

# Men and Trolls: A Discussion of Race and the Depiction of the Sámi in the *Hrafnistumannasögur*<sup>1</sup>

ARWEN THYSSE 陳藹文

**ABSTRACT:** This article discusses the often stereotyped and essentialized depiction of the Sámi in Old Norse sources in light of recent work on critical race theory and its application to the Middle Ages. Focussing on the portrayal of Sámi characters in the late-medieval *Hrafnistumannasögur* [Sagas of the Men of Hrafnista], this article argues that Norse portrayals of the Sámi were racial in character and that there did indeed exist a racial dynamic between the two peoples, at least during the late-medieval period from which these sagas survive. Consideration is also given towards how both positive and negative portrayals of the Sámi in these sources can be understood within a racialized context. This article is a winner of the 2022 Marna Feldt Graduate Publication Award.

**RÉSUMÉ:** À la lumière des récents travaux sur la théorie raciale critique [critical race theory] et son application dans le contexte du Moyen-ge, cet article traite de la représentation, souvent stéréotypée et essentialiste, des Samis dans les sources en vieux norois. Se concentrant sur les portraits des personnages Samis dans les *Hrafnistumannasögur* [sagas des hommes de Hrafnista] du bas Moyen-ge, cet article argumente que les représentations nordiques des Samis étaient de caractère racial et qu'il existait en effet une dynamique raciale entre les deux peuples, tout du moins durant le bas Moyen-ge, période d'où ces sagas nous proviennent. L'interprétation, dans un contexte racialisé, des représentations positives et négatives des Samis dans ces sources est également pris en considération. Cet article a reçu le Prix Marna Feldt de publication pour diplômé [graduate] de 2022.

Arwen Thyse is a doctoral student in the Department of History, Classics, and Religion at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. She is supported in part by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.



Within the so-called *Hrafnistumannasögur* [Sagas of the Men of Hrafnista], a set of four late-medieval sagas which include *Ketils saga hængs* [Saga of Ketill Trout], *Gríms saga loðinkinna* [Saga of Grímr Hairy-Cheek], *Örvar-Odds saga* [Saga of Arrow-Oddr], and *Áns saga bogsveigis* [Saga of Án Bowbender], the possible kinds of interactions between the Norse and the Sámi were extremely varied. On one hand, a Norse man and a Sámi woman might enter into a loving relationship, albeit one frowned upon by the family's Norse patriarch. On the other hand, a Sámi woman, portrayed as conniving and vindictive, curses her Norse stepdaughter and, once her plot is discovered, is unceremoniously stoned to death by the order of her son-in-law. Several other encounters, especially in *Ketils saga*, *Gríms saga*, and *Örvar-Odds saga*, provide different portrayals of Norse-Sámi relations. In these encounters, most of the Sámi characters are portrayed with a variety of stereotypical physical and cultural features which are generally depicted as inferior and undesirable—indicators of their otherness that cemented the difference between them and the Norse within an implied hierarchy. In a modern context, this kind of typifying would likely evoke words such as *race* and *racism*. While many scholars have remarked on the ways in which the Norse had a general and essentialized depiction of the Sámi, very few have discussed these portrayals as evidence for a racial dynamic between the two groups, likely because race has been and continues to be a disputed term in pre-modern studies.<sup>2</sup> However, Geraldine Heng, in her ground-breaking work *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, convincingly argues that the concept of race can and should be used in studies of the medieval past in order to recognize the grave impact that systemic applications of perceived differences had on medieval societies (4). Using Heng's framework as a guide and the *Hrafnistumannasögur* as a case study, I intend to demonstrate that the Sámi were indeed racialized by the medieval Norse and explore how racialized encounters between the Norse and the Sámi might be characterized.

## Terminology

Before continuing any further, a brief discussion of terms and how they are used in this paper will be useful. *Sámi* is a name used by the Sámi to refer to themselves, and it is generally accepted as having come from an earlier Sámi-Finnic word, *šämä* (Hansen and Olsen 36). While there is evidence that the Norse probably had some awareness of the names the Sámi used to refer to themselves, they most often referred to the Sámi as *finnar* and the land they lived in as *Finnmörk*.<sup>3</sup> I have chosen to use *Sámi* in this paper, instead of the Old Norse term *finnar* in order to emphasize that the Sámi were a historical people that existed beyond their portrayal by the Norse in the sagas. With that in mind,

it should be noted that in this paper I will translate all instances of *finnar* as “Sámi” except when it appears in commonly understood place names like Finnmörk. Following the lead of Jeremy DeAngelo in his work on portrayals of the Sámi and Finns in the Icelandic Sagas, I have also chosen to use *Norse* as a term to refer to north-Germanic peoples in a general sense.<sup>4</sup> This is not because the various groups would have recognized each other as the same, but rather because the medieval literature suggests that the way in which these various ‘Norse’ groups perceived each other’s differences was not accentuated nearly as much as the differences between themselves and the Sámi (DeAngelo 257n1).

Another significant term that will be used throughout this paper is, of course, *race*. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the definition suggested by Geraldine Heng in which “race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content,” and it is a term “attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups” (27). Such a definition recognizes the constructed character and relational aspects of race while also providing an opportunity to consider race beyond its popular perception as a natural category tied to biological and physiognomic features. Instead, race-making may be conducted on the basis of any kind of human difference—real or perceived—whether that be physical, social, cultural, or any combination of the above (Heng 26-27).

## Making Race

Corresponding to Heng’s definition of race, the Norse had a tendency in the sagas to depict the Sámi according to stereotypes formed from a set of essentialized physical and cultural differences—features that not only distinguished the Sámi as distinct from the Norse, but also were frequently cast in a negative light, even if only by association with a Sámi character. The *Hrafnistumannasögur* contain examples of most of these stereotypes. These sagas, which are counted amongst the *fornaldarsögur* [sagas of ancient times], tell stories about the fantastic adventures of a family living on an island farmstead named Hrafnista in eighth and ninth century Norway. Located in Hálogaland, the northern province of Norway bordering the area referred to as Finnmörk, Hrafnista would have been considered relatively close to the land associated with the Sámi—which is made evident by the frequency with which the so-called *Hrafnistumenn* [people of Hrafnista] make forays north into Finnmörk for supplies and adventure. In particular, the first three of the *Hrafnistumannasögur*—*Ketils saga*, *Gríms saga*, and *Örvar-Odds saga*—involve a

number of northern expeditions which include encounters that reveal many of the essentialized tropes applied to the Sámi, and for this reason these three sagas will be the focus of this paper.<sup>5</sup>

### *Magic and the Supernatural*

One of the most prominent and frequent tropes attributed to the Sámi was their portrayal as individuals familiar with the supernatural and adept in the use of magic (DeAngelo 258; Lindow 19; Mundal 99). In *Ketils saga*, the eponymous hero's first adventure into Finnmörk involves two encounters with types of magic typically associated with the Sámi: weather manipulation and shapeshifting.<sup>6</sup> On a fishing trip North of Hrafnista, Ketill finds himself caught in a gale which drives him off course into Finnmörk, impeding his journey until he is met with a whale with human eyes who shields him from the weather:

Ok er hann kom norðr á fjörðu, tók hann ofviðri ok sleit undan til hafs, ok náði ekki höfn, ok rak hann at björgum nokkurum norðr fyrir Finnmörk.... Helzt ofviðrit. Þá lagðist hvalr at honum ok skýldi skipinu við veðrinu, ok þótti honum manns augu í honum vera. (*Ketils saga hængs* 158)

[And when he came north into the fjord, a violent gale took him and drove him off course to sea, and he could not reach safe harbour, and was driven towards some rocks north along Finnmörk.... The storm held out. Then a whale swam towards him and sheltered the ship from the weather, and it seemed to him that it had a man's eyes.]<sup>7</sup>

Once Ketill reaches shore, he is almost immediately offered hospitality by a man named Brúni, who is later revealed to be Sámi. In a verse reply, Ketill accepts Brúni's hospitality and reckons that Sámi magic caused the gale which he came across:

Hér mun ek þiggja!  
Hygg ek, at valdi  
Finnsfjölkyngi  
feikna veðri.  
Ok í allan dag  
einn jós ek við þrjá.  
Hvalr kyrrði haf.  
Hér mun ek þiggja.  
(*Ketils saga hængs* 159)

[Here I will accept! I think the witchcraft of the Sámi caused that monstrous weather. And over an entire day I alone pumped (water) in proportion to three (men). A whale calmed the sea. Here I will accept.]

