

The Emergence of *Norðrlönd* in Old Norse Medieval Texts, ca. 1100–1400

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Abstract – The subject of this article is the emergence of the term *Norðrlönd* in Old Norse textual culture, the different meaning and functions of this term, and its connection with the idea of a Northern people who shared certain features, such as a common language, history, and identity. This will be explained through analysis of the precise meaning of the term *Norðrlönd* within medieval discourse, in particular with regard to how it was used in the Scandinavian *lingua franca*. A secondary aim is to explain its connection with related concepts in other languages, for example, Latin. In order to achieve this, an analysis will be made of how the term was used and in what context. In addition, the influence of power structures on the term and their uses will also be analysed. A third consideration will be how the inhabitants of *Norðrlönd* were defined, in other words, who was included and who was not. This study of medieval discourse is qualitative rather than quantitative, as befits the nature of the documentary sources consulted. The primary sources themselves, and the information they provide, is the major focus of the study. Through careful analysis of the term *Norðrlönd* and its use in contemporary texts, the dominant discourse concerning the North in Scandinavia during the Middle Ages will be elucidated, as will the creation of an image of the North and a specific Nordic identity.

Keywords – The North, Iceland, worldview, medieval identities, ethnogenesis, literacy, medieval historiography, medieval geography, exoticism, mental maps

Introduction

Any study of historic phenomena has to start from a set of assumptions. To study the images of the North, one has to take for granted that the North can signify something besides a cardinal direction, that it includes places and communities that can be imagined. The meaning of the North can be both varied and multiform, as evidenced by the heterogeneous views on offer in this collection of articles. To study the North from a historical perspective also presupposes that the images and identities of the North can evolve according to the existing historical circumstances.

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The purpose of this article is to analyze the identities of the North from an etymological perspective by examining the term *Norðrlönd* as it appears in the earliest known Scandinavian sources and providing a general overview of its use in medieval Scandinavian sources. The emphasis on the Old Norse terminology turns the focus to the internal image of the North and how a specific discourse about a certain society was shaped by those belonging to that specific society. Of particular interest is the way in which those who belonged to the North could represent it to other peoples as an exotic location with inherent wonders, in works such as *The King's Mirror* (*Konungs skuggsjá*), written in Norway in the 13th century (see also Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson in this volume).

Any analysis of the term, however, can only benefit by taking into account the terms used to represent the North in other languages, in particular the international language of the day, Latin. The use of this comparative method should offer some insight into northern identities and shed light on how the people of the North identified themselves and made a distinction between themselves and others. The function of the term within literary discourse is also of interest for establishing whether the North was primarily seen as a geographic, social, or even a linguistic community. How did those who identified themselves with the North distinguish between themselves and others who were seen as outside that community? Were all who lived in northern lands seen as part of the North?

From the inception of literary discourse in the northern countries, history was seen as a vital marker of identification. Through the construction of a legendary past in works such as *Tales from the Ancient North* (in Modern Icelandic: *Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda*), the Nordic countries were reinvented as a historical community with an ancient and hallowed lineage. Of special interest is how the image of the historical North was, to a great degree, created at its western margin, in Medieval Iceland, even if Iceland was a new society that had only come into existence in the 9th and 10th centuries. To some degree, the northern past invented in the *fornaldarsögur* was a product of Icelandic literate culture and the introduction of an international system of discourse to this society on the margins of Catholic Christianity.

To summarize briefly, the subject of this article is the emergence of the term *Norðrlönd* in Old Norse textual culture, the different meaning and functions of this term, and its connection with the idea of a northern people who shared certain features, such as a common language, history, and identity.

New Systems of Discourse

In the 12th century a new medium of discourse, literacy, was introduced to Iceland, a country without a structure of government where the inhabitants had only recently been introduced to organized religion. An important milestone in the organization of the Icelandic Church was the introduction of tithes in 1096. This event was witnessed by the first generation of Icelanders who possessed literate culture, historians such as Ari Þorgilsson (1067–1148) and Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056–1133), who had enormous influence on the development of Icelandic historiography.¹ The introduction of a new medium of discourse thus went hand in hand with the adaptation of a new organized religion, Catholic Christianity.

