

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

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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<sup>t</sup>. 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 *Veströnd* (the British Isles), *Suðrríki* (Germany, the Holy Roman Empire), and *Austríki* 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

great power centres in the South, or a micro-region within a system of four competing structures to the west, north, east and south<sup>2</sup>.

An example of the way the North was contrasted with its neighbours can be seen in narratives about Ólafr Tryggvason (d. 1000), the Norwegian king whom Icelandic historians regarded as the most significant missionary of Scandinavia. Ólafr was regarded as the 'most famous man in the Northern lands' (*frægstr maðr á Norðrlöndum*) but the same sources also note his fame within a particular system of discourse, 'the Danish tongue' (*dönsk tunga*), which was shared by all those belonging to the North<sup>3</sup>.

Within the different systems of distinction there were various possible discourses about the North. There was a tendency in the South to identify the North as the 'other', going back to Tacitus' writings on the Germans. Adam of Bremen is inclined to depict the Scandinavians as noble Barbarians, free from the corruption and politicking of the South. The cave-dwelling Icelanders get an honorable mention, for they are seen as Christians by nature, even if they were only recent converts in practice<sup>4</sup>.

In part, these views were shared by the Scandinavians themselves, although they saw little that was noble in their isolation from the centres of religion in the South. With the advent of literacy and a general acceptance of the Catholic world-view they were eager to cement their relationship with the power centres and make up for their marginal status within Christendom. The institution of *súðrgöngur* is an example of one such passage to the centre, both in geographical and social status.

Discourses of the past always involve a degree of invention of the self. In the *Snorra-Edda*, a scholarly exploration of Scaldic verse from the first half of the thirteenth century, there is a prologue that confidently traces the origins of Scandinavian royal and noble lineages from Odin, and thence to the city of Troy. Other sources, both *Heimskringla* and *Sagas of the Apostles*, make a more broad case for emigration from Asia Minor, although the cause of the emigration is not always agreed upon, given that some sources mention campaigns of Roman generals in Asia, whereas others refer to the preaching of the Apostles. The Mediaeval European world-view was allocentric: the most important regions of the world were located in the Mediterranean or in the far corners of Asia, east of India. Thus it is not surprising that the thesis of a migration from Asia at the time of the birth of Christ seems to have enjoyed wide currency, although alternative narratives of origin did exist, most prominently those that involve emigration from Ostrobothnia<sup>5</sup>. This was a method of dealing with the marginal status of the North within Christendom, which itself was mostly confined to the then marginal region of Europe.



Gerhard Munthe: Illustration of Olav Tryggvason's saga, Heimskringla, edition of 1899.

### Nordens uppkomst

Syftet med denna artikel är att analysera meningen hos termen Norðrlönd i den medeltida diskursen, speciellt hur den används i det gemensamma nordiska språket, dönsk tunga. Två skilda sätt att jämföra Norden med andra regioner diskuteras. Dels jämförs Norden med Söderns viktiga centra, såsom Rom och Konstantinopel, dels ställs Norden mot ett mer närbeläget område, med de tre polerna Vestrlönd (de brittiska öarna), Suðrriki (Tyskland) och Austrvegr (Ryssland och dess grannregioner). I den historiska litteraturen, kungasagorna och fornäldersagorna, knöts Norden även till sydliga delar av världen, eftersom de nordiska adelsfamiljerna sades härstamma från Asien.

Key words: the North, Iceland, world view, medieval identities, ethnogenesis

### Notes

- 1 *Sturlunga saga*, eds. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnboegason and Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols, Reykjavík, 1946, II, p. 83.
- 2 Cf. Sverrir Jakobsson, *Vid og veröldin. Heimsmynd Íslendinga 1100–1400*, Reykjavík 2005, pp. 193–99, 217.
- 3 *Saga Oláfs Tryggvasonar af Oddr Snorrason munk*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen 1932, p. 231; *Fagrskinna. Nóregis kononga tal*. Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 30, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen 1902–1903, p. 131.
- 4 *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der Hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*. Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters, II, eds. Werner Trillmich and Rudolf Buchner, Berlin 1961, pp. 426, 484.
- 5 Jakobsson, pp. 208–9.