“Some call Europe, and some call Eneá”: on the origins of the Old Icelandic learned prehistory

Abstract

By the 12th century, northern territories were fairly well known in practice, but there was an urgent need to explain the state of this region in written form. In most national narratives, there is an evident tendency to emphasise the similarity of local history with a more significant and more authoritative (Roman or sacred) history (Mortensen 2005). This paper deals with a very specific geographical image—“Europe, or Eneá”—that appears on two “textual maps” by an Icelandic historian of the 13th century, Snorri Sturluson, in his *Edda*, an Icelandic *ars poetica* (c. 1220), and in his large compendium of the kings’ sagas entitled *Heimskringla* (c. 1230). The author demonstrates that the toponym *Eneá*, going back to the ancient hero Aeneas, was formed by Snorri himself as a result of his immersion in the local Icelandic culture and literature, where the Troy story had, by that time, occupied a significant place.

Keywords

Knowledge transfer • antiquity • Middle Ages • Old Norse-Icelandic sources • geographical images • toponyms

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Introduction

This paper deals with two “textual maps” by an Icelandic historian of the 13th century, Snorri Sturluson, that occur in his *Edda*, an Icelandic *ars poetica* (c. 1220), and in his large compendium of Icelandic kings’ sagas known under the title of *Heimskringla* (c. 1230). The main task is to study a very specific geographical image used by Snorri that might have had direct connections with antiquity—“Europe, or Eneá”—and discuss how and why a toponym formed from the name of a legendary ancestor of Rome and the Romans, one of the main defenders of Troy during the Trojan War, Aeneas, the hero of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, could have occupied a place on Snorri Sturluson’s mental map.

The “circle of lands”

In the opening chapter of *Ynglinga saga*, the first saga of *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson introduces a “textual map” that includes the whole *orbis terrarum*:

Kringla heimsins, sú er mannfólkit byggvir, er mjök vágskorin. Ganga hof stór ór útsjánum inn í jörðina. Er þat kunnigt, at haf gengr frá Nqrvasundum ok allt út til Jørsalalands. Af hafinu gengr langr hafsbotn til landnorðrs, er heitir Svartahaf. Sá skilr heimsþriðjungana. Heitir fyrir austan Ásía, en fyrir vestan kalla sumir Európa, en sumir Eneá. En norðan at Svartahafi gengr Svíþjóð in mikla eða in kalda. Svíþjóð ina miklu kalla sumir menn eigi minni en Serkland it mikla, sumir jafna henni við Blálánd it mikla. Inn norðri hlutr Svíþjóðar liggr óbyggðr af frosti ok kulða, svá sem inn syðri hlutr Blálánds er auðr af sólarbruna. [...] Ór

norðri frá fjöllum þeim, er fyrir útan eru byggð alla, fellr á um Svíþjóð, sú er at réttu heitir Tanais. Hon var forðum kölluð Tanakvísl eða Vanakvísl. Hon kœmr til sjávar inn í Svartahaf. [...] Sú á skilr heimsþriðjungana. Heitir fyrir austan Ásía, en fyrir vestan Európa (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941).

[The disc of the world that mankind inhabits is very indented with bays. Large bodies of water run from the ocean into the land. It is known that a sea extends from Nqrvasund (the Straits of Gibraltar) all the way to Jørsalaland (Palestine). From the sea a long gulf called Svartahaf (the Black Sea) extends to the north-east. It divides the world into thirds. To the east is the region called Asia, and the region to the west some call Europe, and some Enea. And from the north to Svartahaf extends Svíþjóð in mikla (Sweden the Great) or in kalda (the Cold). Some claim Svíþjóð in mikla to be no smaller than Serkland it mikla (Saracen-land the Great, north Africa), others compare it to Blálánd it mikla (Blacks-land the Great, Africa). The northern part of Svíþjóð remains uninhabited because of frost and cold, just as the southern part of Blálánd is empty because of the heat of the sun. [...] From the north, from the mountains that are beyond all habitations, flows a river through Svíþjóð that is properly called Tanais (Don). It was formerly called Tanakvísl (fork of the Don) or Vanakvísl (fork of the Vanir). It reaches the sea in Svartahaf. [...] This river separates the thirds of the world. The region to the east is called Asia, that to the west, Europe (trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2011).]

