

RACIAL THINKING IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE:
THE CASE OF THE *BLÁMAÐR*

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THERE ARE NOT MANY KIND WORDS to be said about the notion of ‘race’. In the last century alone, it has shown itself to be a way of thinking that both lacks any basis in empirical reality (Montagu 1997, 121–44), and is liable to cause a great deal of human misery. But like a lot of bad ideas, it has been around for a long time. However erroneous or dangerous the notion of race may be, it is at least a highly *convenient* way to think about the world. Concepts which we would today label ‘racial’ existed long before Enlightenment figures such as Linnæus set about dividing humanity into the clades of *Americanus*, *Asiaticus*, *Africanus*, *Europeanus* and *Monstrosus*.¹ Prior to these scientific endeavours, and the tendency beginning around the same time to deploy the word ‘race’ itself in an ethnic sense (*OED* 2014, s.v. *race*), the intellectual mechanisms that inspired racial schemas were at work. As will be seen, groups were still being rendered ‘Other’ on account of their lineage, their supposed hereditary characteristics and/or the shaping environments of their ancestral homelands. Individuals were presumed to exhibit certain qualities (physical, intellectual, moral) on the basis of their affiliation with these groups. Skin colour and geographical setting were used to amplify the alterity of fictional characters, forming recognisable tropes that enjoyed literary currency. These psychological developments constitute ‘race’ in all but name. The purpose of this article is to excavate their presence and function in Old Norse literature.

The past twenty years has produced some interesting research into racial thinking during the Middle Ages. A special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* in 2001 dedicated to the topic is particularly worthy of note. There Robert Bartlett elucidated a conception of medieval

¹ Linnæus 1758, 20–23. Incidentally, Linnæus’s schema also has medieval roots, being at least partially based on the Four Temperaments theory. Thus *Americanus* is *rufus*, *cholericus*, *rectus*. *Europeanus* is *albus*, *sanguineus*, *torosus*. *Asiaticus* is *luridus*, *melancholicus*, *rigidus*. *Africanus* is *niger*, *phlegmaticus*, *laxus*. The descriptions of *Monstrosus*, although obviously based on experiences of real peoples such as the Khoikhoi (*Hottentotti*) would not look out of place amongst medieval tropes like the *cynocephali* or *anthropophagi*.

race rooted in a study of contemporary terminology. Thus, he identified *gens* and *natio* as terms which often implied descent groups, while *populus* did not. But he also observed a strong tradition of cultural delineation: more than being matters of breeding, language and law were just as important as inheritable features such as skin colour. Naturally, the question of inherited rather than environmental forces is complicated by the modern Russian-doll style of organisation of collective identities: the ‘cultural’ nation being subordinate to the supposedly ‘biological’ race. In the same volume William Chester Jordan made a bid to employ race as a key to unlock the complex stratification of personal identity. Jordan acknowledged that the formation of human identity is extremely complex and multi-layered, and that, moreover, the relative importance of its shaping forces is highly subjective. For some, race will be the most important personal identifier, for others less so; for many it will not be considered a relevant identity at all. On account of this idiosyncrasy, Jordan found it expedient to reduce racial thinking to its essence: the explanation of a person’s characteristics by recourse to the values projected on to the collective(s) to which they belong. In his own words: ‘We should not substitute ethnic identity for race . . . They mean the same thing in [this] formulation, but it would . . . be a kind of cowardice to hide behind six syllables when we could speak the language of truth with one’ (2001, 39–56; cf. Bartlett 2001, 39–56).

In dialogue with Jordan and Bartlett—and indeed in the same journal issue—Jeffrey Jerome Cohen stressed the importance of bodily markers for the medieval notion of race, work which was later fleshed out in his *Medieval Identity Machines*. Bartlett acknowledged the role of descent and climate, but highlighted language as the most widely attested racial signifier. For example, Bartlett cites John of Fordun (d. c. 1384) separating the *natio* of the Scots into two *gens* based on their *linguae*, being *Theutonica* and *Scotica*. In a reply to Bartlett, Cohen urges a focus on bodily characteristics, describing medieval race as ‘at once wholly artificial and insistently somatic’ (2003, 192). In truth, both critics are correct and both tendencies are observable. Their dissonance is really caused by focuses on two different types of sources. Bartlett was largely discussing works written by chroniclers and administrators. These were people for whom race was a useful way to understand and manipulate the geopolitical landscape, but who could not rely on physical differences to separate Europeans who very obviously looked much alike. Conversely, Cohen is mostly discussing the *chansons de geste*, popular texts where the need for race and *Realpolitik* to be aligned was not so pronounced. The enmity of the Saracens in chivalric romance is a narrative fixture. There

the abstract concept of an inimical belief system, Islam, is given corporeal expression through a racial enemy, perhaps a dark-skinned *Sarrazine*, or *Açopart*. (On discerning the abstract-theological from the physical-somatic in Old Norse depictions of Muslims, see Cole 2014.) Old Norse literature features a heterogeneity in audiences and registers similar to that of the material examined by Bartlett and Cohen, so here we will bear both their views in mind and let them complement rather than contradict each other.

