

MAGIC, MEMORY AND FOLKLORE IN SCANDINAVIA: INTERVIEW
WITH STEPHEN MITCHELL
MAGIA, MEMÓRIA E FOLCLORE NA ESCANDINÁVIA: ENTREVISTA COM
STEPHEN MITCHELL



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1. SCANDIA: *Professor, one of the main contributions of your book Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages (2011) was the discussion regarding representations of witchcraft existing in Scandinavia, which according to you were not only imported from the continent but may also have a native origin. In your opinion, what are the main elements that define the originality of witchcraft in*

Medieval Scandinavia? What sources or themes can still be explored in the question of the uniqueness of Norse witchcraft?

Stephen Mitchell: Getting to the roots of what is truly native to Nordic witchcraft is, of course, probably an impossible task, the sort of chimera Regina Bendix warns against in her 1997 *In Search of Authenticity*. On the other hand, I am sure that we can learn a lot simply by making the attempt to recover the pre-historic Nordic 'witch' figure, and in recent decades I think scholarship has indeed made great strides toward understanding the nature of the various ritual specialists of the pre-Christian North. And, of course, the possibilities for advancing our image of the *vǫlva*, *seiðkona*, and so on, those figures identified by later generations as witches, is enormous as new evidence, frequently archaeological, and new interpretations emerge.

Think, for example, of the significance of the excavation of grave 4 at Fyrkat in the 1950s and of how the detailed scientific examination (and also later re-considerations) of its many different components – the clinker-built wagon body containing the woman, the rich and unusual clothing, the amulets, henbane (*Hyscymus sp.*), and owl pellets, staffs, and so on – when placed against the later textual sources led experts like Pentz, Price and others to conclude that in it we have a genuine 'vǫlva grave'.

Given the richness of the textual and material records of northern Europe, and the relatively late date of the Christianization process in Scandinavia and throughout the Baltic, I am extremely optimistic about the likelihood that succeeding generations of researchers will eventually piece together a serviceable, even largely reliable (if ever slightly uncertain and always shifting in line with new data and new interpretations) picture of magical practitioners and their rituals in the pre-Christian North.

Also, it has to be said in connection with this sort of academic pursuit that a certain vivifying respectability has returned to the study of these topics in recent decades. Part of the reason for this has to do with the increased interest in witchcraft and magic seen more generally within international scholarship, beginning in the early 1970s, especially among anthropologists and historians (e.g., Douglas, Thomas, MacFarlane, Todorov, Kieckhefer, Geertz), but in our field, I think we also see a rebound from the post-war response to the strong

interest in Nordic traditions of magic and witchcraft – often for all the wrong reasons – evinced during the *Nazizeit*. If you look at Turville-Petre’s still magnificent *Myth and Religion of the North* (1964), for example, you’ll see that topics like ‘magic’ and ‘witchcraft’ are not so much as listed in the index. Yet in recent decades we have witnessed the arrival of a great many memorable and invigorating monographic contributions to precisely these topics – Price’s *The Viking Way*, Solli’s *Seid*, Raudvere’s *Kunskap och insikt i norrön tradition*, Dillmann’s *Les magiciens dans l’Islande ancienne*, Heide’s *Gand, seid og åndevind*, Gardela’s (*Magic*) *Staffs in the Viking Age* and so on.

And consider too the broad range of traditional disciplines, and the degree of interdisciplinarity, represented by these titles. At the same time, we see such specialties as the archaeology of magic, gender studies, queer studies, and ‘retrospective methods’ being employed, areas not often thought of with respect to magic and witchcraft 30 or 40 years ago, and even fields largely unheard of not so many decades ago, all twinned now with those more traditional fields, like philology, folklore and archaeology. Similarly, it’s easy to imagine that new scholarly approaches we are not yet even aware of at this moment are bound to emerge over time and offer yet new vistas from which to view the materials of this rich research field. Despite my optimism about the significant leaps forward that have been made in our understanding, I suspect we have only begun to scratch the surface of what we will one day know about the evolution of these important areas of human behavior, cognition and belief in the Nordic world.

