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Where Do the Giants Live?

Once upon a time, in the forest

Bragi the Old, a renowned ninth century court poet and perhaps even the inventor of the *dróttkvætt* metre, is travelling through a certain unspecified forest (“þa er hann oc vm skog nokqvorn”) late at night (“sið vm qveld”), when a certain unspecified troll-wife without even a name (“trollkona”) throws a verse in his direction and asks who is there. Bragi replies with a stanza filled with metaphors (*kenningar*) and poetic synonyms (*heiti*) about poets — she replies in kind and explains who she is, starting with “Traill kalla mic” and ending in “hvat er traill nema þat” (Troll they call

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Abstract: This article examines ideas about the whereabouts of giants in the Edda of Snorri Sturluson, where it is not only difficult to distinguish between giants and e.g. trolls, but even more difficult to determine where they live. Giants may be found in forests, in the mountains and on the shores. Living on the outskirts of the known world, the giants seem to be located on all points of the compass, but are also particularly associated with the East and the North, perhaps reflecting the fact that from the point of view of 13th century Icelanders, these were the directions where heathen and somewhat unfamiliar races like Finns and Permsians are to be found. There is some confusion as to whether or not all giants live in Jötunheimar, a place that is sometimes in the East and sometimes in the North. At the time of the twilight of the Gods, the giants arrive from all directions and perhaps that is our best clue as to the giants' whereabouts in Snorri's Edda. — The confusion in the Edda may be more systematic than it seems to be at first sight. Evil is not unified but divided, perhaps reflecting the chaos originally associated with the primeval giant Ymir, which was then replaced by the order established by the gods. In accordance with this system, it is logical to expect that the giants are going to attack from all directions and that giants and their kin will be found everywhere, in the East and the West, the forests and mountains and in every unfamiliar place in the world.

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me ... what is that but a troll) (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 164–65).¹

Explains is a not really the best word for what the troll-wife is doing, because even after having heard the verse, we cannot really be sure what she is. There is still the problem of what exactly a troll is supposed to be. Ironically we can no longer be quite sure either about who Bragi is, whether our protagonist is indeed Bragi Boddason the ninth century poet or some other Bragi the Old, or what exactly the relationship is between the court poet and the other Bragi, the god of poetry (see Mogk 1887; Bugge 1888; Mogk 1889; Turville-Petre 1964: 185–86; Clunies Ross 2006). But in this narrative, Bragi seems to be well-known indeed, so that it is sufficient for the narrator to merely mention his name. The nameless troll-wife, on the other hand, represents the unknown, the nature of which we may only catch a glimpse of.

The verse reveals some facts about her: that she has a friendly relationship with “volur” (sibyls or witches), and some relations with the dead and the giants (“iötvns”). Last but not least, she is antagonistic to the sun (“solar bał”). In fact, the only thing we may be sure of is that she is entirely negative. She is a creature of the night and of death, an Other, and likely to possess otherworldly powers. And she can be found in a certain forest late at night. As the narrative ends with her verse, we do not even know how the encounter ends, whether Bragi and the troll-wife parted amicably or if one killed the other.

Although this ogress is a “trollkona”, neither Bragi nor we can be entirely sure that she might not also qualify as a “iötvnn” or even a “risi”, since these words are often used as synonyms, not only in modern Icelandic but also in late mediaeval literature (see esp. Schulz 2004: 29–52). For example, in the 15th century *Hjálmþérs saga ok Ölvis*, one of the leading character spots a “risi” but two sentences later, this creature speaks and is now a “jötunn”. The next two times he speaks, he is “risinn” again, but then he is the “jötuninn” (Rafn 1830: 486–88). In another legendary saga, king Hrólfur Gautreksson encounters a terrible “risi”, whom he calls a “tröll” to his back (Rafn 1830: 121–26), and in *Egils saga ok Ásmundar*, the words “jötunn” and “tröll” seem almost interchangeable (Rafn 1830: 394–402).

A similar confusion is present in the *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* (c.

¹ Actually, not all manuscripts of *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* include the verse of the troll-wife. Of the four main manuscripts, Codex Regius has it but not Codex Upsalensis, Codex Wormianus or Codex Trajectinus. In this article, all translations from the *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* are my own.