Catholic Christianity had for centuries been spreading through Europe, from the confines of the defunct Roman Empire into virgin territories in northern and eastern Europe. During the process of conversion and consolidation, Catholic Christianity brought along with it a certain type of discourse and rationale, a method of constructing new truths. Within this discourse, there existed a dominant worldview, a method of clarifying the measure of the world, and classifying its lands and inhabitants. A name, whether of a person, a place, or a region, was an important signifier of status within this worldview.

The introduction of literacy coincided with the advent of a new system of discourse, the Old Norse–Icelandic literary language. As a literary language, Old Norse–Icelandic was in many ways an offshoot of other languages using the Latin alphabet and shared with them a common Christian method of discourse. For a few centuries, between ca. 1100 and ca. 1400, this common literary culture was shared by

¹ Their special status and influence was noted by their unique appropriation of the epithet *fróði* (the learned).

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members of a linguistic community that reached from Greenland to the eastern shores of the Gulf of Finland. Of course, there were differences between West Nordic and East Nordic dialects, but the speakers of these dialects made no distinction between them until the 14th and 15th centuries, when they began to call their languages Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic.² The written language of the Nordic peoples was fairly standardized from the 12th century onwards, even if the dialects had started to differ several centuries before. This would indicate that a standard of linguistic communication between Scandinavians from different parts of the region had developed well before the advent of literacy.³

This linguistic community of speakers of Old Norse–Icelandic had recourse to terms by which to identify themselves, terms with a reference to location or natural phenomena, names such as *Ísland* and *Norðrlönd*. The name of Iceland, evocative of northern chilliness, was recognized in Europe from the 11th century. Adam of Bremen, in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* from the 1070s, mentions both *Island* and its inhabitants, the *Islani*.⁴ However, no interpretation of the name or its connection with ice and coldness can be found in the earliest Latin medieval sources.

According to this source, Icelanders were loyal to several institutions in the 11th century, including the kings of Norway and the archbishops of Hamburg–Bremen. The evidence of Icelandic sources is less categorical in this respect, which demonstrates the importance of perspective. A person from an important Catholic centre, such as Adam of Bremen, had a predisposition to see structures and hierarchy in place whereas such connections were much more tenuous from the viewpoint of marginally situated Icelanders.

How about the larger entity to which the Icelanders belonged, the area known as *Norðrlönd*? How was the name of that particular region

² Compare with Jakobsson 2005: 195–196; see also Karker 1977: 484–487; Árnason 2002: 176–179. Literary Faroese was not created until the 18th and 19th centuries, eventually coming to resemble Icelandic far more than the spoken dialects would warrant.

³ Compare with Árnason 2002: 165–172.

⁴ Trillmich & Buchner, eds., 1961: 426, 484.

constructed, and how did the invention of the name contribute to the identity of the community that inhabited *Norðrlönd*, the people who shared a common linguistic and literary culture? For the rest of this article, I shall look at the context in which this term appears, and what it signifies.

Bipolar and Quadripolar Systems of Distinction

Despite the statement of Adam of Bremen, Iceland was evidently a land that was not subject to any king in the 12th century (or indeed, before), as is amply demonstrated by contemporary sources. In the 13th century, the relationship of Icelanders to the King of Norway was becoming more problematic, as many or most of the leading chieftains in the country became the retainers of the king and subject to his jurisdiction. In the end, this led to the submission of Iceland to the Norwegian kings, which was accomplished piecemeal in 1262–1264.

However, the relationship of the Norse king to power centres in the South was no less problematic. King Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–1263) sought approval for his status from both the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope.⁵ In 1247 a special emissary from Pope Innocent IV came “hither to the Nordic countries [...] to consecrate King Hákon.”⁶ In this instance, the view towards the North (*Norðrlönd*) is externalized by placing it in reference to a person travelling there from an important power centre in the Mediterranean region. However, the word “hither” shows that the term is actually that of the inhabitants of the North themselves.