The Earth in Snorri's "introductory geography" appears in the form of a plane circle surrounded by the ocean and divided into three parts. This image is a reflection of the Christian cosmological concept that prevailed in the Middle Ages, polemicalising against the ideas accumulated in the previous epoch as pagan, and refuting the idea of the sphericity of the Earth. The Earth, according to official Christian dogmas, again "became" flat, as in ancient Ionian science or in the writings of some Roman geographers whose land descriptions were nothing but the geography of the Earth's disc, or more precisely, of the "circle of lands", *orbis terrarum*. A threefold division of the Earth became traditional in the medieval European cosmography written in Latin. Such are geographical introductions to a number of medieval chronicles: *Historia adversus paganos* by Paulus Orosius, 5th century; *Historia Brittonum* by Nennius, early 9th century; *Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus* by Otto Frisingensis, the first half of the 12th century. In Iceland, we find this idea in two texts by Snorri Sturluson and in the opening lines of several geographical treatises. Thus, in *Landalýsing II* ("Description of the Earth II"), AM 764 4^o, early 14th century, the Earth is described as *kringla heimsins* divided into the same three parts:

Í upphafi þessa litla annálabæklingss skulo vèr skrifa nokkut lítið af heimskringlunni... ok vèr höfum fundit í bókum skilríkum eðr annálum fyrri manna, ok svá hefr. Röksamlig skipan fornarr vizku hefir svá ok heldr, at viðerni heimsbygðarinnar er sundrskipt í þrjá hluta: heitir einn þriðjungur Asía, iij Europa, iij Affrica (Melnikova 1986, p. 86).

[At the beginning of this little book of annals, we must write a little about the disc of the world... and we have found [all this] in reliable books or annals of ancient people, and it begins like this. Ancient wisdom established a reasonable order, according to which the expanses of the inhabited land are divided into three parts: one third is called Asia, the second is Europe, the third is Africa.]

For the Christian geography of the Middle Ages, a three-part division of the oecumene was not only a development of the ancient view, but also an illustration of the biblical teaching that after the flood all the land was divided between three sons of Noah (Simek 1996). In the Icelandic geographical treatise *Fra þui huar huerr Noa sona bygði heiminn* ("How the earth was overspread of all the sons of Noah"), AM 544, 4^o, early 14th century, it is written:

Sidan skipti Noe heime med sonum sinum i þria hluti ok gaf nafn öllum hlutum i heiminum, þeim sem adr voro önefndir, hann kalladi einn hlut heims Asiam, enn annan Affrikam, enn þridia Eyropam (Melnikova 1986, p. 133).

[Then Noah divided the world into three parts between his sons and gave the names to each part in the world that had no name before. He called one part of the world Asia, the other Africa, and the third Europe.]

Surprisingly, it was well known in medieval Iceland that the earth was spherical. We can judge the prevalence of this knowledge on the basis of the Old Icelandic translation of *Elucidarius* by Honorius Augustodunensis, on the Second Astronomical Treaty, on *Konungs skuggsjá* ("The Royal Mirror"), a didactic work written in Norway in the late 13th century, and a number of other works (Faulkes 1978-79, p. 23).

The Tanais

Coming back to Snorri's "textual map", it is worth paying attention to his description of the river *Tanais* (Don). In his text, the river flows through *Svíþjóð hin mikla* from the mountains in the north that are beyond all habitations, and separates the thirds of the world. It is in this capacity (as a border between Europe and Asia) and under this name (*Tanais*) that the river is known in ancient and medieval geography and cartography (depicted even on most schematic maps).