While the whale is never explicitly referred to as being a human in whale form, or a Sámi person for that matter, the fact that it is described as having “manns augu” [man’s eyes] seems intended to strongly suggest a shapeshifted human being to the audience.<sup>8</sup> Since the episode also occurs while Ketill is in Finnmörk, it seems likely that the whale episode would at least have been associated with the land of the Sámi if not the Sámi themselves. DeAngelo notes that Sámi were frequently portrayed as being able to shapeshift into various northern species like whales and walruses, and that the Sámi often act as the “model” for sorcerer characters in Norse literature, with one of their most common powers being weather manipulation, especially of winter weather (275, 277).<sup>9</sup> DeAngelo connects these features with contemporary Norse perceptions of the North as an inhospitable place home to the fantastic and the strange—a land of the Norse Hel and giants (273). This is reflected in *Gríms saga*, in which Grímr declares that it seemed as though “hann hafa heimtan ór helju” [he had returned from hell] (194) after returning home from adventuring in Finnmörk.<sup>10</sup> The Sámi, as inhabitants of this dangerous northern world, in turn have otherworldly traits attributed to them which make it possible for them to live there—at least from the perspective of a Norseman from the relative South (DeAngelo 272-79). It is these supernatural traits that we see exhibited in Ketill’s northern encounter with the strangely human whale and what he presumes to be the weather magic of the Sámi.

The association drawn between magical abilities and the Sámi in Ketill’s adventure with the whale is not a solitary case in the *Hrafnistumannasögur*. In what is perhaps another nod to weather manipulation in *Ketils saga*, the dramatic entrance of Brúni’s brother, Gusir—the “Finna konungr” [King of the Sámi] and Ketill’s main antagonist during his Finnmörk adventures—arrives with a “mjallroku mikla” [a great whirl of loose snow] (*Ketils saga hængs* 160). Later, magic appears in the final stage of an archery battle, which hitherto had been at an impasse, as it is revealed that Brúni enchanted his brother’s last arrow so that it would appear bent, allowing Ketill’s final shot to meet its mark and with deadly results: “Síðan skutust þeir at, ok mættust nú ekki á fluginum, ok fló broddrinn í brjóst Gusi, ok fekk hann bana. Brúni hafði látit Gusi sýnast hallr fleinninn.” [Afterwards, they shot at each other, and now the arrows did not meet in their flight, and the spiked shaft flew into Gusir’s breast, and he was killed. Brúni had let the arrow shaft seem bent to Gusir] (*Ketils saga hængs* 164). From this fight, Ketill will acquire the arrows known collectively as the

*Gusisnautar* (Gusir's gifts), "Flaug, Hremsu ok Fífu" [Flight, Shaft, and Arrow (lit. cotton grass)] (*Ketils saga hængs* 164) which in *Örvar-Odds saga* are said to have magical qualities.<sup>11</sup> The source of these arrows' magic is somewhat ambiguous. In one part of the explanation it is said that "þær flugu sjálfar af streng ok á, ok þurfti aldri at leita þeira" [they flew by themselves to and from the string, and one never needed to search for them] (*Örvar-Odds saga* 213-14); no explicit source for this magical ability is given, but one might assume that it can be attributed to the Sámi given the fact that they were first owned by Gusir.<sup>12</sup> However, Grímr in his explanation of their properties to Oddr adds that these arrows "bíta allt þat, þeim er til vísat, því at þær eru dvergasmíði" [bite everything, which they aim towards, because they were dwarf-smithed] (*Örvar-Odds saga* 214). Whether the source of the arrows' magic was dwarven or Sámi, they are nevertheless a set of magical items which Ketill and his descendants obtain through an interaction, albeit an antagonistic one, with a Sámi ruler.

Although closely associated with magic, Gusir is still provided the luxury of a characterization beyond his antagonism and his supernatural abilities—he is, after all, portrayed as a person of rank, a King of the Sámi, and he can meet with the Norse Ketill on even footing in both his poetic speech and his combat abilities.<sup>13</sup> Other Sámi antagonists are not so fortunate. This is exemplified by the main antagonist of *Gríms saga*, Grímhildr Jösursdóttir, who is described as a woman from Finnörk, making her very likely Sámi. Unlike Gusir, she is defined almost solely by her magical abilities. Grímhildr's primary act of antagonism is turning Lofthæna—her stepdaughter and Grímr's betrothed—into a troll-woman and cursing her so as to prevent her from ever returning to her human form. In Grímhildr's own words:

Nú skal ek þat launa þér, Lofthæna, at þú hefir sýnt mér þrjúzku ok þverúð, síðan er ek kom í ríkit. Læt ek þat verða um mælt, at þú verðir at inni ljótustu tröllkonu.... Þú skalt ok vera hvímeið öllum, bæði tröllum ok mönnum. Þú skalt ok ... í þessari ánauð vera alla þína ævi ok aldri ór komast, nema nokkurr mennskr maðr játi þér þeim þrim hlutum, sem þú beiðir, sem ek veit, at engi mun vera. Sá er inn fyrsti at þiggja at þér líf, sá annarr at kyssa þik, ok sá er inn þriði at byggja eina sæng ok þú, sem öllum mun first um fara. (*Gríms saga loðinkinna* 193)

[Now I shall reward you, Lofthæna, since you have shown me obstinacy and disobedience after I came into the kingdom. I now let it happen as spoken, that you become the most hideous troll-woman.... You will also be detested by all, both trolls and men. You will also ... be in this bondage for your whole life and

never come out of this, unless some human man agrees to these three things for you, which you will ask, and I know that no one will do. The first thing is to accept life from you (i.e. is saved by you), the second to kiss you, and the third is that you also occupy one bed together, which will be avoided first by all.]

This speech is the single longest encounter that the audience has with Grímhildr's character, and ironically even that is given second-hand through Lofthæna's voice. Thus, the clearest example of a Sámi character in *Gríms saga* is primarily defined by her spiteful use of magic—and shapeshifting magic no less—to unjustly punish her stepdaughter. Indeed, this ill-intended sorcery is represented as the most notable feature of her character. Later, it is also revealed that Grímhildr took over the running of her Norse husband's chieftaincy while Lofthæna was away (*Gríms saga loðinkinna* 194). This meddling (at least from a Norse perspective) as well as Grímhildr's malicious use of magic conforms to a literary trope found in other sagas where Sámi stepmothers and wives are portrayed as quick to use magic as punishment, malevolent, and disturbers of familial peace.<sup>14</sup> Grímhildr complies to all three of these behaviours and is characterized by little else. Through Grímhildr in particular, we see Sámi difference, as Heng would put it, “selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental” where magic and the supernatural became defining features of the Sámi for the Norse, and ones that frequently seemed to overshadow all other potential Sámi features.