1220), where the anecdote about Bragi and the troll-wife is found. According to Snorri Sturluson, the very first being is called Ymir. He and all his family are “hrimþvrsar” (frost-giants) at first, although Ymir in fact has “mannz likandi” (the shape of a man), but soon he is also referred to as a “iotvnn” (giant) and when he is killed and all his family, one escapes who is the father of the “hrimþvrsar” family, and called Bergelmir by “iotnar” (giants). These “iotnar” continue to play a large role in the narrative. Soon we are also introduced to something called “Iotvnheimar” (giantland) and a “gygr” (giantess) who lives in the forest Ironwood in the east, along with a band of “traðllkonvr” (trollwives) called “Iarnviðivr”, who breed giants and wolves (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 12–18). Some beings called “bergrisar” (mountain-giants) also make an appearance before long, whose mortal enemy Þórr is and against whom Bifröst must be defended, should they wish to cross it, perhaps along with the frost-giants. These mountain-giants may be identical with “iotnar” (giants), since at least one of them “færiz . . . iotvnmóð” (changed into giant shape) when provoked (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 23, 29, 33 and 47).

Defining a giant in 13th and 14th century sources is thus far from unproblematic. Lotte Motz (1987) made a brave attempt, arguing for four distinguishable categories of giants in some unspecified pre-history.² Unfortunately, even those mediaeval sources which wish to make such a distinction are unable to sustain it (see Ármann Jakobsson forthcoming). In this article I will not discuss the terminology any further but focus instead on where such beings may be found. I will also limit myself to one source, the *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*.

This particular single source is, of course, much more than that. It is the main mythological work of the 13th century, and it is thus of some worth to ascertain whether the mythologist Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) had a clear notion of where giants lived. Furthermore, I do think it is worth the effort to demonstrate how even a single source presents us with conflicting information of the whereabouts of giants. Of course, reviewing other sources would add further examples and increase the ambiguity. However, as I will demonstrate, that is not really necessary.

Do giants, trolls and ogres live in the forest? In this instance, yes. If travelling through the forest at night, you may run into a troll-wife.

² These four classes of beings, each with its own role, were lords and guardians of nature (“jötunn”), mythical magicians (“tröll”), hostile and monstrous beings (“þurs”) and “heroic and courtly beings” (risi).

But as a closer inspection of Edda reveals, they also live in the mountains and on the shore, in the East and in the North. John Lindow is more or less right when he says: “Scandinavian mythology places the *jötnar* in two different remote locations: on the beach, and to the east” (p. 18). This is close enough to the truth, but, apart from the fact that the term “Scandinavian mythology” is somewhat vague (he actually means Snorri), the whereabouts of the giants actually turn out to be even more uncertain than this. In fact, once you get out of that familiar place that Snorri calls “Miðgarðr” (Finnur Jónsson: 16), who knows where you might run into one.

In the periphery

Acute readers of the *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* are bound to become infuriated with what seems to be Snorri’s unconventional sense of mythological geography. According to his *Gylfaginning*, the first part of his *Edda*, there are two worlds besides the one which we inhabit, Niflheimr in the North and Múspell in the South. Both are cruel in their excesses, one excessively cold, the other hot. Our own world seems to be an amalgamation of the two. When elements from these two worlds drip into the emptiness of Ginnungagap, the clash of heat and cold make the first man (“manz likandi”) but this first “man” is not a man but the aforementioned frost-giant (“hrimþvss”) or a giant (“iotvn”) called Ymir, who in Snorri’s version turns out to be the ancestor not of men (cf. Meyer 1907), but of all giants and frost-giants (Finnur Jónsson: 12–14). Óðinn and his brothers descend from another first man, — but, according to Snorri’s *Gylfaginning* they are not the forefathers of man either, but create a third “first man” of their own out of driftwood, along with his wife (Finnur Jónsson: 16).

When Ymir has been killed by Óðinn and his brothers, he also ends up as the matter of which our world is made and man (or at least the giants) thus precedes the world, which is essentially created out of him. It remains unclear how to define this founding father of the world, man or frost-giants or giant, as well as his race, the giants (see Schulz 2004: 65–72; Ármann Jakobsson forthcoming). In fact, the terms giant and frost-giant seem interchangeable in the first Chapters of the *Gylfaginning*, and the vagueness about the terms “iotvnn” and “hrimþvss” (and to what degree they should be considered human) eventually translates into confusion about where the giants live.

