

# *Finnvitka*: The Cultural Interface, Identity Negotiation, and Saami Ritual in Medieval Fennoscandia



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*In the medieval Eastern Norwegian law codes of the Borgarþing and the Eidsvǫþing, seeking out Saami people to receive divination, believing in their power and participating in their rituals, is prohibited, and, in the latter, equated with outlawry and unlawfulness. The transcription of these laws stipulate that the Saami were indeed sought out for such 'magical' help by people understood as Christian, and interestingly, the transgressor is never presented as the Saami, but rather, those Christians that sought out these rituals. Simultaneously, a multitude of instances from saga story-worlds demonstrate that such transgression occurred (or is presented as occurring) regularly, in different contexts and with different outcomes, and even the saintly King Óláfr Haraldsson is portrayed as seeking out the Saami to participate in Saami ritual performance. The delineations between normative and transgressive activity are therefore not sharp when it comes to this performance, as is also suggested in interpretations of archaeological material from the medieval period. In the proposed paper I will investigate the ambiguity associated with Saami ritual performance in medieval Norse texts, balanced with interpretations of archaeological material as representing similar aspects. Recent calls to 'Indigenise' Medieval Studies will be incorporated as a methodological framework for the investigation.*

In the two medieval Eastern Norwegian law codes of the *Borgarþing* and the *Eidsvǫþing*, seeking out Saami peoples to receive divination, believing in their power, and participating in their rituals is prohibited and equated with outlawry or

unlawfulness.<sup>1</sup> These law codes demonstrate an expressed ambiguity associated with the Saami in medieval texts, highlighting a so-called double bind of medieval perceptions and experiences with Saami peoples. The transcription of the law codes demonstrate that the Saami were indeed sought out for 'magical' purposes by people understood (by the transcribers) as Christian. However, interestingly, the laws do not present the transgressor as the Saami ritual performers, but rather, those Christians that seek them out. Parallel to the law codes, a multitude of instances from Norse and other medieval texts, such as the sagas, establish that this transgression – that is, the observation or direct participation in Saami ritual performance – occurred (or is presented as occurring) regularly, in different contexts, and with different outcomes.<sup>2</sup> The delineations between normative and transgressive activity are, therefore, not sharp, and in this article I further investigate the ambiguity associated with Saami ritual performance and how it ties in overall with the Norse-Saami relations in the medieval period. This investigation is grounded in frameworks emphasised in recent calls to Indigenise Medieval Studies in order to arrive at fairer and more nuanced interpretations of Indigenous characters in historical sources. By showcasing the many diverse reactions to, not to mention realities of, Saami ritual performance within medieval texts, I reveal the diversity of medieval Fennoscandia, investigate identity negotiation and shared rituals, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Norges Gamle Love: Norges Love ældre end Kong Magnus Haakonssöns Regjerings-Tiltrædelse i 1263*, ed. by Rudolf Keyser and Peter Andreas Munch, vol. 1 (Christiania: Chr. Grøndahl, 1836), pp. 372, 389–90.

<sup>2</sup> *Olafs saga hins helga: En kort saga om Kong Olav den Hellige fra anden halvdeel af det tolfte aarhundrede*, ed. by Rudolf Keyser and Carl Richard Unger (Christiania: Feilberg & Landmarks, 1849), pp. iv–viii, 16.

emphasise the often-neglected role of Saami characters, and people, within medieval historiography.

## **RESEARCH TRADITION, FINNVITKA, AND METHODOLOGY**

The Saami are the Indigenous people of Fennoscandia. Sápmi, the traditional settlement area of the Saami, is located within the contemporary nation-states of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, and in the Kola peninsula of Russia, although many Saami people live outside of this region.<sup>3</sup> The borders of Sápmi have been significantly contested throughout history, especially in the southern regions of Norway and Sweden, as well as along the Bothnian coast and in the Murmansk Oblast.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, there is considerable historical, linguistic, and archaeological evidence indicating that the Saami area was significantly larger in the medieval period. Belonging to the Finno-Ugric language family, the Saami languages (of which there are ten today) are structurally and etymologically different from the Nordic languages,<sup>5</sup> which raise questions about bilingualism and communication in the medieval period. As Carl-Gösta Ojala writes, the Saami 'is not a homogenous entity, neither in the present not in the past',<sup>6</sup> and this acknowledgement of diversity is crucial for our recognition of medieval Saami societies as regionally varied and

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<sup>3</sup> Carl-Gösta Ojala, *Sámi Prehistories: The Politics of Archaeology and Identity in Northernmost Europe*, Occasional Papers in Archaeology 47 (Uppsala Universitet, Institutionen för Arkeologi och Antik Historia, 2009), p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> Ojala, *Prehistories*, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> *Store norske leksikon*, 'Samisk' (last updated 20 December 2020) <<https://snl.no/samisk>> [accessed 27 May 2022].

<sup>6</sup> Ojala, *Prehistories*, p. 73.

linguistically and culturally multi-faceted. As recent research emphasises, the Saami, or the *finnar* (pl.) as they are typically called in Norse sources, were significant social and political players in medieval Fennoscandian societies.<sup>7</sup>

Texts from the classical period onwards portray the Saami as skilled skiers, able fishermen, sought-after teachers of magic, apt ritual performers, and expert hunters, different from but nevertheless a part of Norse society. Saami settlements are referred to as far south as Hadeland in Norway, with Saami presence across the sea in England and in Iceland also alluded to, in addition to the large-scale fur-trade monopoly held by the Saami in the eastern trading networks; altogether representative of the far-reaching influence of Saami societies in the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup> Close contact between the Saami and Norse groups is consequently not surprising, with trade; personal relationships such as marriage, childrearing, and fostering; personal and military alliances; shared ritual performance; and magic being common themes associated with the Saami across the medieval textual corpus. The emergence of post-colonial scholarship in the past generation and archaeological works focused on liminal identities and cultural hybridity as significant factors in the interactions between the Norse and the Saami has initiated an understanding of medieval Fennoscandia as less monocultural and more multi-faceted and diverse than

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<sup>7</sup> Solveig Marie Wang, 'Decolonising Norse Studies: Colonial Strategies and the Saami as the Other in Scholarship', *Kyngervi*, 3 (2022) [forthcoming].