Race has not been ignored in medieval Scandinavian studies. Jenny Jochens takes the concept at face value and attempts to define the actual skin colours of the Norwegians, Icelanders and their Celtic slaves, but along the way she also provides a noteworthy example of how the well known light/dark dichotomy might be applied to groups as well as individual saga characters (1997, 313–14). For instance, the genealogy of the *Mýramenn* exhibits a number of binary pairs, darkness being aligned with descent from trolls and ugliness, lightness being aligned with humanity, beauty and possibly being *ðargr*. Norwegianness, according to Jochens, was a category that could tolerate all of these traits. Ian McDougall and Sverrir Jakobsson in their respective surveys of Icelandic perceptions of other nations do not describe their focus as racial, but their methods certainly conform to the Bartlett-Jordan definition referred to above. Sverrir acknowledges the presence of ‘model immigrants’ in Icelandic sagas, but he also notes that non-Icelanders are also often marginal characters, given to violence or magic, lacking in agency. They are not unique in this respect. To quote: ‘The important factor is unfamiliarity, not nationality’ (Sverrir Jakobsson 2007, 154). McDougall highlights the adaptation by Old Norse speakers of Latin *barbarismus*, the denigration of non-Latin speakers as possessing a meaningless language, most likely suggestive of their impaired mental faculties. According to McDougall, there was an observable tendency amongst medieval Icelandic authors to differentiate Norse speakers from the weird and wonderful Others imagined to be on the fringes of the known world on the basis of their linguistic alterity. He also examines the role of the interpreter (*túlkr*) in narratives where Scandinavians interact with their northern and eastern neighbours (1986–89, 207–09). Germane to this theme, a great deal of attention has been given to the treatment of the *Finnar* in Old Norse, much of which touches on racial themes. Intriguing work by Sandra Ballif Straubhaar explores the overlapping categories of male/female, Norse/Finnic, human/troll in the *formaldarsögur* (2001, 105–23). Jeremy DeAngelo has recently noted some of the parallels between Classical natural philosophy and Norse conceptions of the *Finnar*, which perhaps result from direct influence. He also draws special attention to another important opposition, namely the

theme of Finnic peoples being technologically incapable compared with the relative sophistication of Norwegians (2010, 257–81). An important article by John Lindow covers a number of these topics, and also sketches some of the racial archetypes of Old Norse literature (1997, 8–28).

We can begin by noting some of the terminology which Old Norse speakers employed to articulate a mode of thought which we might today call racial. Old Norse had a variety of words, like the Latin terms studied by Bartlett (*gens, natio, populus*), all of which had domestic meanings in addition to their occasional use to denote race. Naturally, it is these second definitions which we focus on here. *Kyn* conveys the idea of genetic extraction, but also of type or species. Thus Cleasby and Vigfússon suggest the Latin translation *genus*, or modern English ‘kin, kindred . . . a kind, sort, species’. *Ætt*, being cognate with Old English *æhte*, is defined as ‘what is inborn, native, one’s own, Lat. *proprium*; one’s family, extraction, kindred, pedigree’. *Fólk* is a rather semantically narrow term, quite possibly equivalent to Medieval Latin *populus*, defined in the *Icelandic–English Dictionary* as ‘folk, people’.² The word *þjóð* probably corresponds to Bartlett’s *natio*: ‘a people, a nation’ (Cleasby–Vigfússon 1874, 336, 760, 161, 739). Incidentally, it is also a descendant of the Common Germanic designator for the ‘Self group’. The root **Peudō* is thought to have been used to refer to the Germanic-speaking ‘us’, with **Walhaz* denoting the Romance- or Celtic-speaking ‘them’ (de Vries 1961, 613).

When organising these terms, we may note that the aforementioned ‘Russian-doll’ hierarchy of identities which we know from modern thought also seems to have existed in Old Norse. Today we might see units of personal identity increasing in scale from an individual level: an individual belongs to a family, which maybe belongs to a social class, which perhaps belongs to a tribe, which perhaps belongs to a nation, which belongs to a race (which units are considered applicable will, of course, vary from person to person). For example, Jane Bloggs of the Bloggs family, a supporter of Crystal Palace Football Club, an Englishwoman, a white person, etc. Naturally, this hierarchy is completely subjective, with every individual placing different value on the various collectives, possibly disregarding or adding their own layers of identity (such as subculture, religion, political party, region), and perhaps accepting that the strata of their personal identity will sometimes bring about conflicts

² The spelling of *fólk* with an *ó* rather than *o* follows the orthographies of Michael Barnes and Geir T. Zoëga, and is intended here to avoid confusion with modern English. Cleasby–Vigfússon and the *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* prefer *folk*.

of interest. Similarly, in the Old Icelandic homily on the Nativity we find the following stratification (*HomIsl*, 47):³

Asía heiter austrhálfá heimens. Affrica en syðre hlutr. Európa en neorþe hlutr. þaþan af talþe [keisari Augustus] hversó margar þioþer hafþe hverhlutr heimsens. oc hversó mǫrg kyn hafþe hversem ein þioþ. oc hversó margar borger hvertsem eitt kynet hafþe. oc hversó marger men voro i hverre borg.

Asia is the name of the eastern half of the world, and Africa the southern part. Europe is the northern part. [Emperor Augustus] counted thereof how many races [*þjóðir*] each part of the world had, and how many nations [*kyn*] went into one race, and how many settlements a race had, and how many people there were in each settlement.

We can debate how best to translate *kyn* and *þjóð*, but whatever the homilist would have said if he could speak modern English, it is clear that he had a conception of a greater ethnic identity which could incorporate lesser ethnic identities. Similarly, in *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri Sturluson cites a piece of poetry which appears to stratify identity in a manner very reminiscent of the Jane Bloggs model outlined here (*Skáldskaparmál*, I 106–07):⁴

Maðr heitir einn hverr,	‘Man’ is the name of each one,
tá ef tveir ró,	‘a jaunt’ if there are two,
þorp ef þrír ró,	‘a village’ if there are three,
fjórir ró foruneyti,	‘four’ makes company,
flokk eru fimm menn,	‘a party’ are five men,
sveit ef sex eru,	‘a troop’ if there are six,
...	...
þjóð eru þrír tigur,	‘a nation’ [<i>þjóð</i>] are thirty,
fólk eru fjórir tigur.	‘a race’ [<i>fólk</i>] are forty.