### **Bodies and Inheritance**

This essentialized view of magic and the supernatural as an integral part of the Norse portrayal of the Sámi can also be seen at even more fundamental levels of Sámi existence—their bodies. For example, Grímr, who is a mixed-race individual born out of the union between Ketill and Brúni's daughter, Hrafnhildr, is born with a hairy cheek which cannot be harmed by any iron weapon. In the beginning of *Örvar-Odds saga* it is explained how this came to be:

Grímr hét maðr ok var kallaðr loðinkinni. Því var hann svá kallaðr, at hann var með því alinn, en þat kom svá til, at þá þau Ketill hængr, faðir Gríms, ok Hrafnhildr Brúnadóttir gengu í eina sæng, sem fyrr er skrifat, at Brúni breiddi á þau húð eina, er hann hafði boðit til sín Finnum mörgum, ok um nóttina leit Hrafnhildr út undan húðinni ok sá á kinn einum Finnum, en sá var allr loðinn. Ok því hafði Grímr þetta merki síðan, at

menn ætla, at hann muni á þeiri stundu getinn hafa verit.  
(*Örvar-Odds saga* 201)

[There was a man named Grímr and he was called ‘hairy-cheek’. He was called this because he was born with it (i.e. a hairy-cheek), and that came about in this way: as is written before, when Ketill ‘Trout,’ Grímr’s father, and Hrafnhildr Brúnadottir went into one bed, Brúni lay a hide over them, when he had invited many Sámi to his place, and during the night Hrafnhildr looked out from beneath the hide and saw the cheek of one of the Sámi, and that man was entirely hairy. And in this way Grímr received this mark since, as men suppose, he would have been conceived at that moment.]

In *Ketils saga* Brúni also explains why he hides the couple from his Sámi visitors, saying “vil ek eigi, at þit verðið fyrir sjónum þeira” [I do not wish that the two of you should be within their sights] (*Ketils saga hængs* 159). On its own, Brúni’s action seems very practical—Ketill and Hrafnhildr do not need spectators in this rather intimate moment. However, read together with the passage from *Örvar-Odds saga*, these passages seem to suggest that magic is so inextricably woven into the Norse image of the Sámi that the very gaze and bodies of Sámi people have magical and threatening potential.<sup>15</sup> Brúni seems to try to prevent the untoward consequences that may arise should his Sámi visitors gaze upon the couple, but nonetheless, once Hrafnhildr happens to gaze upon one of the Sámi men, the child she conceives is only then slated to develop a magical hairy cheek. Although the text does not clarify whether it is the Sámi man’s presence or Hrafnhildr’s own Sámi body that ultimately results in Grímr’s abnormality, this episode nonetheless tightly weaves the essentialized feature of Sámi magic and the supernatural into Sámi bodies—a binding that finds indelible bodily representation in Grímr’s hairy cheek.

The portrayal of magic as an innate feature of the Sámi and their bodies is related to another feature of the Hrafnistumenn in which they seem to biologically inherit magical skills across generations. In *Gríms saga*, Grímr calls up winds in calm weather, a skill that we are told he inherited from his father, and one that his forebears had as well: “Tók hann þá til listar þeirar, er haft hafði Ketill hængr, faðir hans, ok aðrir Hrafnistumenn, at hann dró upp segl í logni, ok rann þegar byrr á” [Then he took to that art which he had from Ketill ‘Trout’, his father, and the other Hrafnistumenn, that he drew up a sail in calm weather, and immediately a wind rose up] (*Gríms saga loðinkinna* 194).<sup>16</sup> This passage introduces the idea that an ability to manipulate the weather was passed down through the Hrafnista family, but in this passage it is still unclear whether this skill was learned or inherited by blood. However, in *Örvar-Odds*



*saga* this is clarified: although Oddr did not grow up with his father, Grímr, and was instead fostered by a family in the south, during his first journey north to visit his biological family, he finds, with great success, that he has the weather manipulation ability that he had heard belonged to his family:

En þá er þeir váru komnir út um eyjar, tók Oddr til orða:  
 “Erfiðlig er för okkar, ef vit skulum róa alla leið norðr til Hrafnistu; mun nú verða at vita, hvárt ek hefi nokkut af ættargift várri. Þat er mér sagt, at Ketill hængr drægi segl upp í logni. Nú skal ek þat reyna ok draga segl upp.”  
 En þegar þeir höfðu undit seglit, þá gaf þeim byr, til þess at þeir koma til Hrafnistu snemma dags. (*Örvar-Odds saga* 210)

[But then when they were coming around the outside of the islands, Oddr began to speak: “Our journey is toilsome, if we must row the entire journey north to Hrafnista; I will now try to understand whether I have some of our family’s gift. It has been said to me, that Ketill ‘Trout’ drew up the sail in calm weather. Now I shall try and draw up the sail.”

And right away once they unwound the sail, it then gave them a fair wind, such that they came to Hrafnista early in the day.]

Not only does Oddr realize his weather manipulation ability before he meets his father—suggesting that it is an innate rather than a learned ability—but he also refers to it as an *ættargift*, connecting this skill, this “gift,” to family and genealogy.<sup>17</sup> The context and choice of wording suggests an innate and inherited ability rather than a learned one, and that the Norse viewed magic ability, at least as they attributed it to the Sámi, as a matter of blood and bloodline—a biological feature that could be passed down from generation to generation.

This conflation of biology with what seems more likely to be an outsider’s view of a feature of Sámi culture demonstrates a typical feature of medieval race-making where essentialized cultural or social differences were attributed to natural and inherent differences. In her introductory points on medieval religion and race, Heng discusses how “nature and the sociocultural” in the Middle Ages should not be viewed as “bifurcated spheres in medieval race-formation” and that religion could “function both socioculturally and biopolitically” (27, emphasis in original). This is exemplified by the medieval Christian discourse on converted Jews, who often continued to be identified by Christian onlookers as Jewish even if the conversion process had occurred several generations in the past (Heng 75-81). Although Heng is primarily speaking of the role of religion in medieval acts of race-making, a similar

intertwining of the ‘sociocultural’ and the ‘natural’ can be seen in the association of magic within Sámi bodies, where magic, in the eyes of the Norse, became such a fundamental feature of Sámi existence that it was tied up in ideas of their very bodies and bloodlines.

### **Religion**

That being said, a religious element to Norse views of Sámi magic must be considered. The Norse attribution of magic as an integral feature of the Sámi was likely related to the Sámi’s shamanistic religion which remained in practice all through the Middle Ages (Mundal 112-13; Aalto and Lehtola 13). Although the Norse were likely somewhat familiar with Sámi religion, after the Norse conversion to Christianity, the Sámi would have certainly been viewed as different on religious grounds, which manifests in the sagas through the frequent association of Sámi magic with their non-Christian religion (Lindow 24; Mundal 112).<sup>18</sup> For example, in Snorri Sturluson’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* [Saga of Ólafr Tryggvason], one of the chieftains against King Ólafr and his evangelizing activities, Eyvindr Kinnrifa [cleft cheek], is ultimately unable to receive baptism because he is a spirit placed into a human body and brought to life through Sámi magic, which could suggest the incompatibility of that magic with, or even its opposition to Christianity (Snorri Sturluson 1941, 323). Although the association of Sámi magic with paganism does not appear with any frequency in the *Hrafnistumannasögur*, its significance in the sagas more broadly suggests a reason why Sámi magic came to be so key to differentiating Sámi otherness, and why it seems to be so frequently viewed with suspicion, even if it had the potential to benefit the Norse.

