

**MYTH AND FOLKLORE IN THE CIRCUM-BALTIC AREA: AN INTERVIEW
WITH MR. FROG
MITO E FOLCLORE NA ÁREA CIRCUM-BÁLTICA: ENTREVISTA COM
MR. FROG**



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1. SCANDIA: *One of the biggest challenges one faces when doing comparative research on the Circum-Baltic area is regarding the many different languages in which the sources are written. A great example of how to make these materials more accessible is the book *The Great Bear: A Thematic Anthology of Oral Poetry in the Finno-Ugrian Languages*. Can we expect translated works of such kind to appear in the near future? Are you aware of any efforts being made in this respect covering the Circum-Baltic area?*

There are independent plans to translate particular works and possibly to make collections of a particular tradition in one language, and there are studies that will make available a lot of source material in translation, such as a monograph on the Baltic thunder god that is expected to appear in English next year. However, there are no current plans for a multi-cultural anthology for the Baltic Sea region comparable to *The Great Bear*. Developing such anthologies face two problems in Northern Europe's academic ecology today. First, academic administration and funders easily see them as translation projects, which are difficult to fund even if specialists should be selecting and introducing the texts. Second, bibliometrics – that is, counting the number of publications of different types and where these appear – has become an increasing concern for researchers because it is important to how they are assessed by the institutional administration or how their applications for projects are assessed. Researchers thus want research articles in peer-reviewed international journals because they are worth the most “points”, whereas translations do not count for much at all. This reduces scholars' enthusiasm to work on translations or to organize larger translation projects.

2. SCANDIA. *To what factors other than language spread might we attribute common features of religious practices and mythology shared between the different Sámi populations, especially concerning theonyms and the potential worship of comparable (if not identical) deities?*

Sameness and difference between populations' mythologies and religious practices can be connected to a number of different factors, and there are a lot of aspects of mythology and ritual practices that might be considered. Features commonly associated with “classic” shamanism are part of a religious technology combining the use of a drum with trance states and are shared quite broadly across Eurasia and North America, where their manifestations follow cross-cultural regional patterns. Some of these features were likely established in the northern parts of the Scandinavian Peninsula, Finland and Karelia and the Kola Peninsula long before Sámi languages were widely spoken. Some features are areal: the thunder god developed a distinctive prominence in cultures around the Baltic Sea, and this appears to be related to historical contacts between speakers of different languages, although it is difficult to guess when this happened or why. This type of development does not mean that one culture “borrowed” from another: it can also happen because one culture reacts to what happens in

another, so people start to change the way they think about their gods because comparable gods become more important for their neighbours.

The “big three” that would account for features of sameness are:

- a. shared heritage
- b. multigenesis (i.e. independently developing aspects that are the same because of how human beings respond to their surroundings)
- c. “diffusion” or communication between groups

Modern comparative mythology research developed at the end of the eighteenth and through the nineteenth century with focus on identifying a shared cultural inheritance. This was based on an assumption that culture and language were directly and consistently linked. The approach created a type of research bias that made it common to assume that, where people speak historically related languages, features of sameness in their mythologies or religions also reflect a shared heritage. The idea of multigenesis is actually older, built on an idea that cultures evolve in more or less universal patterns (ideas that were around long before Darwin). Theories of diffusion became popular around the beginning of the twentieth century, partly as a response to other theories – that is, rather than similar traditions either reflecting a shared inheritance or their independent creation in different cultures, they may have been communicated from one group to another. Early versions of all of these theories seem rather simplistic today. Multigenesis generally only holds for simple ideas and practices, like that thunder is caused by a god in some way. The ability to do global comparisons with big data has shown that, even where traditions are widely found across a number of cultures, more complex traditions generally exhibit areal distribution. Some features of mythologies and religious practices seem to go back much farther than the history of individual language families, so that basic plots and patterns of mythology are, for instance, shared by cultures across both Eurasia and North America. The processes behind these similarities can reach so far into the past that there is no way to reconstruct what is behind them, but it could be that Sámi speakers and also other cultures that began speaking Sámi language already had some traditions that were similar. On the other hand, Proto-Sámi language contains a lot of vocabulary that seems to have spread through Proto-Sámi dialects, including a number of words related to belief traditions, mythology or ritual. Concepts and traditions related to beliefs were no doubt also carried through these networks.