In Old-Norse literature, along with Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga*, the river is mentioned in a list of rivers dated, according to the oldest manuscript, to the early 14th century, that laconically states the following: "Tanais heitir a. er skilr Europa fra Asia" (Melnikova 1986, p. 152) ["Tanais is the name of a river which separates Europe from Asia"], and in a translation of the Bible into Old Norse called *Stjórn*, carried out in the late 13th to early 14th centuries: "Europa hefr upp ok tekr til af einni mikils hattar ok frægri aa Tanays" (Melnikova 1986, p. 143) ["Europe begins at the big and famous river Tanais"], the compiler of which had, no doubt, borrowed this description from the *Etymologies* by Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636).

Scythia

Snorri's *Svíþjóð in mikla* ("Sweden the Great") that the Tanais flows through resembles ancient *Scythia*. Old Norse-Icelandic sources of the 12th through the 14th centuries include numerous mentions of *Scythia* (*Scitia*, *Cithia*). They are nothing but borrowings from ancient and early medieval writers – Augustine (354–430), Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), Isidorus Hispalensis (c. 560–636), Honorius of Autun (the first half of the 12th century), Peter Comestor (died in 1178 or 1198), Vincent of Beauvais (1190–1264). In geographical treatises and religious literature (*Stjórn* and some Apostles' sagas), as well as in *Alexanders saga* (a prose translation of *Alexandreis*), *Scythia* is not merely included in the lists of lands in different parts of the world, but is always accompanied by an explanation: "Scitia, þat er nu Svíþjóð hin mikla" ["Scythia, that is now Sweden the Great"], or "Cithia, þat kollvm uer Suíþjóð hinu myclu" ["Scythia that we call now Sweden the Great"]. Generally, we encounter such explanatory constructions in Icelandic texts when a "bookish" word of a non-Icelandic origin is used, but *Svíþjóð in mikla* is not a local name, but a part of the *gelehrte Urgeschichte*, in terms of Andreas Heusler (1908). Its earliest record occurs in *Skjöldunga saga* (composed between 1180–1200), in a legend of the settlement of Scandinavia by emigrants from Asia, according to which the ancestors of Swedish and Norwegian kings were pagan gods headed by Óðinn, the supreme god of the *Æsir*. This legend goes back to Ari the Wise (early 12th century) and is widely spread in Old Icelandic sources. Walter Baetke believes that *Skjöldunga saga* connects *Svíþjóð in mikla* with *Scythia Magna* (Baetke 1973, p. 218), which is indicated at least by the fact that it is placed "to the north of the Maeotian swamps" ["Norden for palude Moeotide"] (ed. Bjarni Guðnason 1982, p. 4). Snorri Sturluson has produced his own variant of this legend of origin, giving "the historical, euhemeristic treatment of the *Æsir*" both in the Prologue to his *Edda* and in the *Ynglinga saga* (Faulkes 1983, p. 284). His *Svíþjóð in mikla* is a very weak echo of some ancient knowledge, but mostly a result of his intellectual efforts.

The Riphean Mountains

According to Snorri, the Tanais river flows through *Svíþjóð in mikla* from "the mountains in the north that are beyond all habitations", but he does not dare give them the name of the Riphean Mountains. As time progressed, as the new territories were developed, the boundary dividing the world known to the Scandinavians and the mysterious space inhabited by

supernatural and fantastic creatures gradually moved further north and northeast. The northern extremity of Norway, the areas of the Saami, as well as the ocean coast, became more and more well-known from the stories of eyewitnesses who had visited them or sailed along the shore, and therefore there was no room left on the mental map for the Riphean mountains lying beyond all inhabited lands in the north by the ocean. As a result, the Riphean mountains are mentioned only once in the works of Old Norse literature, namely, in a small geographical text dedicated to climatic zones, and several authors, like Snorri, tell of the nameless mountains in the far north from which the river Tanais, separating Europe and Asia, was flowing.