These two sources constitute a sadly limited corpus for reconstructing the stratified bisections of identity. Not only do they belong to radically different genres, but the second piece is clearly designed to fit with conventions of alliteration, ‘þjóð eru þrír tigur . . . fólk eru fjórir tigur’. Is a *fólk* larger than a *þjóð* here only for this reason? Poets of any calibre tend not to say things that they believe are completely untrue just because they rhyme, and any poet that would do so is unlikely to have been cited by a poetic connoisseur like Snorri Sturluson. We should remember that

³ I suspect that this passage has a Latin source, but if so I have not been able to locate it.

⁴ cf. *Hávamál* 63: *þjóð veit, ef þríro*. It has been suggested that there was an oral proverb: *þjóð veit, þat er þrír vitu*, parallel to *Quod tribus est notum, raro solet esse secretum*. For a summary of theories, see Evans 1986, 103–04. Whether the poem Snorri cited was circulating folk poetry or his own composition is thus hard to say.

Skáldskaparmál appears to have been intended as an instructional text. It is not unreasonable to adduce that Snorri believed future skalds would be correct to consider a *þjóð* smaller than a *fólk*. On the other hand, perhaps Snorri did not intend this at all, and he was merely citing a piece of folk poetry whose alliterative content he found pleasing. In this latter train of hypothetical thought, we can observe the persistent idiosyncrasy of racial thinking, i.e. that Snorri might not have agreed with or perhaps not even cared about the supremacy of one stratum of identity over another. Indeed, he may very well have entertained a number of half-formed, unarticulated, mutually exclusive perceptions about the formation of ethnic identity. Perhaps he accepted that, then just as now, there would have been plenty of different personal opinions concerning race, and was happy to present an example he did not particularly endorse for the purpose of poetic pedagogy.

The fact that these two excerpts belong to both homily and secular poetry is not necessarily a handicap for this investigation; if anything, it is a further suggestion of how widespread, if hugely subjective, such classifications were. Despite the limitations of our sources, the differences between them are still telling. The poem cited by Snorri makes *þjóð* a subordinate identity, the homilist makes it the highest. Snorri's poem does not mention *kyn*; other sources, as we shall see, consider it crucial. There seems to have been considerable heterodoxy amongst Norse speakers as to which terms they deemed appropriate and how they ranked their importance. Indeed, when we examine attestations of *fólk*, *kyn*, *ætt* and *þjóð* elsewhere in Old Norse literature, it becomes clear that their meanings are always idiosyncratic. This diversity precludes a study organised neatly by terminology. Rather, here we will briefly examine some of the ways these terms are used to describe one particular Old Norse racial type, and how these words represent various proto-racial notions. *Skrælingar* (Frakes 2001, 157–99) and *Finnar* have been extensively discussed elsewhere, thus the focus here is on a somewhat less discussed figure, the *blámaðr* 'black man'. It should be noted at the outset, however, that the focus is really on the ideas represented by *fólk*, *kyn* etc., and not on the *blámaðr* himself. Doubtless, comparative reading exposes some common elements between various appearances of *blámenn*, but I am not suggesting that the *blámaðr* was a discrete 'stock character' whose appearance performed precisely the same function in every context.

Although he is sometimes viewed as purely fantastical or demonic, particularly when appearing in vision literature (Battista 2006, 113–22), there are plenty of moments in Old Norse literature where the *blámaðr*

appears to be conceived of in ethnic terms. Indeed, the roles of demon, monster and racial Other were not mutually exclusive. As John Lindow observes, 'from the very first, notions of ethnicity and social boundaries have been associated with the supernatural' (1997, 11). That is to say, the *blámaðr*'s fantastic or wondrous qualities did not necessarily preclude the idea that he was also a real being, located in real space and the product of 'real' natural principles. This distinctly racial apprehension of the *blámaðr* is often highlighted by his juxtaposition with another 'Other', the *Serkr* 'Saracen'. In crusader narratives, *Serkr* represent a clear understanding that Islam is a belief system. These Saracens derive their oppositional intent from their religion, not from their race. Like the pre-Christian Norsemen of the *Íslendinga-* and *konungasögur*, they are not shown to have any differences in language or in body from the Christian saga audience. In *Orkneyinga saga* Rognvaldr and his men engage a shipload of *Maumets villumenn* 'Mohammed's heretics'. The saga author remarks that *Þar var mart blámanna, ok veittu þeir ina hørðustu móttöku* 'There were many *blámenn*, and they offered the hardest resistance' (*Orkn*, 225). The Orcadians simply kill them, but they take pains to capture the enemy captain alive. He is no *blámaðr*, but an *oðlingr af Serklandi* 'nobleman from Serkland'. In a way reminiscent of the chivalrous relationship of Saladin and Richard the Lionheart, the captive is apparently able to say farewell to Rognvaldr without the need for an interpreter: '*Þér skuluð nú frá mér þess mest njóta, er þér gáfuð mér líf ok leituðuð mér slikrar sæmðar sem þér máttuð. En gjarna vil ek, at vér sæimsk aldri síðan, ok lifið nú heilir ok vel.*' 'You will now profit greatly from me because you gave me life and showed me such honour as you could. But I would really like it if we never see each other again. Live well and in health' (*Orkn*, 228).⁵ Nor do *Serkr* seem to have any substantial physical differences. It is their religion, rather than any inherited intellectual or physical deficiencies, which means that they are always ultimately overcome. For instance, in *Mírmanns saga*, when the eponymous hero is standing over the dead body of the Muslim champion Lucidarius, he remarks: '*ef þv værer kristinn madur værer þv godur riddari*' 'if you had been a Christian, you would have

⁵ The crew do have Bishop Vilhjálmr of Orkney with them as a *túlkr*—an authorial conceit which allows the Norse-speakers to communicate freely with the other Europeans—but if the *Serkr* were imagined as having an exotic language of their own then it would surely test the audience's credulity were Vilhjálmr to speak it without further comment.