<sup>8</sup> See Solveig Marie Wang, *Decolonising Medieval Fennoscandia: An Interdisciplinary Study of Norse-Saami Relations in the Medieval Period* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

assumed in previous research.<sup>9</sup>

Across medieval texts, the qualities and attributes ascribed to Saami characters are remarkably consistent, and the stability to purvey these stereotyped textual motifs is undoubtedly the most common theme in the historiographic discourse on the medieval Saami within Norse Studies.<sup>10</sup> As Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough comments, the scholarly tendency to focus on these stereotyped textual motifs of Saami characters in Norse (and more generally medieval) texts focuses on their contrasts to the Norse, thereby highlighting their Otherness.<sup>11</sup> The textual motifs associated with the Saami do tend to concentrate on Othering, chiefly through allusions to hunting and archery, forest animals such as bears and wolves, winter weather and skiing, as well as magic and supernatural beings. This constellation of attributes forms what I have coined the 'Saami Motif-Cluster' elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> and allude

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<sup>9</sup> Marte Spangen, 'Silver Hoards in Sámi Areas', in *Recent Perspectives on Sámi Archaeology in Fennoscandia and North-West Russia*, ed. by Petri Halinen and others (Helsinki: Finnish Antiquarian Society, 2009), pp. 94–106.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy DeAngelo, 'The North and the Depiction of the "Finnar" in the Icelandic Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies*, 83.3 (2010), 257–86 (p. 258); Sirpa Aalto, and Veli-Pekka Lehtola, 'The Sami Representations Reflecting the Multi-Ethnic North of the Saga Literature', *Journal of Northern Studies*, 11.2 (2017), 7–30 (pp. 12–16); Else Mundal, 'The Perception of the Saamis and Their Religion in Old Norse Sources', in *Shamanism and Northern Ecology*, ed. by Juha Pentikäinen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1996), pp. 97–116 (pp. 98–101); John Lindow, 'Supernatural Others and Ethnic Others: A Millennium of World View', *Scandinavian Studies*, 67.1 (1995), 8–31 (pp. 11–12); Thomas DuBois, 'Ethnomemory: Ethnographic and Culture-Centered Approaches to the Study of Memory', *Scandinavian Studies*, 85.3 (2013), 306–31 (p. 309); Hermann Pálsson, 'The Sami People in Old Norse Literature', *Nordlit*, 5 (1999), 29–53 (p. 29); Alf Ragnar Nielsén, *Landnám fra nord: Utvandringa fra det nordlige Norge til Island i vikingtid* (Stamsund: Orkana Akademisk forlag, 2012), pp. 87–9.

<sup>10</sup> Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, 'Arctic Frontiers: Rethinking Norse-Sámi Relations in the Old Norse Sagas', *Viator*, 48.3 (2017), 27–51 (p. 28).

<sup>11</sup> Barraclough, 'Frontiers', p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Wang, *Decolonising Medieval Fennoscandia*.

to the Saami across the texts. It should, however, be clarified that these attributes are not exclusive to the Saami only.

Within the Saami Motif-Cluster, magic is the predominant theme and is repeated extensively across medieval texts as well as in historiography.<sup>13</sup> Through descriptions concerning bewitching, spellbinding, divination, weather magic, supernatural beings, shapeshifting, spirit journeys, healing, and ritual performance, in addition to the abilities to disappear, shoot targeted arrows, and hide objects, Saami characters emerge as experts of 'magic' across the written material.<sup>14</sup> While the term 'magic' itself is controversial, the above aspects of expertise and performance are clustered in what I refer to when employing the term here.<sup>15</sup> Saami characters often materialise as teachers of magic or sources of magical expertise, with Norse characters repetitively seeking them out. These characters are usually described as

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<sup>13</sup> Hermann Pálsson, 'Sami', p. 29; Aalto and Lehtola, 'Representations', p. 13; Mundal, 'Perception', p. 114; Barraclough, 'Frontiers', p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> See for example: *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum*, ed. and trans. by Matthew James Driscoll (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2008), pp. 5–6; *Hrólfs saga kraka*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðrlanda eptir gömlum handritum*, ed. by Carl Christian Rafn, vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Ennu Popsku, 1829–30), 48–50; *Ketils saga hængs*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðrlanda eptir gömlum handritum*, ed. by Carl Christian Rafn, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Ennu Popsku, 1829–30), p. 123; *Sorla saga sterka*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðrlanda eptir gömlum handritum*, ed. by Carl Christian Rafn, vol. 3 (Copenhagen: Ennu Popsku, 1829–30), pp. 444–6; *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðrlanda eptir gömlum handritum*, ed. by Carl Christian Rafn, vol. 3 (Copenhagen: Ennu Popsku, 1829–30), p. 613; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla 2*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 27 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1945), p. 11; *Færeyinga saga – Óláfs saga Odds*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, Íslenzk fornrit 25 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2006), pp. 96, 187–90; *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1939), pp. 30, 34–5; *Historia Norwegie*, ed. by Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, trans. by Peter Fisher (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), pp. 62–3; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, ed. by Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. by Peter Fisher, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 344.

<sup>15</sup> See Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Scandinavia', in *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, ed. by Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 136–50.

*Fjolkynngi Finna* ('Saami knowledgeable in magic') in the textual material, as is the case for the *Finna ein fjolkunnig* ('Saami woman knowledgeable in magic') invited to Ingimundr's feast in the thirteenth-century *Vatnsdæla saga*,<sup>16</sup> or the *fjolkunnigra Finna* ('Saami knowledgeable in magic') that manufacture the impenetrable cloak of Þórir hundr as related in Sigvatr Þórðarson's eleventh-century *Erfidrápa Óláfs helga*.<sup>17</sup> The term *finnvitka*, commonly understood as meaning 'performing magic in a Saami way' or 'bewitching like a Saami', only appears once in the Old Norse corpus and is found in *Hróa þáttr* in the late fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók*.<sup>18</sup>

This performance of magic in a *Saami way* is often unquestionably referred to by scholars in the field of Medieval Studies as a specifically negative attribute. Due to their association with non-Christian activities, such as magic, Jeremy DeAngelo writes that the Saami are 'if not outwardly hostile to the Norse then otherwise foreboding ill through their presence'.<sup>19</sup> He further argues that 'there is no admirable individual among them in the corpus of sagas who counterbalances the prevailing stereotypical portrayal'. Hermann Pálsson describes the Saami as 'seductive, deceitful',<sup>20</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson ascribes the Saami with the title of the 'pagan enemy',<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Jesch, 'Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Erfidrápa Óláfs helga* 16', in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, ed. by Diana Whaley, vol. 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), p. 663.

