

SUPERNATURAL ENCOUNTERS
IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE
AND TRADITION

BORDERS, BOUNDARIES, LANDSCAPES

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SUPERNATURAL ENCOUNTERS
IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE
AND TRADITION

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FROM THE INSIDE OUT: CHRONICLES, GENEALOGIES, MONSTERS, AND THE MAKINGS OF AN ICELANDIC WORLD VIEW

Arngrímur Vídalín

Eirekr spurði konung vandliga at ömbun réttlætis eða píslum helvítis. Hann spurði ok at yfirbragði þjóða ok grein landa, frá höfum ok útlöndum ok frá allri austrálfu heimsins ok suðrálfu, frá konungum stórum ok frá ýmissum eyjum, frá auðn landa ok frá þeim stöðum, er þeir áttu ferð yfir, frá mönnum undarligum ok búningi þeira ok síðum margra þjóða, frá höggormum ok flugdrekum ok alls kyns dýrum ok fuglum, frá gnótt gulls ok gimsteina. Þessar spurningar ok margar aðrar leysti konungur vel ok fróðliga. Eptir þetta váru þeir skírðir Eirekr ok hans menn.¹

¹ *Eiríks saga víðförla*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 451.

Abstract: This essay gives an overview of learned medieval Icelandic sources and the concern they exhibit with a dualistic Christian understanding of the world. Within a system of binary opposition between Christian and pagan, centre and periphery, self and other, a need to argue for one's placement on the right side of the divide seems to have become ever more important for people already marginalized by the world model. A common way of doing so was by way of pedigree, where noble men would trace their ancestry through legendary kings to Adam. The sources bear witness to an understanding of the world which presumed its apocalyptic end in which the damned and the saved would clash in a cataclysmic battle, which further sharpened the divide between the Christian self and the pagan other. Thus a rhetoric of dehumanization rooted in antiquity came into systematic use by continental scholars of the Middle Ages, while their distant Nordic counterparts simultaneously put the same tools to use in an attempt to demarginalize themselves.

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(Eiríkr asked the king extensively about the rewards of justice and the torments of Hell. He also asked about the appearance of nations and the various lands, about oceans and distant countries and all of the eastern and southern hemispheres, about great kings and various islands, about the wealth of individual lands and of those places they were to cross; he asked about strange men and their clothing and the customs of many nations, about serpents and flying dragons and all kinds of animals and birds, about multitudes of gold and gemstones. These questions and many others the king resolved well and wisely. After that they were baptized, Eiríkr and his men.)

There is a context in Old Norse texts that has received little attention: an underlying theme of contrast between centre and periphery, civilization and wilderness, humanity and monstrosity. I would argue that this dichotomy is a fundamental building block of even the most run-of-the-mill medieval saga. This context is defined by the universal Christian² understanding of the world and is embedded in Old Norse literature through a transfusion of folk-story-telling, Latin learning, and Christian ideology. Nowhere is this context more evident than in the learned writings of medieval Iceland and Norway, though the tension between the civilized centre and monstrous peripheries may easily be seen in many sagas as well, as I have previously argued.³ Here, I would like to take a closer look at the fundamental ideology that influences so much of what we know about Northern European history.

The aim of this essay is not to show how learned Icelanders were dependent on Christian models of viewing the world, as this has already been demonstrated time and time again, and the only way one could miss out on this fact would be to actively ignore the obvious.⁴ As the European influence on

² This, in fact, is what the word ‘Catholic’ means. Usually, ‘Catholic’ is used to designate one of the three main branches of modern Christianity, the other two being Protestant and Orthodox. However, prior to Luther and the Reformation, the term ‘Catholic’ was used to emphasize the *universal* faith common to all Christians. Cf. Sverrir Jakobsson, *Víð og veröldin*, pp. 128–29.

³ Arngrímur Vídalín, *The Supernatural in ‘Íslendingasögur’* and “‘Er þat illt, at þú vilt elska tröll þat’”.

⁴ Suffice it to name but a few examples: Sverrir Jakobsson (*Víð og veröldin*) shows that the world-view of learned Icelanders in the Middle Ages is by its very nature Christian; Sverrir Tómasson (*Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum*) demonstrates the influence of continental thought on Icelandic saga writers. Sufficient proof is further to be found in the sheer volume of extant learned writings from medieval Iceland, both translations of works such as Honorius Augustodunensis’s *Elucidarius* as well as homemade encyclopaedias such as *Hauksbók* and AM 194 8vo, which incessantly allude to and cite directly from learned sources such

Icelandic saga writers is undisputed, the aim here is rather to investigate a single aspect of how this influence affected the literature produced in Iceland during the Middle Ages, in order to demonstrate how deeply ingrained the concept of monstrous peripheries was in the medieval mind and how this is underlined in the sources. The key question explored in this article is how the natives of Iceland, a peripheral island, viewed themselves in light of this deeply rooted idea of monstrous peripheries.

Defining the Centre

The ideological centre of the world lay in Jerusalem.⁵ More often than not, Jerusalem is shown on medieval maps to be quite literally at the centre of the known world.⁶ The birthplace of Christ in Bethlehem is little less than 10 kilometres south of Jerusalem, and it was in the hills outside of Jerusalem that he was later crucified. Jerusalem was thus considered to be the place on Earth that was closest to God. It was a place with layer upon layer of biblical meaning and its central place in the world-view of medieval thought was often, but not

as Pliny, Augustine, and Isidore. There are so many more that only ignorance of these sources would excuse a modern scholar of Old Norse from recognizing that medieval Icelandic authors were very much in keeping with Western European thought.

⁵ In the words of John Block Friedman (*The Monstrous Races*, pp. 43–45): ‘Jerusalem’s placement on the world disk in the Noachid maps is a visual reflection of the belief that it was geographically the centre of the world, an idea that developed from a reading of the phrase that salvation would come “en meso tes ges” from the Septuagint version of Psalm 73:12. This was rendered in the Vulgate as “operatus est salutem in medio terrae” where the theological concept was quickly interpreted as a geographical one, buttressed in part by Ezekiel 5:5, where God says that He will establish Jerusalem in the midst of nations. Isidore of Seville spoke of the city as the “navel of all the land” of Palestine, and Hrabanus Maurus expanded this phrase to read “of the entire earth”. The significance of this city for Christians is clearly stated in a gloss on Psalm 73:12 by the Dominican exegete, Hugh of St Cher. “In the middle of the earth,” he explains, is “Jerusalem, where Christ by his Incarnation, his preaching, and his passion, was the salvation of the human race.”’

⁶ See, e.g., the Hereford map (Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought*, passim). The special importance of Jerusalem for Icelandic scribes is also evident in the three maps of the city extant in Icelandic manuscripts, out of only fourteen known medieval European maps of Jerusalem on the whole (Soffía Guðný Guðmundsdóttir, ‘Uppdráttur af Jórslaborg’), whereas map-making was, to say the least, not otherwise especially practised in medieval Iceland. Rudolf Simek (‘Scandinavian World Maps’) says that out of ‘8000 medieval Icelandic manuscripts that have been preserved, maps play only a minor role: three manuscripts contain between them a total of five *mappae mundi* (plus four postmedieval copies).’

always, both literal in a geographic sense and figurative in a more abstract, theological sense.⁷ It was in Jerusalem that the seeds of salvation were thought to have been sown, and from there religious culture spread along rhizomatic veins throughout the world, enlightening the darkest corners of the Earth with the gospel of Christ.

