



## Old Norse folklorist network

### **The purpose of the network**

The network aims to bring together scholars

- who are interested in using folklore theories and methods in their Old Norse research.
- who want to use the late recorded legends, folktales, poems and other folklore to interpret and illuminate the Old Norse texts and conditions.
- who want to use the Old Norse source material in studies of later-day folklore.
- who want to examine traditions, stories, poems and beliefs in Northern Europe over a long period and take into account both the Old Norse material and later traditions and records.

### **Background**

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Old Norse philology has been strongly textually oriented. This is especially evident in saga scholarship, where the book-prose ideology of “The Icelandic school” made the issue of the origin of individual sagas into an issue of direct influences from other written works. The focus has had methodological advantages by reducing the scope for unwarranted assumptions and speculative reconstruction. But it has also meant that folkloristic knowledge and methods have been neglected. Scholars have generally failed to take account of the extensive material of later records of folk belief and folklore. An important purpose of the network is to emphasize the relevance of these methods and sources for Old Norse studies and through discussion try to solve the problems inherent in this. In the aim of solving problems concerned with the use of late sources in Old Norse studies the purpose of the network partly coincides with the purpose of the Retrospective Methods Network. The conference in Bergen in 2010 also gave rise to the idea of this network. The precursor is more generally focused on the issue of retrospective studies, not specifically folklore, and its emphasis is heavily on developing methodology, rather than on specific issues. The Old Norse Folkloristic Network is not a competitor but a complement to the precursor.

The network comprises both scholars who have their fundamental roots in Old Norse philology and scholars with their basic roots in folkloristics. The only essential condition is



that the scholar has an interest in combining the fields. Both postdoctoral scholars and doctoral students are welcome.

### Suggestions for some themes for the activities

#### 1) Meeting the Other World in the saga literature.

- Are there at this point general patterns and homogenous tendencies in the alleged saga genres *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*? Are there differences between these groups, as several scholars claim? If so, what sort of differences are there and how can they be explained? Are there at this point chronological differences in the Norse literature, e.g. between (presumably old) Eddic poetry and High Medieval saga literature or between the classical and the post-classical *Íslendingasögur*?
- Are *Sage* and *Märchen* useful concepts here, and is the distinction between them (as Max Lüthi has described it) relevant for the understanding of tendencies and differences in the saga literature, as some scholars recently have claimed?
- How much of the supernatural elements did the authors and audiences of the sagas *believe* in? Cf. Ármann Jakobsson's and Vésteinn Ólason's different opinions at this point in the case of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*. Is this question of importance at all for the interpretation of the saga literature? Is it of importance for the standard distinctions between classical and post-classical sagas? In precisely this case the issue of belief contra non-belief in the supernatural elements has been seen as a demarcation criterion by e.g. Vésteinn Ólason. How strong are the arguments for this opinion?

#### 2) How much continuity is there between the Icelandic sagas and later folklore?

- An example could be the conception of trolls. A starting point for discussion can be Ármann Jakobsson's article in *Saga och sed*, which examines the relevant cases of the sagas but doesn't take the folkloristic aspect into account. The article raises several critical and fundamentally important issues.
- Can we interpret the beliefs and conceptions about trolls of the medieval saga authors from later traditions (in folk tales and folk legends) about trolls?
- How are the concepts of trolls and giants related to each other? In Old Norse tradition and in later folklore? How are the wise giants of the Edda, whose women were the most beautiful and became the wives of the gods, related to the giants of

the folktales and folk legends? How are the giants of these traditions related to the trolls and giants of the *fornaldarsögur*? Is there as a distinction at all between trolls and giants in the saga literature and in later tradition (legends and folktales)?

- The conception of the *haugbúar*? Is the terrible and evil *haugbúi* of the sagas and the farm-protecting *haugbúi* (mostly related to the *gårdstomte*) in later Norwegian and Orkney (*hogboon*) tradition the same thing at all? Or is just the term the same? How are the *haugbúar* that are mentioned in the Norwegian laws related to these (possibly different) types?
- The conception of elves? In the Edda elves is a kind of gods, but in modern Icelandic folklore they are small invisible beings in the hills, and elves in Swedish folklore are even more different. Do they have the same origin at all? How will the change be explained? Is it possible to reconstruct the conception of elves using later traditions?
- Wolves, witches and werewolves in Old Norse literature, courtly poetry and later folklore – how are these traditions related? Which is the origin of the tales about these creatures and to what extent have the different traditions and genres influenced each other?