<sup>18</sup> Veturliði Oskarsson, 'Um sögnina *finnvitka* í *Flateyjarbók*', *Gripla*, xxiv (2013), pp. 269–79.

<sup>19</sup> DeAngelo, 'The North', pp. 264–5.

<sup>20</sup> Herman Pálsson, 'Sami', p. 38.

<sup>21</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson, "'Black Men and Malignant-Looking": The Place of the Indigenous Peoples of North America in the Icelandic World View', in *Approaches to Vinland*, ed. by Andrew Wawn and Þórunn Sigurðardóttir (Reykjavík: Sigurður Nordal Institute, 2001), pp. 88–104 (p. 98).

and Geraldine Heng labels the Saami as 'familiar monstrosities'.<sup>22</sup> Together, these quotes encompass the general scholarly attitude towards the Saami in medieval texts as representing the monstrous and uncivilised, an extreme alterity, and transgressive behaviour. Jeremy DeAngelo writes, more recently, that 'They [the *finnar*] stand between humanity and nature, civilization and savagery, the world as we know it and the supernatural'.<sup>23</sup> Troy Storfjell echoes this attitude when he writes: 'Their geographic proximity to and paradigmatic connection with the *jötnar* [. . .] served to strengthen the association of both with an existence in the chaotic, wild periphery (*útgardr*) beyond the boundaries of civilization'.<sup>24</sup> The tendency within scholarship to uncritically accept that the Saami are exclusively portrayed as uncivilised 'sorcerers' who only affect the narrative negatively in medieval texts, as a reflection of how Norse people or those responsible for the texts viewed the Saami in real life, is an issue, since it hinders an unbiased reading of the source material. These tendencies risk re-producing previously de-bunked colonial truths about the Saami as 'boxed' representations of alterity, particularly as non-human, given the often-unquestioned assumption among scholars that trolls, *jötnar*, and other extranormal creatures are symbolic representations of the Saami in Norse texts. Most clear from these readings, however, is the reluctance with which our field as a whole has to view the Saami as

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<sup>22</sup> Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 273.

<sup>23</sup> Jeremy DeAngelo, *Outlawry, Liminality and Sanctity in the Literature of the Early Medieval North Atlantic* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), p. 183.

<sup>24</sup> Troy Storfjell, 'The Ambivalence of the Wild: Figuring Sápmi and the Sámi in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Discourse to the Eighteenth Century', in *L'Image du Sápmi: Artes et Linguae* 16, ed. by Kajsa Andersson (Örebro: Örebro University Press, 2013), pp. 112–47.



something else than the Other, or as something other than a ‘problem’ in the narrative. Jostein Bergstøl and Hege Skalleberg Gjerde have analysed the role Saami people play in recent historiography on the Viking Age and medieval period, concluding that: ‘They [Saami people] are seemingly, however, almost always presented as an exceptional case, and an outlier we should consider, again demonstrating that the world of the Vikings and Viking history is primarily about bona fide Norse culture’.<sup>25</sup>

The consequences of Othering have been listed on several occasions in postcolonial scholarship, with Nick Shepherd noting effects such as de-authentication of Indigenous, in this case Saami, self-realisation and conceptualisation, and the assumption that Indigenous peoples exist outside history as ethnographic rather than historical actors.<sup>26</sup> Discourses of Othering are therefore connected with colonialist structures that result in an articulation of the Other as being radically homogenous both in the present and in the past. By exclusively focusing on the notions of Othering associated with the portrayal of the Saami in medieval narration, agency is, albeit unintentionally, removed from the Saami characters. Naturally, the Saami Motif-Cluster was most likely occasionally utilised by the compiler of a given text as a means of highlighting the Other and the

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<sup>25</sup> Hege Skalleberg Gjerde and Jostein Bergstøl, ‘Sámi Vikings?’, in *Vikings Across Boundaries*, ed. by Hanne Lovise Aannestad and others (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 166–78.

<sup>26</sup> Nick Shepherd, ‘Naming the Indigenous’, in *Archaeologies of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’: Debating History, Heritage and Indigeneity*, ed. by Charlotta Hillerdal, Anna Karlström and Carl-Gösta Ojala (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 33–7 (p. 35).

periphery, but categorising Saami characters solely as textual representations of the far-northern, dangerous periphery is a simplification of the role Saami people play in medieval literature and society. Charlotte Damm has condensed the issues connected to simplifying Indigenous characters as Other:

Half a century ago the majority of historians and archaeologists were not concerned with the past of 'Others', relegating them to extras/supernumeraries, at best secondary in our stories. Now we have taken one step up, in wishing to investigate their history, but maybe the most fundamental problem is that we often portray groups such as the San, the Saami, or the Inuit as essentially different. Through such a perspective we may be perpetuating colonial dichotomies constructed in and for the West. To uphold dominance the powerful needs an opposite, a powerless 'other'. For centuries Indigenous groups across the world have been conveniently amongst these 'others', as they have continued to have no access to the authoritative discourse.<sup>27</sup>

As such, the uncritiqued assumption among most scholars that the Saami are textual representatives of the uncivilised Other may be directly harmful and can strengthen colonial notions of the Indigenous as static and non-human.<sup>28</sup>

The colonial structures inherent in the field of Medieval Studies have recently been challenged by several scholars. Tiffany Boyle and Jessica Carden specifically tie

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<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Damm, 'Archaeology, Ethno-history and Oral Traditions: Approaches to the Indigenous Past', *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 38.2 (2005), 73–87 (p. 84).