The divine nature of the place lay within its soil⁸ and in its climate. It was a place marked by the presence of God, where he himself walked the Earth, where his blood was spilt. It was the most sacred of all holy places, barring only Eden itself, which also was considered a place on Earth. This was attested by Christian scholars of authority such as Augustine of Hippo in his *De civitate Dei*, Honorius Augustodunensis in his *Elucidarius*, Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologiae*, Hrabanus Maurus, and many more.⁹ According to them, Paradise lay in the Far East, and we have stories of people such as Eiríkr víðförli who tried to travel to Paradise but found it to be impenetrable, ‘því at eldligr veggr stendr fyrir, sá tekr allt til himins upp’ (for a wall of fire encloses it, reaching all the way to the heavens).¹⁰ Equally canonical to the terrestrial location of Paradise was the idea that it was warded by heavenly figures, as stated in the Vulgate: ‘eiecitque Adam et conlocavit ante paradysum voluptatis cherubin et flammeum gladium atque versatilem ad custodiendam viam ligni vitae’ (so he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden the Cherubim, and the flame of a sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life’).¹¹ Since Paradise had been irrevocably sealed off after the Fall of Man, the place closest to God accessible to man was thought to be Jerusalem.

The superiority of that city and the surrounding Holy Land could be argued for by virtue of many things. For instance, it was widely believed that, just as the climate of Paradise was in all respects absolutely perfect and mild according to scripture,¹² the climate of Jerusalem was the mildest and most perfect one conceivable outside of Paradise. This mild climate in turn produced the mildest people of the most temperate nature.

⁷ Mittman, ‘The Other Close at Hand’, pp. 103–07.

⁸ For a discussion of the soil of Jerusalem as a relic, see Donkin, ‘Earth from Elsewhere’.

⁹ Cf. Sverrir Tómasson, ‘Ferðir þessa heims og annars’, p. 28.

¹⁰ *Eiríks saga víðförla*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 449.

¹¹ Genesis 3.24.

¹² And, by the same token, according to *Stjórn* (ed. by Astås, p. 100), ‘Paradisus er einn ágætr staðr í austr hálfu [...] þar er alldreigin frost ne of mikill hiti’ (Paradisus is the best place in the eastern hemisphere [...] neither is there frost nor too much heat).

This very same concept is prominent in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (extant from c. 1300), a work heavily dependent on the Christian world model in which giants and monstrous creatures await the looming world war which will herald the apocalypse (*ragnarökkr*) in their habitat in the outermost regions of the Earth (*Útgarðr*), outside the civilized areas (*Ásgarðr*, *Midgarðr*), though presumably this would make Asia Minor the central point of the mythological world – another place of great importance to the learned elite.¹⁵ The tension between the godly in-group and the monstrous out-group is the driving force of all narrative in most, if not all, of the mythological sources.¹⁶ Whatever Snorri's purpose was in writing it, his *Edda* is structured according to the only world view known to him. After all, it would be wishful thinking to presume that a man of Christian learning would or even could write an authentic heathen mythology.¹⁷ The god Þórr keeps watch over the borders and sometimes he travels to distant

gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea. And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them. And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever).

¹⁵ The Carolingians were both instrumental in the Christianization of Scandinavia and influential in traditionalizing the inextricable bond between hagiography and legendary saga, Christianity and pedigree. The ancestral bond to great kings of the legendary past became important to consolidate power and legitimize a higher social standing and thus the tradition of tracing one's genealogy to Troy came to be, a practice which was widespread not only among the continental learned elite but among Icelanders as well. The euhemeristic approach to the old Scandinavian gods employed in *Edda* is but one example of this practice among learned Icelanders in the Middle Ages. Another is the genealogy of Haukr Erlendsson, lawspeaker, preserved in his *Hauksbók* which also contains an Old Norse translation of the *Historia regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Breta sögur*), in which the ancestral past of the Brits (and thus the Icelanders) is traced to Troy. Cf. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, 'Úr sögu kristni og kirkju'; Clunies Ross, 'The Development of Old Norse Textual Worlds'.

¹⁶ Even *Skírnismál*, a poem about the god Freyr's obsessive infatuation with the giantess Gerðr Gymisdóttir, shows Freyr giving away his sword in exchange for his servant undertaking a trip to ask Gerðr to wed him (according to *Gylfaginning*; see *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 37). Although it is not stated in *Skírnismál*, it is made clear in *Gylfaginning* that this means Freyr will be without a weapon during *ragnarökkr*: 'Verða mun þat er Frey mun þykkja verr við koma er hann missir sverðsins þá er Muspells synir fara ok herja' (*Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, pp. 31–32). I think a similar understanding would have been inferred by medieval audiences regardless of it being specifically mentioned in the poem. Notwithstanding its questionable narrative to our modern tastes, it was at the time undoubtedly construed as a romantic sacrifice.

¹⁷ Among those who have noted the *Edda*'s basis in Christian thought are Dronke and Dronke, 'The Prologue of the Prose Edda'; Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, pp. 151–73.

lands to fight trolls (although often this happens as a consequence of his travels) while the gods fortify Ásgarðr and those who seek to destroy the world try to gain entry. In fact, all of these elements are combined in the story of the *borgarsmiðr* (builder of city walls) in which a giant in disguise offers his help in building a wall around Ásgarðr while Þórr is away in Austrvegr ‘at berja tröll’ (fighting trolls).¹⁸ While the story ends on a positive note (at least for the gods) with Loki, half god and half giant, birthing the incredibly useful horse Sleipnir, Loki is also said to breed monsters from inside the Æsir’s fortifications and the gods fail to deal properly with this offspring: a gigantic wolf who will eat the Moon and the Sun, a horrendous serpent encircling the world ocean and being the future bane of Þórr,¹⁹ and Hel, the very personification of the underworld. I will come back to concerns of monstrosities being born within society later on.

There are many more sources pointing in the same direction. While I will not contend that the elaborate world map preserved in Hereford Cathedral (dated to *c.* 1285) is by any means a depiction of a monolithic medieval world-view, it does nonetheless give us a detailed description, both visual and textual, of exactly the kind we find in many Old Norse texts and their sources. There, we find the earthly Paradise in the farthest Eastern corner, just as in the description of the Elucidarius-like exchange in *Eiríks saga víðförla* between Eiríkr and the king, quoted in part at the beginning of this essay. Eiríkr asks where Paradise is to be found and the king replies: ‘Í austr er land frá Indíalandi hinu yzta’ (to the East is a land after the farthest India).²⁰ The map also lends confirmation to the view of the periphery described above. Jerusalem sits right in the middle of the map and along its edges monstrous and otherwise strange races are described: *Gigantes* (giants); *Pandea*, who are ruled by women (which was considered a strange arrangement); *Satirii* (satyres); *Fauni* (centaurs), who are *semi caballi homines* (half-horse, half-human); *Scinopodes* (unipeds) who use their feet to shield themselves from the sun; *Gens ore* (straw-drinkers) who are ‘concreto calamo cibatur’ (people with rigid faces who are nourished through straws); *Blemee* (blemmyes), ‘os et oculos habent in pectore’ (they have their mouth and eyes in their chests); *Epiphagi*, ‘isti os et oculos habent in humeris’ (these

¹⁸ *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 35.

¹⁹ The myth of Þórr’s fishing trip in which he attempts to fish the *miðgarðsormr* from the ocean is in fact an interpolation of a Christian myth in which it is Christ who goes out fishing for Leviathan. See Janson, ‘Edda and “Oral Christianity”’.