2. SCANDIA: In your chapter “*Magic as Acquired Art and the Ethnographic Value of the Sagas*” (*Old Norse, Myths, Literature and Society*, 2003), Icelandic sagas are taken as materials of ethnographic nature and therefore supposed to hold the potential to elucidate questions regarding representations of witchcraft, magic and sorcery in Medieval Scandinavia. Considering the sagas as testimonies of how Scandinavians comprehended their surrounding world and also bearing in mind the differences which are noticed in some social representations when literary materials are compared with non-literary sources, the concept of otherness seems a vital component to shed some light on this matter. According to your opinion, what could be the role and importance of this otherness and of the representations of

gender and ethnicity (both described in sagas) when it comes to interpreting and defining Norse witchcraft and sorcery? What contributions are these concepts able to give on this matter?

Stephen Mitchell: There are, as your question suggests, a number of important cultural filters that a researcher needs to be aware, of course. The most prominent, and likely still most significant, of which is the degree to which the details and other data being presented in our texts have been influenced by the Christian worldviews and prejudices of the writers, so-called *interpretatio Christiana*. But clearly other comparable predispositions color what we can expect to get from our sources.

Consider, for example, the observations in the 12th-c. *Historia Norvegiae* where the author specifies that it is ‘Christians’ who, while discussing trade matters with some Sámi, witness what we today would broadly describe as a shamanic event. Making use of such a report demands not only that we consider the traders’ and the author’s Christian perspective and how it impacts what the traders believe they see and what is reported, but presumably so too must we be cognizant of the ethnic differences between the two communities, important linguistic and cultural issues that not only effect questions of prejudice but also of perception.

New perspectives, such as Britt Solli introduced earlier in the millennium by using queer theory as an avenue for exploring pre-Christian Nordic ecstatic religious experience, are important by virtue of providing new tools for our kits, bringing fresh perspectives, and creating interest in our topics. So one should always be pleased to see the excitement and energy emerging approaches inject into our studies, especially when they result in useful findings.

3. SCANDIA: *In your essay “Leechbooks, Manuals, and Grimoires” (ARV 70, 2015), you mention an Icelandic legal case from the sixteenth century, in which Oddr Þorsteinsson is accused of seducing a woman through the use of magical arts by resorting to a book of magic. When studying magic in Northern countries, one may also find other examples of male practitioners occupying themselves with love matters. Despite scant surviving material on this particular subject, would you regard possible that there might have been a male Nordic tradition concerning the arousal in women or would that have followed witchcraft European tendencies?*

Stephen Mitchell: For the reference to Oddr Þorsteinsson, I want to thank again Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, who, as one of the editors of that volume of *ARV*, pointed the case out to me. The court materials summarize the offense in a heading by stating in part, *hann lockade stulcku til saurliffis* [he enticed a girl into fornication] and then goes on in the body of the entry to discuss in more detail how Oddr accomplishes his goal through the use of occult arts and magic (*med sijnum konztrum og gaulldrum*). This case does seem to reflect what one suspects from the great many late medieval and early modern charm texts that suggest similar behavior, with males manipulating women through magic, actual behaviors that might have been wide-spread – or at least behaviors and desires widely believed to have been true of male magic. The limited runic evidence would seem to support this view, as in the famous case of Rannveig the Red (N B628 M).

In the same vein, the late 15th-/early 16th-c. Norwegian *Vinjoboka* (ed. Garstein), for example, has several relevant charms: ‘To get power over a woman’ (#12) and ‘To win the love of a young woman’ (#13). The Icelandic text known as *Galdrabók* (ed. Lindqvist), from roughly a century later, likewise includes several charms with similar sentiments and hoped-for outcomes (pp. 28-29, 56-61; cf. 32-33).

On the other hand, if we turn to the few actual cases we have from the Nordic Middle Ages, things look quite different: the famous case from 1407 in Greenland, in which a male, Kólgrímr, is said to have used ‘the black arts’ in order to win the love of a woman is a rarity. That instance is one of the few medieval cases where a man is charged with such a crime. We know, by contrast, of several cases where it is women who are said to have manipulated male sexuality and/or desire through charm magic (e.g., Ragnhildr in Bergen 1324; Birgitta Andirsdóttir in Arboga 1471; Margit halffstop in Stockholm 1490). But clearly the capricious nature of how many and what cases the archives offer us undermines the usefulness of using a mere handful of such cases, as might too the question of who is actually charged by authorities.