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Crocker, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Vínland: History, Whiteness, Indigenous Erasure, and the Early Norse Presence in Newfoundland', *Canadian Journal of History/Annales Canadiennes D'Histoire*, 55.1–2 (2020), 91–122 (p. 95).

these structures to the notion of a contemporary acceptance of Scandinavian history as ‘untainted’ and a general ‘cultural amnesia regarding Scandinavian imperial projects’.<sup>29</sup> Johan Höglund and Linda Andersson Burnett also highlight this ‘cultural amnesia’ and state that ‘scholars tied to the field of Scandinavian Studies appear to have been particularly reluctant to engage with the field of Nordic colonialism’.<sup>30</sup> They further address the notion that the colonial pasts (and presents) of the Nordic countries, especially those of Denmark and Norway – both concerning Kalaallit Nunaat and Sápmi, but also Denmark-Norway and Denmark’s colonies in the West-Indies and Africa – is often downplayed as charitable and benevolent. It is our responsibility as scholars of a region inhabited by the Saami to confront these aspects of the Nordic past and present.<sup>31</sup> Recent pushes towards decolonising the academy and support for the ‘Indigenous turn’ of Medieval Studies contribute to a broader understanding of how these colonial structures have and continue to affect historiography within our field.<sup>32</sup> However, the Saami are often forgotten, neglected, or ignored in this expression, which I would argue is a result of the fact that there is

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<sup>29</sup> Tiffany Boyle and Jessica Carden, ‘Nordic Colonialism and Indigenous Peoples’, in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, ed. by Immanuel Ness and Zak Cope (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Johan Höglund and Linda Andersson Burnett, ‘Introduction: Nordic Colonialisms and Scandinavian Studies’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 91.1–2 (2019), 1–12 (p. 2).

<sup>31</sup> Brenna Duperron and Elizabeth Edwards, ‘Thinking Indigeneity: A Challenge to Medieval Studies’, *Exemplaria*, 33.1 (2021), 94–107 (p. 101).

<sup>32</sup> Duperron and Edwards, ‘Thinking Indigeneity’, p. 101; Crocker, ‘Vínland’; Mary Rambaran-Olm, M. Breann Leake and Micah James Goodrich, ‘Medieval Studies: The Stakes of the Field’, *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 11.4 (2020), 356–70; Sierra Lomuto, ‘Becoming Postmedieval: The Stakes of the Global Middle Ages’, *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 11.4 (2020), 503–12 (p. 503).

a tendency to reject or forget that the Saami are a part of the Nordic colonial articulation. Carl-Gösta Ojala writes that scholars working with Indigenous, specifically Saami, contexts:

must never forget that we are dealing with histories of conquest, violence, oppression, exploitation, relocation, assimilation, discrimination, racism, appropriation and erasure of culture, language history and heritage – histories with very real consequences and effects on the social, cultural, and economic lives and the well-being and health of Indigenous communities today.<sup>33</sup>

He adds that as scholars we also need to acknowledge another dimension of these histories, namely 'Indigenous agency and Indigenous strategies for resistance and survival through times of great pressure and change'.<sup>34</sup> With that in mind, it should be noted that there is an active, positive change taking place across scholarship, which is the direct result of the growth of Indigenous Studies as an independent field and the many significant contributions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars that have sought and continue to seek to decolonise historical narratives.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Carl-Gösta Ojala, 'Discussion: Colonialism Past and Present: Archaeological Engagements and Entanglements', in *The Sound of Silence: Indigenous Perspectives on the Historical Archaeology of Colonialism*, ed. by Tiina Äikäs and Anna-Kaisa Salmi (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), pp. 182–201 (p. 182).

<sup>34</sup> Ojala, 'Colonialism Past and Present', p. 182.

<sup>35</sup> Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen, Torjer Olsen and Pigga Keskitalo, 'Contemporary Indigenous Research Within Sámi and Global Indigenous Studies Contexts', in *Indigenous Research Methodologies in Sámi and Global Contexts*, ed. by Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen, Torjer Olsen and Pigga Keskitalo (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 7–32.

For the purposes of analysing the reception of Saami ritual performance in the medieval period, a decolonising approach becomes particularly useful as it acknowledges majority-culture bias inherent in the narration of history, which in turn allows alternative histories to emerge. Nevertheless, the current academic zeitgeist of decolonising *everything* has been criticised and so employing these frameworks is neither unbiased nor uncomplicated. Brenna Duperron and Elizabeth Edwards write that even research with the best intentions has a tendency to focus the critical inquiry on the imperial gaze.<sup>36</sup> Rather, they support Tarren Andrews' suggested 'Indigenous Turn' of Medieval Studies, which demands an epistemic shift and calls for 'the acceptance of different knowledge regimes, for situated knowledge, and for Indigenous theory'.<sup>37</sup> Like in other calls to decolonise the academy, we need to actively ensure that our good intentions do not become complicit in ongoing Indigenous erasure, or what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang refer to as 'settler moves to innocence'.<sup>38</sup> Methodologies suggested in Indigenous Studies are therefore of particular value for the current investigation, as they can open our eyes to the Indigene who 'was already there' and enable us to look beyond tropes and tokenisms connected to Indigenous characters,<sup>39</sup> in this case *finnvitka*. *Gáfestallan* (North Saami for coffee break), an Indigenous Research Methodology proposed by

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<sup>36</sup> Duperron and Edwards, 'Thinking Indigeneity', p. 95.

<sup>37</sup> Duperron and Edwards, 'Thinking Indigeneity', p. 95.

<sup>38</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1.1 (2012), 1–40 (p. 10).

<sup>39</sup> Duperron and Edwards, 'Thinking Indigeneity', p. 95.