²⁰ *Eiríks saga víðförla*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 449. Sverrir Tómasson (‘Ferðir þessa heims og annars’, pp. 28–29) also notes the similarity.

people have eyes and mouths on their shoulders) — the list goes on. A notable exception to the overall monstrosity of the peripheral inhabitants of the Hereford world map are the greatly Christian *Nibei*, who were most certainly meant to allude to tales of Prester John and his kingdom in Ethiopia. However, we have the *Cynocephali* (dog-headed people) situated in Karelia, the *Essedones* who make a banquet of their dead, and a second entry where the *Essedones* are counted among the *Anthropophagi* (cannibals), along with this text describing their land:

Omnia horribilia plus quam credi potest frigus intollerabile omni tempore uentus acerimus a montibus quem incolae bizo vocant Hic sont [sunt] homines truculenti nimis humanis carnibus vescentes cruorem potantes fili caim maledicti Hos inclusit dominus per magnum alexandrum nam terre motu facto in conspectu principis montes super montes in circuitu eorum ceciderunt ubi montes deerant ipse eos muro insolubili cinxit Isti inclusi idem esse creduntur qui a solino antropophagi dicuntur inter quos et essedones numerantur nam tempore antichristi erupturi et omni mundo persecucionem illaturi.

(Everything is horrible, more than can be believed; there is intolerable cold; the whole time there is the fiercest wind from the mountains, which the inhabitants call Bizo. Here there are very savage men feeding on human flesh, drinking blood, the sons of the accursed Cain. The Lord closed these in by means of Alexander the Great: for an earthquake took place in the sight of the leader, and mountains fell upon mountains in a circuit around them; where the mountains were absent he himself confined them with a wall that cannot be demolished. And closed in also are believed to be the ones who are called Anthropophagi by Solinus, among whom are numbered the Essedones; for at the time of the Antichrist they will break out and will carry persecution to the whole world.)²¹

Among the peoples of the east surrounding Paradise are the Pygmies, the Monocoli (unipeds), the Giants, and the Astomi (who live on the scent of apples). To the south, that is, in the enormous land mass south of Egypt commonly referred to as Ethiopia in the Middle Ages, are the Hermaphrodites, the Blemmyes and Epiphagi, the Troglodytes ('cave-dwellers'). Finally, to the north in Scandinavia and Scythia are the most monstrous and horrible peoples: the cannibals and pagans, the Scythotauri who murder strangers for sacrifices, those who eat their parents, those who will fight alongside the Antichrist, and then there are the griffins which the Arimaspi fight over emeralds.²² In contrast,



²¹ Latin and translation both from Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought*, pp. 142–45.

²² Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought*, pp. 150–53.

as Naomi Reed Kline notes, 'the inhabitants of Europe are not described or illustrated' on the map, and thus 'the figure of Christ and those surrounding him serve as their exemplars by default; their long bodies and graceful drapery are linked to the beauty of the Christian message [...]. Tellingly, most of the strange and monstrous peoples are relegated to the southernmost and northernmost reaches of the world far from the navel of Jerusalem.'²³

The idea of monsters and strange nations in the extreme and wild countries outside of Western European culture was not new in the Middle Ages. It can be traced to Herodotus's *Histories* (*Ἱστορίαι*) written in the fifth century BC, such as his story of the dealings of the Ichthyophagy (fish-eaters) with the Ethiopians,²⁴ but it was made popular in the first century AD work *Naturalis historia* by Pliny the Elder. The classical types of monsters reported by Herodotus and Pliny are so famous they need no introduction to the habitual reader of medieval literature. These are much the same as those on the Hereford map: Troglodytes, Pygmies, Blemmyes, Sciopodes (unipeds who use their single foot to shield them from sunlight), Cyclopes, Arimaspi, and many more.²⁵ Having been popularized by Pliny, these monsters were later dealt with in Augustine's *De civitate Dei* in the fourth century,²⁶ wherein he argued that, if such monsters were to exist, they would by necessity be the creation of God, as nothing could exist except by virtue of God and that nothing could exist *contra naturam*.²⁷ Augustine's argument seems to have been a sort of Eureka moment in the history of Christianity since all of a sudden all of these strange rumours about wondrous beasts and sightings of monstrous figures recounted in various forms, both written and oral, could simply be explained by the sentiment that, were they real, they were portents of some higher purpose by their very exist-

²³ Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought*, p. 162.

²⁴ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, ed. by Rawlinson and others, pp. 26–33.

²⁵ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, ed. by Rackman, pp. 478–79, 520–21; 478–79, 522–25; 520–21 ('rursusque ab his occidentam versus quosdam sine cervice oculos in umeris habentes'); 520–21; 512–13; 512–13, respectively.

²⁶ Augustine mentions people with one eye in their foreheads (presumably cyclopes), people with their feet turned backwards, hermaphrodites, those who have no mouths but live on the air they breathe, pygmies, females who conceive at the age of five and do not live beyond their eighth year, sciopods, those with no neck and with eyes in their shoulders (blemmyes), and cynocephali, 'whose dogs' heads and actual barking are evidence that they are rather beasts than men'. All these, he argues, should they exist and if they be human, are descended from Adam; see *City of God*, ed. by Sanford and others, v, 40–49.

²⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, ed. by Green, VII, 56–58.



Figure 2:
 Depicted here are the Arimaspi fighting a griffin (top); a Cynocephalus 'dog-head' (centre); Hippopodes, 'horse-footed', with hooves instead of feet (bottom right); the Panotii who could cover their whole body with their ears (bottom centre); and the Cyclopes with a single eye in their forehead which they can pass between them (bottom left). Some of the figures have not yet been identified. Reproduction from *Heimskringla*, III: *Lykilbók*, ed. by Bergljót Soffía Kristjánsdóttir and others reproduced here with kind permission from Forlagið.

ence. The explanation might not be obvious, but it certainly was there, written into the fabric of God's creation. The modern idiom 'God works in mysterious ways' fits into this line of thinking.

This simple answer to a complicated question was then addressed once more by Isidore of Seville in his seventh-century 'best-seller' *Etymologiae*. Much like *Naturalis historia*, Isidore's *Etymologiae* is an encyclopaedic work, but it differs in a few important respects. Pliny's work, written by a Roman polytheist, was meant to be a compendium of all ancient knowledge and as such it was never completed (the work's completion was permanently impeded when Pliny famously died during the Vesuvius eruption of AD 79). The *Etymologiae* was written by a Catholic bishop whose purpose was to include all important knowledge



Figure 3:
 Depicted here are, among others, Blemmyes (centre left), a sciopod (centre), snake-eaters (centre right; bottom left), and a grass-eater (bottom centre). Some of the figures have not been identified. Reproduction from *Heimskringla*, III: *Lykilbók*, ed. by Bergljót Soffía Kristjánsdóttir and others reproduced here with kind permission from Forlagið.

and at the same time to provide with it a proper exegesis to put it into context. Isidore thus includes monstrous kinds of people in his work and then, diverging from Augustine's view that one should not seek to interpret them because God's actions were not to be put under scrutiny, Isidore seeks to discover for what purpose they had been created.²⁸ Such an analysis of the meaning of wondrous beasts was, in fact, the whole purpose of medieval bestiaries, which were interesting compendia of animals, both actual and fictitious, explained through bib-

²⁸ Isidore, *Etymologies*, ed. by Barney and others, pp. 243–46. Part of the problem with an investigation into the meaning of *some lives* might have been that such a study may very quickly escalate into an investigation into the overall *meaning of life*.

lical exegesis. The bestiaries were derived from the second-century Greek work *Physiologus*, which is thought to have been translated into Latin around the year 700, some seventy years after the death of Isidore in 636.