The term *Norðrlönd* presupposes an ultimate system of direction, rather than a proximate system. The direction north is seen as a constant, the property of certain lands. In a similar way, Rome was defined as the South in Icelandic terminology and pilgrimages there were known as *sudrgöngur* (walks to the South). This definition of North and South was probably influenced by Latin terminology, in which the peoples of the North were known as *gentes septentrionales*.

⁵ Vigfússon, ed., 1887, vol. II: 269–270.

⁶ “Hingat í Norðrlönd [...] til þess at vígja Hákon konung undir kórónu.” Jóhannesson et al., eds., 1946, vol. II: 83 (my translation).

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Within this system, the North was not confined to Scandinavia, and in some texts France, Germany, and England are seen as parts of *Norðrlönd*.⁷

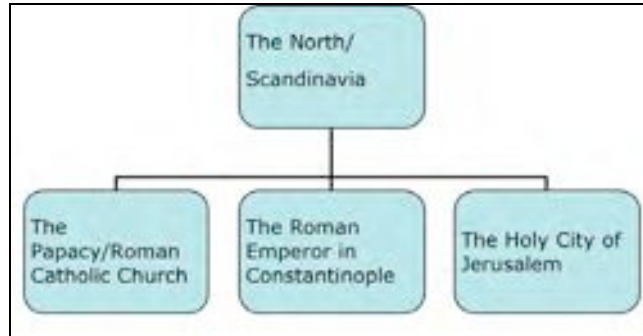


Figure 1. Relevant power structures within the North–South system.

In addition to this bipolar system of contrasting North and South, authors writing in the Old Norse–Icelandic language also appear to use the term *Norðrlönd* within a quadripolar system, in contrast to the lands that were closest to the region, the *Veströnd* (the British Isles), *Suðrriki* (Germany, the Holy Roman Empire) and *Austrriki/Austrvegr* (Russia and other lands to the east).⁸

An example of the way the North was contrasted with its neighbours can be seen in narratives about Óláfr Tryggvason (d. 1000), the Norse king whom Icelandic historians commonly depicted as the most significant missionary of Scandinavia. Óláfr was regarded as the “most famous man in the northern lands,” but the same sources also note his fame within a particular system of discourse, “the Danish tongue” (*dönsk tunga*), in this instance the Old Norse–Icelandic language that was shared by the Scandinavians.⁹

The fame of Óláfr was not confined to the North; he also received “all sorts of fame in Russia and widely on the eastern paths,

⁷ Those examples are discussed further in Jakobsson 2005: 196–197.

⁸ Compare with Jakobsson (2005): 193–199, 217.

⁹ “Frægstr maðr á Norðrlöndum.” Jónsson, ed., 1932: 231; Jónsson, ed., 1902–1903: 131 (my translation).

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in the southern lands and the western lands.”¹⁰ The emphasis that Scandinavian historians placed on the historical renown of this Norwegian monarch in other regions demonstrates that people and events in the North were thought to be of importance for these cultures. In these lands the North was not as distant or marginal as it was perceived in the power centres in the South.

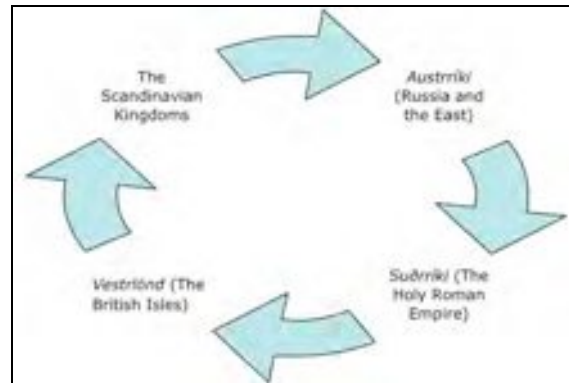


Figure 2. Relevant power structure within the quadripolar system.

The term *Norðrlönd* thus had a dual meaning, depending on the context. It was either a vaguely defined region, north of the great power centres in the South, or a micro-region within a system of four competing structures to the west, north, east, and south.

Within these different systems of distinction there were various possible discourses about the North. From the viewpoint of the South there was a tendency to identify the North as *the Other*, going back to Tacitus’ writings on the Germans. Adam of Bremen has a tendency to depict the Scandinavians as noble Barbarians, free from the corruptions and politics of the South. The cave-dwelling Icelanders get an honourable mention and are seen as Christians in nature, even if recent converts in practice (see also Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson in this volume).