been a good knight' (92–96).⁶ The strictly theological, nonsomatic *Serkr* is probably best explicated in the fragmentary *Ræða gegn biskupum* from c. 200 (*Mírmanns saga* 1997, 298):

En þó at vér hafim þessa talda eru margir ónefndir, þeir sem þá váru villumenn ok mikill stóð skaði af þeira villu. En svá var einn verstr er mestr stóð skaði af er Nicholas advena var kallaðr er var lærisveinn Dróttins sjálfs ok síðan var byskup á Serklandi ok er nú kallaðr Mahomet, ok stendr sú villa hátt er hann boðaði í sínum byskupsdómi at nálíga annarr helfningr heims trúir á hann, ok kalla han guð vera.

Although we have made this little reckoning there are many unnamed who were heretics and much damage arose from their heresy. But there was one who was the worst and who caused the most damage, who was called Nicholas Advena, who was a disciple of the Lord Himself and then became a bishop in Serkland and is now called Mahomet, and this heresy which he preached in his bishopric remains so strong that virtually one half of the world believes in it, and declares him to be a god.

Whatever is objectionable about the *Serkr*, it can be converted away—indeed, sometimes it is, as in the case of the *Serkr* Balam who is baptised and becomes the Christian Vitaclin in *Karlamagnus saga* (*Karlamagnus saga*, 204). But the *blámaðr* constitutes the darker side of the Norse conception of Otherness, be it Islamic, Finnic or demonic: a being who does not *believe* something unnatural, but *is* something unnatural. He is a creature shaped not by his beliefs, but by the baseness of his blood. Whether his environment has conditioned him into this state is not always made clear, but there are some hints that Snorri considered the *þjóð* of the *blámenn* intrinsic to their geographical position. *Blámenn* make several appearance in Snorri's *Heimskringla*. On one occasion they represent the forces of Islam. In *Magnússona saga*, King Sigurðr Jórsalafari (r. 1103–30) and his men confront a troop of *blámenn* on the Balearic island of Formentera. The Moors *æpðu á þá ok eggjuðu þá ok frýðu þeim hugar* 'screached at them, incited them and questioned their courage' (*Heimskringla*, III 245–46). But in *Ynglinga saga*, the prologue to his opus, Snorri also places *blámenn* in the frozen Finnic north (*Heimskringla*, I 9–10):

⁶ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the similarity here with a line in *La Chanson de Roland* concerning the Emir of Balaguet: *De vasselage est-il ben alosez; / Fust chrestiens, asez aüst barnet* (36) 'And for his courage he's famous far and near; / Were he but Christian, right knightly he'd appear' (*La Chanson de Roland*, 36; Sayers 1957, 87).

En norðan at Svartahafi gengr Svíþjóð in mikla eða in kalda. Svíþjóð ina miklu kalla sumir menn eigi minni en Serkland it mikla, sumir jafna henni við Bláland it mikla. Inn nørðri hlutr Svíþjóðar liggir óbyggðr af frosti ok kulda, svá sem inn syðri hlutr Blálands er auðr af sólbruna. Í Svíþjóð eru stórheruð mǫrg. Þar eru ok margs konar þjóðir ok margar tungur. Þar eru risar, ok þar eru dvergar, þar eru blámenn, ok þar eru margs konar undarligar þjóðir.

And north from the Black Sea runs Greater Sweden or Sweden the Cold. Some men reckon Greater Sweden to be no smaller than Greater Serkland, some compare it to Great Bláland. The northerly part of Sweden remains unsettled because of ice and cold, just as the southerly part of Bláland is because of the burning of the sun. There are many vast regions in Sweden. There are also many kinds of races [*þjóðir*] and many languages. There are giants, and there are dwarves, there are *blámenn*, and there are many kinds of bizarre races.

For Snorri, as for many others from Antiquity onwards, extreme climates produce extreme physicalities. There is something coolly scientific about his mode of thought: he does not seem to treat the exotic beings of the North as purely fantastic. They may live alongside *drekar furðuliga stórir* 'terribly large dragons' (10), but they are also a *þjóð*, the same word used to denote historical groups such as the Goths in *Veraldar saga*, the men of Gwynedd in *Breta saga* and the native Greenlanders in Ari Þorgilsson's uniquely sober account in *Íslendingabók* (*ONP*, s.v. *þjóð*). There is nothing to say that Snorri's focus on environment was not simply the result of his own ponderings, but it should be noted that a similar concept is found in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, and other ancient geographers widely read during the Middle Ages (DeAngelo 2010, 267–71, cf. 274) e.g. *Aethiopsis vicini sideris vapore torreri adustisque similes gigni barba et capillo vibrato non est dubium* 'Doubtless, the Ethiopians are scorched by their closeness to the heat of the sun, they are born like those who have been burnt, with crimped beard and hair' (*NH*, 320). Snorri also seems to be applying thirteenth-century racial thought in his *Edda*, again with echoes of Pliny. In *Völuspá*, the giant Surtr, whose name obviously derives from *svartr* 'black', carries a flaming sword and departs from Muspell (or somewhere *sunnan* at any rate) during Ragnarøk (de Vries 1961, 562). But in the poem, the audience is not given any further information about what this homeland is really like. In the *Prose Edda*, Snorri who was surely able to recognise the etymology of Surtr's name, is the first to describe Muspell much like a worldly geographical entity. It is a place to which one can be *útlendir* 'foreign', or which one can call an *óðul* 'native land'. Moreover, it bears a suspicious resemblance to his own description of Africa and to Pliny's 'torrid zone' (*Gylfaginning*, 9):

Pá mælir Þriði: ‘Fyrst var þó sá heimr í suðrhálfu er Muspell heitir. Hann er ljóss ok heitr. Sú átt er logandi ok brennandi, er hann ok ófœrr þeim er þar eru útlendir ok eigi eigu þar óðul. Sá er Surtr nefndr er þar sitr á lands enda til landvarnar. Hann hefir loganda sverð, ok í enda veraldar mun hann fara ok herja ok sigra ǫll goðin ok brenna allan heim með eldi.’