All these works were as well known in Iceland as they were elsewhere in the Middle Ages, and we find them cited in numerous sources. In the manuscript AM 673a I 4to, known as one of two Icelandic *Physiologus* fragments, there is a depiction of many of these monstrous peoples.²⁹ The illuminations show, among other characters, two Blemmyes, one uniped, Ophiophagy (‘snake-eaters’), Cynocephali, and a grass-eater. At first glance, the grass-eater might seem not to belong in such company, were it not for the fact that strange diets warranted strange comparisons, and a grass-eater would have been thought of as equally monstrous as Pliny’s fish-eaters (named *homodubii* in *The Wonders of the East* after their doubtful status),³⁰ the aforementioned Astomi who live only on the scent of apples, the snake-eaters, or the butter-enthusiastic Finns of *Ketils saga hængs*.³¹

In the Hauksbók manuscript AM 544 4to, there is a detailed description of monstrous nations under the heading ‘Her segir fra marghattuðum þjóðum’ (Here is Told of Manifold Nations) along with a description of the various lands of the world. A similar passage is found in the manuscript AM 194 8vo, published by Kristian Kålund as *Alfræði íslenzk 1* (albeit not all of its contents), although Kålund himself seems to have made up the heading ‘Um risabjóðir’ as there is no corresponding heading in the manuscript. This passage, however, draws a connection between the biblical giants that lived before the Flood and the monstrous races, such as Ciclopi, Lamnies (Blemmyes), and Cenocefali, in very much a Plinian fashion (i.e., with no interpretation following their description).³² This same connection is found in Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* where Denmark is argued to have been inhabited by giants as, Saxo claims, may be still seen by the enormous ruins they left behind (‘Danicam uero regionem giganteo quondam cultu exercitam eximie magnitudinis saxa

²⁹ AM 673 a I 4to, fol. 2^v. Both *Physiologus* manuscripts have been edited by Halldór Hermannsson as *The Icelandic Physiologus*, which includes pictures of the manuscript pages.

³⁰ *Wonders of the East*, ed. by Orchard, pp. 188–89.

³¹ Cf. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, pp. 26–28; *Ketils saga hængs*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 251–52. I have previously discussed the butter-loving Finns in Arngrímur Vídalín, “Er þat illt, at þú vilt elska tröll þat”, pp. 192–93.

³² Cf. *Alfræði íslenzk 1*, ed. by Kålund, pp. 34–36.

ueterum bustis ac specubus affixa testantur'),³³ as well as in later works such as Arngrímur Jónsson's *Crymogæa*, published in 1609, which argues extensively for the existence of giants, quoting among others the Bible, Augustine, and Saxo as infallible sources for this.³⁴ So extensive are his arguments that they would, in fact, warrant a separate article, but let it be mentioned here that he invokes not only giants as a generic term in his *gens islandorum* but also the cyclope Polyphemos, the giant Goliath, Trojans, the Nordic gods, and even the Canaanites to prove his reasoning. In this, he takes after his medieval forebears.

There are also accounts of individual monstrous births, which were considered portents.³⁵ Reynistaðarbók (AM 764 4to) is mainly a chronicle but also contains various ecclesiastic texts, and tucked into its annals is a remarkable tale of a two-breasted, two-headed boy being born in the castle of Emmaus:³⁶ 'J þeim kastala er emaus heiter fæddiz anuckurum tima einn smasueinn algiorr at allri skapan upp til nafla [...].'³⁷ While one half feasted, the other slept, but never were both awake at once. This monstrous child died shortly thereafter (one half after the other), and what is most curious is that no attempt is made to decipher what this monster was meant to portend. This story is found with

³³ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. by Friis-Jensen and others, p. 84. The constructions Saxo and other sources speak of as creations of giants (or *enta geweorc* as they were called in Britain) were the monoliths and other structures created by Romans and other ancient societies. See Cohen, *Of Giants*, pp. 5–7.

³⁴ Arngrímur Jónsson, *Crymogæa*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson and others, pp. 105–33.

³⁵ Cf. Isidore, *Etymologies*, ed. by Barney and others, p. 244.

³⁶ Abigail Wheatley (*The Idea of the Castle*, pp. 87–88) identifies the castle Emmaus as the site Abu Gosh, 'where Christ supped with his disciples. Emmaus, too, is a Biblical castle, referred to in Luke 24.13 as a *castellum*. The extremely strong construction of the basilica church on this site, like the central tower with perimeter defences at Bethany, converted Emmaus once more into a castle-like structure, in accordance with the Biblical text. I have already provided evidence in the first chapter to show that both Emmaus and Bethany were referred to as castles quite straightforwardly in medieval texts. These sites have not been much discussed in terms of their symbolic or Biblical significance, as far as I know. However, it seems to me highly probable that Crusader building schemes at such sites were meant to recreate symbolically the castles believed to have occupied them in Biblical times. As such, these building projects are every bit as significant as those undertaken at sites such as the Holy Sepulchre. They all express in their form and symbolism a veneration of Biblical architecture, and a desire by the Crusaders to reconstruct it.'

³⁷ AM 764 4to, fol. 31^v. For the definite analysis of the universal history of AM 764 4to, see Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Universal History in Fourteenth-Century Iceland'.

slight variation in most of the Icelandic annals³⁸ and is perhaps derived from Sigebert of Gembloux's 1111 work *Chronicon sive chronographia: Hoc tempore in castello Uideæ Emaus natus est puer perfectus ab umbilico [...]*.³⁹ Whatever the meaning of this story, it seems to have been considered important in Iceland and, as Reynistaðarbók exhibits, the traditions of annals and other chronicles were very much interlinked.

Universal histories like Reynistaðarbók, *Veraldar saga*, the greatly ambitious *Stjórn*, along with shorter chronicles and fragments found in Hauksbók, AM 194 8vo, AM 731 4to, AM 415 4to, AM 461 12mo, and other manuscripts, are of key importance — not just for our understanding of monsters in the literature but for our understanding of the literary corpus as a whole. These chronicles are based on the Augustinian understanding that the universal history should be divided into six epochs or ages. The first age starts with the creation of the Earth and humanity and ends with Noah and the Flood. The second age continues from there and ends with Abraham, the third age reaches the time of David, the fourth age extends from David until the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, the fifth age from then until the birth of Jesus Christ, and the sixth and final age starts with the resurrection of Christ and ends with the coming of the Antichrist during the Apocalypse and the subsequent Judgement.

All chronicles of this sort are inherently apocalyptic. They are the known history of mankind from its beginning and until the day of their writing, sometime during the final age of the world. Even though Augustine had objected to it, many theologians tried to calculate using various methods how much time was left before Armageddon, and some modern scholars believe that a common fear of the apocalypse started spreading around the year 1000, as it had done before and continued to do with regular intervals thereafter.⁴⁰ Although the reality of the fear of an apocalyptic year 1000 is debated, it does seem that medieval scholars were always mindful of the end of days.⁴¹ The Icelandic annals, which are based on the same chronology as the universal histories,

³⁸ *Islandske annaler*, ed. by Storm, pp. 5, 38, 163. I have yet to scour all of the annals for this tale but undoubtedly there are more instances.

³⁹ Sigebert of Gembloux, *Chronicon*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Landes, 'The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000'.

⁴¹ As Sigurður Nordal ('Völuspá', pp. 172–76) put it, it was more common to calculate the coming of Judgement Day than it was to calculate the next lunar eclipse. Abbo of Fleury speaks of a sermon he heard as a youth in which the Antichrist was said to make his appearance quickly following the year 1000, and Sigurður further argues that a fear of the Apocalypse was a driving force of Óláfr Tryggvason's missionary efforts.

from Genesis to the present, report various kinds of apocalyptic symbols. Frequently interspersed among news of the death of the Pope, the conquests of Theodoric the Great, and other important milestones are signs of the end times, *sén cometa* (a comet was seen), *sól rauð* (red sun), *rægnde blode* (blood rained), *eldsuppkváma* (volcanic eruption), *eclipsis solis*, and more. At one point in *Konungsannáll* three moons are seen at once and the mark of the Cross appeared on the central one,⁴² as if to indicate the two criminals on either side of the crucifix and thus the return of Christ and the beginning of the end. These are all highly dreadful portents, meticulously copied from annal to annal, and they had neither been copied nor reported in the first place had they not been considered important.⁴³ As the monsters on the margins are inseparable from the condemned nations and armies of the Antichrist, they are also regarded as especially important in a world where the apocalypse is always looming.