¹⁰ “Margs kyns frægð í Garðaríki ok víða um Austrvegu, í Suðrlöndum ok í Vestrlöndum.” Jónsson, ed., 1902–1903: 108–111 (my translation).

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In part, this view was shared by the Scandinavians themselves, although they saw nothing noble in their isolation and distance from the centres of religion in the South. With the advent of literacy and a general acceptance of the Catholic worldview they were eager to cement their relationship with the power centres and make up for their marginal status within Christianity. The institution of *súðrgöngur* is an example of such a passage to the centre, both in geographical and social terms.

Within the quadripolar system, the North is more often used as a field of comparison. It is a reference that is used to estimate the achievements of individual kings. Their success depends partly on the fame of a particular king within the Scandinavian system of discourse, *dönsk tunga*. Their greatness was seen in terms of their power within this particular geographic frame, *Norðrlönd*. This can be inferred from the manner in which individual kings are classified in the Icelandic *konungasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, as the richest or most powerful kings within “Norðrlönd.”

East Meets North: *The King's Mirror* and the Exotic Self

In the 13th-century text *The King's Mirror* (L: *Speculum regale*; ON: *Konungs skuggsjá*), which is narrated in the form of a dialogue between a wise father and an inquisitive son, there is a detailed discussion about social and natural phenomena that pertain to the work of a merchant or a king. Early in the narrative, the father mentions the difference between the position of the sun in northern and southern parts of the World, which leads to a discussion about the relative temperatures of southern parts of the World (such as Apulia or the Holy Land) and the northern parts of the World, in which the discussion takes place. The father informs the son about the spherical nature of the Earth and the effect of its spherical form on the climate. Then the son wants to go on to lighter subjects, such as the wonders that are to be found in lands such as Ireland, Iceland, or Greenland. This leads the father into a discussion about the “wonders that are here with us in the North,”¹¹ although reluctantly, as people are loath to believe such tales about things they have not seen themselves. In this section, he clearly identifies himself as belonging to the North.

¹¹ “Undr þau er hier eru norðr med oss” (my translation).

However, the father makes an explicit comparison between the North and India, with a reference to a book that was supposedly made in India about the Indies and sent to Emperor Manuel I (r. 1143–1180) in Constantinople. This is the famous book, *De ritu et moribus Indorum*, that was ascribed to the pseudo-Christian Indian king, Prester John, and circulated widely in Medieval Europe. The argument of the father seems to be that this book also contains wondrous tales and yet is highly credible. By analogy, the same should apply to wondrous tales from the North.¹²

In *The King's Mirror*, then, the North is described as if from outside, a place that might seem wondrous to strangers, to people not belonging to the North. However, these wonders are depicted as normal from an inside point of view; it is only a lack of familiarity that makes them strange, just as the wonders of the East seem strange to people not belonging to that part of the world. The wise father figure then goes on to describe natural phenomena that belong to the North, remarkable sea creatures, ice, volcanoes, and northern lights. At all times he attempts to explain them as manifestations of the natural order, not as monstrous anomalies. However, he makes no attempt to classify the wonders of Iceland or Greenland (let alone Ireland) as specifically “Northern” attributes. On the contrary, they are compared and classified with similar strange phenomena in more southern or eastern parts of the world, such as India or Sicily.

Although *The King's Mirror* is one of the earliest works to discuss phenomena that belong to the North, its identification of peculiar Northern attributes is not made with any vigour. The author seems to be implying that each region has its own wonders, which make them seem exotic to strangers, but are all part of the divine order of nature. The author of *The King's Mirror* deliberately shies away from making a sharp distinction between the North and other parts of the world, although he identifies himself as part of the North. Thus, in this work, the North is seen as a separate region but not necessarily very different from other regions. The implication of *The King's Mirror* is that the peculiarities of the North are no more peculiar than those of any other region on Earth.

¹² Holm-Olsen, ed., 1983: 13.