Then Third says: ‘The first world was in the southern region and is called Muspell. It is bright and hot. This part is on fire and burning, and it is impassible to those who are foreign to it and do not have their native land there. He who is named Surtr sits at the land’s end to defend it. He carries a flaming sword, and at the end of the world he will go and attack and defeat all the gods and burn all the world with fire.’

Snorri’s Muspell may profitably be compared with his description of Africa, given in the Prologue to the *Edda: Frá suðri í vestr ok inn at Miðjarðarsjá, sá hlutr var kallaðr Affrica. Hinn syðri hlutr þeirar deildar er heitr ok brunninn af sólu* ‘From the south to the west and down to the Mediterranean, this part was called Africa. The more southerly part of that region is hot and burnt by the sun’ (*Gylfaginning*, 4).

Both of Snorri’s accounts appear to have some affinity with Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia* concerning the torrid zone: *media vero terrarum, qua solis orbita est, exusta flammis et cremata comminus vapore torretur* ‘Truly, in the middle of the two lands, wherein there is the orbit of the sun, it is scorched and burned by the closeness of its heat’ (*NH*, 306). I am not suggesting that Snorri had first-hand knowledge of the *Naturalis Historia*. However, it seems plausible that either during his time studying at Oddi, visiting the Augustinian monks at Viðeyjarklaustur, or in the cultured milieu of King Hákon Hákonarson’s court, he could have encountered some of the classically derived racial theories that were then popular (Ptolemy, Origen, Isidore of Seville). At Hákon’s court, he might well have been exposed to the voguish chivalric material which the young monarch was keen to have translated into the vernacular. Although the earliest ‘Hakonian’ translation is dated to 1226, the appetite for French and English literature at Hákon’s court was considerable (Sif Ríkharrðsdóttir 2012, 27–28), and I see no reason for assuming a total absence of such material during Snorri’s visit in 1220. This would have been the very same material in which, as we have seen, Cohen identifies somatically oriented racism. We might note as an aside that there were even real *blámenn* at Hákon’s court in the year of Snorri’s death. According to *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, in the summer of 1241, *Pá kom til Hákonar konungs sendimaðr Fríðreks keisara er Mattheus hét með mǫrgum ágætum gjöfum. Með honum komu útan fimm Blámenn* (my normalisation) ‘Then the emissary of Emperor Frederick, who was called Mattheus, came to King Hákon with many excellent gifts.

Five *blámenn* arrived with him’ (*Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, 136). Snorri would not have been present to see them for himself, but we may speculate whether Frederick chose his company (were they part of the *ágætar gjöf* themselves?) knowing the curiosity with which Hákon and his court would receive them, newly exposed as they were to exotic French tales of derring-do and eastern enemies.

Regardless of how Snorri came to the conclusion, it is obvious that by his logic Surtr, ‘the black one’, should most naturally live in Muspell/Africa. Although he never calls Surtr a *blámaðr* explicitly, he would have had plenty of *blámenn* to turn to as models if he were looking to describe a dark creature with a special affinity with fire. Consider for example this vivid description from *Bartholomeus saga postola*. When St. Bartholomew exorcises a pagan idol, the following comes running out (*Bartholomeus saga postola*, 763):

ogorlegr blamaþr biki svartari, harðlundlegr oc hvassnefiaðr, siðskeggiaðr oc svart skeggit oc illilict, harit svart oc sitt, sva at toc a tær honum, augun sem elldr væri i at sia, oc flugu gneistar or sem af vellandi iarni. Or munnum oc nausunum for ut sva sem brennusteins logi.

a terrible *blámaðr*, blacker than pitch, proud and pointy-nosed, long-whiskered and with a black beard, ugly, with black hair that went down to his toes, and with eyes that were like looking into fire, and sparks flew from him as from molten iron. Flames of brimstone came from his mouth and nose.

Further associations of *blámenn* with fire are to be found in Marian miracles. An Old Norse translation identified as part of the *Geirardus i Cluny og Altumiugum* tradition (Widding 1996, 95) contains a *blámaðr* apparition who appears to the miracle’s protagonist thus: *Hann retti ut or sinum mvnni elldliga tungu, med huerri hann sagdi sik skylldu sleikia brott allt kiot af hans beinum* ‘He extended out of his mouth a fiery tongue, with which he said he wished to lick away all the meat from his bones’ (*MaS*, 810). A translation of the *Mouth of Hell* type of Marian tale features *two blámenn logandi sem elldr* ‘two *blámenn*, flaming like fire’ (*MaS*, 905–06; Widding 1996, 96).

Snorri does seem to have known the account from *Bartholomeus saga postola*, as the only other attestation of the simile *biki svartari* ‘blacker than pitch’ in West Norse is found in his description of the *Dökkálfar* ‘Dark Elves’ (*Gylfaginning*, 19):

Hár segir: ‘Margir staðir eru þar göfugligir. Sá er einn staðr er kallaðr er Álfheimr. Þar byggvir fólk þat er ljósálfar heita, en dökkálfar búa niðri í jörðu, ok eru þeir ólíkir þeim sýnum en myklu ólíkari reyndum. Ljósálfar eru fegri en sól sýnum, en dökkálfar eru svartari en bik.’