### **Trolls and Trollishness**

The magical qualities attributed to the Sámi are also related to their frequent association with *tröll* which was, in Old Norse literature, applied to a variety of beings characterized by magic and shapeshifting.<sup>19</sup> This connection was in no way a positive one, since *tröll* in Old Norse literature were almost exclusively portrayed as monstrous and primitive antagonists of Norse society and its heroes. As Martin Arnold suggests in his “Cultural History of the Troll,” the troll appears to evoke “all that is most threatening and offensive to social stability” (124). This is certainly true in the *Hrafnistumannasögur* where all trolls and trollishness are portrayed as actively impeding Norse characters in some fashion, and the accepted response is to either drive them away or kill them outright. Ketill, Grímr, and Oddr all encounter a great variety of trolls and trollish beings which they usually chase away or, more usually, kill. The prominence of the latter is clearly demonstrated in *Gríms saga* when one among a family of trolls comments that Grímr and his father were “meir lagðir til þess

er aðrir menn at drepa niðr tröll ok bergbúa” [more inclined to this than other men in the matter of cutting down trolls and berg-dwellers] (*Gríms saga loðinkinna* 189).

This sense that trolls and trollishness worked against Norse interests is also present when trolls are associated closely with the Sámi in these sagas. One of the most prominent examples, and one frequently commented upon in scholarship, is the episode in *Ketils saga* in which Hrafnhildr, Brúni’s daughter and Ketill’s lover, visits Hrafnista and is angrily rejected by Ketill’s father Hallbjörn Hálftröll. Despite the fact that he is himself *hálftröll* [half-troll]—suggesting his own Sámi or otherwise mixed background—Hallbjörn angrily opposes his son’s attempt to have Hrafnhildr stay with them, calling her a tröll in the process:

Þá kom þar skip við eyna, ok var þar á Hrafnhildr Brúnadóttir ok sonr þeira Ketils, er Grímr hét. Ketill bauð þeim þar at vera. Hallbjörn mælti: “Hví býðr þú trölli þessu hér at vera?” Ok var hann mjök byrstr ok styggr við hennar kvámu. (*Ketils saga hængs* 164-65)

[Then a ship came there to the island, and there on it was Hrafnhildr Brúnadóttir and her son by Ketill, who was named Grímr. Ketill invited them there. Hallbjörn said: “Why did you invite this troll here?” And he was very angry and offended with her visit.]

Hallbjörn does this again a little later in the saga as his son pines for Hrafnhildr and remains uninterested in a promising marriage to a Norse woman, telling Ketill, “er þat illt, at þú vilt elska tröll þat” [it is a bad thing, that you are willing to love that troll] (*Ketils saga hængs* 165). With his angry and frustrated reaction, Hallbjörn’s use of *tröll* to refer to Hrafnhildr is clearly meant in a pejorative sense and to evoke all the bad qualities of trolls.<sup>20</sup> In these passages, Hallbjörn seems to perceive Hrafnhildr as impeding Ketill’s success through a socially acceptable marriage to a Norse woman. Since the surrounding narrative is quite sympathetic to Ketill and Hrafnhildr’s situation, Hallbjörn curiously seems to display a certain amount of trollishness himself, since his actions also impede Ketill and, by proxy, Hrafnhildr’s happiness. The situation as a whole is somewhat unique, however, since Hrafnhildr is otherwise portrayed sympathetically, and when Hrafnhildr was first introduced in the saga, she was referred to as a *kona* [woman], not a troll (*Ketils saga hængs* 159). It seems to be Hallbjörn’s own attitudes towards her background that causes him to unleash the word *tröll* and all its associations upon her; one might even think of his use of the term as a racial slur.

### *Names and Naming*

Hallbjörn's use of *tröll* as a pejorative term for Hrafnhildir raises the significance of naming within processes of race-making. Both *tröll* and *finnar*—the most common terms used by the Norse to refer to the Sámi—were not names that the Sámi would have used to refer to themselves in their own language (Hansen and Olsen 36).<sup>21</sup> Nor was it the case that the Norse lacked knowledge of the self-referential terms used by the Sámi. In *Vatnsdæla saga*, the term *semsveinar* is used self-referentially by a group of Sámi men; the second unit of this compound is clearly from the Old Norse *sveinn* (boy), but the first unit, *sem-*, is likely of Sámi origin and was used as a self-referential term by the Sámi (Hansen and Olsen 36; Mundal 98; Hermann Pálsson 30). This is the only time this term appears in the Old Norse corpus (Hansen and Olsen 36; Hermann Pálsson 30), but it does suggest at least some familiarity with Sámi terms of self-reference, especially as it was not deemed necessary to explicate the term further for a Norse audience.

Why would the Norse use a different name to refer to the Sámi if they were aware of Sámi names for themselves, and what does this have to do with race? In her discussion of the term *Saracen* and its etymologies, both real and false, Heng brings to light the ways in which naming can be used to encapsulate a set of essentialized features. As Heng points out, *Saracen* was used by the Latin West to identify a diverse set of peoples who shared Islam as their religion, and by doing so the Latin West gave an “essence-imparting power to Islam, a power to confer a quintessential identity that horizontally flattens out other identity attributes.” The various groups subsumed by this broad sweeping use of the word *Saracen* came to be viewed as a homogenous “international foe,” rather than the linguistically, ethnically, and geographically diverse peoples they really were. Later, false etymologies, which claimed Arabs had taken up the name as an elaborate lie in order to hide a shameful ancestry, compounded another essentialized feature into this act of naming, further colouring the view of the Latin West towards the so-called Saracens (Heng 111).

Thus, the act of naming has power. And, Hallbjörn's use of the word *tröll* and the Norse practice of naming the Sámi *finnar* also functioned as a tool of race-making that essentialized the Sámi according to a set of understood characteristics. The associations surrounding the word *tröll* have already been discussed, but the term *finnar* was also, at one time, used to encapsulate a certain set of features. The term is likely Germanic in origin and was used in the works of Classical writers, including Tacitus and Ptolemy who identified the *finnar* (*fenni* in Latin and *finnoi* in Greek) as a northern hunting people that appeared distinct when compared to the civilized agrarian culture of their writers (Hansen and Olsen 36). The term thus has roots in ideas about the essential difference of these northern groups from the culture performing the

act of naming. That *finnar* should continue to be used in this way is supported by medieval Scandinavian sources, such as the *Historia Norwegiae* (History of Norway), which also essentialize the *finnar* as a hunting people (Barracough 35-36). This manifests itself in *Ketils saga* where Brúni has a shooting range [*skotbakki*], goes hunting [*dýraveiðar*], and conveniently has a bow on hand for Ketill to use; Gusir also demonstrates his exceptional abilities with the bow in his fight with Ketill (*Ketils saga hængs* 159-60, 163). There was also some ambiguity in the use of the term *finnar* where it could be used to refer to both the Sámi and to people from Finland, suggesting that the Norse did not see much to distinguish the two groups and thus easily attributed the same term and its associations to both (Mundal 98). *Finnar*, like *tröll*, could also be used to flatten complexity and encapsulate a culture according to essentialized differences, and thus was also part of the act of race-making.<sup>22</sup>

### **Suggesting the Subhuman**

Returning to the Norse association of the Sámi with trolls and trollishness, the other major instance in the *Hrafnistumannasögur* where Sámi seem to be related to trolls is through the character of Grímhildr in *Gríms saga*. Although Grímhildr is never referred to as a troll herself, she belongs to the family of trolls mentioned earlier. This is first introduced when Hrímnir, one of “tvau tröll” [two trolls] whom Grímr comes across while in Finnmörk, remarks to another that the disappearance of Lofthæna before her wedding with Grímr was caused by Grímhildr, his sister: “Því veldr Grímhildr, systir mín” [Grímhildr, my sister, caused this] (*Gríms saga loðinkinna* 189). In Lofthæna’s account of what Grímhildr did to her, Grímhildr also confirms this familial connection saying that she will send Lofthæna north where she will live and quarrel with her brother, Hrímnir: “[þú] byggir þar afhelli ok sitir þar í stóðrenni við Hrímní, bróður minn, ok eigizt þit við bæði margt ok illt” [(you) will live there in a side-cave and sit there in the neighborhood by Hrímnir, my brother, and you two will fight each other over both numerous and evil things] (*Gríms saga loðinkinna* 193). The familial connection between Grímhildr, who is never referred to as a *tröll*, and Hrímnir, who is unquestionably one, blurs the distinction between these two types of beings—the presumably human and the troll.