In line with these historical cases, Jóhanna Katrín Friðrikdóttir argues that magic in the family sagas can frequently represent, as she writes, “women's weapons.” In fact, evidence from the sagas and other literary texts (e.g., *Njáls saga*, *Skírnismál*, Óðinn’s claims in the 16th

and 17th charms in the *Ljóðatal* section of *Hávamál*) certainly bolsters the view that a wide range of female and male magical practices were believed. So the picture is mixed, and I don't think magical traditions involving male dominance of the objects of their love (or lust) can be said to be an exclusively Nordic innovation — desire is a purpose for which magic appears to be often employed, but is it not always a specifically male to female relationship, or necessarily one that is pagan in character. What is often broadly, if wrongly, called 'love magic' is definitely a question we must continue to pursue.

4. SCANDIA: *In one of your works you investigated how Memory plays an important role in the affairs between the Icelander's travellers, the Norwegian Kings and their courts. You even used Evans-Pritchard work as a comparative analogy to frame Memory, Performance and Mediality as a trifold for the basis of narrative art in the Old Norse World, in an article "Memory, Mediality and "Performative Turn": recontextualizing, remembering in Medieval Scandinavia" (Scandinavian Studies 85, 2013). It was an important discussion not only to illustrate different aspects of Memory, as a tool and an abstract concept on medieval Scandinavia (not only on its different supports but also to stress the coexistence of both oral and written performances). Our question is: not rarely on the Icelandic sagas, it is possible to read how an Icelander composed and played well a poem or recalled something from the past, and synthesized it as a Truth, or that appealed truthfully as a historical knowledge or even a narrativized form, in a shared cultural environment. Is this the case of a motif used to promote the stereotypical figure of the Icelanders as masters of old forms of memory (and its uses as a political tool)? If it is the case, why is the situation of Icelandic literature so different from its counterparts on Scandinavia? Why vernacular literature didn't appear strongly on Norway, Denmark or Sweden, or even on other colonies, like the Faeroe Islands?*

Stephen Mitchell: Your question about Icelanders composing and presenting poems with connections to the past, synthesized as 'Truth', is extremely evocative. It, in turn, raises yet further intriguing questions about Icelandic skalds as memory specialists with marked cultural functions in the Nordic world. Similar issues, although mainly about law-speakers and their roles in an oral culture, are raised by, for example, Gísli Sigurðsson in his *Túlkun íslendingasagna í ljósi munnlegrar hefðar* (2002; translated as *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral*

Tradition: A Discourse on Method, 2004). In fact, the nature and function of social memory and those who help create and curate it, as we imagine the skalds must have done, are topics on which there has been a great deal of discussion and activity in recent years, perhaps especially in the wake of the growing interest in memory studies and Old Norse (e.g., *The Handbook of Pre-Modern Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*). And specifically the Icelandic skalds as memory specialists is a topic I understand Anna Solovyeva is currently writing on in Aarhus.

The “stereotypical figure of the Icelanders as masters of old forms of memory,” as you write, is a perspective we also see sprinkled throughout a number of non-Icelandic sources, such as those by Saxo Grammaticus and Theodoricus monachus, who both refer to the Icelanders’ special relationship to the past and its poetry. These relationships are very real and potent, so much so, that we feel them even today in reading the Old Icelandic texts.

As to why we do not assess vernacular literature from the other Nordic areas to be as strong as the Icelandic, I have several responses. To begin with, I happily agree with the highly positive evaluations of the Icelandic texts above, although at the same time, I do feel compelled to come to the defense of the non-Icelandic materials. Now, I would be the first to agree that the non-Icelandic texts generally lack deep insights into the grand mythological traditions revealed in the Eddas nor can they boast the sort of verve and ethnographic realism of the sagas, but I am nevertheless convinced that they cannot simply be ignored.