Pigga Keskitalo, Torkel Rasmussen, Rauna Rahko-Ravantti, and Rauni Äärelä-Vihriälä, is based on accountability. *Gáfestallan* can therefore function as a valuable tool to arrive at more alternative readings of Saami characters in medieval texts, since the methodology emphasises active positioning of research literature as well as our own personal actions as researchers and educators.<sup>40</sup> Parallels may here be drawn to Jill Carter's suggested 'red reading', where she revisited canonical texts through Indigenous theory.<sup>41</sup> This type of reading has recently been expanded on by Duperron and Edwards who vouch for the 'reparative readings of medieval texts'.<sup>42</sup> These accountable and reparative readings form the methodological foundation of the succeeding analysis.

### ***FJOLKYNNGI FINNA, AMBIGUITY AND RITUAL PERFORMANCE***

When the portrayal of Saami ritual performance in medieval texts is considered, most scholars tend to focus on its 'shamanistic' features, with John Lindow stating that 'most Norwegians [or Norse people] would have known the rules for a Saami shamanic performance'.<sup>43</sup> The most famous example of a Saami ritual performance

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<sup>40</sup> Pigga Keskitalo, Torkel Rasmussen, Rayna Rahko-Ravanatti and Rauni Äärelä-Vihriälä, 'Gáfestallan Talks of the Indigenous Research Paradigm in Sámi Research', in *Indigenous Research Methodologies in Sámi and Global Contexts*, ed. by Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen, Torjer Olsen and Pigga Keskitalo (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 65–83.

<sup>41</sup> Jill Carter, 'Repairing the Web: Spiderwoman's Children Staging the New Human Being' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> Duperron and Edwards, 'Thinking Indigeneity', p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> John Lindow, 'Myth Read as History: Odin in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga*', in *Myth: A New Symposium*, ed. by Gregory Schrempp and William Hansen (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2002), pp. 107–23 (pp. 117–18).

found in medieval sources is related in the mid-to-late twelfth century Latin chronicle *Historia Norwegie*. Here, two Saami ritual performers are portrayed as practicing a ritual in front of Christian observers:

Once, when Christians who had come to trade had sat down at table with some [Saami], their hostess fell forward all of a sudden and expired. While the Christians felt serious grief at this calamity, the [Saami] were not in the least saddened, but told them that the woman was not dead, merely pillaged by the *gands* of her adversaries, and that they could quickly restore her. Then a magician, spreading out a cloth under which he might prepare himself for intoning unholy sorcerer's spells, raised aloft in his outstretched hands a small vessel similar to a [sieve], decorated with tiny figures of whales, harnessed reindeer, skis, and even a miniature boat with oars; using these means of transport the demonic spirit was able to travel across tall snowdrifts, mountain-sides and deep lakes. After chanting incantations for a very long time and leaping about there with this paraphernalia, he finally threw himself to the ground, black all over [. . .] and foaming at the mouth as if he were mad; ripped across his stomach, with a mighty roar he eventually relinquished his life. Next they consulted another specialist in the magic arts as to what had happened in each case. This individual went through all his practices in similar fashion, though with a different outcome: the hostess arose in sound health and then he revealed to them that the sorcerer had died in the following way: his *gand*, having taken on the likeness of a whale, was shooting rapidly through a lake when it had the misfortune to encounter a hostile *gand*, which had transformed itself into sharply pointed

stakes; these stakes, hidden in the depths of the lake, penetrated the repulsed creature's belly, and this was also manifested by the death of the magician in the house.<sup>44</sup>

Numerous features of the portrayed ritual performance have been compared to early modern ethnographic descriptions of Saami *noaidevuohta* and early modern to modern practice of shamanism in circumpolar areas.<sup>45</sup> The *gandus* (or 'helping spirit') of the bereaved woman, the cloth laid down before the ritual, the chanting, and the usage of the small vessel (potentially a drum) decorated with figures that enable the trance are treated in scholarship as indicative of shamanistic performance.<sup>46</sup> The instance is mirrored in the famous *semsveinar*-episode in *Vatnsdæla saga*, where two Saami men are presented as undertaking a 'spirit journey' through a trance, enabling a trip to Iceland which in turn functions as a catalyst for the saga's *landnám*

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<sup>44</sup> 'Quadam uero uice dum christiani causa comercii apud Finnos ad mensam sedissent, illorum hospita subito inclinata expirauit. Vnde christianis multum | dolentibus non mortuam, sed a gaudis emulorum esse depredatam, sese illam cito adepturos ipsi Finni nichil contristati respondent. Tunc quidam magis extenso panno, sub quo se ad profanes ueneficas incantaciones preparet, quoddam uasculum ad modum taratantarorum sursum erectis minibus extulit, cetinis atque ceruinis formulis cum loris et ondriolis nauicula eciam cum remis occupatum, quibus uehiculis per alta niuium et deuexa moncium uel profunda stagnorum ille diabolicus gandus uteretur. Cumque diutissime incantando tali apparatu ibi saltasset, humo tandem prostratus totus niger ut ethiops, spumans ora ut puta freneticus, prerruptus uentrem uix aliquando cum maximo {fremore} emisit spiritum. Tum alterum in magica arte peritissimum consuluerunt, quid de utrisque actum sit. Qui simili modo, sed non eodem euentu suum implens officium – namque hospita sana surrexit – et defunctum magum tali euentu interisse eis intimauit: Gandum uidelicet eius in cetinam effigiem inmagnetatum ostico gando in preacutas sudas transformato, dum per quoddam stagnum uelocissime prosiliret, malo omine obuiasse, quia in stagni eiusdem profundo sudas latitantes exactu uentrem perforabant. Quod et in mago domi mortuo apparuit'. *Historia Norwegie*, pp. 62–3.

<sup>45</sup> Konsta Ilari Kaikkonen, 'Contextualising Descriptions of Noaidevuohta: Saami Ritual Specialists in Texts Written until 1871' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Bergen, 2019).

<sup>46</sup> Lars Ivar Hansen and Bjørnar Olsen, *Hunters in Transition: An Outline of Early Sámi History* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 345.



narrative.<sup>47</sup> Earlier in the saga, the previously mentioned *Finna ein fjölkunnig* is described as foretelling the future of the people present during a ritual that sees her dressed in a lavish outfit on a raised platform in the middle of a hall.<sup>48</sup> In both contexts, the Saami ritual and its performers initiate positive outcomes, and especially the good treatment received by the *semsveinar* is emphasised. Correspondingly, in both contexts, the Saami ritual performers are actively sought out by the protagonist.

