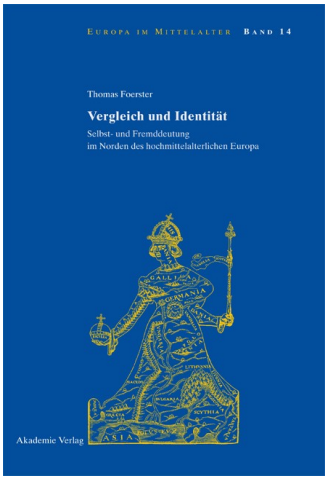

Thomas Foerster, *Vergleich und Identität: Selbst- und Fremddeutung im Norden des hochmittelalterlichen Europa*, (Europa in Mittelalter: Abhandlungen und Beiträge zur historischen Komparistik, 14), Akademie Verlag: Berlin 2009. 228 pp.

Thomas Foerster's Heidelberg doctoral dissertation begins with theoretical considerations of the role of 'otherness' in defining 'identity', and on that basis goes on to analyze how history writers of the high Middle Ages defined Scandinavian identity. The analysis focuses on how the various writers framed comparisons with 'the Other', thus emphasizing the fundamental interdependence of identity and otherness, rather than simply examining 'perceptions of the Other'.

The book consists of two main parts. The first treats European writers who deal with Scandinavia and Scandinavian raiders and immigrants. A first section focuses on contemporary writers such as the various annalists of the Viking Age as well as the historiographical work coming out of the Bremen church, especially Adam of Bremen (bef. 1050–ca. 1081/1085), while the second deals with Henry of Huntingdon (ca. 1080/1088–ca.1157), William of Malmesbury (ca. 1090–ca. 1143) and other English writers from after the Norman invasion of 1066. The second part of the book examines how Scandinavian history writers evaluate the comparison between Scandinavia and the rest of Europe. Four categories of works are treated: the lives of royal saints, the Latin history works of Norway (notably Theodoric the Monk and the *Historia Norwegie*), Saxo Grammaticus (ca. 1150–1220) and his contemporaries, and the kings' sagas by Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) and others.

Foerster is very successful in consistently applying his chosen perspective, investigating how the various authors employ comparisons and talk about identity and otherness. A reader may perhaps be forgiven if he does not find the results earth-shattering. Different authors dealt with identity and otherness in different ways, depending on their overall goals. The early medieval annalists attempting to come to grips with the raiders from the North grasped for religious models of understanding, in particular leaning on the words of Jeremiah 1:14: 'From the north shall an evil break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land'. The texts from the missionary church in Bremen are also infused with religious interpretations,

focusing on spreading the faith, but the historian Adam of Bremen (1070s) also introduced a parallel understanding of cultural otherness, which he based in his reading of ancient authors and their concept of barbarism.

The twelfth-century English historians whose works Foerster examined treated the Northmen differently. Henry of Huntingdon was in the first place a moralist and, thus, emphasized the heathenness of the Vikings. William of Malmesbury, on the other hand, focused on their barbarism, which, like the barbarism of the Celts, he understood on the basis of Classical models and contrasted with the ever more civilized English. Both of these English history writers used the story of invading Scandinavians to construct a myth about King Alfred the Great as the defender (against the Vikings) and unifier of England.

Scandinavian history writers, unsurprisingly, had a different view of things. Foerster maps how they first are concerned to recount the creation of northern state formations around the year 1000, stories that typically focus on early royal saints (St Olav in Norway, St Knut in Denmark, etc.). Only later do they explore the origins of their respective peoples in ancient antiquity, thus negating the strictures against uselessly exploring heathen history expressed by Adam of Bremen (1.61), whose great work previously had thrown a long shadow in Scandinavia.

In developing these histories, Scandinavian history writers more or less explicitly compared their northern subjects to the rest of Europe. That comparison, as Foerster makes clear, seldom or never comes out negative for Scandinavia, while all writers more or less explicitly insist on Scandinavia's equality with the south. St Knut forms the shape of a cross when he is murdered, and St Olav dies in ways similar to St Stephen. Saxo Grammaticus works out a more complex comparison, in which he extols prehistoric Scandinavia under Danish King Frodo as a northern counterpart of the Roman Empire, equal in power and importance. When he gets closer to his own time, Saxo even suggests that the north excelled the south by being faithful to Pope Alexander III (papacy 1159–1181) while the "Roman" Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (1122–1190) in the 1160s and 1170s practically became a heathen by putting up an antipope.

Saxo and the other Scandinavian history writers wrote in Latin, and thus, Foerster argues, for a European audience, which is the reason why they consistently pleaded for the equality or even superiority of the north. Snorri Sturluson, in contrast, wrote in Old Norse and directed his work inward. He, thus, has little place for comparisons with a southern other and he seems actively to avoid them.

There is much to admire in this book. I wish I could be more enthusiastic about the overall approach, which I do not feel brings much new light to our understanding of medieval historiography. Much of what Foerster treats is already more or less well known, but he does bring his subject into sharper focus by looking at comparisons rather than simple perceptions of otherness. Foerster is also a fundamentally sound and honest reader of his sources, which he in many places illuminates in helpful ways.

Anders Winroth, PhD

Department of History
Yale University, New Haven, CT
anders.winroth[at]yale.edu