Monsters under your Bed

I have so far discussed civilization at the centre, monsters on the peripheries of the known world, and their connection to apocalyptic anxieties in the Middle Ages. But there are also monsters born *within* society, monsters that are the unquestionable offspring of humans.

While the annals rarely mention monsters, with the notable exception of the monstrous birth of Emmaus, the chronicles and other encyclopaedic texts frequently do. Notwithstanding the ones already mentioned, an especially thought-provoking example is the great chronicle and biblical translation *Stjórn*, in which the reader is offered the mandatory chapter on monsters with the over-emphasized title *skyssilig skrimsl* (monstrous/trollish monsters), in which we get perhaps the most interesting hypothesis concerning their origins in all the Old Norse texts: they are described as post-human in a similar fashion to the post-hobbit Gollum of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

Sithia, er vér köllum miklu Svíþjóð, var forðum eitt stórt land, kallað svo af [Magog] einum syni Japhets. Henni liggur áfast það land er Hircania heitir. Hafa þessi lönd bæði saman margar þjóðir víða reikandi og farandi sakir landanna ófrjóleiks, af hverjum er sumar plægja akra sér til viðurlífis, sumar af þeim orðnar svo skessulegar og hræðilegar og fæðast viður manna líkami og drekka þeirra blóð sem matropoph-

⁴² *Íslandske annaler*, ed. by Storm, p. 115.

⁴³ Landes, 'The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000', p. 131 passim. Cf. Mosley, 'Past Portents Predict', p. 5 passim.

agi heita. Þar er sú þjóð er Panothios heitir, hafandi svo stór og víð eyru að hún hylur drjúgum allan sinn líkam meður einum saman eyrunum [...].⁴⁴

(Scythia, which we call the greater Sweden, was once a big land, so called by [Magog] one of Japhet's sons. Next to it lies the land called Hircania. Both these lands have many nations widely wandering and travelling for the sake of the infertility of the lands, of which some plow fields to survive, some of them having become so monstrous and terrible and feast on human bodies and drink their blood who are called matropophagi. There is the nation called panothios, having so big and wide ears that they cover most all of their body with only their ears [...].)

We are also offered an interesting description of a woman giving birth to a child 'sua sem blalenzkan burð' (in the liking of an Ethiopian⁴⁵ birth), for at the moment of the child's conception the woman saw a graven image of a similar sort. This story, attributed to Quintillianus, is followed by a story of Hippocrates's intervention in the case of a young woman who has given birth to a child quite unlike its parents. The woman is accused of adultery until Hippocrates asks the mob to search her house to see whether they will find anything in the likeness of the baby, and when, indeed, they do, the woman is cleared of the wrongful charges made against her.⁴⁶ This passage is taken from Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale*,⁴⁷ one of the sources mentioned in *Stjórn*'s prologue, although it has hitherto gone unrecognized that this passage is also a direct translation of St Jerome's fourth-century biblical commentary *Quaestiones hebraicae in libro Geneseos* in which both accounts appear together, as they do in *Stjórn*.⁴⁸ Vincent's *Speculum* is a much younger work, dating from the thirteenth century, and is in turn partly based on the previously mentioned *Chronicon sive chronographia* by Sigebert of Gembloux. I am not aware of any older form of these accounts so Jerome may very well be their originator,

⁴⁴ *Stjórn*, ed. by Astås, p. 117.

⁴⁵ Although the meaning of the word *blámaðr* is somewhat ambiguous, Ethiopian or otherwise African is what the adjective *blálenzkr* must refer to, and *Aethiops* is indeed the word used by St Jerome in the original passage and by Vincent of Beauvais in his later redaction of the same passage.

⁴⁶ *Stjórn*, ed. by Unger, pp. 178–79; *Stjórn*, ed. by Astås, pp. 269–70.

⁴⁷ According to *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* <onp.ku.dk> (s.v. *blálenzkr*), although neither the edition of *Stjórn* edited by Unger nor that edited by Astås identifies the citation. This attribution to Vincent of Beauvais is confirmed by Jakob Benediktsson, 'Some Observations on *Stjórn*', pp. 28–29.

⁴⁸ Jerome, *Quaestiones hebraicae*, ed. by de Lagarde, p. 48.

although this concept of maternal imagination, which was to gain prominence more than 1100 years later in the sixteenth century, such as in the surgeon Ambroise Paré's medical treatise *Des monstres et prodiges* (On Monsters and Marvels)⁴⁹ is also present in Pliny's *Natural History*, although Pliny speaks of human imagination rather than the imagination of women alone.⁵⁰ So much is clear, at least, that the Hippocratic corpus does not include this story or anything like it, although the Hippocratic treatise *Nature of the Child* states that anything affecting the child in utero is brought from the mother to the foetus, 'just as things growing in the earth are also nourished from the earth, and whatever that particular earth possesses, the things growing in it will have the same',⁵¹ and in the treatise *Superfetation* it is said that '[if] a pregnant woman wishes to eat earth or coal, and she does so', although the reason why she should want to do so is never presented, 'a mark will appear on the head of the child at birth as a result'.⁵²

If the mother can produce offspring in the liking of things she can imagine, it means she can also give birth to monsters, such as usually happened in maternal imagination cases during the Renaissance period.⁵³ Even though the Ethiopian child mentioned in *Stjórn* is not a monster per se, it is wildly different from other members of its society, and in fact it belongs to a marginal out-group living in the torrid zone, which was frequently associated with mon-

⁴⁹ Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, pp. 38–42. Cf. Shildrick, 'Maternal Imagination', passim; Roodenburg, 'The Maternal Imagination', passim.

⁵⁰ 'Similitudinum quidem inmensa reputatio est et in qua credantur multa fortuita pollere, visus, auditus memoriae haustaeque imagines sub ipso conceptu. cogitatio etiam utriuslibet animum subito transvolans effingere similitudinem aut miscere existimatur, ideoque plures in homine quam in ceteris omnibus animalibus differentiae quoniam velocitas cogitationum animique celeritas et ingeni varietas multiformes notas inprimunt, cum ceteris animantibus immobiles sint animi et similes omnibus singulisque in suo cuique genere' (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, ed. by Rackham, pp. 540–41: 'Cases of likeness are indeed an extremely wide subject, and one which includes the belief that a great many accidental circumstances are influential — recollections of sights and sounds and actual sense-impressions received at the time of conception. Also a thought suddenly flitting across the mind of either parent is supposed to produce likeness or to cause a combination of features, and the reason why there are more differences in man than in all the other animals is that his swiftness of thought and quickness of mind and variety of mental character impress a great diversity of patterns, whereas the minds of the other animals are sluggish, and are alike for all and sundry, each in their own kind').

⁵¹ Hippocrates, *Generation*, ed. by Potter, pp. 60–63.

⁵² Hippocrates, *Anatomy*, ed. by Potter, pp. 330–31.

