

REVIEWS

Hermann Pálsson

Úr landnorðri. Samar og ysttu rætur íslenskrar menningar.

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On Iceland and its Sami Forebears.

The scale of Norwegian and Irish immigration to Iceland during the Age of Settlement has been subject to a lot of discussion over the years. As a result, the idea of an overwhelming Norwegian element among the first settlers has been brought into question. Until now however, few have asked how many Sami (or Lapps) were involved in the colonisation of this 'newly discovered' island country. But this is exactly what Hermann Pálsson, Professor Emeritus at the University of Edinburgh, has done in one of his latest books – *Úr landnorðri. Samar og ystu rætur íslenskrar menningar* – or roughly translated – 'Out of the Northeast. The Sami and the Ultimate Roots of Icelandic Culture'.

This book is an enormously valuable contribution to the debate on how the earliest population of Iceland was constituted. But it is also more than that. For anyone with an interest in the earlier history of the northernmost part of the area now known as Norway it is a goldmine. Few are better versed in

Old Norse literature than Pálsson, and in it he gives us a comprehensive, and I would imagine almost complete, overview of the representation of the Sami in the sagas. He makes reference, of course, to the Kings' Sagas as well as the larger of the better known Family Sagas. However, he also introduces us to a number of colourful and exciting individuals who, appearing only in smaller saga texts with relatively unknown titles, have previously gone unnoticed.

I should imagine that anyone, regardless of how well they know the sagas, would be surprised by the sheer quantity of sources that Pálsson is able to cite. And it is through a list of these that he manages to convince us that the number of Sami who made Iceland their home during the Age of Settlement was in fact remarkably high. Among the most important of the northern colonists he mentions are the three chieftains Skallagrim Kveldulfsson, Ingimund the Old and Ketil Hæng and it is likely that a good deal more Sami blood found its way to Iceland in their wake.

The Old Norse word for Sami was *finni* or *finnr* (*finna* for women). However, the designation *lappi* or *semsveinn* is also encountered. Their appearance in the sagas is primarily in association with magic and witchcraft. They were regarded as specialists in this area and there are a number of tales of people who journeyed north to learn it from them.

The masters of these magic arts were for the most part women. And it is for this reason that women are so strongly represented in both the tales of

the sagas and Pálsson's book. He highlights a certain Geirríð Þórólfsdóttir from *Eyrbyggja saga* as an example of how the Icelanders too considered women to be the best teachers of this craft. Geirríð's ability to teach magic appears to have been self evident from the fact that her grandparents came from Hålogaland. The most renowned of all the female sorcerers was however a certain Gunnhild who, after receiving schooling from the Sami in Finnmark, went on to marry Eirik Bloodaxe. It is interesting to note here that Pálsson's views on her parentage differ substantially from those of his countryman Sigurður Nordal. While Nordal has argued the case for Gunnhild being the daughter of a king of Denmark, Pálsson is of the same opinion as Snorri Sturlason, who was adamant that she came from Hålogaland and that her father was called Össur.

The book is full of interesting information about the Sami and the area that is now encompassed by the district of Northern Norway. But I would say that the most exciting thing about it is its deconstruction of the term 'Icelandic' and of how the Sami with their 'ways' and their special characteristics were involved in colouring Icelandic culture from its earliest stages.

Let us hope that this book is translated into at least one if not several other languages before too long – to make it accessible to the large group of people who are interested in the Old Norse world but cannot read Icelandic!

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(Translated by Alan Macniven)