Seeking out the Saami to participate in rituals is prohibited in two medieval eastern Norwegian law codes, as mentioned in the introduction. The *Borgarþingslög*, the law code relevant for the areas around the Oslo fjord from Sarps(borg) to Bohuslän, was likely founded prior to 1164, with its Christian law section and a short section on village-held þings being revised in the new *landslov* of King Magnús lagabæti from 1274.<sup>49</sup> In all three recensions of the law code, one violation of the moral commandments is to seek out the Saami to receive divination: ‘it is unlawful for persons to travel to the Saami to ask for divination’.<sup>50</sup> In the *Eiðsýfapingslög*, the law code relevant for the Oppland-region and potentially first compiled in the 1150s, a similar prohibition is included. Here, the transgressive activity of seeking out the Saami to participate in their rituals is equally defined as *ubota værk*, but the section is

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<sup>47</sup> *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 34–5. The Saami men lie down for three days in a shed without moving or eating, inducing a trance that enables their mind-journey to Iceland.

<sup>48</sup> *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>49</sup> *Store norske leksikon*, ‘Borgarting’ (last updated 10 November 2017) <<https://snl.no/Borgarting>> [accessed 27 May 2022].

<sup>50</sup> ‘Þet er oc vbota værk. er maðr fær a fínmarkr at spyria spadom’. *Norges Gamle Love*, vol. 1, p. 362.

slightly longer: 'No person should believe in [the power of] the Saami, or sorcery, or [their] drum, or sacrifice, or root, or in that which belongs to heathendom, or seek help there. And if a person seeks out the Saami, he is an outlaw and an unlawful person'.<sup>51</sup> The two south-eastern law texts forbid seeking out the Saami and were relevant for the spatial regions that the law-codes covered. Else Mundal has commented that the law documents that Norse people:

knew about the holy places of the [Saami], that they had faith in what could be achieved by visiting such places, that they had most likely witnessed rituals performed at [Saami] holy places, and that they perhaps even assisted their [Saami] hosts when they performed rituals on their behalf.<sup>52</sup>

The prohibition to seek out the Saami for participation in magical ritual in these areas indicate that Christian people seeking out the Saami for these purposes was perceived as possible, was potentially occurring on a regular basis, and was viewed by the Church as problematic. Now, significantly, the problem expressed in the law codes is not the Saami ritual performance itself but, rather, the fact that Christians sought it out. On a different note, it has also been noted that the activity of seeking out the Saami to participate in their rituals could have been a means for converted people to take in order to re-confirm their pre-Christian identities, as further

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<sup>51</sup> 'Engi maðr a at trua. a finna. eða fordæðor. eða vit. eða blot. eða rot. eða þat. er til siðar hæyrir. eða leita ser þar bota. En ef maðr fær til finna. oc uærðr hann sannr at þui. þa er hann utlægr. oc ubota maðr'. *Norges Gamle Love*, vol. 1, pp. 389–90; Else Mundal, 'Sami Sieidis in a Nordic Context?', *Journal of Northern Studies*, 12.1 (2018), 11–20 (p. 12).

<sup>52</sup> Mundal, 'Sieidis', p. 14.

discussed below. Complicating matters further, Mundal demonstrates that it is often taken for granted that the Saami mentioned in these laws were heathens or exclusively not Christian, which may not be the case. Actually, other prohibitions against magic performance and ritual practice exist across the medieval laws and, in those cases, the practices do not characterise the performers as heathens but rather as 'bad' Christians.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the prohibition for Christians to participate in Saami rituals in eastern Norway, a multitude of instances from Medieval and Norse texts depict such transgressive activity occurring. Most often, Saami ritual performers appear in the narratives because the protagonist of the text, regardless of cultural affiliation, seeks them out. This ambiguous portrayal demonstrates that the understanding of Saami characters, and thereby medieval Saami societies, as textual representations of the 'quintessential horror of the magical outsider allowed into the intimate domestic sphere',<sup>54</sup> is more complicated than often assumed.

Emily S. Lee has argued that, as a concept within postcolonial theory, ambiguity and its ability to recognise complexity promotes non-binary interpretations of cultural fluidity can be useful for understanding the multi-faceted portrayals of postcolonial subjects.<sup>55</sup> This complexity can, admittedly with quite a bit of caution, be extended to function as a tool in our reading of the ambiguous

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<sup>53</sup> Mundal, 'Sieidis', p. 18.

<sup>54</sup> Barraclough, 'Frontiers', p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> Emily S. Lee, 'Postcolonial Ambivalence and Phenomenological Ambiguity: Towards Recognizing Asian American Women's Agency', *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 4.1 (2016), 56–73 (p. 66).

portrayals of Saami ritual performance across Norse texts. Building on this complexity, Martin Nakata's conceptualisation of the *cultural interface* in the meeting between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous living in the border zones between different identities might also prove useful in our reading of Saami characters. Nakata suggests that the interface results in an ambiguity that incorporates a site of contestation of engagement which in turn represents a space of tension that enables the possibilities for multitude positions in-between.<sup>56</sup>

Instances involved the saintly Norwegian King Óláfr Haraldssonar again demonstrates the ambiguity associated with Saami ritual performers in Norse narration and help showcase a multitude of positions in-between. The king is usually associated with Saami ritual performance through his portrayed death at the battle of Stiklastaðir, as recited in the previously mentioned *Erfridrápa Óláfs helga* and repeated in *Heimskringla* and *Helgisaga Óláfs konungs Haraldssonar*. Here, the cloak that protected the antagonist Þórir hundr, which reportedly lead to the king's death, was made by the Saami with 'great magic'.<sup>57</sup> This event is often assumed to be representative of negative medieval attitudes toward the Saami, since the king's death is associated with pre-Christian Saami performance of magic. However, another incident in *Helgisaga* depicts the king as listening to the prophetic vision of a

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<sup>56</sup> Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).