Hár says: ‘There are many excellent places there. One is a place called Álfheimr. The people who are called the Light-Elves live there, but the Dark-Elves live down in the earth, and they are most unlike them in appearance, and much more different in behaviour. The Light-Elves are fairer than the sun, but the Dark-Elves are blacker than pitch.’

Incidentally, the phrase also recalls the trope *neirs cume peiz* ‘blacker than pitch/ink’ that describes Saracens or Ethiopians in the *chansons de geste* (Cohen 2003, 201).

For Snorri, the *blámannþjóð* had an environmental dimension. Elsewhere in Old Norse literature the focus is decidedly genetic. In the fourteenth-century *Bragða-Mágus saga* (alias *Mágus saga jarls*) the author imagines how the child of a Scandinavian woman and a *blámaðr* might look. The result is the *Hálfliti-maðr* ‘Two-Tone man’. He is not technically a character in his own right. Instead he is one of many alter egos adopted by the saga’s eponymous hero. Split down the middle from his head to his toe, one side of his body is black and one is white. In the following scene, we are introduced to Mágus in his ‘Two-Tone Man’ persona for the first time. In the process, he makes an unlikely plea against racial discrimination (*BMs*, 114–15):

Í þeim flokki sáu þeir mann, er nokkut var undarligr . . . Auga hans var annat blátt ok svart, ok at öllu vel fallit, en annat augu var mórætt sem í ketti, ok at öllu illiligt. Önnur kinn hans var hvít sem snjór, og hafði fagran roða; hálf hans nef ok enni ok haka hafði fagran hörundslit. Önnur hans kinn ok allr öðrum megin var hann móræuð, ok svo mátti at kveða, at þeim megin var hans andlit ljótt ok leiðiligt, ok allr hans líkamr, en öðrum megin var hann ljóss ok fagr, sem kjósa mátti . . . [Konungr] spurði hann at nafni. Hann svarar: ‘Auðsæt er nafn mitt, ek heiti Hálfliti-maðr; hefi ek aldri annat nafn haft á æfi minni; en skjót eru vár erindi til yðar: ek vil, herra, biðja yðr hirðvistar, ok dveljast með yðr nokra stund.’ . . . Konungr tók því heldr seinliga: ‘Hafa mæð illa gefizt allir kynjamenn.’⁷ Enn Hálfliti-maðr svarar: ‘Lengi skapar sik sjálfr; eru mæð úsjálfráð mín yfirlit, ok má þá ekki kyn kalla, því at nálíga er engi öðrum líkr í ásjónu, en prófa megit þær mitt athæfi, hvárt yðr sýnist þat með nokkrum kynjum.’

In that group they saw a man who was rather strange . . . One of his eyes was black and dark, and in all ways becoming, but the other eye was yellowish brown as in a cat, and in all ways ugly. One of his cheeks was white as snow

⁷ It is tempting to see some kind of word-play here between *kyn* and *kynjamenn*. However, *kynjamenn* is derived from a false friend of the word *kyn* in the racial sense. This alternative sense of *kyn* as ‘a wonder, miracle’ derives etymologically from *kænn* and *kunna*, while the racial sense is cognate with Old English *cyn*. (Cleasby–Vigfússon 1874, 366; de Vries 1961, 340).

and had a fair flush. Half his nose, forehead and neck had a beautiful skin colour. On his other cheek and on the other side he was yellowish brown, and so one would say that on that side his face was ugly and loathsome, and all his body too, but on the other side he was light and beautiful as one could wish to be . . . [The king] asked his name. He replies: ‘My name is obvious. I am called the Two-Tone Man. I have never had another name in my life, but my errand to you can be briefly stated. Sire, I ask for the shelter of your retinue, and to stay with you a while.’ . . . The king responded rather reluctantly: ‘I have always been given trouble by weirdos.’ The Two-Tone man replies: ‘Nobody creates himself. My appearance was not decided by me, and one cannot call it a race, because there is virtually no other like me in appearance, and you may appraise my actions and see whether I seem to you some sort of weirdo.’

There are obvious nods to the figure of Hel here, herself in a sense biracial, or at least the product of a liaison between two sharply delineated and inimical kinship groups, having a *gýgr* mother and an *áss* father. Another interesting analogue is the case of Feirefiz from Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (c. 1200–05). He is the half-brother of the titular hero; his father was white and his mother was Moorish, the opposite of the arrangement in *Bragða-Mágus saga*. As a result, Feirefiz’s skin is *als ein geschriben permint / swarz und blanc her und dá* (2: 278) ‘like a written parchment / black and white here and there’ and his colouring is also compared to an *agelster* ‘magpie’ (1: 102).⁸ As shown elsewhere, the author of *Bragða-Mágus saga* was one of the most eclectically informed personalities in Old Norse literature (Cole, forthcoming). While space precludes a study of the *Hálfliti-maðr*’s sources, it is far from unthinkable that he was intended to allude to both traditions. In the slightly younger version of the saga (c. 1350) the author adds the following exchange, where we are reminded of Snorri’s positioning of *blámenn* both in Serkland and Svíþjóð in *mikla* (*Msj*, 34–35):

‘Hvar lannda ertu feðingr?’ segir keisara. Hann mælti: ‘Ek em barnfeðdr a Blálandi. Enn blamaðr var faðir minn, enn moðir mín var ettuð norðan yfir haf; ok því em ek blár oððrum megin, at mer bregðr þui til feðr mins; ok marga megí þer þar seá aBlálandi sva vorðna, sem ek em, ok micklu endimligri, ok sva aSithia hinni Micklu.’

‘Of which country are you a native?’ says the emperor. He said: ‘I was born in Bláland. My father was a *blámaðr*, but my mother was descended [ættuð] from the north over the sea, and thus I am black on one side, which I get from my father, and you can see many in Bláland who look like me, and much more hideous besides, and also in Greater Scythia.’