⁵³ Cf. Shildrick, 'Maternal Imagination'; Roodenburg, 'The Maternal Imagination'.

sters and demons.⁵⁴ The apparent supernatural quality of the event further indicates the negativity with which it was interpreted. In this way, *Stjórn* not only provides insight into the origin and distribution of ideas of the monstrous in Western thought in the Middle Ages, it also shows that medicinal explanation for birth deformities during the Renaissance period in Europe had already been an object of fancy in medieval Iceland long before, and that its roots lay not in the works of the medicinal father Hippocrates but in the writings of the earliest Church Fathers.

Why is this so? It would not make much sense but for a very particular reason: namely, that monsters were an integral part of the Christian world model, and that it was vital to show that perhaps evil did not only reside ‘out there’ — it also had the capability to affect anyone. The monster, as the antithesis to *us*, also resides within us — just as the half-giant, half-god Loki has potential to becoming impregnated by something alien and consequently birthing horrible and dangerous monsters into Ásgarðr.⁵⁵ Whereas demons are often portrayed as attacking and punishing women for their sins,⁵⁶ the implication here seems to be that the monster is an agent of evil that has the capability to corrupt you from the inside, birthing the Other into society by violently inserting its seed in the imagination of women. It is a world with a centre in Jerusalem and Christendom, with an antithesis in the heathen peripheries whence monstrous nations will attack alongside the armies of the Antichrist during Armageddon to wage war against humanity. It is a world model where the whole of history seems to lead to this eventuality of the End of Days. It is one of the most defining aspects of Christianity as a religion, or in the words of theologian Jaroslav Pelikan, apocalypticism ‘was the mother of all Christian theology’,⁵⁷ so it should come as no surprise that it is also the most defining aspect of the Old Norse religion as it was reconstructed by Christian scholars in the Middle Ages. But one question remains: If this was how remote countries were perceived in general

⁵⁴ I address this association of Ethiopians to Blemmyes, demons, and trolls in a separate article focusing on the semantics of the word *blámaðr*, aimed for publication in 2018.

⁵⁵ Loki is already father to three dangerous monstrosities: Fenrisúlfr, Miðgarðsormr, and Hel. Although there is great use in the benign eight-legged horse Sleipnir to whom Loki is the mother, an eight-legged horse remains a monstrosity regardless — a monstrosity fit for a pagan god such as Óðinn, perhaps.

⁵⁶ Cormack, ‘Visions, Demons and Gender’; Helga Kress, “Grey þykir mér Freyja”, pp. 45–47.

⁵⁷ Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, p. 123.

by Christian authorities, how then did the peripheral nations view themselves? How did the Icelanders see Iceland?

Self and Other

It has been convincingly argued by Margaret Clunies Ross that the key to Icelandic literature lies in genealogies. She writes:

How could a society relatively recently emerged from paganism construct for itself a respectable social and cultural history when its own histories, myths, and legends were both non-Christian and orally transmitted? [...] Like many other European societies in the twelfth century, Icelanders turned to the classical Troy story to provide one kind of solution to this problem.⁵⁸

Genealogical tracings to a legendary past was common practice during the Middle Ages and is also quite prominent in Icelandic sources.

Íslendingabók written by Ari Þorgilsson in the period 1122–33 (extant from the seventeenth century) tells the history of the first years of Icelandic settlement out of Norway, which according to Ari coincided with the reign of King Haraldr hárfagri of Norway and the killing of Edmund, king of England, at the hands of Ívarr, son of Ragnarr loðbrók, seventy and eight hundred years after the birth of Christ, respectively.⁵⁹ *Landnámabók* starts by claiming Iceland to be the legendary Thule before recounting who was pope and king of Scandinavia, Orkney, and Dublin at the time, while maintaining that Iceland was originally settled by Christians (the Papar)⁶⁰ — as Ari does in *Íslendingabók*.⁶¹ *Landnámabók* contains a wealth of genealogical material and is, in fact, still used as a genealogical source in modern Iceland;⁶² on the one hand, there are few means by which to ascertain how factual these genealogies are; on the other, it is obvious that genealogies are capital in themselves. They are the foundation of hereditary power and proof of pedigree, and the fact that *Landnámabók* is still the single source for the origin of most Icelandic families

⁵⁸ Clunies Ross, ‘The Development of Old Norse Textual Worlds’, p. 372.

⁵⁹ *Íslendingabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Landnámabók*, in *Íslendingabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 31–32.

⁶¹ *Íslendingabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, p. 5.

⁶² If the Icelandic online genealogical database, aptly named *Íslendingabók* <islending-abok.is> [last accessed 7 May 2017], is used to look up Ari Þorgilsson, for example, we are told that he wrote *Íslendingabók* and that the source of this information is *Landnámabók*.

underlines the importance of establishing who is who in relation to power and influence.

It should not come as a surprise then that the genealogy of the Sturlungar is preserved in at least two *Edda* manuscripts: AM 748 II 4to and Uppsala-Edda,⁶³ in which the line of Snorri Sturluson is traced from Adam himself through legendary history, such as Priam of Troy and the euhemerized Norse gods.⁶⁴ Haukr Erlendsson's genealogy in *Hauksbók* is built up in much the same way⁶⁵ and, as Annette Lassen has noted, Ari Þorgilsson may have been the first Icelander to claim that Scandinavians are descended from Troy by having Freyr and Njörðr Sviakonungr follow Yngvi Tyrkjakonungr in his genealogy.⁶⁶ The most important link here is Troy and how Icelanders purportedly descend from there. It is interesting to note that both Snorri's *Edda* and *Heimskringla* utilize euhemerism in similar ways: namely, in the way the Norse gods are said to not actually be gods at all, but very human descendants from Troy who travelled north after the war and became kings of Scandinavia. The locals had lost the name of God although they felt him in nature,⁶⁷ and when the Æsir came they were mistaken for divine beings, and in this manner the origin of Norse religion is explained while it is emphasized that the people of Scandinavia never really lost their true faith in the Christian God: they just failed to recognize what their true faith was. And it is this very lineage of old Scandinavian kings, pseudo-gods, and legendary heroes that Snorri claims to belong to in his genealogy. *Heimskringla* is not only the history of the Norwegian kings but also his own history.

It is interesting to note in light of this that *Hauksbók*, with its chronicle, details of the Plinian monsters, and a genealogy linking Haukr to Troy, also contains *Trójumanna saga*, which is an adaption of the *Daretis Phrygii de excidio Trojae historia*. In the Old Norse translation, the heroes and gods are revealed

⁶³ For the latter, cf. *Uppsala-Edda*, ed. by Heimir Pálsson, pp. 118–20.

⁶⁴ The Habsburgs had their line traced to Hector of Troy, incidentally making Haukr a relation to one of the greatest dynasties in European history if all were to be taken literally. Smith, 'Portentous Births and the Monstrous Imagination', p. 270.

⁶⁵ *Hauksbók*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, pp. 504–05.

⁶⁶ Lassen, *Odin på kristent pergament*, p. 237; cf. *Íslendingabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 27–28.

⁶⁷ As Isidore says in his *Etymologies*, 'cum voluntas Creatoris cuiusque conditae rei natura sit. Vnde et ipsi gentiles Deum modo Naturam, modo Deum appellant' (the nature of everything is the will of the Creator. Whence even the pagans address God sometimes as 'Nature', sometimes as 'God'); Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, ed. by Barney and others, p. 243.

to be the Norse gods (Saturnus is Freyr, there is a Krítar-Þórr, and Freyja, Sif, and Gefjun compete over the Apple of Discord, to name a few examples). At the end of *Trójumanna saga* we are informed that:

Hér fellr nú niðr sú saga er Dares hefir sagt ok þykkir sú saga sannleguz enda var hann þar við ok vissi gjörla en þeir aðrir er þessa sögu hafa sagt váro komnir frá Enea ok bera þeir meir af honum vélar eða þau ráð er honum sömðu illa við sína tengda menn ok þykkir þat flestum vitrum mönnum ótrúlegt en þat vita menn at sú ætt er göfguz í heiminum er frá honum eru komnir ok Cresve dóttur Priami konungs sem eru keisararnir er höfuðs menn eru allrar veraldarinnar.⁶⁸

(Here ends the saga that Dares has told and is thought to be most truthful as he was present and knew in detail. But the others who have recounted this saga were descended from Aeneas and they circulate more his lies or his council to his disliked confidants which most wise men find incredulous. But it is known that the family is the noblest in the world which is of his [Aeneas'] house and of Cresve the daughter of king Priam who are the emperors who are champions of the entire world.)