3. SCANDIA. *Do you think that by studying religion formations through a combination of linguistic and archaeological perspectives we can debunk the myth of a monolithically, unchangeable and cohesive "Sámi religion"? How?*

The idea that "Sámi religion" is some sort of coherent and unified thing is mainly a product of how people talk about it. Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars were emphasizing that Sámi religion needs to be approached according to its particular regional forms rather than making generalizations about Sámi religion as a whole. In Sámi studies, the diversity of Sámi languages and cultures are generally recognized. However, Sámi traditions receive attention from a wide range of interests, such as studies in shamanism and Uralic linguistics. There are scholars working with medieval and Viking Age Scandinavia who also work with Sámi traditions, but most rarely deal directly with Sámi religions and have only a fairly superficial impression of the cultures. Their impressions are based on how Sámi cultures are discussed in their own and closely related fields that may simply reproduce the way the Sámi have been discussed for generations of scholars. The problem is largely a lack of knowledge or awareness of the issues. I only hope that my work on diversity in Sámi religion formations (i.e. constellations of shared as well as other elements) in the Iron Age can raise awareness in Scandinavian studies and other fields by making the issues relevant to the different types of research that take interest in, for instance, Sámi shamanism for comparative research.

4. SCANDIA. *How should we deal with the linguistic and archaeological sources for Sámi and their vocabularies since, for a long time, the written sources that we have available were written by people that circumscribed the Sámi as a single linguistic and religious group? In other words, how can we conduct historically accurate investigations that take into account the specific context of the authors that coined and spread different ethnonyms of the Sámi such as Fenni, Lapps and their variations?*

The early written sources for Sámi cultures and beliefs present all sorts of problems, but they can be critically approached and contextualized, for instance in relation to the author, region and historical context. The source can then be analyzed using methods from philology

and close reading, both to assess whether it draws on earlier written texts and to assess “what is happening” in the description or representation. A lot of work is required, and there are limits to what questions the sources can answer, but there is data to work with. The greater difficulties are that research often relies on earlier studies that looked at the source materials differently than today, and primary sources for Sámi religion have not been compiled into massive collections that might facilitate research with indices by topic, geographical provenance, and so forth. The source situation becomes still more complex moving into the nineteenth century, when modern ethnographic documentation begins as do descriptions in for instance travelogues, not to mention that Sámi began travelling and appear in ethnographic exhibitions such as William Bullock’s in London in 1822, which initially included a Sámi drum. Consequently, if you want to know about bear rituals or shamanic trance rituals, you read what someone else wrote about them and might find a few descriptions in early sources relatively quickly, but it can be very challenging to track down all of the primary sources related to any one topic. Moreover, studies of geographical variation tend to track only one feature of a phenomenon or to focus on a localized form of a tradition rather than trying to develop a model of regional variation in more complex religion formations. Hopefully future research will develop more sophisticated surveys and collections of written sources.

Unlike written sources, archaeological data is linked to physical locations. Coordinating this data with etymologically reconstructed vocabulary and potential traditions requires triangulating methods linked to particular types of data to focus on the semantic categories to which these can refer like “sheep” or “axe” and domains of culture like “hunting” or “death”. When the different types of data have been indexed in this way, it becomes possible to assess potential links between, for instance, loan words in South Sámi alongside what is seen in the archaeological record. Developing methodologies for this type of work that meet current research standards is an ongoing process.

5. SCANDIA. *In your article From Mythology to Identity and Imaginal Experience: An Exploratory Approach to the Symbolic Matrix in Viking Age Åland you have demonstrated that it is possible to explore religious/mythological environments of the past in depth even when no written sources or other similar direct data has survived from the culture in question. In your opinion, what*

other cultural milieus from Scandinavia and the Baltic do you feel deserve such an approach due to a silence of the available sources?