⁸ I am indebted to Joel Anderson for bringing this parallel to my attention.

This is very clearly a mode of thought which we would today consider racial, perhaps even post-racial. The author believes that skin tone is genetically inherited, and imagines what the progeny of an African father and a Scandinavian mother might look like. This scene is taking place in Saxland, so when the mother is said to be *ættuð norðan yfir haf* the inference must be that she is from Scandinavia. It is interesting to note that the author appears to be deploying a binary opposition here; the *blámaðr* being the epitome of blackness, the Scandinavian the epitome of whiteness.⁹ The king makes judgements based on his hue, but the *Hálfliti-maðr* begs to be judged only on his personal merit. In the course of this exchange, the *Hálfliti-maðr* demonstrates a sound understanding of the king's conception of *kyn*. For King Karl, a *kyn* is a collective under which people can be categorised according to their appearance; that is why the argument '*má þá ekki kyn kalla, því at nálíga er engi öðrum líkr í ásjónu*' is effective. Surely this is a mode of thought which is instantly recognisable to anyone acquainted with modern conceptions of race.

There is also a certain double meaning in the *Hálfliti-maðr*'s deployment of the proverb '*engi skapar sik sjálf*'. When the words 'nobody creates himself' come out of Mágus's mouth, they are laced with a teasing sense of irony. Mágus actually *has* created himself by donning his disguise. In fact, he regularly does so by adopting his various personae, namely the *Skeljakarl*, who as his name suggests is entirely bedecked in shells, and the wizened-but-self-rejuvenating Óðinn pastiche, *Víðförull* (for more on these aliases, see Cole, forthcoming). This is why his assurance that 'I have never had any other name in my life' must surely have been intended as a knowing wink at the audience who have already seen him with two different monikers. However, just as Mágus and the *Hálfliti-maðr* are two sides of the same figure, his statement has two different aspects. The words can also be interpreted as coming directly out of the mouth of the avatar rather than the man behind it. The *Hálfliti-maðr* is a marginalised, freakish hybrid, the product of a taboo liaison. Even without the information from the younger recension of the saga, his one feline eye and dark-skinned side evoke the image of the *blámaðr* (we shall see another example of catlike eyes in just a moment). Taken at face value (literally), the invoking of the phrase *engi skapar sik sjálf* by the *Hálfliti-maðr* is simple anti-racist reasoning. It may be cynically and ironically deployed by Mágus to win over the king, but seen in the context of the *Hálfliti-maðr*'s back story it is

⁹ cf. Cohen on Bartholomaeus Anglicus (fl. 1240): 'cold for Bartholomaeus is the "modir of whitenesse", and the white skin of northerners is the outward marker of their inner valiance' (2003, 197). See also Bartlett 2001, 46.

entirely sensible. How many times have victims of racism felt in frustration that they have no power over the racial identity projected upon them?

Besides drawing an analogy with contemporary racism, we can also note some connotations specific to an Old Norse *Weltanschauung* in the intellectual position represented by King Karl. There is a degree of ambiguity in the king's reluctance to accept the *Hálfliti-maðr* because he is a *kynjamaðr*. His distaste for unusual-looking people also applies to the last two personae with which Mágus tricked him, the *Skeljakarl* and *Víðförull*. But it is not the appearance alone which concerns him, rather what that appearance might mean. The king's hesitancy is probably representative of a widely held position in the Old-Norse-speaking world. Dark complexions in general were often distrusted by Icelandic authors, being seen as ugly or suggestive of loutishness, impudence or malevolence. It is a common trope in the *Íslendingasögur* that of two brothers the one with a darker complexion will be a troublemaker (for instance, Grímr and Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, then Egill and Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson in *Egils saga*). The sociologist Christian T. Jonassen went so far as to claim that this eulogising of fair features at the expense of the dark was part of 'a rather complete racist theory which was integrated with . . . mythology and [the Scandinavian] total value system, and which in most respects paralleled the myths of modern racist dogma' (1951, 157; cf. Jochens 1997, 313–14). The proposition that dark skin had universally negative connotations in Old Norse does seem to accord with the image of the *blámaðr*. A survey of Old Norse–Icelandic literature reveals none who is particularly pleasant. A classic account of these unappealing qualities which is largely representative of the presentations of *blámenn* in the *fornaldarsögur* can be found in *Sörla saga sterka*. Having set out from Norway, Prince Sörli and his men sail for days before landing in Africa (*Sörla saga sterka*, 313):

Í þessu bili sjá þeir tólf menn stefna á móti sér, forkunnar stóra ok ólíka öðrum menskum mönnum; svartir vóru þeir ok illilegir ásýndum, ekkert hár á höfði, brýrnar hengu allt á nef niðr, augun gul sem í ketti, en tennrnar sem kalt járn . . . Ok er þeir litu konungsson ok hans menn, tóku þeir allir at hrína mjök grimmilega, ok eggjandi hvórr annan . . . sóttu þá blámenn at honum með mikilli eggjan ok ólmlegum hljóðum ok öskri.

At that moment they saw twelve men heading towards them, exceptionally large and unlike other human beings. They were black and ugly in appearance, with no hair upon their heads. Their brows hung down all the way to their noses. Their eyes were yellow like a cat's, and their teeth were like cold iron . . . And when they saw the prince and his men they all began to squeal most fiercely, and egg each other on . . . then the *blámenn* descended on him with great excitement and savage noises and bellowing.