Having already shown his relation to this most noble family, Haukr succeeds in drawing the reader's attention to his own importance and his own authority on matters. *Hauksbók* also contains *Breta sögur*, a translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* (History of the British Kings) in which the British are said to be descended from Troy. *Breta sögur* ends by linking together the British and Norwegian royal families and thus rejoining the two diverged threads of Trojan ancestry.⁶⁹ I would argue that this was an absolutely vital lineage to medieval Icelandic scholars, a status symbol within the larger world. As is stated in the Melabók redaction of *Landnámabók*:

Þat er margra manna mál, at þat sé óskyldr fróðleikr at rita landnám. En vér þykjumsk heldr svara kunna útlendum mönnum, þá er þeir bregða oss því, at vér séim komnir af þrælum eða illmendum, ef vér vitum víst vórar kynferðir sannar, svá ok þeim mönnum, er vita vilja forn frœði eða rekja ættartölur, at taka heldr at upphafi til en höggvask í mitt mál, enda eru svá allar vitrar þjóðir, at vita vilja upphaf sinna landsbyggða eða hvers(u) hvergi til hefjask eða kynslóðir.⁷⁰

(It is said by many that writing about land-claims is irrelevant knowledge. But we feel we are better equipped when answering to foreigners when they castigate us with our ancestry from slaves or evil-doers, if we know our true ancestry; and also

⁶⁸ *Hauksbók*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, p. 222.

⁶⁹ *Hauksbók*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, pp. 301–02.

⁷⁰ *Landnámabók*, in *Íslendingabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, p. 336.

those who wish to know old lore or be able to trace genealogies, to start at the roots rather than cutting in mid-way, for all wise nations wish to know the beginnings of their settlement or how far back it can be traced or their generations.)

It seems that for Icelanders it was particularly important to make clear their relation to the outside world, to give Iceland a place within history. For that purpose, the universal history is the perfect medium; through it the history of nations could be explained in regard to their lineage from Adam and Noah, whether through the noble families of Seth, Shem, and Japheth, or through the accursed Cain or Ham (Icelanders, according to most sources, were descended from Japheth). The Icelandic annals often begin with the Creation and then link Iceland with legendary and biblical history. Such is the case in both *Oddaannálar* and *Oddverjaannáll*,⁷¹ while *Forni annáll* begins with the archangel Gabriel appearing before the Virgin Mary.⁷² *Konungsannáll* begins by stating the number of years passed from the Creation until the time Solomon built his temple,⁷³ numbering Augustine's six ages of the world, and *Lögmansannáll* begins with *passio Petri et Pavli apostolorum*.⁷⁴

The universal history, including its legendary digressions, was a standardized method of understanding the world and not least in relation to oneself.⁷⁵ It was a tradition of viewing history that created a distinction between nations based on their lineage according to scripture and traced their history up until the time of writing. The universal history presents such an all-encompassing Christian understanding of the world that it is unlikely that other histories written by Christian scribes would greatly diverge from the universal model. This in turn leads us precisely to the reason why Icelanders incorporated 'pseudo-historical' texts into their universal history writing and why annals are equally focused on great empires and world history as they are on events happening in this or that region or parish in Iceland: it was done to illustrate that Icelanders were equally important, equally Christian people of great pedigree and in possession of a legendary history. This was especially important to Icelanders because of their marginal place within the Christian world model.

⁷¹ *Oddaannálar og Oddverjaannáll*, ed. by Eiríkur Þormóðsson and Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. 5 and 49 respectively.

⁷² *Islandske annaler*, ed. by Storm, p. 33.

⁷³ *Islandske annaler*, ed. by Storm, p. 79.

⁷⁴ *Islandske annaler*, ed. by Storm, p. 233.

⁷⁵ Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Hin heilaga fortíð', *passim*. See also Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Um aldir alda'.



Sverrir Jakobsson has argued that there were many other more decisive factors determining the self-image of medieval Icelanders than belonging to a national group. They first and foremost thought of themselves as Christians, and they shared a cultural memory and awareness of their origins, which was articulated through the writing of universal history and thus further cemented. The writing of universal histories was part of Icelandic historiography from the very beginning, and Sverrir further points out that, in many ways, the writing of universal history was a prerequisite for the writing of the history of Icelanders, because through it emerged a model for Icelandic historiography, evident for example in *Íslendingabók* which never could have been written without a knowledge of continental histories — the sources being primarily Isidore's *Etymologies* and Bede's *Ecclesiastic History*.⁷⁶ Sverrir Tómasson has likewise shown that the structure of *Íslendingabók* is in every respect very similar to Latin chronicles of the Middle Ages.⁷⁷

How Icelanders viewed themselves is most evident in how 'the Other' is represented in the sources. Lotte Motz has shown that most troll-women in Icelandic sources reside on the very periphery of the Nordic countries, in polar regions and mountains or otherwise secluded places,⁷⁸ and there are strong indications that northern Norway and Finland were considered a monstrous periphery even within the Nordic countries, a region filled with trolls, sorcerers, and trollish sorcerers.⁷⁹ The Nordic countries themselves were considered peripheral by European standards and far removed from civilization. This, in fact, continued to be the case for Iceland in particular well into the modern period,⁸⁰ notwithstanding the fact that in spite of Iceland's marginal location it was never more isolated from Central Europe during the Middle Ages than was, to name an example, Spain. Britain was also considered to be extremely marginal, even by British authors, so much so that it was conceptually connected to the many monsters and marvels of the East (in this context mean-

⁷⁶ Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Hin heilaga fortíð', pp. 150–52.

⁷⁷ Sverrir Tómasson, 'Tækileg vitni', p. 12.

⁷⁸ Motz, *The Beauty and the Hag*, pp. 64–65.

⁷⁹ Arngrímur Vídalín, "Er þat illt, at þú vilt elska tröll þat"; Hermann Pálsson, *Úr land-norðri*, pp. 10–37; Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin*, pp. 246–60.

⁸⁰ Cf. the writings of Anderson (1746), Peerse (1561), and Blefken (1607), in *Frásagnir af Íslandi*, ed. by Gunnar Þór Bjarnason and Már Jónsson; Sumarliði Ísleifsson, *Ísland, framandi land*, pp. 11–77 passim; Sumarliði Ísleifsson, *Tvær eyjar á jadrinum*, pp. 81–120. Peerse in particular gives grotesque descriptions of the diet of Icelanders (pp. 238–41) and thus accentuates their otherness.

ing both Asia and Africa). This changed with *Topographia Hibernica* written by Gerald of Wales (c. 1188). By connecting Ireland and the *Marvels of the East* (c. 1000),⁸¹ Gerald's *Topographia* differs from earlier writings in that he effectively demarginalizes Britain by making the inhabitants of Ireland monstrous by comparison and reminiscent, in fact, of Pliny's monstrous peoples. By shifting 'the world's edge further west than earlier writers', Gerald 'thereby has moved Britain ever so slightly closer to the centre'.⁸² The geographical placement defines the people here, much as it does in Icelandic sources. It would have been imperative for Icelanders to redefine themselves in very much the same way, and there are several indications that they did.