The first place that Snorri Sturluson mentions is the outskirts of the world: “Hon er kringlott vtan ok þar vtan vm ligr hin divpi siar, ok með þeiri siavar strændv gafv þeir laund til bygþar iotna ættvm” (It is circular round the edges and the deep sea surrounds it, and along the shore they gave lands to the families of giants to settle) (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 15). This seems to suggest that the geographical demarcation between the gods and the giants is one of centre and periphery.³ The civilized world is called “Miðgarðr” (Middle-Earth being a tempting translation), and only considerably later in *Gylfaginning* is it revealed that at least some giants live in the city called “Vtgarðr” (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 53) which literally would translate into “outskirt city”. As Clunies Ross has argued (1994: 50–56) this is somewhat of an over-simplification (see also Schulz 2004: 99–106). According to her, the idea of “Miðgarþr” and “Vtgarþr” nevertheless reveals how all the myths are narrated from the point of view of the gods, and thus the giants can be said to live “away” or “out there”.

In accordance with this first statement about the giants’ whereabouts after the slaughter of Ymir, when the god Þórr goes on one of his hunts for the giant serpent “Miðgarþz ormr” that lives in the deep sea that surrounds the world, of course he finds giants on the shore: “Geck hann vt of Miðgarþ sva sem vngr drengr ok kom ein aptan at qveldi til iotvns nockvrs” (He went out of Miðgarðr having assumed the guise of a young boy and came one evening at a certain giant’s) (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 61). Of course, that may have seemed puzzling to Snorri’s original Icelandic audience, since Iceland tended to be mostly inhabited along the shore even at that time, and central Iceland would be more likely to be their role-model for the wilderness. In fact, that is not the only peculiar thing about the centre and periphery binary in Snorri’s Edda, if we take into account that 13th century Icelanders are more likely to have regarded themselves as being in the periphery rather than the centre (see Sverrir Jakobsson 2005: 161–88). Nevertheless, this is at least one of Snorri’s versions of where the giants live. For those who would prefer symmetry, it is unfortunately not the only one, and in fact it is close to impossible to conceive of one single location for the giants in Snorri’s mythical world.

If the civilized world lies in the Middle and the world is a globe

³ See examples collected by Motz (1984). On the binary of Miðgarðr and Útgarðr as centre and periphery, see Gurevich (1969) and Hastrup (1985: 145–51). Stewart (1993: 71) characterizes the relationship between us and giants as us being “enveloped by the gigantic, surrounded by it, enclosed within its shadow”.

(“kringla heimsins” is a word famously used by Snorri in the prologue to his *Heimskringla*), the outskirts lie in all directions so that if you travel for long enough, sooner or later you will find the place where the giants live. On the other hand, Snorri seems to favour some directions as more likely than other to lead to the whereabouts of the giants.

North or East?

Not every giant seems to live on the shore. Snorri frequently assumes that the giants live in *Iotvnheimar* (giantland) (see e.g. Finnur Jónsson 1931: 17, 20, 46 and 65), and while that may very well be on the shore or close to it, there is no explicit statement to that fact.⁴ This suggests a fixed space, a terrain governed and inhabited by giants and home to every possible kind of ogre, including the monstrous children of Loki: the giant wolf Fenrir, the giant serpent Miðgarðsormr and Hel (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 34). On at least two occasions, it is indicated that the region of *Iotvnheimar* is to the north: “flygr hann norðr i Iotvnheima” (flies north to giantland) (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 80; see also p. 104). As we will see, this idea does not run through *Gylfaginning* — but if *Iotvnheimar* are indeed to the North, we might infer that the natural abode of the giants is the coldness of the North, which fits in with the notion of frost-giants. However, as it turns out, North is not always the direction where giants can be found.

Leaving the exact location of *Iotvnheimar* aside for the moment, the gods certainly do not need to go north to find their enemies. The tale of the wicked giant Hrungrnir starts when Þórr has gone east to thrash trolls but Óðinn goes to *Iotvnheimar*: “Þor var farin i A/strvega at beria tráll, en Óþin reið Sleipni i Iotvnheima” (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 100). While trolls and giants are not quite as inseparable as giants and frost-giants, the demarcation between them is nevertheless far from clear (see Schulz 2004: 45–46; Ármann Jakobsson forthcoming). In this instance, the gods travel in two separate directions to encounter ogres. Þórr goes east but Óðinn goes to *Iotvnheimar*, which presumably lie in the North. Are they seeking the same enemy?