The Inherent Model: Latin Discourse about the North

In *The King's Mirror*, the discussion about the wonders of the North is preceded by an explanation of the northern winds and their effects on the work of farmers and sailors and other professions. In connecting the North to certain winds, the author was able to draw upon a very ancient tradition. In ancient Greek and Latin texts, the North was traditionally identified by either the winds or the star signs. The northern wind was known as *boreas* (in Greek) or *aquilo* (in Latin), but these terms usually had negative connotations, especially the Latin *aquilo*. Identifying the North by seven stars in Ursa Major, the *septem triones* (Greek: *arktos*), was also an ancient custom, but these terms had a much more neutral connotation.¹³

When the first Christian missionaries went to the North in the early 9th century, their missionary field was identified as *partes aquilonis*, the region of the northern wind.¹⁴ These lands were explicitly contrasted with the homelands of Christianity in the South. In 11th- and 12th-century works by German Christian historians, however, the more neutral terms *septentrio* and *boreas* gained ground at the expense of *aquilo*.¹⁵ This coincided with the spread of Christianity to the North, which was thus no longer distinct from the South in respect to religion. The use of these Latin terms was of more ancient provenance than the Old Norse term *Norðrlönd* and must have influenced its use in Scandinavian medieval historiography.

In works by authors such as Adam of Bremen, negative characterizations are reserved for those he regards as *pagani*, although not all the people thus termed by Adam were actually pagans.¹⁶ David Fraesdorff argues that the North as an imaginary construction in the writings of medieval clerics was dependent on ancient models identifying the North with darkness and coldness. However, the stark contrasting of the pagan North, *aquilo*, with the Christian South was in retreat from the 9th century onwards. Interestingly, the Pagan-Christian dichotomy contributed also to a western European tradition

¹³ Fraesdorff 2005: 37–40.

¹⁴ Fraesdorff 2005: 58.

¹⁵ Fraesdorff 2005: 355–356.

¹⁶ Janson 1998: 333.

of discourse where the Slavonic eastern lands were seen as parts of the missionary field of the North. This reflected the ambition of German clergymen in the 12th and 13th centuries, but the influence on later discourse was profound.¹⁷

These Latin terms and models of discourse were available to Northern literati who wished to define their own region. Thus, *The King's Mirror* is far from the only source to identify the cardinal regions with the winds, and the use of stellar constellations was also very common. The Medieval Latin discourse about the North also influenced the identification of North with certain cultural characteristics, such as wildness and paganism. In the works of 11th- and 12th-century authors, however, such inferences were receding in importance, as the North became an established part of the Catholic oecumene.

The Northern Community: The Other North

As the example of Óláfr Tryggvason demonstrates, it was common in Old Norse historiography to identify “the Northern lands” (*Norðrlönd*) with a particular system of discourse, “the Danish tongue” (*dönsk tunga*), which was shared by those inhabiting the northern lands. Thus, the North was identified with a certain ethnicity and a certain culture. Such a definition, however, was inherently problematic as not all the inhabitants of the North belonged to the cultural group speaking the Danish tongue.

In his overview of the northern lands, Adam of Bremen mentions several peoples belonging to the North, among others such exotic peoples as the Sami (L: *Scriðfinni*), who were “steeled by the cold” (L: *gelu decocti*).¹⁸ In *Historia Norvegiae*, a distinction is made between zones that are populated by the king's subjects and those which are “populated by Finns [Sami] and not cultivated” (L: *Finnis inhabitatur sed non aratur*).¹⁹ A distinction is made between the inhabitants (L: *incolae*) of northern Norway and the godless (L: *profani*) Sami using

¹⁷ Fraesdorff 2005: 361–363.

¹⁸ Trillmich & Buchner, eds., 1961: 256.

¹⁹ Storm, ed., 1880: 73.

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religious terminology, although it is explicit that there is also a distinction between the lifestyle of the Sami as hunters and nomads and the Norse as settled cultivators.²⁰ A similar distinction can be seen in several Icelandic historical sources, such as the *fornaldarsögur*, where the Sami and other related peoples clearly belong to the “other” North.²¹

The North was then not only a geographic area but a marker of identity. Those who belonged to the North had something in common that they did not share with the inhabitants of the lands nearest to them: a common language, a common culture, a common lifestyle, and, last but not least, a common history. It is this history that defined the North, as can be seen in the statements about Óláfr Tryggvason, who had gained “historical fame” (ON: *sögufrægd*) in the North. This was only possible because the North was seen as a region that had a shared culture and origins. The North was defined in the discourse about its past.