The many thousands of non-Icelandic manuscripts lost in the Great Copenhagen Fire of 1728 explain in part why we know so relatively little about the vernacular situation in Denmark, perhaps to some degree also in Norway, but there do exist substantial materials available in Old Swedish. True, their origins tend to be connected to religious and court life, and not least to the influence that derived from intermarriages between Nordic aristocratic houses and those from the Continent, a difference I sought to examine decades ago in an essay on courts, consorts, and the transformation of medieval Scandinavian literature. So in some ways – focus, fashion, audience, sponsors, for example – the non-Icelandic materials are perhaps not as past-oriented as are the Icelandic materials, nor from our modern points of view are they the sort of direct testimony to medieval daily life we imagine to be the case in the more popular Icelandic sagas. Yet in other ways, there are strong similarities – we



reasonably praise what Andreas Heusler famously characterized as *Die gelehrte Urgeschichte im altisländischen Schrifttum*, but at the same time, we are as a group generally dismissive of the deep interest in Nordic history demonstrated by the great cycle of Old Swedish historical chronicles, for example. In my opinion, we ignore such important testimony at our peril, and I would strongly urge colleagues to take the East Norse materials seriously and to explore them with open minds.

5. SCANDIA: How can one trace connections between the earlier versions of the Guta Saga and its revisitation along the 16th and 17th centuries (“The Mythologized Past: Memory and Politics in Medieval Gotland”, in: *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, 2014)? Could one relate the memory constructed in those texts to the political environment experienced by the authors (Strelow and Pedersen)? You proposed that the conversion narratives both emerged from and contributed to different sorts of traditions: the medieval Christian thinking and the Germanic mythological patterns. Could you give some more perspective on them?

Stephen Mitchell: This issue is very engaging, isn't it? – when I first began to consider the topic of Gotland and its cultural memory for the *Minni and Muninn* volume, I had intended to examine several additional notable moments in the island's history, such as the 1361 fall of the island to Valdemar Atterdag and the 'erasure' some three centuries later by occupying Danish forces (following the return of Gotland to Sweden) of the fortress in Visby called Visborg. As it happened, what I found in the competing narratives about the island's conversion to Christianity became so compelling, that drilling down on it ended up overwhelming my original design.

In that plan, I expected to pay much more attention to, for example, the various memorials and markers that dot the island's built landscape. To a lesser degree, something similar was also true of the conversion tales, and so some of those same considerations found their way into the essay, but I think bringing even more of the substantial material evidence into the discussion would be very productive and possibly cast things in a supportive, and perhaps even different, light – especially if one were to draw on the talents of so many Swedish



archaeologists and scholars of religion who have strong connections to the island (Anders Andrén, Neil Price, Linda Qviström, and Olle Sundqvist to name some of the most obvious).

And, of course, a comparative approach would undoubtedly add considerable value: undertaking an historically deeper and geographically broader view of how such pre-Christian origin myths might have helped groom native traditions about the conversion experience elsewhere would no doubt be an important starting point for any thorough ransacking of this question. Part of my thinking here derives from just such a comparison, what I regard as the curious difference between the way in which Icelandic writers show an almost obsessive concern for the Icelandic conversion story, yet we learn relatively little about the Christianization of Scandinavia from the mainland Old Swedish sources.

Why does Sweden's pagan past and its turn to the 'true faith' engender so little comment in the historical writing of medieval Sweden? Generally speaking, modern scholarship's knowledge of the pre-Christian religious practices and beliefs of northern Europe are informed, at least as regards textual matters, almost entirely by Old Icelandic sources, with important supplements provided by a few key texts—mainly in Latin—by writers from outside of Sweden (e.g., Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*, Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*).