The case of Åland stands out because it is on the frontier of Scandinavian and Finnic language areas, which makes it interesting because we don't technically know which language was spoken there or what the contact between cultures meeting there may have produced. However, written sources are generally lacking for the Viking Age, and the same methodology can be applied to almost any of these contexts without the situation necessarily being so complicated. Variations in local culture are so interesting that the challenge is finding one that does not deserve attention.

6. SCANDIA. The Symbolic Matrix approach is, as you have successfully demonstrated, an extremely valuable and also highly adaptable approach, since it can always be calibrated according to the cultural milieu to be explored and the mythology (or mythologies) which are alive in it. However, what do you reckon are the limitations of this approach? Or, even if not limitations per se, but what kind of caution should one keep in mind when making use of the Symbolic Matrix as a research tool?

Any method is more useful for answering certain questions than others or for addressing a particular type of data rather than something else. The Symbolic Matrix approach is best equipped for looking at what happens to mythology when people use and manipulate it at a micro-level up to what happens to it when cultures or religions interact in processes of historical change at a macro-level. Research focused on mythology as a static system might find some value in the formal distinctions made between an "image", a "motif", and so forth, but, if it is not concerned with how that relates to people, their perspectives and what they do, the methodology will probably not help much. Similarly, an analysis of a sort of narrative grammar of Old Norse myths similar to Vladimir Propp's for Russian folktales would probably not find much use in the methodology. Again, the formal units distinguished in the methodology might be relevant, but the rest of it is probably not needed if the research is only concerned with the formal side of variation. If the problem you face is a nail, you use a hammer; if it's a screw, you use a screwdriver.

For example, I have recently been working with formal units of mythic knowledge in the eddic poem *Vafþrúðnismál* and the potential for the paired stanzas of question and answer to vary in order and potentially to move between different poems. The question of *whether* question and answer (or just an answer) can move within a dialogue or across poems and *how that works* does not need to use the Symbolic Matrix approach. Once these questions have been answered, however, they provide ways of understanding the formal side of variation, which then becomes complementary to analyzing variation through the Symbolic Matrix.

When it comes to hazards of a methodology, there are two that are common for this and many others. The first is making a generalization beyond what the data allows, such as interpreting one case as representing a general cultural pattern. We are all susceptible to this problem, but one example is not a pattern, however much we would like it to be. It is also necessary to be cautious when all of the evidence for a pattern is localized rather than distributed through evidence, because it might reflect an isolated development or some other factor. The second hazard is becoming enamored with an interpretation and, perhaps unconsciously, using a methodology to find support for it. We can all become victims of our own enthusiasm, but the truth of the matter is that not all interpretations or hypotheses hold up against the primary evidence. This can be particularly frustrating when a hypothesis fits with a number of examples but then conflicts with other information that might at first seem peripheral, especially if it connects to some trending topic like ecocriticism or viral epidemics. This problem can be guarded against by checking that the interpretation holds up against all available data and watching how these interpretations link to other discussions. Particularly important is to weigh interpretations against alternatives. The hazards are not because of the methods *per se*, but how the methods are used, and, in the excitement of finding something new, perhaps of losing sight of how those findings with the method are dependent on the scope and quality of the data.

7. SCANDIA. *Even though the Finnish Method has been outdated, it seems it still impacts current Finnish folkloristics in a considerably beneficial manner. In what way do you consider this inheritance makes modern Finnish researches on Scandinavian/Finno-Ugric folklore and pre-Christian religions different from other scholarly traditions on these topics?*