If we are supposed to regard trolls (*tráll*) and giants (*iotnar*) as one

⁴ While *Iotvnheimar* is usually translated as “giantland” in the singular, the Old Norse word is in the plural, which explains the use of the plural in this article. *Iotvnheimar* actually do not figure strongly in Eddic poems. They are only mentioned in *Skirnismál*, *Völuspá* and *Prymskvíða* (Kellogg 1988: 575).

and the same, their race presumably lives both in the North and in the East. And while *Iotvnheimar* sometimes seem to lie in the North, it turns out that the land of the giants may also lie in the East. When Þórr visits the giant Útgarða-Loki, he “byriði ferþina æstr i Iotvnheima ok alt til hafsz, þa geck hann vpp ok með honvm Loki ok Þjalfi ok Ravsqva. Þa er þa hofþv litla hrið gengit, varð firir þeim mork stor” (started on the journey east to giantland and all the way up to sea and then he crossed the deep sea. But when he reached land, he went ashore and Loki, Þjálfi and Raskva with him. When they had only walked for a short while, they came to a great forest) (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 50). Here Þórr is not only heading east to find giants but the region he is heading for is even called *Iotvnheimar*, apparently somewhat contradicting Snorri’s later statement that while Þórr is going to the East, Óðinn travels north to *Iotvnheimar*.

It may not be a coincidence that the East and the North should be replete with giants since from the 13th century Icelanders’ point of view these directions would have been full of strange and unfamiliar races of men, such as Finns and Permians (Lindow 1995; McKinnell 2005; Sverrir Jakobsson 2005: 217–76). Locating the giants in the East and the North may indeed seem to reflect a somewhat archaic and Norway-centric view of the world, as East and North to Norwegians would mean heathen and somewhat unfamiliar races whereas to the West and South were Christians and more Norwegians.⁵ Not that giants are always presented as unfamiliar. In fact, Snorri also reveals that the family of the gods includes their daughters, their ally Loki is a fosterbrother of Óðinn and the great god himself is the grandson of a giant. The relationship of the gods and the giants is thus far from simple (see e.g. Ciklamini 1962; Motz 1982; Mundal 1990, Steinsland 1991; Schulz: 256–86), although Snorri attempts to simplify it by carving out a separate territory for these troublesome relatives of the gods, the giantland.

However, even in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*, there is great uncertainty where the Land of the giants lies. *Iotvnheimar* turn out to not always

⁵ This would not be the only instance of a Norway-centric world view surviving in 13th-century Iceland (the Irish are frequently referred to as “Vestmenn” in 12th and 13th century sources, although Ireland is not to the West of the Iceland, see Sverrir Jakobsson 2005: 217 note 3). Neither is this type of colonial archaism unique to 13th century Icelanders (21st century Australians refer to the countries to the far north-west as “the Middle East”).

lie in the North. Sometimes the gods must go to the East. And in the East there is a great forest.

Forests and mountains

Is this the same forest that Bragi was crossing when he met his troll-wife? There seem to be many forests in the East, including the Ironwood where a giantess raises wolves: “Gygr ein byr firir [av]stan Miðgarþ í þeim skogi, er [I]arnviðr h(eitir). Í þeim skogi byggja þær trálkonvr, er Iarnviðivr h(eita). En gamla gygr fæþir at sonvm marga iotna ok alla ivargs likivm” (A giantess lives east of Middle-earth in a forest called Ironwood. This forest is inhabited by those trollwives called Ironwoodesses. But the old giantess raises as sons many giants and all in wolf shapes) (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 18). And forests figure in more giant narratives of the *Edda*: When the goddess Iðunn is abducted to *Lotvnheimar*, she, too, travels through a forest (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 79).

Perhaps readers of *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* were expected to make a distinction between the trolls and troll-wives in the forests of the East and the giants of *Lotvnheimar* in the mountains of the North. When Þórr meets the huge Skrímir in the forest he tells them to go east to Útgarðr while he is heading north to the mountains: “þa stefnit þer iavstr, en ek á nv norðr leið til fialla þesa” (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 53). And East is the place where Þórr goes to thrash his trolls: “þa var hann farin i Austrveg at beria tráll” (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 46; see also p. 121). In this particular episode, it is possible to argue for a distinction made between trolls, forests and the East on one hand, and on the other giants, mountains and the North. But unfortunately, in *Gylfaginning* as a whole, this distinction is at best hazy and we cannot so easily resolve the controversy or overlook the fact that in *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, *Lotvnheimar* are sometimes in the East but sometimes in the North.