<sup>57</sup> 'Mikill fjölkyngi'. *Olafs saga hins helga*, p. 69.

Saami man in his retinue prior to a battle, which results in success.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, King Óláfr Tryggvason is also portrayed as having both positive and negative experiences with Saami ritual performance. In Oddr Snorrason's version of the king's saga from the 1190s, Óláfr is portrayed as asking a Saami man dwelling in the mountains somewhere along the fjord of Trondheim for magical help against the text's antagonists.<sup>59</sup> The king is not portrayed as actively seeking out the Saami on this occasion; however, later in the same text the king does actively seek out the same Saami man for healing the royal dog.

In the majority of instances incorporating Saami ritual performance, the common denominator is that the protagonists actively seek it out. Such transgressive activity, according to the law codes mentioned above, seems then to have been quite normative in real life. In the aforementioned drum-ritual instigated by the Saami performer in *Historia Norwegie*, the performance seems to be strongly opposed by the author, but the motif of Christian people attending the performance is normalised,<sup>60</sup> again showcasing a multitude of positions in-between both for the Saami ritual performers and its observers. Additionally, it should be emphasised that the texts never problematise the Saami themselves, but rather the paganism of pre-Christian rituals. This problematisation, and again ambiguity, is reflected in King Hákon V's 1313 law amendment for Hálógaland which, among other things, intended to make

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<sup>58</sup> *Olafs saga hins helga*, pp. iv–viii, 16.

<sup>59</sup> *Óláfs saga Odds*, pp. 187–90.

<sup>60</sup> *Historia Norwegie*, pp. 62–3.

life easier for newly-converted Saami people in the region by granting converts reduced fines for offences in the first twenty years following conversion.<sup>61</sup>

## NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND THE NORSE-SAAMI COMMON GROUND

It has been suggested in sociological theory that when finding themselves in comparable situations, people come to think alike. This cognitive similarity in turn allows for the possibility of the blending of religious fields following cultural meetings.<sup>62</sup> Numerous scholars have therefore emphasised that a substantial foundation for the close connections between Norse and Saami peoples in the medieval period was rooted in the sharing of central religious features that allowed for mutuality and respect.<sup>63</sup> Aspects like spirit journeys, shapeshifting, personification of nature and animal spirits, weather magic, magical clothing and weapons, as well as ecstatic ritual performance, are visible in both Saami and Norse archaeological material as well as in the texts.<sup>64</sup> If we assume this collected material

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<sup>61</sup> *Norges Gamle Love: Lovgivningen efter Kong Magnus Håkonssons Död 1280 indtil 1387*, ed. by Rudolf Keyser and Peter Andreas Munch, vol. 3 (Christiania: Chr. Grøndahl, 1849), p. 107.

<sup>62</sup> Tine Jeanette Bierning, 'The Concept of Shamanism in Old Norse Religion from a Sociological Perspective', in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes and Interactions*, ed. by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 171–8 (p. 172).

<sup>63</sup> Svestad, Asgeir, 'Svøpt i myra: Synspunkter på Skjoldehamnfunnets etniske og kulturelle tilknytning', in *Viking: Norsk arkeologisk årbok*, ed. by Herdis Hølleland and others, vol. 80 (Oslo: Norsk Arkeologisk Selskap, 2017), pp. 129–56; Hansen and Olsen, *Hunters*, pp. 50–1; Mundal, 'Sieidis', pp. 11–13.

<sup>64</sup> For the archaeology of some of these features, see Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019), pp. 217–71.

consists of reflections of actual ritual performance, significant common ground will have existed during different types of interactions.

One such shared ritual aspect might be traceable in a Norse loan word into the Saami languages. In North Saami, the term 'skeaŋka' refers to a gift, whereas the term 'skenkja' in Norse refers to the serving of a drink or to pour.<sup>65</sup> As has been documented in both early and later medieval texts, in skaldic poetry, as well as in the archaeological material, ceremonial drinking via the pouring or sharing of drinks and symbolic gift-exchange played a significant role in Norse rituals and specifically in the creation and upholding of alliances.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, Audhild Schanche has proposed that the language loan from 'pouring a drink' in Norse to 'gift' in North Saami indicates that ceremonial drinking was an important factor in the formal exchanges between the groups.<sup>67</sup> As I have argued previously, I find Schanche's interpretation convincing as several meetings between Norse and Saami characters across medieval texts revolve around the sharing of a drink. For example, when King Haraldr hárfagri is first introduced to the Saami woman Snæfriðr, she offers him a cup of mead (following the typical Norse protocol of greeting a guest), and in the stories about the throne-pretender Sigurðr Slembidjárn's stay with a Saami boat-

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<sup>65</sup> Hansen and Olsen, *Hunters*, p. 76.

<sup>66</sup> Lisa Turberfield, 'Intoxicating Women: Old Norse Drinking Culture and the Role of Women' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2016), pp. 31, 99–100; Marte Spangen and Johan Eilertsen Arntzen, 'Sticky Structures and Opportunistic Builders: The Construction and Social Role of Longhouses in Northern Norway', in *Re-Imagining Periphery: Archaeology and Text in Northern Europe from Iron Age to Viking and Early Medieval Periods*, ed. by Charlotta Hillerdal and Kristin Ilves (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2020), pp. 11–32 (pp. 28–9).

<sup>67</sup> Audhild Schanche, *Graver i ur og berg: Samisk gravskikk og religion fra forhistorisk til nyere tid* (Karasjok: Davvi Girji: 2000), p. 305.

builder in Hálogaland, the fact that they share beer together is highlighted.<sup>68</sup> While these are instances from texts, ceremonial drinking may have been a contributing factor to the consolidation of personal relationships or as a solidifier of a common ground before a shared ritual performance.