This blurring of the boundaries between the human and the troll relates to the Norse perception of the Sámi as subhuman. Trolls and trollishness in and of themselves were perceived as a challenge to humanity—not only were trolls portrayed as primitive and monstrous, but they were also perceived as being steeped in magic, and in particular shapeshifting magic (Ármann Jakobsson 47; DeAngelo 275-76). The portrayal of Grímhildr’s troll family encapsulates a representation of the first two of these features. Hrímnir and the female troll, with whom he lives, live in a “helli mikinn” [a large cave] rather than in a

human dwelling, and wear short skin clothes that barely cover them: “Þau váru í stuttum ok skörpum skinnstökkum bæði. Gerla sá hann [Grímr], hversu þau váru í sköpun bæði í millum fótanna” [They were both in short, coarse, and shrivelled tunics made of skin. He (Grímr) clearly saw how they were both shaped between their legs] (*Gríms saga loðinkinna* 189). In the eyes of the Norse Grímr, the living conditions, and the material and cut of their clothes—both primitive and immodest—mark out these trolls as different from himself and from humanity; as Sandra Ballif Straubhar puts it, trolls are “other” and “marked as deserving of death and shame because of their difference from the common run of humankind” (118).

If Hrímnir is somehow subhuman because of his otherness, Grímhildr presumably would have been perceived, by association, as questionably human. This, compounded with her familial connection to trolls and her ability to shapeshift others, may further bring Grímhildr’s true form into question, underscoring her potential subhuman condition. It is perhaps the perception of her questionable humanness that makes Grímr’s response to her machinations so absolute and final: just like the other trolls Grímr has encountered on his adventures, he immediately chooses to have her killed, and “lét hann Grímhildi verða tekna ok færðan belg á höfuð henni ok barða grjóti í hel” [he let Grímhildr be taken and a bag placed on her head and stoned to death] (*Gríms saga loðinkinna* 194). Her death is almost a footnote, and one that seems to state an outcome that the Norse may have perceived as natural and undisturbing, since the victim was, in their view, questionably human.

Similar suggestions that the Sámi were perceived as subhuman through physical monstrosity, primitivity, and shapeshifting are scattered throughout the *Hrafnistumannasögur*. In *Ketils saga*, while Brúni is not marked off as physically different, his daughter Hrafnhildr is described as being remarkably strong and having an unusually wide face: “Hún hét Hrafnhildr ok var harðla stór vexti ok þó drengilig. Svá er sagt, at hún hafði alnar breitt andlit” [She was called Hrafnhildr, and was very great in stature and valiant to boot. It is said, that she had a face an ell (half-yard) wide] (*Ketils saga hængs* 159). Later, Ketill, somewhat enigmatically, speaks of “grýlur Brúna” [Brúni’s ogresses] (160), which may well be a reference to Hrafnhildr and her unnamed sister since there is no mention of Brúni having any other women, or monsters for that matter, in his vicinity. If Ketill is indeed speaking of Hrafnhildr here, her great strength and valiance seem to be tied to some perception of her monstrousness and otherness. The stereotype of the wide-faced Sámi returns soon after Hrafnhildr’s introduction where Brúni’s Sámi guests are described as “ekki mjóleitir” [not narrow-faced] (*Ketils saga hængs* 159). The essentializing of physical features like a broad face and the subsequent attribution of such features in a general way to visually mark out a social group is reminiscent of both medieval and modern forms of race-making. The portrayal of Jews with

hooked noses in the medieval and even modern period is a particularly salient example. Indeed, wide faces have been used as a stereotypical racial marker for the Sámi even in the modern day (Straubhaar 107n5).

Brúni's Sámi visitors also display other stereotypical traits of primitiveness and uncertain humanness as represented through their bodies. In Old Norse literature, a common trope in the portrayal of the Sámi was their desire for and the value placed upon butter. This may seem somewhat strange and inconsequential, but as Phil Cardew notes the sources suggest that butter and butter production were viewed as an important feature of a civilized agrarian society, and the Sámi's real or perceived value of butter became a difference between them and the Norse that could be used and essentialized as a fundamental distinction, where the Sámi came to be viewed as "unsophisticated in terms of human skills—like butter making" (Cardew 151-52). As Arngrímur Vídalín (2013) points out, using differences in diet to alienate certain groups from a perceived social center has a long precedent; for example, a number of the classical Plinian races, including the *anthropophagi* [man-eaters] and *panphagi* [eaters of everything], were primarily defined according to their diet (182). In this way, butter became a marker of civilization for the Norse, and the Sámi, who in the sagas desire butter but seem unable to make it themselves, become marked out as a primitive culture in Norse eyes.<sup>23</sup> In *Ketils saga* in particular, the idea that the Sámi are obsessed with butter turns up in relation to Brúni's Sámi guests, who he says have "koma til smjörlaupa þinna [Ketils]" [come for your (Ketill's) butter-chest] (*Ketils saga hængs* 159). Underscoring this desire for butter, the same Sámi later remark on the satisfaction they get from eating it: "Mannfögnuðr er oss at smjöri þessu" [To us, this butter is fine fare] (*Ketils saga hængs* 159).

While this group of Sámi is portrayed as primitive in *Ketils saga*, the details added to this episode in *Örvar-Odds saga* bring us back to perceptions of sub-humanness through physical form and shapeshifting. As has been mentioned before, in *Örvar-Odds saga* the reason for Grímr's hairy cheek is explained by the incident in which Hrafnhildr peeked out from under the protective hide set up by her father and saw the cheek of one of the Sámi guests who "var allr loðinn" [was entirely hairy] (*Örvar-Odds saga* 201). Since this man's hairiness is portrayed as such a notable thing, and it results in Gríms own magical hairy cheek, one imagines that this is not to be understood as body hair within human proportions. Rather, this passage seems to suggest that this Sámi man is outside of human norms, perhaps almost beastly, raising the question of whether he is more animal than man. Extending this to the more general association of the Sámi with shapeshifting, the question becomes whether one can be truly human if one can also take the form of an animal.<sup>24</sup>

This questioning of another group's humanness was also part of other medieval acts of race-making. Heng offers an extreme and disturbing example

of this in which Christian accounts and later literary imaginings of Crusaders cannibalising ‘Saracens’ reduced Muslim enemies “into the less-than-human—into consumables,” giving them the status of *things* rather than humans (120-23). In the Norse context, Vídalín (2020) has discussed the importance of dehumanization in racial thinking, and hones in on the monstrification of *blámenn* [lit. blue-men], a term used to refer to people with dark or black skin in Old Norse sources which might include trolls, demons, Ethiopians, and Muslims (226-28).<sup>25</sup> He points out that *blámenn* were often represented as “bestial” and “less-than-human” by conflating them with animals and by portraying them as unable to communicate with human language (2020, 232-33). While the Norse perception of the Sámi does not, as far as I know, enter the realm of cannibalism as in Heng’s example, the suggestion that the Sámi were less-than-human through a perceived primitivism, monstrous physical otherness, and uncertain humanness does have parallels with the dehumanizing tendencies which Heng and Vídalín observe.