The Legendary Past of the North

A common past was one of the characteristics that defined the identity of the North, as can be seen by the ubiquity of the term *Norðrlönd* within the literature, such as the king’s sagas and legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*). Authors who wanted to compose a history of the North had a lot of legendary material to work with, but the general trustworthiness of such material was questionable. To make the legendary past of the North appear authentic, the author had to anchor the argument by connecting the development of the North to general Catholic history, the authenticity of which was not questioned.

One such connection can be seen in tales about the “Fróðafriðr,” which were recorded by the progenitors of Icelandic history, Sæmundr and Ari. Both seem to have made a reference in their writings to the reign of King Fróði as a period of long-standing peace and good government.²² This period was thought to coincide in time

²⁰ Hansen 2000: 68–70.

²¹ Jakobsson 2005: 249–256.

²² Compare with Karlsson 1969: 332–333; Guðnason 1963: 17, 125, 198.

with the birth of Christ and the reign of Augustus the Great as Roman emperor.

Another attempt to construct a concrete temporal framework for the legendary prehistory of the North can be seen in *Norna-Gests þátr*. The protagonist of that episode, Norna-Gestr, seems to have condensed within a single lifespan (albeit an extraordinary long life of 300 years) all the major characters and events of the legendary history of the North. In this episode, the reign of Óláfr Tryggvason in Norway (995–1000) marks the beginning of a new era, the end of legendary prehistory and the beginning of a properly Christian history.

The hegemonic legend of the ancestry of the Scandinavian kings was under construction in the 12th and 13th centuries, but Turkish origins are hinted at as early as in the works of Ari fróði. In the *Snorra-Edda*, a scholarly exploration of Scaldic verse from the first half of the 13th century, there is a prologue that confidently traces the origins of Scandinavian royal and noble lineages from Odin, and hence to the city of Troy. Other sources, both *Heimskringla* and sagas of the apostles, make a broader case for emigration from Asia Minor to the North. The cause of the emigration is not always agreed upon; some sources cite the campaigns of Roman generals in Asia, whereas others mention the preachings of the apostles.

The general framework of migration from Asia around the birth of Christ seems to have enjoyed wide-ranging currency, although alternative narratives of origin do exist, most prominently those that involve emigration from Ostrobothnia.²³

Conclusion: Icelanders and the Discourse about the North

The discourse on *Norðrlönd* in Old Norse–Icelandic literature centred around two basic systems, one bipolar and the other quadripolar. Within the bipolar system there was a tendency to identify the North as *the Other*, in contrast to wealthy centres of power in the South. This discourse is apparent in writings that reflect a Catholic worldview and

²³ Jakobsson 2005: 208–209.

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define the status of the North in a universal perspective. Within a narrower frame of reference, the quadripolar system, the North was more often used as a field of comparison, to estimate the achievements of individual dignitaries.

Discourses of the past always involve to some degree an invention of the Self. The medieval discourse on *Norðrlönd* included several references to the common past where the North was routinely introduced as a frame of reference. Thus the new medium of literacy was instrumental in bringing about a particular identity of the North, based on a shared historical past and the aristocratic background of the ruling class, which perceived itself as descendants from Turkish immigrants.

The situation of Iceland within the community of people inhabiting the North was ambiguous. In one sense, the prodigious creation of literary works dealing with the common past of the North was of supreme importance for the way scholars of the North came to view themselves. In dealing with the legendary past, Iceland was seen as a repository of ancient knowledge, a fact readily acknowledged by historians from other Scandinavian lands.

The introduction of literacy thus gave Icelandic scholars an opportunity to act as the historians of the North, who had the obligation and prestige of preserving the legends of a common Scandinavian past. Icelanders played a vital role in giving the term *Norðrlönd*, a significance that cemented Nordic identity within a larger, Catholic framework.

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