The term “Finnish Method” is a common international way of referring to the Historical-Geographic Method (HGM), which originated as a bundle of methods, theories and even prescribed research questions along with ideas about what questions were or were not worth asking. The “Classic” HGM of the first half of the twentieth century was a fairly mechanically-implemented framework for analysis and interpretation that was oriented to reconstructing the hypothetical “original form” of any tradition. Changing understandings of folklore, how it is transmitted and varies pulled the rug out from under this aim, and the methodology evolved, adapting to current theories and eventually to quite different research questions. Finnish researchers do not use the term “Finnish Method” and do not identify themselves with the Classic HGM, yet the comparative methodology is at the base of what Finnish research has become. Viewed in a long-term perspective, continuities from the earlier research tradition include: *a)* comparative research *b)* using extensive corpora *c)* in which archival material are prominent, and *d)* focus on verbal art, narration and mythology or belief, with *e)* strong emphases on theory and methodology. These features do not characterize all Finnish folklore research let alone unify it, yet most Finnish folklore researchers connect in one way or another with some or many of these features, which are familiar from academic discussions of folklore and university education. In these continuities, we find the core of the Finnish School as it evolves today. These tendencies set Finnish folklore research apart, whereas Estonian folklore research, for example, is much more concentrated on belief traditions and ritual while folklore research has been largely subsumed by ethnology through much of Scandinavia.

8. SCANDIA. *Your comparative investigation of the eddic poem Brymskviða and the other ATU 1148b narratives has demonstrated how we must be careful before taking medieval texts for completely trustworthy representations of religious traditions. In this case, the myth about Þórr ended up revealing itself as a sort of anomaly of the narrative pattern; therefore, a burlesque (re)adaption. Do you consider making similar comparative analyses of other eddic poems? When comparing narrative motifs from different traditions like in the ATU 1148b case, to what extent does it still makes sense to rely on linguistic and philological conjectures like the Indo-European and the Finno-Ugric theories, etc.?*

The eddic mythological poems are all fascinating for the historical stratification in the background of their content. I have looked into several of them in various degrees of detail.

Hymiskviða presents Þórr's fishing adventure for the World Serpent as merely one in a series of feats of strength rather than as a cosmological event in its own right. *Völundarkviða* attaches the Germanic tradition of the avenging smith to a legend about capturing a supernatural agent to acquire a sword and ring. Of course, there is also the rich wealth of mythic events referred to in *Völuspá* or *Vafþrúðnismál*, any one of which could be explored in detail.

Brymskviða and ATU 1148b are interesting because, on the one hand, the story of ATU 1148b does not seem to be developed from either an Indo-European or an Uralic / Finno-Ugric tradition and, on the other hand, the transformation that created the story of *Brymskviða* seems to be something that can be placed on a timeline probably close to when it was written down. A case like *Hymiskviða*, on the other hand, should be considered in relation to Indo-European traditions of a battle between the god commanding the thunder-weapon and a water monster. On that background, the narrative of the conflict as a fishing adventure can be viewed as an innovation, while the contextualization of that adventure in *Hymiskviða*, disconnecting it from cosmological significance, appears as another innovation suggestive of the story's changing, or at least variable, significance. The Indo-European context is nevertheless relevant for the particular case.

Similarly, the story of the creation of the world in *Völuspá* in which Óðinn and his brothers raise the first earth from a primal sea presents a so-called earth-diver myth: Indo-European comparison is relevant in this case because this does *not* seem to belong to an Indo-European heritage although it is associated with an Uralic heritage and belongs also to a broad pattern of more eastern Eurasian and North American mythologies. Although it might be tempting to see the earth-diver event in *Völuspá* as an extremely exceptional case impact of Uralic traditions on Scandinavian, this is more difficult to assess precisely because it is so widespread and also because the reference to it is so brief.

