Nitida, and effects a brilliant network of Indocentric alliances with Miklagarðr, France, and Apulia: Miklagarðr and India (Ingi weds Syalin, sister of Livorius); France and India (the union of Nitida and Livorius); Miklagarðr, Apulia, and India (Hléskjöldr, heir to Apulia, marries Listalin, sister of Ingi; Livorius gives the couple one-third of India as a wedding present). In the medieval crusading fantasy, the prospect of aid for Christendom was bolstered by the notion that Prester John would lead a counter-crusade out of India (Heng 2003, 286, 446). In this secular fantasy of empire, distant India -- located in medieval cartography at the easternmost point of Asia -- saves the centre of the world from Saracen dominion, and, thanks to Livorius's dynastic networking, resolves lingering tensions between Constantinople and the West in the process.

Physically, Livorius tends to the septentrional rather than the oriental. He is 'fair and ruddy of complexion' (*litos og riodur j anndliti* [p.9]), has fine curly hair, broad shoulders, and the keen eyes of a falcon (*snareygður sem valur*). According to the encyclopaedic Hauksbók text 'Heimslýsing ok helgifræði,' the inhabitants of India are about 20 feet (12 ells) tall and harmful (*xij. alnar ero longer oc ero þeir mann skædir* (Hauksbók 153:15); but although Livorius is a head taller than anyone in his army, he ill-treats only vikings and Saracens. Among other accomplishments, he can read both runes and books (*runar og bækur* [p.9]). *Runar* can refer to the Latin alphabet, and Livorius is not unique among *riddarasögur* heroes in his knowledge of them, but it meshes very aptly with his falcon-like eyes and fair complexion. He has an explicit Scandinavian connection, inasmuch as his aunt, Alduria, lives in Smálönd, and in the latter stages of the saga, when he assumes the guise of Eskilvarðr from Mundia (the Alps), he represents himself as a European northerner.

Indeed, Livorius's entrance in the Cartagena episode is interestingly reminiscent of Kari Solmundarson's when he rescues the Njálssons from a viking band in the Scottish isles:

Sjá þeir þar skip fara sunnan fyrir nesit ok váru eigi færi en tíu. . . . En á því skipi, er fyrst fór, stóð maðr við siglu; sá var í silkitreyju ok hafði gyldan hjálm, en hárit bæði mikit ok fagrt; sjá maðr hafði spjót gullrekit í hendi. (Brennu-Njáls saga, ch. 84)

'they looked out to sea, and saw ships come sweeping round the headland . . . no fewer than ten in all at the mast of the leading ship stood a

man with a magnificent head of hair, who wore a silk tunic and a gilded helmet and carried a spear inlaid with gold.' (*Njal's Saga*, p.180)

In *Nitida saga*:

Nu giora menn at lita huar mikill dreki sigler og skrautlegur og ogrynni annara skipa. sigla nu af hafi og hallda sinum seglum audru meigin vnder eyinna. fer madr af drekanum. . . . hann var digur og háðr suo at hans haufud bar vpp yfer allan herinn. hann liet geisa sitt merki gull ofit fram moti Solldani kongi. (pp. 26-27)

'Now people look to where a great and splendid dragon-ship and a host of other ships sails in from the harbour and holds course for the other side of the island. A man disembarks from the dragon-ship. . . . he is strong and so tall that his head reaches above all his army. He has his gold banner raised against King Soldán.' (p.26)

After Kari slays the viking leader, he takes booty. After Livorius slays Soldán, he does the same (*tekur Liforinus þar mikit herfang* [p.27]). When, later in *Nitida saga*, Nitida views the world with 'Eskilvarðr' through the Visio stone and remarks that Livorius is not to be found 'in shallows and hidden creeks' (*vmm læ og leineuoga* p.31), she may be archly characterizing him as a viking of the old warrior type.

Ultimately, *Nitida saga* redraws the hierarchy of global power, in which the so-called periphery, the far North and India -- and in some Icelandic sources 'Furthest India' is specifically located at the end of the world (*i enda heims; við heimsenda*, Simek 1990, 156-7)¹ -- becomes the centre. The importance of Miklagarðr is undermined in various ways. Nitida, for example, asks Ingi why he has made the journey from there to *suo fiarlæg lond* (p.10); that is, to France -- clearly an ironic geographical reckoning, since it is immediately followed by a comparative belittling of Miklagarðr's power and importance:

þer haft eingvan rikdom til motz vit mig. Hafa og litit ydar ad þyda vit Frackland jd goda og .xx. konga riki er þar til liggia (pp.10-11);
'you have no kingdom by comparison with mine; and your land has little of significance to compare with France the good and the twenty kingdoms which belong to it.'

Miklagarðr is further disempowered when Ingi is tricked and humiliated by Nitida, and outshone by Livorius in love and combat. The power of the centre of civilization, France, is also compromised. Despite the impressiveness of her army, Nitida is dependant upon the forces of Livorius to repel invasion by Serkland, and her most sophisticated source of military intelligence comes from Visio, at the northernmost fringe of the world.

And it is northwards where the saga's ultimate concerns lie. Towards the end of the narrative, Nitida and Livorius view the world through one of the Visio stones. In this textual *mappa mundi* the Scandinavian North is flanked by lands stretching from Normandy to Greece on the one hand (with Scotland presumably linked to France by the 'auld alliance') and, on the other, by the 'eastern hemisphere' (*austur allffuna heimsins*) of India, Palestine, Asia, Serkland, and the rest of the world all the way to the torrid zone or 'burning belt' (*bruna bellied*, p. 31):

¹ I owe these references to Margaret Clunies Ross.