Zonality

Finally, Snorri's geographical description contains some vague knowledge of the ancient concept of latitudinal climatic and natural zoning. Having written that "the northern part of Svíþjóð remains uninhabited because of frost and cold, just as the southern part of Bláland is empty because of the heat of the sun", Snorri thus made it clear that *Svíþjóð in mikla* extends so far north of the Black Sea that it comes outside the inhabited zone and partially enters the northern uninhabited zone, while *Bláland it mikla* (Africa) enters partly into the equatorial hot uninhabited zone.

A text and a map

Snorri's descriptive map combines at least three methods of presenting the oecumene that scholars observe in medieval geographic maps: a principle of *T-O maps*, according to which, Asia, Europe and Africa are surrounded by the ocean and are separated from one another by the Tanais (Don), the Nile and the Mediterranean Sea; a schematic depiction of the world circle indented with the Ocean gulfs; contrasting the northern and southern extremities of the known world, with five climatic zones, the utmost northern and southern being uninhabited for reasons of either cold or heat. It's really tempting (from the position of a modern man) to assume that Snorri, while creating his geographical fragments, relied on a map, since his description is extremely "cartographic". However, we can neither prove, nor completely exclude this.

We only know that Snorri had been brought up by the most powerful chieftain in the country, Jón Loftsson, in his estate Oddi in the south of Iceland, noted both for its school and for the scholarship of its inhabitants. In 1181 Jón Loftsson was forced to offer to foster the infant Snorri. Thus the boy got the opportunity to grow up at one of the main centres of learning in Iceland. As a result, Snorri "received a comprehensive education in the secular spheres required by a young man of chieftainly class aspiring to get on in the world as a poet and a politician: law, poetry, genealogy, cosmology, mythology, and the art of storytelling" (Gísli Sigurðsson 2018, p. 295). We have no information as to what books there were in Oddi, but it's easy to imagine that Latin books with maps (or their copies) were being brought there. As Anthony Faulkes states, "many pieces of classical geography had been translated into Icelandic in the twelfth century, though it is unnecessary to suppose that Snorri had read any of these translations himself" (Faulkes 1993).

Snorri's geography is, no doubt, influenced by contemporary encyclopaedic knowledge: the ocean-girdled *orbis tripartitus*, climatic zones, etc. However, there is still doubt among scholars, whether Snorri knew Latin or not. As is emphasised in scholarly literature, "there are no quotations or verbal correspondences that can be pointed to indicate precisely what texts were used as sources". In this case the most likely solution would be to believe that Snorri's knowledge in this field was gained orally, "from those people who had read Latin works – either formally

in a school", or informally through contacts with learned men, such as Styrmir Kárason *inn fróði* who for a time was Snorri's secretary or collaborator at Reykjaholt (Faulkes 1993; Klingenberg 1992). Geographical information could be easily obtained from looking at those maps or diagrams that existed in many medieval manuscripts, and not as a result of reading an accompanying Latin text (Simek 1990).

Europe or Eneá

Still, there is a place-name that occurs neither in Scandinavian, nor in foreign sources, but is used only by Snorri Sturluson, and is presented as an alternative name for Europe: *Európa eða Eneá*. As a rule, the name *Europe* is explained in Old Norse texts in a different way. One explanation—after a man whose name was *Eurofs*—occurs in the geographical treatise *Landalýsing II*. The other one—after *Europa*, the daughter of Agenor, king of Libia—occurs in *Stjórn*, and is also borrowed from Isidore's *Etymologies*.

It is considered that the place-name *Eneá* is formed based on the name of a legendary ancestor of Rome and the Romans, one of the main defenders of Troy during the Trojan War, *Aeneas*, the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Andreas Heusler expresses surprise at the fact that, although there is not a word in Snorri's texts referring to *Aeneas* or the Trojan time in general, Snorri derives from him the name of Europe (though even in Italy nothing is named after him). According to Heusler, there might be some error here (Heusler 1908, p. 51). Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, however, believes that Europe, in the eyes of Snorri, does indeed, bear the name of *Aeneas* because the European nations, the Romans and the Britons, traced themselves from him (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, p. 9, n. 7).