### ***Relationships in Structure***

By portraying the Sámi as questionably human and racially other, the Norse positioned themselves as the superior people in the Scandinavian North, which in turn created a ‘structural relationship’ that manifested itself through societally acceptable relationships and law codes. Only the first of these is represented in the *Hrafnistumannasögur* but it is important to discuss both aspects to illustrate that Norse race-making tendencies present in the literature, including the *Hrafnistumannasögur*, did have structural implications. The first of these structural features is that marriages or intimate relationships between the Norse and the Sámi are almost exclusively represented as occurring between a Norse man and a Sámi woman. Ketill’s relationship with Hrafnhildr, and the marriage of Grímhildr into a Norse family are two such examples. Hermann Pálsson also notes that there does not appear to be any references to individuals with a Sámi father and a Norse mother in the surviving literature (31).<sup>26</sup> Typically, this kind of scenario suggests a hierarchy of race relations: a unilateral flow of women from a race perceived as inferior into the race perceived as superior is viewed as less destabilizing to the latter race than a reciprocal flow of women in the other direction. Margaret Clunies Ross (1994) has discussed this in relation to the sexual practices across social groups presented in Norse mythology, where within the hierarchy between the *Æsir* and the *jötunn* (*Æsir* > *jötunn*), the *Æsir* never marry but may have sexual liaisons with *jötunn* women, while *jötunn* men are prohibited from having access to *Æsir* women (100-01). When this flow is reversed or has the potential to be reversed, this is always seen as unusual and threatening (Clunies Ross



1994, 101n11). The parallels between Æsir-jötunn relationships and Norse-Sámi relationships underscores the racial hierarchy between the two groups.

The second structural feature of Norse race-making towards the Sámi appears in Norse law codes. The *Borgarthing* and *Eidsivathing* law codes from Eastern Norway both make reference to the Sámi and refer to racialized features that have already been discussed: magic and religion. The surviving manuscripts of these law codes date to the first half of the fourteenth century, but some of their content most likely originated in the early eleventh century (Collinson, et al. 5-6). Mundal summarizes the contents of these law codes:

These laws forbid Christians to have contact with the people called the *finnar*. It is forbidden to go to *Finnmörk* to ask for prophecies, it is forbidden to believe in *finnar*, that is to say: to believe in their power to help, and it is forbidden to make a journey to them or to contact them. (Mundal 102)<sup>27</sup>

Such law codes demonstrate a strongly perceived distinction between the Norse and the Sámi and a desire, at least at the level of Norse law makers, to maintain separation between these two groups. That these laws should focus so closely on Sámi religion and magic suggests how deeply these features had become essentialized and fundamental in Norse views of the Sámi. It also may suggest an anxiety around racial mixing since an attempt was being made to prevent contact between the two groups, which necessarily included sexual and marital contact.<sup>28</sup>

However, laws are generally made in reaction to social circumstances, and their presence thus suggests that the activity they legislated against was relatively common at the time when the law codes were put in place. By extension, Norse interactions with the Sámi must have also been quite common around the time of these law codes, and there is certainly much evidence from both literary and archaeological sources to suggest that interactions between the Sámi and the Norse did occur with some frequency before and during this period (Barraclough 31-33; Hansen and Olsen 142-45, 206-14). In a similar way, the source material I am using only supports with any certainty a racialized view of the Sámi from a Norse perspective and, furthermore, one held by the intellectual class who wrote down the versions of the saga that survive to us. Since these sagas also arise out of a late-medieval tradition, these texts primarily reflect late-medieval attitudes towards the Sámi rather than those of the Viking Age, although some reflection of earlier attitudes may still be contained within them. These earlier attitudes towards the Sámi were probably much more neutral, a point which Thomas DuBois argues in his study of the lack of congruence between the prose of Snorri Sturluson's late-medieval *Heimskringla* and the Viking Age skaldic poetry that it preserves (309-21).<sup>29</sup>

However, by the late Middle Ages, as we have seen, Norse attitudes towards the Sámi were quite heavily racialized according to what were usually negative perceptions of their religion and magic, as well as their supposed physical otherness and primitivity.

## Comprehending the Racial Other

Given the racialized portrayal of the Sámi and the generally negative way in which the essentialized tropes attributed to them were viewed, what can be made of the occasional positive encounters that are depicted between the Sámi and the Norse? Brúni, for example, is described with only a very few racial markers—he lives in the North, uses a bow, and wields magic. However, the negative qualities of the North and the extent of his magical capabilities seem to be diminished. Firstly, despite living in Finnmörk, his way of life seems to bear resemblance to a Norseman from the South—he seems to live a settled agrarian life like the Norse since Ketill meets him chopping wood and caring for animals on his farm [bæ] (*Ketils saga* 158), and he does not have the perceived primitive quality of desiring butter as his Sámi visitors do, despite having ample access to Ketill's butter stash. Secondly, in regards to magic, Brúni actually takes steps to protect Ketill and Hrafnhildr from the potential threat of Sámi magic, and also uses magic himself to assist Ketill. One other point of note is that he is not portrayed as physically distinct or trollish himself, even when his daughters are. If it were not for the fact that his brother is clearly identified as King of the Sámi, Brúni might well pass as a Norseman in this saga.

The portrayal of the mixed-race relationship between Ketill and Hrafnhildr is also unexpectedly nuanced. Both Ketill and Hrafnhildr are much affected by the fact they are unable to be together. As has been mentioned before, Ketill pines for her, refusing to seek out other potential marriage partners, and even intends to go North seemingly with the intent to visit her. Hrafnhildr, at their final and reluctant parting, is “mjök döpr ok þrungin, ok var þat auðsýnt, at henni þótti mikit fyrir skilnaðinum við Ketil” [very downcast and oppressed, and it was easy to see that her parting with Ketill was a great grief for her] (*Ketils saga hængs* 166). Despite Hallbjörn's undisguised displeasure, Ketill and Hrafnhildr's relationship serves as a rare instance of a Norse-Sámi couple in which the Sámi woman is not represented as a malicious being threatening the peace and prosperity of a Norse family.

How then do these prominent and sympathetic encounters fit into the racialization of the Sámi more generally? It may be that the Norse writers of these sagas did not wish to portray the ancestors of an important line of Norse heroes according to the stereotyped and largely negative view of the Sámi, since one might expect that the ancestors of the Hrafnistumenn would be individuals

that the Norse would accept and even be proud of. However, seeing as many saga heroes and their ancestors have difficult personalities and backgrounds, this explanation seems to oversimplify the relatively positive portrayals of Brúni and Hrafnhildr. Instead, the concepts of ‘comprehensible other’ and ‘absolute other’ may be effectively applied in this scenario. Drawing on post-colonial and critical race theory, as well as subaltern studies, Basil Arnould Price in his study of *Kjalnesinga saga* argues that varying intensities of racialized portrayals can be thought of as a “continuum of comprehensible and incomprehensible racial Others” (443). On this continuum, the comprehensible other is still portrayed with racialized traits, but is made comprehensible to the dominant audience because that Other takes on important features of the dominant culture’s identity; in contrast, incomprehensible others are portrayed as subhuman, silent, and beyond the comprehension of the dominant group (Price 444-48).