Considering what mythology may have been carried in connection with linguistic and cultural identity remains important to consider for research into the potentially very complex and stratified history of particular mythological events. However, much research done today is not concerned about the long-term history of the traditions; more commonly, researchers' simply question whether the particular story or mythic event belongs to the non-Christian mythology or is a product linked to Christian discourse and Christian learning. (I prefer the term "non-Christian" to "pre-Christian" because Christian and non-Christian mythologies co-

existed alongside one another for centuries rather than one replacing the other abruptly.) For questions concerned only with the centuries surrounding the written sources, it is usually unnecessary to consider the Indo-European roots of a tradition. Assessing whether something was introduced alongside influences carried with Christianity nevertheless often involves looking at the probability that it was inherited rather than borrowed, beginning with evidence that it was shared across Scandinavian cultures, then considering whether it was borrowed into neighboring cultures from Scandinavians (or vice versa), and then whether it was shared across Old Germanic cultures. Comparison across different Indo-European cultures is a level of relations that is not often reached. Alternately, there has been a strong tendency among some circles of scholars to infer that any parallel between medieval written sources and Scandinavian mythology points to learned influence, which becomes methodologically problematic if the same phenomenon could be inherited from Indo-European.

9. SCANDIA. *Today, the studies about shamanism and its conceptions carry a lot of complexities and heated debates. Taking into consideration all the complex conceptions and definitions that scholars have been discussing until now, how do you understand the tendencies of these debates? Are there any characteristics of Finnic-Germanic shamanism that you think warrant more research and need to be further discussed?*

The questions surrounding shamanism present a number of issues because the contributions often vary according to three factors: (a) the definition of shamanism used, (b) the criteria for bringing source evidence into focus, and (c) the framework of investigation that gets organized between the methodology used and the questions that the scholar is trying to answer. Each discussion that either directly or indirectly explores questions of shamanism ends up with a center that is triangulated from these three points, whether simply addressing something as “shamanism” or testing it against the concept. The trend in these debates during the current century has been to take more nuanced approaches to what constitutes “shamanism” and to use more sophisticated comparative methodologies. I feel that the discussion has advanced considerably across recent decades, but that there is still much to be done. One of the difficulties that is still being wrestled with is the use of “shamanism” as a tool for discussion that provides a framework for cross-cultural comparison rather than

treating it like a branding label – for instance wanting to find Scandinavian “shamanism” because “shamanism” is cool. Related to this is the problem that it is easy to think of “shamanism” in terms of specific practices, with the implication that the Sámi and Norsemen either had or did not have a common tradition of “shamanism” that would have been borrowed from Sámi speakers. However, Germanic speakers had been in this part of the world for a few millennia before contacts with Sámi-speakers on the Scandinavian Peninsula. Some of the features that set apart Germanic languages from other Indo-European languages probably reflect impacts from indigenous languages that far exceed the impact of Sámi languages on Scandinavian. Without direct indications of specifically Sámi impacts, a Scandinavian ritual practice comparable to shamanism could have quite deep roots independent of Sámi contacts. I also suspect that “shamanism” is such a prominent and popular concept that, alongside critical and methodologically sophisticated studies, there will likely always be studies that handle the shamanism loosely or mobilize it as an instrument where argument is more concerned with agendas than sustainable answers.

I approach the concept of shamanism in quite specific terms or as “classic” shamanism of central and Northern Eurasia, which is characterized by a system of features such as spirit-journeys as a basis of knowledge of and communication with otherworlds, a vertically-structured cosmology, use of the drum in connection with trance rituals, and so forth. Traces of Finnic shamanism can be found, but the Finno-Karelian traditions that are well-documented seem to be an innovation owing to Iron Age Germanic influences and are not compatible with forms of classic shamanism. These traditions can be characterized as common Finnic-Germanic ritual technologies, and they do seem to incorporate a type of trance state, but they do not use a drum or centrally rely on the performer’s soul or spirit helpers travelling to otherworlds in physical terms. Instead, emphasis is on incantations and the manipulation of knowledge through language. A detailed study of evidence of traces of Finnic shamanism that preceded the incantation-centered practice is needed, especially in the Finnic language traditions outside of Finnish, Karelian and Izhorian languages. Another question that requires further study is why the Finno-Karelian ritual technology seems to dominate whereas medieval Scandinavian sources seem to present a variety of quite different performer types including the *seiðmaðr* or *seiðkona*, *vǫlva*, *berserkr*, and so on, not to mention positions of social-political significance like the *goði*.