Notes

1 Most of these poems are discussed in Anne Heinrichs, "Der Kanon altnordischer Poesie im 18. Jhd.", in The Audience of the Sagas. *The Eighth International Saga Conference I*, Gothenburg 1991, pp. 201–221.
2 Percy completed the book in 1761, but it was not published for two years.
3 Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians. Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 26–27.
4 *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, p. A6.
5 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford 1998, p. 36.
6 *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, p. A8.
7 Hugh Blair, "A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal", in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. Howard Gaskill, Edinburgh 1996, p. 349.
8 Heinrich Heine, *Die Romantische Schule. Heines Werke in fünf Bänden IV,* Berlin 1967, p. 189.
9 See, for example, Gerhard Schulz, *Romantik. Geschichte und Begriff*, 2nd ed. Munich 2002, pp. 15–16.
10 Adam Oehlenschläger, *Æstetiske Skrifter 1800–1812*, Copenhagen 1980, p. 15.
11 Oehlenschläger, p. 16.
12 Oehlenschläger, p. 34.
13 Ida Falbe-Hansen, *Øhlenschlægers nordiske Digtning og andre Afhandlinger*, Copenhagen 1921, p. 107.
14 Esaias Tegnér, *Samlade skrifter VI*, Stockholm (undated), p. 229.
15 Tegnér, pp. 229–230.

Ideas of an Island in the North

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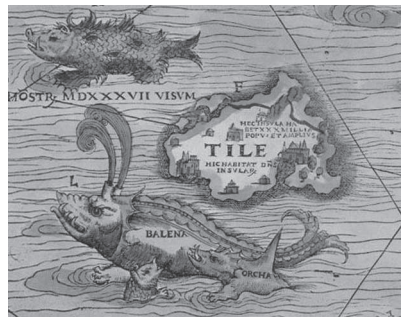
Iceland as part of the North, especially the far North, has a long history, but there are a number of other dominant discourses about Iceland. It is the aim here to demonstrate how images of Iceland have been constructed at a variety of times and places, and to offer some suggestions as to why they are as diverse as they seem to be, drawing on examples from literature on Iceland from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

One of the most important discourses about Iceland stems from it being an island, and therefore part of a wider 'island discourse'. From Antiquity, descriptions of islands have tended to be similar, even when the islands were far from each other and different in many respects. The American scholar, John Kirtland Wright, stated that, 'islands were convenient topographic units



The mythical island of Thule on the Carta Marina, a marine wallmap of Scandinavia by Olaus Magnus, drawn up at Venice in the year 1539.

to which the medieval mind was wont to attribute fabulous and supernatural qualities'.[1] This theme of the exotic is noteworthy; islands have commonly been described as more strange than other places, being usually either paradisiacal or satanic.

As is the case with many other islands, the wondrous has been an important part of Icelandic representations down the ages. Greco–Roman geographic imaginings included descriptions of an island called Thule, a mystical island in the far and foggy North, darkened by night six months of the year, brightly lit by day for the other six months. The tales of Thule became associated with Iceland, and representations of Iceland, in which it was described as a strange island full of wonders such as endlessly burning mountains and springs with a variety of transformative powers. Several texts depicted Iceland as the Devil's island, locating hell or purgatory there; dead spirits were described as circling around the fire of the volcanoes. This image of Iceland persisted until the early nineteenth century. But the reverse of this image was equally long lived: contemporaneous texts and images showed Iceland as a kind of paradisiacal island, a land full of food, with fish in abundance and mountains of butter. And reminiscent of Arcadia, Icelanders supposedly lived to an advanced age, as old as three hundred years, in peace and harmony with nature.[2]

In the literature of Western Europe from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, Iceland barely existed, even for the most learned. An English text from the fifteenth century says 'of Yseland to wryte is lytill need'.[3] If the country was mentioned at all, it was not least as a part of a strange and unknown world on the farthest periphery. Typical of this kind of discourse is a section on Iceland from a travelogue by the Frenchman Pierre Martin de la Martinière from the latter half of the seventeenth century:

> The people of Iceland, for the most part, dwell in caverns, hewn out of the rocks, and the rest live in huts, built like those in Lapland, some with wood, and others with fish bones covered with turf; and both they and their cattle lie under the same roof. Their beds are made of hay or straw, upon which they lie in their clothes, with skins upon them, and make but one bed for the whole family. Both men and women are very disagreeable in appearance: they are swarthy, and dress like the Norwegians, in coats made of the skins of the sea-calf, with the hair outward … They live by fishing, and are very brutal and slovenly.[4]

Ideas of this kind dominated the discourse on Iceland in many texts until at least the late eighteenth century. Similar stereotyped images were also dominant in descriptions of every other 'periphery' in that period, although they might take different forms. The similarity is greatest between representations of Iceland and other areas in the northern periphery: Greenland, northern Scandinavia, and the northernmost areas of Russia. But even descriptions of this kind could also have positive undertones, since the people in these areas were sometimes represented not as barbarians but as noble savages.[5]