Considered on this continuum, the more positive and sympathetic encounters with the Sámi seem to fall squarely within this idea of the ‘comprehensible other’. Brúni, in particular, is depicted as *almost* Norse by taking on features of Norse cultural identity, although he still bears some muted markers of the constructed Sámi race. Brúni’s portrayal also suggests some sense of ‘race exceptionalism’ where he is portrayed as being a near exception to the usual racial stereotype. While similar to Brúni, Hrafnhildr’s portrayal shifts slightly towards the incomprehensible side of the continuum with her unusual physical features and perhaps innate magical qualities. Even so, she is given a voice within the text through which the audience comes to understand her, and in so doing remains largely comprehensible and a sympathetic character for the Norse, despite her racial otherness. Although Hallbjörn suggests that she is not quite human by referring to her as a troll, this seems to demonstrate that it is he who simply does not wish to comprehend her, not that she has fully taken on an incomprehensible position.

This close relationship the Norse drew between Sámi and trolls, however, does show Norse racial thinking on the Sámi moving towards incomprehensible depictions. Trolls are not quite human, and by association the Sámi are also represented with questionable humanness. Grímhildr is the most salient example of this in that she is closely associated with trolls and shapeshifting magic and is easily eliminated for her machinations and perhaps her difference. Similarly, Brúni’s Sámi guests fit more on this incomprehensible end of the spectrum in which they are portrayed as not only primitive, but also containing the potential for threatening magic and subhuman bodies. However, the Sámi rarely seem to reach an entirely incomprehensible state, especially in the *Hrafnistumannasögur*. Even when they are portrayed as or related to trolls, they can still speak, and be understood by the Norse to some extent. This is not the case for another northern group that appears in *Örvar-Odds saga*, the *bjarmar*

who cannot be understood anymore than “fuglaklið” [the din of birds] (*Örvar-Odds saga* 215), and are viewed as a people that can be plundered without any qualms.<sup>30</sup> The fact that the Sámi always seem to be at least somewhat comprehensible to the Norse suggests that they were perhaps a more frequent part of Norse day-to-day life and cultural interactions than the literary sources might have us believe.

This range of methods by which to view and understand the Sámi as a racial other likely arose out of the practicalities of the cross-cultural environment in which the Norse had real and varied interactions with the Sámi, ranging from the mutually beneficial to discordant. The Sámi as ‘comprehensible other’ offered a means through which to understand more positive or neutral interactions with the Sámi. Despite the positive leanings suggested by a depiction that allows a racial group to be comprehended by another, it is important to emphasize that this does not diminish the real negative impacts of the race-making that remains present in such depictions. *Racial* exceptionalism and comprehensible *racial* others are still bound up in racial thinking and continue to perpetuate perceived boundaries constructed from essentialized and often simplified differences. The effects of this are more naturally seen in the Norse depictions where the Sámi lose their comprehensibility, since these show a tendency to construct a sense of Norse superiority on the basis of racial difference that could justify any of the actions, mainly violent, taken against that racial other.

## Conclusion

While the Norse and the Sámi of the medieval period were certainly aware of the differences between each others’ cultures, the Norse took those differences—stretched, reimagined, and even mixed them with fantasy—and in effect constructed a racialized image of the Sámi that was largely comprised of a few essentialized features which they viewed as fundamental to Sámi identity. Unfortunately, given the lack of medieval material that gives voice to Sámi perspectives on the Norse, it is difficult to determine what Sámi responses were to such portrayals and what image they, in turn, constructed of the Norse. However, what can be said, and as demonstrated through the *Hrafnistumannasögur*, is that the Norse wielded a set of race-making tools intertwined with their own religious, social, and cultural biases that caricatured the Sámi as an inferior, magic wielding, pagan, primitive, and even subhuman people. Although *race* as a concept may have its roots in modernity, the processes that construct it were certainly present and active in medieval Scandinavia, especially when *race* and *race-making* are understood as social constructions based on perceived social, cultural, and biological

differences. The enduring power of medieval racial stereotyping is also made evident by the fact that the simplified and stereotyped Norse image of the Sámi continues to have ramifications for the Sámi and their Norse neighbours up into the present day. Images, even false ones, have power, and modernity is well aware of the bloody affects of preconceived racial attitudes. Some of Hrafnhildr's final recorded words come to mind, for it would not seem out of place for her to be speaking of racial profiling when she said, "Þar hefir þú nú gert fyrir um fundi okkra" [In this matter, you have now predetermined the outcome of our meeting] (*Ketils saga hængs* 166).

#### NOTES

1. This paper was written for a seminar on *Race in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, and I would like to extend my sincere thanks to my professor, Dr. Natalie M. Van Deusen, and my classmates, Chelsea Fritz and Sofia Parilla for their valuable suggestions and guidance on earlier versions of this paper. Without them, many sparks would not have ignited. I would also like to thank Dr. Thomas DuBois and Dr. Brandon Alakas for their advice and insight as I refined this work.
2. Among studies of Old Norse Literature, Richard Cole and Arngrímur Vídalín are the notable exceptions to this, as they frame their studies within critical race theory and broader discussions of pre-modern race-making. In his work on "Racial Thinking in Old Norse Literature: The Case of the *blámaðr*," Cole overtly points to the prominence of "racial themes" in the current scholarship on the Sámi in Old Norse literature (21-24), and in "The Man Who Seemed Like a Troll: Racism in Old Norse Literature," Vídalín (2020) lists the Sámi (*finnar*) as one of the groups of people that are "marginalized and dehumanized in Old Norse literature on the basis of pre-racial thought" (224). Vídalín (2020) uses *pre-racial* to indicate racial thinking that occurs prior to the development of the concept of *race* in the nineteenth century (221).
3. Else Mundal points out that there is some ambiguity in the use of *finnar* since it was sometimes also used to refer to people from Finland. However, given that the geographic focus of the *Hrafnistumannasögur* tends to be in Norway, and explicit reference is made to *Finnmörk* rather than *Finnland*, it seems reasonable to me that it is the Sámi that are being referred to in these particular sagas, and not Finns. See Mundal (98, 101), and Hansen and Olsen (36).
4. Jeremy DeAngelo uses *finnar* throughout his work to collectively refer to both the Sámi and Finns (257).
5. *Áns saga bogsveigis*, unlike the rest of the *Hrafnistumannasögur*, is less focused on conflicts between the Norse and peripheral groups, and instead follows an internal conflict within Norse society between a tyrannical ruler and his subjects. As a result, northern peoples only figure very briefly in this saga, and so it will not figure in this paper.
6. Mundal notes, however, that these types of magic were not unique to Sámi sorcerers, and Norse users of magic might also be found shape shifting or manipulating the weather (112). However, as DeAngelo points out, the Sámi seem

to serve as “the most common model” for sorcerers in the sagas (277). This observation is further supported by Stephen Mitchell (also referenced by DeAngelo) who argues that the Sámi and those marked by “otherness” were viewed as having innate magical abilities, while the Norse were usually only able to acquire magical skills (140-44). It is this innate magical ability associated with weather and shape-shifting that is under discussion here.

7. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.
8. I am indebted to Chip Robinson’s notes on *Ketils saga* for pointing out in reference to this passage that shapeshifting was often a feature of shamans and the supernatural (6n17). I have found that a similar incident also occurs in *Laxdæla saga* (Saga of the People of Laxárdalr) where a seal with *manns augu* appears during stormy weather which eventually causes the drowning of Thorsteinn Surt and nine others (*Laxdæla saga* 41). It may be significant in this case that an attempt was made to hunt down the seal. However, there is less of a reason to connect this to the Sámi than in *Ketils saga* since the *Laxdæla saga* episode occurs in Iceland. That the eyes betray a shapeshifted being’s original form is further suggested by an episode of *Skáldskaparmál* (Language of Poetry) (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 24), in which the giant Geirrod recognizes Loki because of his eyes, despite the fact that Loki has disguised himself in the form of a falcon.
9. For more on the Sámi and weather magic, see Moyne, 1981. John Lindow has also discussed the propensity for ethnic others in Norse literature to be given supernatural qualities in his article “Supernatural and Ethnic Others.”
10. For a late medieval audience, the reference to *hel* would have likely conjured up images of both the Norse Hel and the Christian Hell. As DeAngelo points out, the Norse Hel was located in the North, and while it gradually came to be associated with the Christian Hell the northern qualities of the Germanic tradition still occasionally appeared (273).
11. Although the earlier sagas do not mention their magical qualities, it seems likely that a medieval audience would perhaps have understood or expected that these arrows were indeed magical. Not only did they appear through an encounter with the Sámi, but some story about these arrows likely existed long before these sagas were written down: kennings about Gusir’s arrows survive in skaldic poetry from the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Clunies Ross 2017, 2:550, 579). It is probably also significant that the magical quality of these arrows is explained in *Örvar-Odds saga* which has the oldest recorded tradition of the *Hrafnistumannasögur* (Clunies Ross 2017, 1:3, 288; 2:549, 805-06). The older tradition surrounding these arrows suggests that a medieval audience would probably have recalled the legendary significance of these arrows even if this was not explained in the saga.
12. The reoccurring idea in Old Norse literature—and medieval literature more broadly—that weapons had innate abilities and even personalities may also be at play here. See Brunning (139-43) and Pearce (56-57).
13. On the significance of poetic exchanges, see Straubhaar.
14. A couple major examples come to mind: In *Hrólfs saga kraka* (Saga of Hrólfr Kraki) (ch. 24-30), Hvít is a daughter of the King of the Sámi who marries King Hring of Norway. She attempts to seduce Bjorn, King Hring’s son, and the father of Boðvarr Bjarki. Bjorn refuses, and Hvít as punishment causes him to shapeshift into a bear.

Boðvarr later kills her in revenge. Also, in Snorri Sturluson's *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* (Saga of Haraldr the Fairhaired) (ch. 25), Snæfriðr, another daughter of a Sámi king, marries King Haraldr Hárfagri. The narrative suggests that she causes him to become obsessed with her which, in turn, causes him to neglect his duties as king. The neglect continues even after her death because she purportedly used magic to prevent the decay of her body. Also, see Mundal (111) and Barraclough (45) for discussions of the negative portrayal of Sámi wives.

15. As the *Hrafnistumannasögur* were grouped together in medieval manuscripts, it does not seem unlikely that a medieval audience would have connected these two passages together.
16. That all the *Hrafnistumenn* should have this wind manipulation skill can be explained by the fact that the family patriarch, Hallbjörn Hálftröll was possibly half-Sámi himself, as the byname *hálftröll* (half-troll) may indicate Sámi parentage (see Hermann Pálsson 31). As will be discussed later, being a troll or trollish was commonly attributed to the Sámi. Hallbjörn and Ketill thus can be interpreted as having Sámi ancestry, even before *Hrafnhildr's* Sámi bloodline enters the family.
17. The primary meaning of *gift* in Old Norse corresponds, in its primary meaning, to the English "gift," and included within its semantic range the sense of a "gift of nature" (*Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, s.v. "gift *sb.f.*" accessed December 15, 2021, <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o27023>, esp. the Cleasby-Vigfússon entry) It should be noted that *ættargift* is often defined as "family-luck"; this uses the secondary meaning of *gift*—"luck" or "good fortune" (*Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, s.v. "ættar-gift *sb.f.*" accessed December 15, 2021, <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o91545>). In this passage, however, there seems little reason to choose the sense of "luck" over the more common meaning of "gift," especially since manipulating the weather is described as a *list* (art) in *Gríms saga*. Furthermore, since the reader is given to understand that Oddr has not since birth had any contact with his biological family, reading *ættargift* as an innate family gift, in this case for weather manipulation, does not seem unreasonable.
18. Mundal (112-13) as well as Aalto and Lehtola (13) both discuss how the Norse were familiar, or at least felt themselves to be familiar with Sámi religion because of similarities between it and their own pre-Christian Norse religion. The relationship between the two religious groups were likely close since, as Jurij Kusmenko argues, Sámi religion seems to have had a significant impact on pre-Christian mythology (75-82).
19. For discussions of *tröll* and their connection to magic, see Ármann Jakobsson (47); Arnold (122); DeAngelo (275); Aalto and Lehtola (14).
20. Hermann Pálsson also notes this in his overview of the various terms used to refer to the Sámi (29, 31).
21. Note that in the Norse sources some Sámi characters do refer to themselves or others of their community as *finnar*. The most salient example from the sources under discussion here would be when Bruni refers to his brother as "Gusir Finna konungr" (*Ketils saga hængs* 160). However, since this type of naming occurs in the Norse language in a Norse source, it cannot be trusted to be an accurate reflection of Sámi self-naming practices, and as is discussed later in this paper, *finnar* is a

- name likely of Germanic origin and does not originate in the Sámi-Finnic languages (Hansen and Olsen 36).
22. While *finnar* may be a label that flattens complexity and essentializes differences, this particular term does not seem to have had the pejorative sense that *tröll* did. This is especially apparent in the number of Norse proper names which include *finn-* as a component (Kusmenko 74-75).
  23. This connection between dairy products and civilization is also borne out in *Grænlendinga saga* (Saga of Greenlanders) (262), in which a group of indigenous people, referred to as *skrælingar* in the text, are mocked for what the Norse portray as a fascination and overeagerness for dairy products, which they feel is demonstrated by the 'skrælingar's' trading away of valuable furs for what the Norse see as a cheap and ephemeral foodstuff. For an extended discussion of this topic, see Heng (261-262).
  24. DeAngelo discusses shapeshifted forms of any kind as subhuman (275).
  25. The Old Norse word for the colour blue (*blár*) often seems to have overlapped with the colour black. See Kirsten Wolf's work on "The Color Blue in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature."
  26. *Vølundr* from *Vølundarkviða* (Lay of *Vølundr*) may be the one exception: Torun Zachrisson states that *Vølundr* is the "son of a Sámi king who marries a girl from the south, *Hervør*" (151). However, I have not, as of yet, been able to confirm the assertion that *Hervør* is indeed *Vølundr*'s mother, or that she is decidedly Norse.
  27. For the specific sections of the law, see *Borgarthing* 16.3, *Eidsivathing* 45.1, 45.2 (Collinson, et al. 40, 108).
  28. Such anxieties and racisms seem to have bled into Norse perceptions of Hálogalanders, who were often portrayed as antagonistic or ambiguous in their loyalty to the Norse in ways mirroring the Sámi, despite being Norse themselves. This is especially apparent in the *konungasögur* (king's sagas), and as Barraclough argues, Hálogalanders seem to have been perceived by Norwegian royalty as a potentially dangerous and destabilizing presence because, as inhabitants of the northern border region, they had a close relationship with the non-Norse Sámi and significant power accrued through their access to the substantial material wealth of the North (Barraclough 39, 43). Sometimes Hálogalanders were even portrayed with racialized characteristics more usually attributed to the Sámi, including certain magical abilities (Barraclough 42). As Barraclough puts it, Hálogalanders were at once "Norsemen and not yet Norsemen" (43), a perception which may have been heightened, as Thomas DuBois pointed out to me, by their association with the racialized Sámi, further exacerbating tensions between the two peoples.
  29. Kusmenko comes to a similar conclusion based on his examination of the influence of Sámi culture and language on the Norse. A change in perception of the Sámi between the early and late Middle Ages can also explain why Norse parents felt comfortable giving their children names that incorporated the component *finn-* (Kusmenko 74-75).
  30. For more on the Norse depiction of the *bjarmar*, see Barraclough (47-50).



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