In the beginning of the *Edda*, giants are more frequently known as frost-giants (“hrimþvssar”) rather than giants (“iotnar”) or trolls (“tráll”). Once Snorri claims that these frost-giants now live where that great void Ginnungagap used to be (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 22). There is no further depiction of that particular place, apart from the fact that there is a well there, guarded by the extremely wise Mimir who probably is a frost-giant, although that is not explicitly stated — Snorri merely says that his well is located where the frost-giants live, adding “heitir sa Mimir, er a brvnninn” (the owner of the well is named

Mímir) (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 22). Giants thus may be found near a well, as well as on the shore and in the forest. It is unclear how that may be a foundation for the closeness of giants and mountains, or a relationship with forests.

However, Snorri soon starts producing examples of giants who inhabit the mountains — influenced perhaps by giant kennings where their relationship with mountains seems overwhelming (Meissner 1921: 256–58). The giantess Skaði who marries the god Níorðr turns out to be used to mountain landscape (which contributes to the wreckage of their marriage) (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 30). Óðinn also finds the giant Suttungr in a mountain (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 83–84) and when Loki assumes the form of the party-pooping giantess Þavck he, too, dwells in a cave (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 67). But while Snorri seems to be aware of the fact that giants may be located in mountains, also reflected in the word “bergrisar” (mountain-giants) (see e.g. Finnur Jónsson 1931: 23, 29 and 33), in his *Gylfaginning*, mountains nevertheless do not to have more prominence as a dwelling place for giants than the shore or the forest (cf. Motz 1984).

Surrounded by evil

When the twilight of the gods (the “*ragna ra/kr*”) is near, their enemies attack from all directions. The frost-giants arrive from the sea while the sons of Múspell cross the rainbow of Bifravst (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 71). The gods seem surrounded, which might fit in with a world-view where the civilization lies at the centre, in the Mitgarðr. But this centre is surrounded by outskirts, a shore in an undisclosed direction, a North with mountain-giants and an East replete with forests and trolls.

Possibly, there is no real discrepancy — gods and humans are simply surrounded by “*iotnar*” and “*tröll*” and “*hrímþvrsar*” and “*bergrisar*”. They live on the shore and in the East and in the North and in the forest and in the mountains. They are, indeed, everywhere.

In Snorri’s presentation of the twilight of the gods in *Gylfaginning*, it is revealed that the giants very much outnumber the gods, and it thus almost seems like an act of destiny that they have to surround the centre and seem to be everywhere: in the forests and caves and mountains and sea-shores — in the East and the North and perhaps everywhere if you venture far enough. Snorri also presents them as being more fertile. Before the gods kill him, Ymir can multiply by

rubbing his feet together and by sweating, which seems in the end bound to produce a lot of “hrimþvrsar” (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 13), and enable them to attack from all directions in the twilight of the gods.

When the old giant Ymir was killed and his body transformed into the world, cosmos succeeded chaos — the gods arrange the new world to their own liking. The killers of Ymir are not presented as creators *ex nihilo*, instead they are the makers of the world order and thus the slayers of the chaos that preceded it (see e.g. Clunies Ross 1994: 197–98, 262–63; Kroesen 1996: 59). In this binary, the giants and frost-giants and all their family represent chaos. Thus it is perhaps only logical that they should have many names and that they should be grouped into hazy sub-categories with vague demarcation between the various classes. They are after all the enemies of order and method. Perhaps it is also their chaotic nature which allows them to triumph in the twilight of the gods. It needs only one tiny thing to be out of order for chaos to replace unity.

And it seems to be equally logical that the gods should live together and be united while the giants can be found in all directions. While good is unified, evil is divided. While harmony can be found in a single place, discord is everywhere. And so, indeed, are the giants. They are in the East and in the North, on the shores and in the forest and in the mountains. To pin them down is to deny the giants their very chaotic essence.

As the encounter between Bragi and the troll-wife demonstrates, it is impossible to be quite sure of how to classify the creatures you might encounter in the dark forest of the night. There are frost-giants, mountain-dwellers, trolls, ogres and all sorts of evil creatures lurking in the unfamiliar places of the world. And you may encounter them anywhere.

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