Following the large-scale conversion to Christianity in the early medieval period onwards, however, such a common ground was increasingly lost as the Saami were traditionally not subjected to large-scale conversion until the early modern period (although some regional variation certainly existed).<sup>69</sup> Archaeologists have therefore suggested that archaeological material with mixed Norse-Saami identity markers represent the strategies of cross-cultural societies or blended Norse-Saami families that chose to reclaim their pre-Christian identities and associate themselves more intimately with Saami culture rather than converting.<sup>70</sup> The conversion was associated with the employment of new social structures connected with centralisation and growth of the nation-state under individual rule. Marte Spangen highlights that the harsh measures to obtain these changes were predominantly directed at the Norse, while conversion of the Saami was typically not intensified until after the Reformation period.<sup>71</sup> Converted Norwegians or people otherwise unwilling to convert may therefore have wanted to associate themselves

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<sup>68</sup> *Ágrip*, p. 5; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla 3*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit 28 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), p. 311.

<sup>69</sup> Mundal, 'Sieidis', p. 18.

<sup>70</sup> Marte Spangen, 'Silver Hoards in Sámi Areas', in *Recent Perspectives on Sámi Archaeology in Fennoscandia and North-West Russia*, ed. by Petri Halinen and others (Helsinki: Finnish Antiquarian Society, 2009), pp. 94–106 (p. 103); Svestad, 'Skjoldehamnfunnet', p. 134.

<sup>71</sup> Spangen, 'Hoards', p. 103.



more intimately with the Saami to reclaim their pre-Christian identities. The ambiguous portrayal of Saami ritual in the textual material could therefore also be connected to such a reclaiming of pre-Christian identity.<sup>72</sup>

The negotiation of identity and cultural belonging is especially clear in the stories about the conception of Eyvindr kinnrifa. Here, a childless Norse couple seeks help from Saami ritual performers outside Niðarós, as described in Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga*:

My [Eyvindr's] father and mother spent a long time together in lawful wedlock and had no children. When they grew old, they were much grieved that they might have to die with no heir. They then visited the [Saami] with a great deal of money and asked that they grant them an heir with the exercise of magic. The [Saami] then called on the chief of their spirits, who dwell in the sky, for the sky is as full of unclean spirits as the earth. This spirit sent an unclean spirit into the dark dungeon that in fact may be called my mother's womb. That same spirit am I, and I was incarnated in this way and then appeared in human form. That was the manner of my birth [...] I cannot be baptized for the reason that I am not a man.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> See Wang, *Decolonising Medieval Fennoscandia*.

<sup>73</sup> 'Faðir minn ok móðir váur saman langa hríð með lögligum hjúskap ok áttu ekki barn. Ok er þau eldusk, þá hǫrmuðu þau þat mjök ef þau dæi erfingjalaus. Fóru þau síðan til Finna með miki fé ok báðu þá gefa sér nokkvorn erfingja af fjölkynngis íþrótt. Finnar kǫlluðu þá til hǫfðingja þeira anda er loptit byggja, fyrir því at jafnfullt er loptit af óhreinum ǫndum sem jǫrðin. Ok sjá andi sendi einn óhreinan anda í þessa hina dǫkku myrkvastofu er at sǫnnu má kallask minnar móður kviðr. Ok sá hinn sami andi em ek, ok holdguðumk ek svá með þessum hætti, ok síðan sýndumk ek með mannligri ásjá, ok var ek svá borinn í heim [. . .] ok fyrir því má ek eigi skírask at ek em eigi maðr'. *Óláfs saga Odds*, p. 257; *Oddr Snorrason, The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, trans. by Theodore M. Andersson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 96.

In an elaboration of the story in the probably-early-fourteenth century *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, the Saami characters agree to help the childless couple only after they have sworn with an oath that 'the child shall serve Thor and Odin till the day of its death, and that we may have him when he is old enough'.<sup>74</sup> It is not necessary the demand that Eyvindr had to devote himself to the Norse gods that is unique in this context, but rather the requirement that he should return to Saami society upon reaching adulthood. Perhaps this requirement helps illuminate the possibilities awarded to bi-cultural people to emphasise their Saami identities rather than their Norse as a way of maintaining their pre-Christian identities.

## CONCLUSION

The Norse and the Saami shared central religious features that allowed for a common understanding, which in turn enabled the participation in and contribution to each other's respective ritual performances and ceremonies. Although the general interpretation of Saami ritual performance, or *finnvitka*, as it is portrayed in medieval texts, tends to be specifically negative in contemporary scholarship, the ambiguity associated with such performance in the primary sources demonstrates its dynamic aspects. Saami ritual performance is not portrayed as static, and it occurs (or is presented as occurring) regularly, in different contexts and with a variety of different

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<sup>74</sup> 'Sá maðr skal alt til dauðadags þjóna Þór ok Óðni, ef vér megum öðlast þat barn er líf ok aldr hafi til'. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, in *Fornmannasögur eptir gömlum handritum*, ed. By Peter Andreas Munch, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Kongelige Nordiske oldsskriftselskab, 1826), p. 168.

outcomes. Similarly, the delineations between normative and transgressive activity are also not sharp considering the portrayal of Saami ritual performance, which is exemplified in the contrast between the eastern Norwegian law codes that prohibit seeking out the Saami for participation in such performance and the abundant material across other texts showcasing exactly this participation. By employing Martin Nakata's proposed cultural interface, the ambiguity associated with Saami ritual performance may be compared to the space of tension that enables the possibilities for multitude positions in-between for postcolonial subjects. Within such an *ambiguous interface* of identity and culture, new and more inclusive interpretations of Saami ritual performance, as well as the role of the Saami in medieval society more generally, emerge, where social boundaries are not clear-cut and the Saami emerge as significant social and political players. Furthermore, using methodologies suggested in the so-called 'Indigenous Turn' of Medieval Studies which aims to provide more dynamic representations of Indigenous peoples in historical source material, the colonial roots our field continues to perpetuate can be confronted and the episteme re-adjusted. By employing reparative readings in the investigation of Saami ritual performance across medieval texts, the many alternative opportunities for Saami characters are visualised beyond the stereotypes of the field as static, simple, peripheral, and far-northern sorcerers. Instead, Saami ritual performers emerge as diverse and dynamic political and social players, functioning in multi-faceted ways across the different texts. These portrayals

demonstrate, once again, the normalised, long-standing, spatially wide-ranging, varied, and significant presence of Saami peoples in medieval Fennoscandia.



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