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Solveig Marie Wang. Decolonising Medieval Fennoscandia: An Interdisciplinary Study of Norse-Saami Relations in the Medieval Period

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Medieval Fennoscandia as a site of colonial activity has not received extensive consideration in either popular or academic spheres, even as its histories and portrayals have, intentionally or unintentionally, participated in colonial ideologies and practices of the modern period. In her interdisciplinary monograph focusing on the relationship between the Norse and the Saami, Solveig Marie Wang directly tackles these issues. Examining the medieval textual material alongside archaeological evidence, Wang explores the “multifaceted and dynamic portrayal of Saami characters” (26) and how these suggest diverse manifestations of real Norse-Saami interactions. Drawing on postcolonial and decolonizing approaches, Wang aims to provide alternative readings that destabilize persistent, one-dimensional, and often harmful narratives about the people of medieval Fennoscandia, especially the Saami. As Wang explains, challenging these narratives is critical, since explicit or unintentionally retained imperialist and racial discourse has been complicit in modern colonial activities and ongoing discrimination against the Saami. To resist this, Wang employs postcolonial approaches to Indigeneity that decentre the Norse as the sole point of power and agency from narratives of Norse-Saami history and bring the Saami into the narrative as equal and active agents in the historical processes around them. By considering the Saami as dynamic and active participants in their own and Norse histories, Wang reveals a more nuanced picture of the sociocultural and political landscape of medieval Fennoscandia.

Wang begins with a general overview of medieval Norse-Saami relations and the historiography of historical and archaeological research focusing on the Saami in this period. This is followed by a detailed survey of the premodern sources that reference the Saami, which form the textual corpus for her research. Wang explores ecclesiastic, historiographic, and legal texts from the Fennoscandian region, as well as relevant material from other parts of Northern Europe and the Mediterranean region. Evidence from the *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, and *fornaldarsögur* represent the majority of the source material. Wang’s use of the *fornaldarsögur* is noteworthy, as the historical value of these sagas has often been overlooked because of their fantastical content.

In the third chapter, “The Saami Motif-Cluster,” Wang provides a thorough discussion of a set of traits that consistently—but not exclusively—accompany Saami characters in the medieval textual material and examines how these traits, while stereotyped, may have been connected to real medieval Saami ways of life. Wang argues that such motifs can be effectively used to “trace” the presence of Saami characters in the source material and thus “allow for the deconstruction of these stereotypes” (73) by providing a gateway for more nuanced and in-depth understandings of medieval Saami life and experiences, and the Norse understanding of them. In this chapter, Wang also introduces her reoccurring argument that Othering portrayals of the Saami may be related less to a perceived Norse-Saami dichotomy and rather to a non-Christian/Christian dichotomy. However, I wonder if focusing on such a distinction draws attention away from the gravity of Othering rhetoric of any kind on the experiences of the medieval Saami, especially considering how entangled medieval religion, culture, and even conceptualizations of biological heritability were in this period.

Chapter 4 offers a discussion of the areas associated with the Saami in the textual tradition and the importance of considering shared spatial belonging and fluid identifications between Saami and Norse regions. Wang emphasizes that spatial designations should be considered as changeable over time and not necessarily exclusive to one cultural group. What is revealed is that medieval Fennoscandia was socioculturally diverse and the site of complex cultural and political interactions that could be characterized by fluidity and liminal spaces.

In Chapter 5, “The Saami Trade,” Wang discusses the textual and archaeological evidence for *finnkaup* (Norse-Saami trade) and in particular pushes against the tendency to view the Saami exclusively as the victims of exploitation. Wang argues that the Saami should instead be understood as Norse trading partners who had independent agency within that partnership. As Wang puts it, the Norse-Saami fur trade “should be understood as a reciprocal exchange system based on mutual benefits and revenue for both groups” (176).

Chapter 6 explores the diverse portrayal of Norse-Saami personal relationships, and how this underscores cultural diversity and the fluidity of cultural identification in medieval Fennoscandia. Wang argues that premodern sources portray normalized and often mundane or practical relationships formed between people living in close proximity to each other. These relationships involved negotiation between cultural groups, the development of blended cultural expressions, and a fluidity of identification that is exemplified in characters described as having dual cultural affiliations.

In light of this, Wang suggests that Norse-Saami cultural affiliation should be considered a spectrum as opposed to two discrete entities, with mixed or liminal identities mediating between the two extremes. Given that Wang elsewhere discusses Fennoscandia as the home of more cultural groups than the

Norse and Saami, it may have been useful to consider the limitations of a spectrum as a conceptual tool, as it retains some of the limitations of a binary.

Wang concludes with a thorough discussion of the medieval evidence for Saami presence in the south of Fennoscandia, which has often been overlooked in the scholarship on the assumption that the Saami have always been associated with the north. This discussion is critical for Saami populations today, as their Indigeneity has frequently been questioned based on the assumption that they were early modern settlers in the southern region. As Wang demonstrates, the surviving evidence strongly suggests the premodern and normalized presence of Saami people in the south. To further ground the reader, it might also have been useful to discuss the ways in which historical discussion may have been influenced by shifts between medieval and modern conceptual frameworks of “North” and “South.”

Throughout the work, Wang provides extensive evidence that Norse portrayals of the Saami were not exclusively Othered or negative. While this is an extremely important point to make, it may have been useful in some places to engage in greater depth with negative portrayals and Othering themes, as the impact of medieval colonial activities on Saami populations sometimes seems diminished. For example, Wang cites as problematic Phil Cardew’s argument that the Norse constructed the Saami as a primitive Other based on their portrayal as being desirous of supposedly unsophisticated trade goods. Wang argues that this dehumanizes the Saami based on modern ideas of “‘development’ and sophistication” (173). However, this seems to overlook that Cardew is focused on a medieval Norse construct of primitivism—the creation of which is supportable in other colonial contexts, including the Norse portrayal of North American Indigenous people in *Grœnlandinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*. Thus, it seems to me that Cardew is pointing out problematic attitudes in the sources—attitudes that surely played a role in the lived realities of both the medieval Saami and Norse. By not engaging further with this, a significant facet of Norse-Saami relations and the medieval Saami experience goes relatively unexplored.

As a whole, I found Wang’s book a well-written and illuminating work that successfully uses postcolonial theory and informed approaches to decolonization to provide an extensive and refreshing examination of the medieval source material. Covering an impressive number of important issues related to the medieval Saami experience, and by extension the experience of later and current Saami populations, Wang’s work stands out for engaging with Indigenous approaches to medieval history and working to decentre the Norse from a discussion that has often overlooked the Saami as active agents in this relationship. Wang successfully demonstrates that medieval Fennoscandia was a culturally diverse region characterized by cultural discourse, exchange, and fluidity, and that the Indigenous Saami played an integral role in the

sociocultural and political activities of this time. As such, Wang has provided a much-needed work on the cultural landscape of this region, one that not only challenges assumptions and scholarly norms about the past, but also illustrates the important role that scholars of seemingly distant pasts play in the experiences of modern cultural groups and the responsibility that falls to us to give them the fair, nuanced, and complex representation that is their right.

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