By contrast, to the extent that Sweden's conversion is represented *within* medieval Sweden itself, it comes mainly in the form of Latin liturgical works celebrating the lives of key figures in the conversion of the heathen Swedes (e.g., the *officia* of Ansgar, Botvid, Sigfrid, Eskil, and Helena of Skövde). In general, Old Swedish vernacular literature does not concern itself much at all with this momentous change in the culture, at least not until the later Middle Ages in such 15th-century texts as *Prosaiska krönikan* and *Lilla Rimkrönikan*. Thus, the sort of 14th- and early 15th-century writers of works that otherwise collectively present a rich panorama of the nation's history—*Erikskrönikan*, *Förbindelsedikten*, *Engelbrektskrönikan*, *Karlskrönikan*, and *Sturekrönikan*—are seemingly utterly indifferent to the issue of their forefathers' embrace of the new religion. There was never, so far as we know, an attempt in Sweden to pen an "*Olofskrönika*," recording in the vernacular the embrace of the new religion by Sweden's first resolutely Christian king, Olof Skötkonung, son of the apostate Erik

Segersäll, or an *"Ingeskrönika,"* detailing the final triumph of Christianity against Blót-Sveinn and paganism.

But things are quite different with respect to the Old Gutnish testimony, and on Gotland we have these multiple and highly detailed stories about the conversion – even if we confine our discussion strictly to the pre-Reformation era, there seems to be more interest on display in the Old Gutnish materials than in all the Old Swedish texts. So, yes, I think there remain many possible avenues that we should eventually go down in considering these competing conversion narratives, including what I have not much mentioned here, their potential political value to various international, national and regional interests.

6. SCANDIA: *You have explored the symbolic functions of the whetstones in Germanic societies, demonstrating their role as a complex of ideas associated with authority and leadership ("The Whetstone as Symbol of Authority in Old English and Old Norse", Scandinavian Studies 57, 1985). More specifically, you have also pointed that in this context the whetstones can be associated with smithing, considering the high prestige this occupation has held among Germanic peoples: the sparks produced during metal-working may be associated with the sky and thunder, and thus (possibly) to a sky god. Scandinavian sources also tend to relate the whetstones with movement through the air. Bearing this in mind, what can be said with a certain level of conviction about this relation between whetstones and a sky god with smithing skills or acts? Could other peoples have suffered influence from this Scandinavian concept, such as the Finns and their god Ilmarinen?*

Stephen Mitchell: Naturally, as I think your question implies, many cultures, especially if they have historical or genealogical connections, make similar associations between certain goods and certain cultural categories – the sky god and his weapon is a famous example: thus, Zeus and his thunderbolts, Indra and his *vajra*, Þórr and his *hamarr* (as John Lindow has pointed out). Another frequently-encountered cluster consists of smithing, flight (or movement through the air in any event), and shamanism, as, for example, Lotte Motz and Clive Tolley have discussed with respect to the northern materials. It is not difficult to imagine in that context how figures like Völundr and Ilmarinen might figure in.

The whetstone, as one of the most prominent and final instruments in the production of metal tools and weapons, at some point perhaps comes to represent the complex as a whole in the narrative traditions of the North. Carried along in what Lauri Harvilahti, Frog and others have referred to as an 'ethnocultural substratum', and aided by the complementary linguistic senses of *whet*, *hvetja*, and so on, this cluster emerges in the medieval literary period in the highly unusual ways we see in the Old Icelandic texts, and perhaps even in such stately objects as the famous Sutton Hoo whetstone-scepter.

Of course, in the decades since the publication of the whetstones piece, which I wrote principally from points of view based in studies of mythology, anthropology and philology, I have had the very fulfilling opportunity of participating frequently in excavations of Viking Age sites as the director of Harvard's Viking Studies Program, run jointly with colleagues from Moesgård Museum and Aarhus University. From my current vantage point, I would note that nothing could contrast more sharply with the sorts of evidence I used in the arguments from the early 1980s than the unglamorous if nevertheless intriguing excavation of ordinary settlements from the Germanic Iron and Viking Ages, mainly pit-houses and other structures, features that not infrequently turn up whetstones, blades, and even occasional evidence of smelting from bog iron. I would not so much say that these experiences undermine my confidence in those earlier arguments, so much as that they add texture, humility, perspective, and a strong sense of lived lives to it – and I often find myself wondering, bent over a sieving station or with trowel in hand, whether my, or any modern, interpretation would have meant anything to the people who had lived, worked, played and died in these settlements.