3) Are “saga-like” phenomena in later recorded folk tradition independent of the contemporary learned literature with its knowledge about the medieval saga literature? Or are folk legends and folk belief, on the contrary, strongly influenced by the learned literature and by written versions of the Icelandic sagas? Are the elements connecting the Old Norse tradition with the late recorded folklore in fact fakelore? How can we distinguish them from each other? Is it at all legitimate to make such a distinction? Even folklore of a learned origin lives, after all, on in folk tradition.

- Is the tradition of Grotti Finnie and Lucky Minni in Orkney folklore an old tradition of the same roots as the tradition of the mill Grotti and giantess Fenja and Menja? In that case these legends and the Old Norse *Grottasöngur* would be entirely independent versions of the same old Grotti tale. Or have legends about Grotti Finnie and Lucky Minni arisen under the influence of translations of the Edda and the learned literature on Grotti, Fenja and Menja?
- The *Ætternisstapi* in *Gautreks saga*, which was translated into Swedish in 1664, is usually claimed to have given rise to all the Swedish folk legends and local traditions of *ättestupor*. At least the term has almost certainly come from the translation of *Gautreks saga*, a fact that in turn gives interesting information about



how quickly a motif in learned literature can be spread far and wide and go deep into the oral folk tradition. But is also the motif of the *ättestupa* (apart from the word itself) in the Swedish folk legends borrowed from the learned literature or may it have old roots, independent of the learned literature?

- Are local legends and traditions in Iceland on certain sites about saga heroes genuine unbroken oral tradition from the Middle Ages, or are the traditions/legends influenced by the late saga editions? And if so: to what extent?
- 4) Can late recorded folklore give us information about ancient myths and traditions of pagan gods and of the supernatural/ fantastic beings that are not mentioned in the sagas and otherwise would be lost to us? Or do we have to do with traditions of late origin?
- An example is the extensive folk legend complex in Scandinavia about Odin's wild hunt and Odin as a *skogsrå* hunter. Is there a tradition that goes back to medieval / ancient time and to genuine Odin traditions, even though the ancient/medieval literature doesn't mention anything like this in connection with Odin? Or is this legend created entirely in late, Christian times, when gods become pure 'fairy tale'-characters?
  - Is this a parallel to those mythological tales of the Norse literature which cannot be found elsewhere, such as the story of Þrymskviða or as Snorri's description of Thor's trip to Útgardaloki?

These are only proposals to begin with. We look forward to comments and more proposals! When the plans for the first meeting have become more concrete the topics will be more specified on the basis of other ideas and comments.



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### **The activity of the network**

It seems natural to begin the activities as soon as possible. We are right now preparing a number of applications to primarily Nordic, Swedish and Estonian funds. Ideas about funding from e.g. Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian, British, American or EU funds will be received with gratitude!

Several foundations are generous with funding to initiating research, international networking and “exploratory workshops”. These funds also have the purpose of cooperation between scholars from several countries, why we are not as bound by national funds. Therefore we have put emphasis on this initially. This activity will mean a fairly intensive discussion in a smaller group, rather than traditional lectures to a wider audience with the accompanying question and answer session. Since our network, and in a sense our approach, is fairly new, it seems to be an advantage to give priority to the discussion between active scholars rather than to individual presentations and a more passive listening to the presentations of completed projects. It should be possible to get funds for this kind of workshops or networking meetings already during the spring. We hope to welcome you all to Tartu in 2011! It usually takes more time to get funds for conferences, and the foundations are often nationally oriented. It requires more planning, but it is likely that we may have a conference in 2012. That conference can also invite people from outside the network and be open to a wider audience to attend. Again, the Department of Scandinavian Studies will be happy to host this event. Folklore studies has a strong position at Tartu University and there are good opportunities to make new contacts and collaborations.

In the first phase we are applying for funding from the Riksbankens jubileumsfond, Nordforsk, Nordiska ministerrådet, NOS-HS, Eesti Teadusfond/Estonian Science Foundation and European Science Foundation.



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