This image of the *blámaðr* is obviously consistent with Snorri's geographically-minded account and the genetically-minded *Mágus saga*. As in *Heimskringla*, the *blámenn* make terrifying noises as they go into battle, and we see again the use of the verb *at eggja*. As in *Mágus saga*, they have yellow, feline eyes. It is this latter, strikingly somatic line of argument which is built upon. The author frequently enters the semantic field of the bestial: as Lindow observes, he defines the *blámenn* in opposition to [öðrum] *mennskir menn* (1995, 15–16). They have cats' eyes. Furthermore, the verb *at hrína* carries with it the connotations of 'to squeal like swine . . . of an animal in heat' (Cleasby–Vigfússon 1874, 286). But as has been postulated elsewhere these particular *blámenn* appear to be more complex than simple bipartite human-animal hybrids (Cole, 2014). The brow that descends to the nose could simply have been intended as a racial caricature based on the supposed physiognomy of a sub-Saharan face, but it also distorts the face to the point where it seems ludicrous to identify any humanity at all. The words *brýrnar*, *eggjandi*, *eggjan* seem to pun on *at brýna* 'to sharpen', and *egg* 'edge', part of a sword or spear. This, together with the teeth *sem kállt járn*, suggest a countenance which is part animal, part ogre, part weapon. Their features are disturbingly exaggerated, golden eyes against black skin, faces distorted beyond recognition. They cannot speak, they must squeal and roar. They cannot have 'some hair', they must have masses or none at all. When notions of ideological or religious difference are articulated via the body, and when geographical areas (in this case, Africa) are given a particular association with those bodies, it seems hard to deny that we are in the presence of something very much akin to a racial mode of thought. To reiterate an earlier observation concerning the *Serkir*, nothing one can *believe* makes one into such a creature. Rather, it is a question of what one 'is', *how* and *where* one was born.

By way of conclusion, we can describe the *blámaðr* as one manifestation of a racial ideology that at various times included one or more of the following theses:

- 1) that geographical location is a predictor of, or shaping force upon, physiognomy,
- 2) that these corporeal traits are inherited,
- 3) that dark skin colour is associated with negative characteristics, chiefly oppositional intent,
- 4) that characters could still be construed as ethnic Others even when they are described as not quite human, e.g. being noticeably animalistic or demonic,

5) that the body is distinct from belief system as a strategy for articulating ethnic difference.

Þjóð, *kyn*, *fólk* and *ætt* were far from being universally agreed labels for explicating this ideology. There was no widely accepted organisation of these terms into hierarchies, and their application to particular groups was always highly idiosyncratic. That said, Snorri and the Icelandic Homilist both explicate their own schemas for anatomising identity, where lesser collective units were seen as constituting parts of greater collective units. Similarly idiosyncratic evaluations of importance are placed on race relative to other identities in modern thought. For some individuals, race will be considered a very important predictor of personal character. Others will see it as trivial or disregard it entirely. Although no consensus emerged on the appropriateness of each term in Old Norse (*þjóð*, *kyn*, *fólk*, *ætt*), Old-Norse-speaking authors who subscribed to the ideology of race did choose from these four descriptors when seeking a vocabulary of racial difference.

In some ways, the existence of such racial or even racist thought in medieval Iceland is surprising. Until 1262, this was, as Tom Shippey famously pointed out, a country free of all the disadvantages attendant on having a state (of course, it missed out on all the advantages too) (Shippey 1989, 16–17). There were no policy-makers seeking to justify their incursions into foreign territory, and in contrast to its parent nation, Norway, there was no involvement of state figures in Crusades. Moreover, Iceland was geographically remote in the extreme from any peoples who would have had radically different skin tone. Why should such a comparatively sophisticated, if unpleasant, doctrine develop? But when considered a little more closely, the idea of race appears to be well integrated with the contours of medieval Icelandic society. From the outset, the basic principles of breeding and inherited characteristics—we may well call this a primitive genetics—would have been obvious to the Icelanders. Animal husbandry would have been crucial to the means of production for much of Icelandic history, and it can hardly have escaped the notice of the *bændr* that there were different breeds of cattle, some more suitable to certain environments than others, some breeds being admixtures of others (on animal husbandry in Iceland, see Orri Vésteinsson 1998, 1–29). These same *bændr* being the audience or patrons of saga writers, we can expect that the observations made about livestock would have sooner or later been applied to humans, and thereafter passed into the literary sphere too. We should also note that genealogy was a national pastime in medieval Iceland. Some of the earliest works in Old

Norse, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*, are essentially genealogies, and virtually all the *Íslendingasögur* contain protracted catalogues of the breeding of their characters, often reaching back for generations (on the ubiquity of genealogy, see Callow 2006, 300–04). Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that speculation about descent groups and the role of hereditary characteristics should emerge (cf. Bibire 2003, 236). Note, for example, that the word for a ‘family resemblance’ was a *kynfylgja* (Cleasby–Vigfússon 1847, 366).

Distant races such as that of the *blámaðr* would not have been of as much political use to an Icelandic author as they might have been to a propagandist from a country more intimately connected with the Crusades or engaged in wars against other nations. But this remoteness from real confrontations with radically different peoples does not mean that Icelanders would not have been interested in them. As Jochens points out, referring to the assimilation of Celtic slaves brought to Iceland by Norwegian settlers, ‘the adaptability of the original Celts and the corresponding receptivity of the Norse eliminated racial and ethnic tension and produced in Iceland a culture remarkable for its homogeneity’ (1997, 322). Under these circumstances, tales of strange races and consideration of their nature would not have had practical applications, but they would have had exotic allure. Then, just as now, it is quite plausible to imagine that racial thought would have flourished in an environment where people were ignorant of the realities of living alongside ethnic alterity, but were aware of the wider world and eager to understand their place in it.

Note: An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 8th Annual Fiske Conference on Medieval Icelandic Studies at Cornell University in the summer of 2013. I would like to thank the participants there for their generous suggestions. Haki Antonsson read the first draft and provided much-appreciated recommendations. I am also grateful to Alison Finlay and the anonymous reviewers for their many constructive insights.

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