When Iceland was described as part of the far North in the period from c. 1500 to 1800, it was generally as an extremely cold place, where no trees or grain could grow and the wind was so fierce that nothing could withstand it. Instead of eating bread made of grain it was asserted that the inhabitants subsisted on bread made with fish. Further, it was believed that people on this Northern island lived underground like animals because of the extreme cold.[6] The situation was supposed to be similar to the life of the people in the far South, where they were also said to live underground, but there because of the extreme heat. One frequent theme in image constructions in general is the tendency to mirror the assumed situation in one place with that in another; these places are likely to be different in a converse mode.[7]

Ideas and terms are not static but constantly change, and the term North is no exception. It was reconsidered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The North and the Northerners were no longer only thought of as source of evil – the 'swarms of barbarians, who for several ages under the names of Danes and Normans ravaged the different countries of Europe' as one eighteenth-century writer chose to describe the people of the North.[8] The North could also be a positive source according to the new trends in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western Europe. During the period of nation-building and Romanticism in Western and Northern Europe in the nineteenth century, there was a nationalistic need for a counterpart to the South and Classical literature. Herein arose a demand for a new Northern cultural image, conveniently found in Iceland and the sagas.[9] Authors writing about Iceland in the nineteenth century started to compare the life of the

Icelanders in the age of the sagas with the Golden Age of Greece and Rome, both in respect of their Viking Age deeds and their later literary cultural abilities. Examples of this kind are numerous. The British nineteenth-century historian and statesman, James Bryce, stated that the Icelanders were an intellectually cultivated people who had produced a literature both in prose and verse that of all the primitive literatures was second only to ancient Greece in terms of quantity and quality. Nowhere else, except in Greece, was so much produced that attained, in a time of primitive simplicity, so high a level of excellence both in imaginative power and brilliance of expression.[10]

Thus the meaning of the North changed fundamentally in the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century. Instead of its connotations as the cold, frightful, and aggressive North, it became a positive source, representing among other things the original, the creative, and the daring.

In researching representations of Iceland, or indeed other regions, it is important to bear in mind that they are formed of different 'material' and that the land is seen from different viewpoints. Research on the image-history of Iceland makes it clear that one of the most important 'angles' on Iceland has been the view of the North, representing Iceland both as a utopia and a dystopia. The (different) ideas of the North have surely in many ways shaped the idea of Iceland through the ages, but other views have also been important, such as those mentioned here: the idea of the island, but also of the periphery in general. These examples and the general image-history of Iceland show that it is important to remember that the meaning of terms and concepts is not constant but continuously changing, switching dialectically between the positive and the negative, and over time. In any age, at any given moment, there are many Norths, insular ideals, and peripheries.

Ideer om en ö i norr

Artikeln diskuterar hur de nationella bilderna av Island har formats genom århundradena och hur idéer om öar i allmänhet, om en periferi, och om Norden har influerat dessa. Det diskuteras också om dessa nationella bilder av Island varit statiska eller föränderliga, varav det senare är författarens slutsats.

Keywords: Iceland, islands, periphery, far North

Notes

1 John Kirtland Wright, *The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades. A Study in the History of Medieval Science and Tradition in Western Europe*, New York 1965, pp. 229–230.

2 See Sumarlidi R. Ísleifsson, *Ísland framandi land*, Reykjavík 1996.

3 Quoted in Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians. Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 9, 17.
4 Pierre Martin de La Martinière, *A New Voyage to the North: Containing, A full Account of Norway; the Laplands, both Danish, Swedish and Muscovite; Of Borandia, Siberia, Samojedia, Zembla and Iseland: With the Description of the Religion and Customs of these several Nations*, London 1706 (originally published in French in 1671), pp. 439–440.
5 La Martinière, pp. 431, 438; Sumarlidi R. Ísleifsson, "Barbarians of the North become the Hellenians of the North," in *Northbound. Travels, Encounters and Constructions 1700-1830*, ed. Karen Klitgaard Povlsen, Aarhus 2007, pp. 111–128.
6 See Sebastian Franck, Weltbuch, *spiegel und bildtniss des gantzen erdtbodens*, Tübingen 1533 p. lx.
7 John Gillies, *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference. Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture*, Cambridge 1994, p. 9.
8 Alexander Adam, *A Summary of Geography and History, Both Ancient and Modern*, London 1797, p. 584.
9 See Julia Zernack, *Geschichten aus Thule. Íslendingasögur in Übersetzungen deutscher Germanisten. Berliner Beiträge zur Skandinavistik*, Berlin 1994, pp. 1–3, 372–373.
10 James Bryce, "Preface", in *Denmark and Sweden with Iceland and Finland*, Jón Stefánsson, London 1916 pp. x–xi.