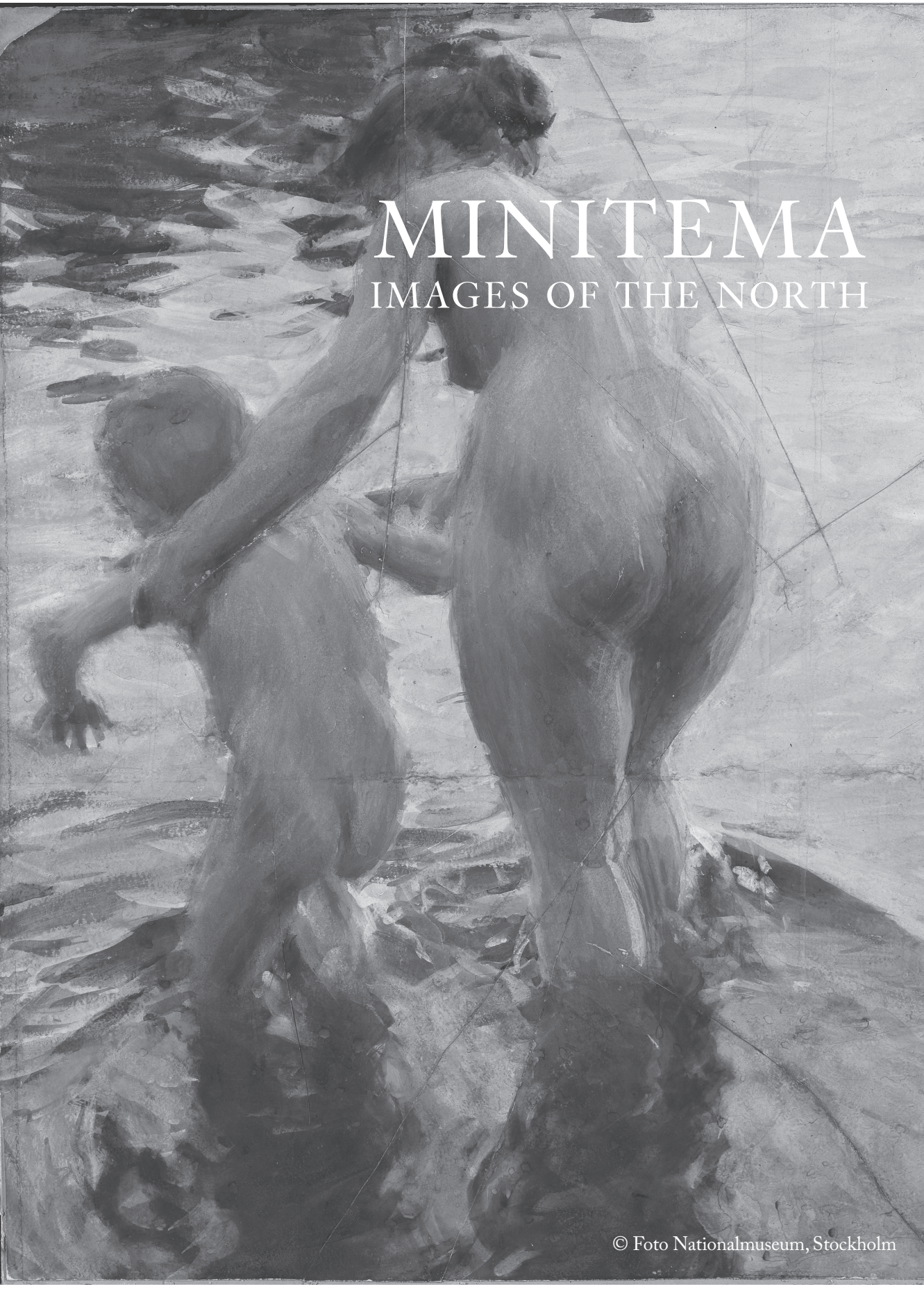

MINITEMA
IMAGES OF THE NORTH

Eyjafjallajökull, Island

Introduction

Sverrir Jacobsson

From the earliest times the North has been portrayed as exotic from the viewpoint of western civilization. Images of the North as the 'other' have contributed to shaping the identities of western nations, regardless of their actual geographical location. Down the centuries various images have emerged, images that have both embodied civilization and barbarism, even at the same time in the same place. The North could be a paradise, as in the classical Greek myth of the Hyperboreans; it could equally well be either hell on earth or a model of progress and harmony, a utopia. At the 26th Nordic Historians Conference in Reykjavík in 2007 a group of scholars came together to discuss the development of ideas about the North and the role of historical consciousness in creating the identity of the Nordic peoples.