It is interesting in this connection to note the opinion of Margaret Clunies Ross (1978, p. 155) that some Latin works were known to Snorri, and that he was familiar with certain subjects from the *Aeneid* through the medium of *Historia Regum Britanniae* ("History of the Kings of Britain", 1135–1138) by a Celtic historian of the 12th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth. It is not easy to discover traces of the *Aeneid* in Iceland (Würth 1998, p. 38, 48, 56, 59, 71, 82), however, if *Breta sögur* ("Stories of the Britons") that include the retelling of the *Aeneid* are rightly attributed to the monk Gunnlaugr (late 12th century), then it is not unreasonable to assume that the intellectual circles at the Benedictine Þingeyrar Monastery (the first monastery in Iceland) to which he belonged were at that time familiar with Virgil (Andersson 2003, p. 15). Heinz Klingenberg sees in the use of the name of *Aeneas* intertextual reference to Vergil's *Aeneid* admired throughout the entire Middle Ages, widely read, and used for instruction in medieval schools, and considers the "Európa eða Eneá" in the *Edda* as a keyword for Snorri's learned prehistory which begins in this work with Troy (Klingenberg 1992). Indeed, both Snorri's works open with a geographical description of the inhabited world and a euhemeristic account of the migrations of the *Æsir* out of Asia and into the north of Europe. Snorri links the *Æsir*, the Norse gods, to their ancestral home in Asia on pseudo-etymological grounds: he understands the *Æsir* (singular *Ás*) as *Asiamenn* ("people from Asia"). Furthermore, according to the *Edda*, Óðinn and his people set off on their trip from Asia to Europe from Troy, which positively indicates that, in Snorri's "learned prehistory" Troy and its heroes occupied a very important place.

The Trojan story

Dares Phrygius's Latin translation (done between the 4th and 6th centuries) of a Greek work (very likely, written in the 1st century AD) entitled *De excidio Troiae historia* ("The History of the Destruction of Troy") was, no doubt, the most popular work about the fall of Troy in the Middle Ages. Most countries of medieval

Europe used this concise work to retell the Trojan story. The Old Norse *Trójumanna saga* ("The saga of the Trojans") is not an exception. It is based on Dares's translation and its author often refers to *meistar(i) Dares*. The saga has reached our time in more than a dozen manuscripts, so the likelihood of its widespread fame in medieval Iceland is also quite high. All manuscripts of this saga date to not earlier than the 14th century. Still, the story of the Trojan War must have come quite early to Northern Europe. As can be deduced from another pseudo-history, the *Veraldar saga* ("The World's Saga"), the original version of which is thought to have been written between 1152–1190, a Latin version of the story must have been known in Iceland, and probably in Norway too, at the end of the 12th century. (Würth 2005) The abovementioned *Breta sögur* could be still another source of information for Snorri on the Trojan War.

Final remarks

To sum up, Snorri's descriptive map, although it has some kind of antique parallels, is in reality a product of the Middle Ages. Encyclopaedic medieval knowledge could enter through

the books, but also through the mediation of better-educated people from Snorri's entourage. Credit for the appearance of the place-name *Eneá* as a synonym for *Europe* should go entirely to Snorri himself. His acquaintance with the ancient hero Aeneas is a consequence of his immersion in the local Icelandic culture and literature, where the Troy story occupied a significant place by the end of the 12th century. The idea behind his identification of Europe and *Eneá*, as it seems to me, is worth searching within the limits of his "learned prehistory": the Trojan hero Aeneas had survived the Trojan War and went on to achieve "great deeds", he left Asia, travelled extensively and came to Europe, just like the *Æsir* came from Asia to the European North. Thus, this place-name was invented by Snorri to identify Europe with an eponymous founder and to complement the *Edda* Prologue's theme of the Trojan origins.

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