Hann sá þá yffer allt Frackland, Proventiam, Ravenam, Spaniam, Hallitiam, Frisland, Flandren, Nordmandiam, Skottland, Grickland . . . þá sau þau norður aalffuna alla, Noreg, Ysland, Faereyär, Sudureyar, Orkneyär, Svijþjod, Danmork, Eingland, Ýrland, og morg lond onnur . . . nu austur aalffuna heimsins, Indialand, Palestinam, Asiam, Serkland, og oll onnur lond heimsins, og jafnvel umm bruna bellted, það sem ey er bigt. (pp.30-31)

'Then he looked across all of France, Provence, Ravenna, Spain, Helvetia (?), Frisia, Flanders, Normandy, Scotland, Greece . . . Then they saw all the northern region, Norway, Iceland, the Faroes, the Hebrides, the Orkneys, Sweden, Denmark, England, Ireland, and many other lands . . . now the eastern region of the world, India, Palestine, Asia, Serkland, and all the other lands of the world, and even to the torrid zone, which is uninhabited.'

No collective regional name is given to the first named vast stretch of predominantly Latin Europe. With the conspicuous absence of Greenland, the 'northern hemisphere' (*norður aalffuna alla*) at the centre of this *mappa mundi* consists of Scandinavia and its sphere of influence. Moreover, in contravention of the standard naming sequence of the world's three parts in Old Norse cosmographical texts (Asia, Africa, Europe), in which Iceland comes last as the most northern island of Europe -- the formula is that 'Iceland is a big island which lies north from Ireland' (*Island er oc ey mikil i norðr fra irlandi* [Simek 1990, 432] or 'is the northernmost island of Christendom' (*er norðuz i kristni* [Simek 1990, 440]) -- Norway and Iceland lead the Scandinavian North as the hub of the world.

In *Nitida saga*'s fantasy of geopolitical desire, the power is with the periphery, East and North. It is that underlying message that prompts the reader to consider that fantasy as it might relate to late-fourteenth-century-Iceland's self-perception of its place in Scandinavia and the wider world.

Iceland had been progressively marginalized within the Northern scheme of things throughout the fourteenth century. Paradoxically, although peripheral in terms of population, in terms of distance, Iceland in the 1260's was at the centre of the Norwegian North Atlantic Empire. When Bergen and Trondheim were its administrative centres, the journey from those locations to Iceland took less time than from the Eastern Quarter to the Althing. But Hákon V Magnússon (1299-1319) moved his main residence from Bergen to Oslo and looked eastwards to expand his power base. By 1380, under Olav IV of Denmark and Norway, the capital had moved to Copenhagen, and Iceland's satellite, Greenland -- notable by its omission from the world map of *Nitida saga* -- had disappeared from the royal line of vision (Gunnar Karlsson 2000, 100-05). Iceland was further marginalized by the geopolitical priorities of Queen Margrethe (1387-1412), ruler of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, whose principal concern was the formation of those kingdoms into the Kalmar Union (Ashman Rowe 2005, 95, 255, 290-93, 349).

Playful references in *riddarasögur* to Iceland's distance from their narrative worlds are not uncommon. The ultimate fate of the players in *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans*, for instance, is allegedly of no interest to the narrator:

En fyrir því af þessur menn eru fjarlægð vorum löndum, þá höfum vér eigi spurt, hver aðrif orðið hafa þessara manna (p.121)

'because these men are far from our lands, we haven't enquired as to what their ultimate destiny was.'

At the conclusion of *Ectors saga*, which takes place in a totally unhistorical fourth century B.C., the narrator disingenuously asks to be excused for his deficiency of knowledge, because he could 'hardly have been further away' (*hardla fjarre staddir verit þeim tíðindum*, p.185) -- in time and place -- from the events of the story.

With similar rhetorical self-deprecation, at the conclusion to *Nitida saga* the narrator relegates his native land to the boondocks of the world (*i uilegðum veralldarinnar*) and declares his 'unlearned' (*öfroðre*) tongue unequal to the task of describing the high life at its centre:

er og ei auðsagt með öfroðre tungu. . . hvor fognudur vera munde i midtium heimenum af slíku hoffolke (p.36).

The telling of the tale has, of course, demonstrated the untruth of the latter claim, but the multilingualism of many *riddarasögur* heroes bespeaks 'the pragmatism of an insular people with an uncommon language and devoted to travel' (Kalinke 1983, 861).

The two indices of Icelandic marginality delineated by *Nitida saga* -- distance and language -- were matters of topical concern in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Iceland. A century after that, they had become the principal markers of Iceland's separation from mainland Scandinavia: '[i]nstead of being predominantly connected through a common language, as in the Viking Age and high Middle Ages, Icelandic society was now, together with its geographical remoteness, distinguished mainly by its language' (Gunnar Karlsson 2000, 105). From the last third of the fourteenth century, the influence of Danish and Swedish on Old Norwegian had begun to fragment the common West Norse vernacular (Ashman Rowe 2005, 25). Whereas that process hastened Iceland's marginalization from mainland Scandinavia, it provided a focus for the active recognition of a distinctive Icelandic identity, independent of its post-commonwealth status as an increasingly neglected satellite of Norway.

Mapping is a predominant concern of *Nitida saga*. Its constructions of world geography embrace the spectrum of medieval cartography: continental, zonal, directional. Its world view extends from the extreme north to the torrid zone. Strategies for overcoming vulnerability and distance -- intellectual, linguistic, magical -- drive its meta-narrative, in which geopolitical norms are upended and global significance is not precluded by geographic marginality. In this unusually popular saga -- extant are sixty-five manuscripts, the earliest from the sixteenth century (Driscoll 1993, 432) -- cosmographical comedy serves as both witty entertainment and, arguably, as a vehicle for Icelandic audiences to dispel the mentality of 'cultural cringe' and validate their collective identity on the global map.

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