The images of the North were generated within the western tradition, within which three distinct modes of thought can be discerned. From Antiquity until the Renaissance the traditional discourse about the North was negative and patronising, and was viewed wholly from a southern and Latin perspective. During the Enlightenment there was a shift in perception and the North was increasingly seen as a progressive utopia distinguished by virtue, pragmatism, Protestantism and parliamentary institutions. The Romantic view of the North was similarly positive, but was based on a hermeneutic tradition that was the diametric opposite of the Enlightenment's moving spirit. The Romantic discourse about the North is characterized by respect for its uncorrupted nature and people, whereas it views civilization with mistrust and a dose of self-criticism.[1] Each of these traditions had a period of origin, and survives in active or latent form in modern images of the North. Most images of the North are to a degree structured upon the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism; between self and other.

The North is often depicted as a region that is ambivalently situated both within and outside such structures as modernity, European culture, the centre, and the West. The North may be a geographical location – it exists topographically in relation to where you are standing at any given moment – but it is so much more. Every region has a set of cultural associations. Sometimes they derive from how outsiders view that region, but the self-images of its

inhabitants are also significant. Images of the North are thus conjured up by its inhabitants' own descriptions of a region, a country, or a kingdom.

The image of the North was never fixed, and was always subject to multifarious cultural trends. In the Middle Ages, the North was seen as a marginal region, which in turn influenced the discourse amongst the Scandinavians themselves. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the traditional image of the North shifted, and positive images allowed it to be compared favourably with older centres of civilization in the South. Similarly, the status of Old Norse literature gained in importance as it was put forward as a counterweight to the cultural predominance of the South and the Graeco–Roman classics.

In the following papers the main theme is how discourses about the North have been shaped by the study of its past. In his study of how the North was portrayed in the Middle Ages, Sverrir Jakobsson shows how lineages of the royal houses and noblemen were traced to historic locations in Asia, and connected with the history of Troy and the Romans. In this period, Nordic scholars were at pains to demonstrate how the North was intrinsically connected to other parts of the world. The fundamental unity of the North with other parts of Christendom was also emphasized by authors such as Adam of Bremen, who depicted the North from outside. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as Sumarliði Ísleifsson shows, the farthest regions of the North were depicted as utopian or distopian extremes. However, there was a shift in the eighteenth century as the past of the northern countries was regarded as a classical age, a positive counterpoint to the dominant history of the South. As Anna Wallette makes clear, this was in no small part due to the efforts and increasing confidence of Scandinavian historians such as Sven Lagerbring. In the second of half of the eighteenth century, the pioneers of pre-Romanticism in European culture also discovered the literary heritage of the North, and began to translate it and to rework it into new literary works. As Gylfi Gunnlaugsson argues, literary approaches to the past are bound to be different from historical ones. Whereas poets and writers of fiction were free to fill in the gaps of historical discourse, the literary reformulation was significantly constrained by the aesthetic and ethical discourse. This appropriation of the 'classical' past had important repercussions on views of the North in nineteenth-century Europe. As Peter Stadius demonstrates, the reception of such literary giants as Ibsen and Strindberg was shaped by latent images of the North and its people. Their radical works were sometimes viewed as the products of unbalanced minds swayed by northern savagery, far removed from the sensibilities of the European tradition. A discussion of modernity and radicalism was largely formulated as an issue of North and South – far more so than reality would suggest.

Although the papers deal with different periods and various aspects of the

discourse about the North, one common theme is how the tradition of all the dead generations weighed on the minds of the living. The North cannot escape its past, but its educated classes could influence how that past was viewed, both within the region and amongst other peoples.

Notes

1 Cf. Peter Stadius, *Resan till norr. Spanska Nordenbilder kring sekelskiftet 1900*, Helsinki 2005, pp. 28–60.

The Emergence of the North

Sverrir Jakobsson

The North existed as a self-projection in Scandinavia as early as the Middle Ages. This much is clear from the terminology used by those who wrote about the history of the North. One such historian, the Icelander Sturla Þórðarson (1214–1284) informs us that in 1247 a special emissary from Pope Innocent IV came 'hither to the Nordic countries' (hingat í *Norðrlönd*) to consecrate King Hákon of Norway[1]. In this instance, the North (*Norðrlönd*) is viewed from the perspective of an important power centre in the Mediterranean region. The North is contrasted with the South.

The term Norðrlönd presupposes an ultimate system of direction, rather than a proximate system. The direction North is seen as a constant; an attribute possessed by certain lands. In a similar way, Rome was defined as the South in Icelandic terminology, leading pilgrimages to be known as 'walks to the South' (*suðrgöngur*). This definition of North and South was influenced by Latin terminology, in which the peoples of the North were known as gentes septentrionales. Within this system, the North was not confined to Scandinavia. Indeed, in some Old Norse texts, France, Germany, and England are seen as parts of Norðrlönd.

Apart from this bipolar system that contrasted North and South, authors writing in the Old Norse-Icelandic language also appear to use the term Norðrlönd within a quadripolar system that held good beyond the immediate region: Norðrlönd, the Vestrlönd (the British Isles), Suðrríki (Germany, the Holy Roman Empire), and Austrríki or Austrvegr (Russia and other lands to the East). The term Norðrlönd thus had a dual meaning, depending on the context. It was a vaguely defined region that existed to the north of the