*7. SCANDIA: In your essay "Continuity: Folklore's Problem Child?", published in 2014 as part of the book *Folklore in Old Norse-Old Norse in Folklore*, your reflections clarify the historical development of the continuity of tradition concept. Your explanation suggests that beliefs, narratives, and behaviors that continue to exist over the centuries must be analyzed contextually and ethnographically in order to discover the individual, social, and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning in the conduct of social life. To better illustrate this fact, you have taken the Icelandic sagas as a case study. So, can Nordic fairy tales, even if they often have no definite authorship and do not refer to myths directly, also be cited as legitimate continuators of traditions? And today, approximately five*

years after the article's publication, are the notions of continuity and temporality getting better reception among researchers?

Stephen Mitchell: There has been much debate in recent decades about whether fairy tales indeed have long histories, or if instead they might be much more modern products. The latter view is one Jan Ziolkowski pushed back against a dozen years ago in his *Fairy Tales from before Fairy Tales: The Medieval Latin Past of Wonderful Lies*. This same problem of the age of the folktale is also being tackled by scholars approaching the question through phylogenetic research, in which statistical methods are used to gauge the approximate age of selected AT-U materials from a range of Indo-European traditions. In a 2016 article by Sara Graça da Silva and Jamshid Tehrani using this approach (“Comparative Phylogenetic Analyses Uncover the Ancient Roots of Indo-European Folktales”), for example, the authors maintain that some of these materials may go back a number of millennia. So it would seem that the question of age – and the clearly related matter of continuity – is very much alive today.

My own approach to these issues of age, continuity, tradition, heritage and so on has increasingly turned toward what is to be learned through the application of so-called memory studies (e.g., *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and me), where I suppose one might say that interest is more focused on the social production of these attitudes to the past and on what we can learn from the finely layered contexts such attention yields.

It seems to me that this is a natural course for a folklorist to pursue. If I may quote from one of the essays I wrote for the *Handbook* (“Folklore Studies,” I: 94),

...the scientific study of folklore – a field historically concerned with the reception, perception, use, and reconfiguration of cultural forms inherited from the past (or believed to have been inherited from the past) – means that folklore scholarship often anticipated by decades many of the concerns and approaches we today associate with modern international memory studies. As Henning Laugerud notes, “Folklore studies have in one sense always been concerned with memory as a cultural phenomenon. The term folklore describes a certain kind of transmitted and collectively shared memory” (Laugerud 2010, 19).

To my mind, it’s more than mere coincidence that over the past two centuries one of the most frequently used terms employed to describe the field of ‘folklore’ (or perhaps ‘ethnography’ would be preferred in modern parlance) in the various Nordic languages is a

compound that builds on the expression 'folk memory' (i.e. *folkminnesforskning*, *folkeminnesforskning*, *folkemindeforskning*, *þjóðminjafraeði*).

As to the reception and status of these ideas, over the past half-dozen years or so, a group of Old Norse scholars have been examining the possibilities of applying memory studies to our materials, most obviously in the formation of the research group with the lengthy title, *Memory and the Pre-Modern North: An International Memory Studies Research Network Focussing on Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavia* (<http://premodern-memory.org/>). As part of the group's activities, we have produced several anthologies (*Memory and Remembering: Past Awareness in the Medieval North*, edited by Pernille Hermann and me; *Minni and Muninn. Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, edited by Pernille Hermann, Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, and me), and the *Handbook* mentioned above, a work consisting of 100 entries by 80 international scholars. Recently, Simon Nygaard and Yoav Tirosh organized sessions on 'Old Norse Studies and Collective Memory' at the 2018 International Medieval Congress at Leeds University and expect to publish some of those results. Recall too that modern international memory studies is an approach which, one could argue, shows an important intellectual legacy drawn from the past two centuries of our field. So, with respect to the status of what might be grouped under such rubrics as 'continuity', 'cultural memory', and so on, Old Norse studies has maintained a healthy, forward-leaning position, one which we can hope will continue to yield valuable readings.

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