Returning again to Ari Þorgilsson, it has been suggested by among others John Lindow and Pernille Hermann that the foundation narrative of his *Íslendingabók* prefigures Iceland as Christian territory by the mention of various paraphernalia of Irish monks (*papar*) that were found by the first settlers. As such, Iceland was already a Christian country even when it became settled by pagans, and its conversion to Christianity a little over a century later was thus inevitable. This kind of typological interpretation was, according to Pernille Hermann, 'one of the dominant principles for understanding history'.⁸³ Another example has already been mentioned, that is, the Scandinavians of Snorri's *Edda* who have 'lost the name of God' but are depicted as being sensible nonetheless. The notion also surfaces in the conversion narrative of *Íslendingabók* where the pagan Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði is entrusted with the decision of whether the people of Iceland should revert to Christianity, which is the inevitable conclusion he reaches after giving it grave consideration. It was inevitable because the land already was consecrated ground. It was the destiny of Icelanders to assume their God-given Christianity.

Much like Gerald of Wales, if Icelanders were to reaffirm their natural place within the Christian world, another margin had to be located, and just as in the case of Gerald's *Topographia*, medieval Icelandic literature assumes a fixed geographical centre in Iceland, 'attaching peripheral Iceland to the centre of the known world', to quote Lindow,⁸⁴ while thrusting the peripheries even farther outwards. Such is the case in many sagas where trolls and monstrous



⁸¹ This text has been published under the title *Wonders of the East*, ed. by Orchard.

⁸² Mittman, 'The Other Close at Hand', pp. 97–98.

⁸³ Hermann, 'Íslendingabók and History', p. 23.

⁸⁴ Lindow, 'Íslendingabók and Myth', p. 456.

creatures are found in distant countries, such as the *finngálkn* and *flugdreki*⁸⁵ that Þorkell hákr meets in *Njáls saga*,⁸⁶ or the giant and the dragon Jakúlus in *Yngvars saga víðförla*⁸⁷ (evidently borrowed from the worm Iaculus in Isidore's *Etymologies*).⁸⁸ It is also true of the *Hrafnistumannasögur*,⁸⁹ which deal with a few famous ancestors of Icelanders and are centred in Norway, in their heavy focus on the trolls and monsters inhabiting the northernmost parts of Norway and Finland, which results in the southerly parts of Scandinavia being pushed closer to Christian Europe.⁹⁰ The *Vínland sagas* offer perhaps the most potent examples in that not only does the new western frontier have its own Other, the *skrelingjar*, but in *Eiríks saga rauða* there are also other kinds of monsters.⁹¹ In the relatively few cases where monsters appear in Iceland, they are tied to a different kind of peripheral area, yet also as far removed from civilization as possible, such as behind waterfalls (e.g., the *Beowulf*-like episode where Grettir wrestles with the two trolls),⁹² in caves, and in mountains.⁹³

Following the settlement narrative of *Íslendingabók*, Ari Þorgilsson speaks of the settlement of Greenland, 'thus placing Iceland not on the western periphery but somewhere on a line leading to that periphery', as Lindow notes.⁹⁴ In this context, Haukr Erlendsson's interest in *Vínland* should not come as a sur-

⁸⁵ A *finngálkn* is an unspecified human-animal hybrid, a monster sometimes wrongfully identified as a centaur although at other times that may be the case. The prefix *finn-* may allude to the paranormal qualities of Finns and thus suggest a country of origin. *Flugdreki* is simply a flying dragon.

⁸⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, pp. 302–03. For a discussion of this and similar episodes in *Íslendingasögur*, see Arngrímur Vídalín, *The Supernatural in 'Íslendingasögur'*, pp. 86–92. See also Sävborg, 'Avstånd, gräns och förundran'.

⁸⁷ *Yngvars saga víðförla*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 372–73 and 389.

⁸⁸ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, ed. by Barney and others, p. 257. Sverrir Tómasson ('Ferðir þessa heims og annars', p. 33) notes this too.

⁸⁹ That is, *Ketils saga hængs*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Örvar-Odds saga*, and *Ans saga bogsveigis*.

⁹⁰ Arngrímur Vídalín, "Er þat illt, at þú vilt elska tröll þat", pp. 191–204.

⁹¹ On the Other in the *Vínland sagas*, cf. Sverrir Jakobsson, "Black Men and Malignant-Looking"; Larrington, "Undruðusk þá, sem fyrir var"; Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference'; Hanselmann, 'Perifera representationer'.

⁹² *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, pp. 212–17.

⁹³ Cf. Arngrímur Vídalín, *The Supernatural in 'Íslendingasögur'*, pp. 93–114.

⁹⁴ Lindow, *Íslendingabók and Myth*, p. 459.

prise. Not only does he note Blemmyes and Cynocephali in Africa and India, but he also finds Sciopods on the western margins, close to Vínland. Vínland lay in Africa according to the geographical fragment AM 736 I 4to written at the same time as Hauksbók which, incidentally, also contains a hemispherical world map and one of the three Icelandic maps of Jerusalem. The Vínland narratives thus seem to function as a tool — and an excellent one — to centralize Iceland within the Christian world model. One might assume there is more than coincidence at work here.

Concluding Remarks

In this essay, I have explored the theme of marginalization in light of medieval chronicles and genealogies, how the information gleaned from these and other sources betrays the authors' sense of self, and how they wished to be perceived by others. The Bible provided the basis for the understanding of history and, as the universal history or chronicle was the main vehicle for documenting history, with due aid from the Bible, so too was Icelandic historiography founded in the universal history and its typological interpretation of historical events.

A major part of the construction of 'Other' in the Middle Ages was played by the divine location of Jerusalem, situated as close to God as humanly possible in the best and most temperate climate, which influenced the good and pious behaviour of its inhabitants. Those belonging to the outer rim of the world, the torrid and cold zones, were hideously deformed monsters with no civility and no faith or they were, even worse, adversaries of the true faith and thus by Isidore's definition each and every one of them was the Antichrist.⁹⁵ The prophecies foretold of a terrible end to the world in which the condemned nations Gog and Magog would fight alongside the agents of evil, and a similar anxiety is manifested in the many mythological sources centred on the inevitable *ragnarökkr*, in which the giants and monstrous progeny of the mythological counterpart to the Antichrist, Loki, unleash horror upon the world resulting in its destruction. Much like Loki's repeated production of monstrous children, the threat of 'the Other' being produced into society was also at hand, a possibility which women were made responsible for and which they in turn blamed on their imagination. The threat of monsters thus remained both outwards and inwards.



⁹⁵ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, ed. by Barney and others, pp. 184–05.

The sheer amount of writings on the subject of monsters in Iceland indicates that Icelanders were very well aware of this monstrous discourse and, by the same token, their own monstrous placement within the world model. Through a clear tendency of placing the monstrous on peripheries even farther away than Iceland and in different parts of the world, Icelanders seem to have attempted a literary displacement of the island from the monstrous periphery towards the Christian centre of Europe. They would further trace their lineage through legendary heroes to Adam and Eve to prove their nobility and pioussness, and they would write the histories of such heroes as well as the histories of peoples of classical antiquity, all leading eventually to their own prehistory, the settlement of Iceland, the sagas of Icelanders, and the numerous sagas of kings. All these histories serve the purpose of putting Iceland into its correct place in history, not as some remote island far from the Church and God but as a pious country of great pedigree and history. This re-imagining of Iceland, this inside-out geographical replacement of otherness, is particularly apparent in the way in which they viewed their comparative others: as anti-Christian monsters lying in wait out in the uncharted wilderness.

* * *

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