

Lectures

Why Care about Later Folklore in Old Norse Studies?

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Script of a talk that was given at a workshop on Old Norse Studies and folklore at the Fifteenth International Saga Conference, 5th–11th August 2012, Århus, Denmark.

The present short discussion is structured around three common arguments against the use of more recently documented folklore in Old Norse Studies:

1. 'It is not relevant.'
2. 'OK, it may seem relevant, but we cannot use it because it is impossible to know if it really has any informative value for periods far preceding it.'
3. 'OK, it may be relevant and there may be ways to use it, but that kind of work is not Old Norse Studies.'

Each of these arguments will be briefly addressed in turn, beginning with the last one. Old Norse studies is the study of Old Norse manuscripts and all that this brings with it. Often we only use the information that we find in the texts themselves, but we also frequently use different kinds of additional material in order to help throw light on topics that we study. The most important types of additional material are: *a*) contemporary but foreign texts, usually learned texts in Latin; and *b*) indigenous but much later information, usually post-medieval, of many kinds: place names, dialect words, folklore, etc.

In some scholarly milieus today, especially some that heavily emphasize manuscript studies, many want to limit themselves to the contemporary additional material. In these milieus, some feel that studies that make extensive use of late information, especially folklore, are not really Old Norse Studies, but Folkloristics. However, if that were the case, studies that make equally extensive use of foreign medieval texts in Latin are not Old Norse Studies either, but Medieval Latin Studies or even Classical Studies. This, of course, would be nonsense. Any study that aims at understanding questions raised by the Old Norse texts is an Old Norse study, no matter what kind of additional material it makes use of. And one could argue that we

had better try to find and make use of all the potentially useful additional material, because lack of information is our biggest problem.

Many a work from learned literature is highly relevant to the understanding of Old Norse literature. However, this literature is not relevant unless it can be established that the particular work was known by Old Norse authors, and to establish this is often no easier than establishing the relevance of late folkloric material.

This leads us to a response to argument 1. Later folklore can be valuable for Old Norse Studies in two ways:

1. As additional material, additional input and data in the calculations that lead to our interpretations.
2. Analogically as a 'school' that teaches us how to view the Old Scandinavian religion – which was itself a form of folklore, as opposed to the centrally authorised Christianity – and the background of the written Old Norse literature. The learned European literature was very important for the development of Old Norse literature, but the indigenous, oral background was no less important. Therefore, a broad knowledge of the phenomenon of folklore should be compulsory to any student of Old Norse literature.

The use of post-medieval folklore as additional material can be illustrated with an example from Daniel Sävborg's work on the so-called post-classical sagas of Icelanders (Sävborg forthcoming). The traditional view is that these sagas are bookish fiction, inspired by the legendary sagas. However, Sävborg's studies have convincingly shown that the closest parallels to certain narrative episodes appearing in these works are to be found in 19th and 20th century folklore, and that the 'post-classical' sagas of Icelanders were also based on oral tradition, just like the

other sagas of Icelanders – although a different part of the tradition, a part more interested in the supernatural.

One compelling episode that led Sävborg to this conclusion can be found in *Bárðar saga*, where the troll woman called Hetta tells the fisherman Ingjaldr how he can find a certain, excellent fishing spot called Grímsmið. She does this by reciting a verse that lists the landmarks, the cross bearings that indicate the location of the fishing spot. The information in the verses is roughly:

‘It is where you can see this mountain against that headland in one direction, and that mountain clear from this mountain in the other direction.’¹

All the place names in the verse are real. There are no parallels to this episode in the legendary sagas, but many in the popular traditions recorded in the 19th and 20th centuries. Legends where a supernatural being tells fishermen a verse with the bearings for a fantastic fishing spot are found all along the coast of Norway as well as in Iceland (Hovda 1961; Lúðvík Kristjánsson 1983: 194–200). It is hard not to think that these legends have some kind of connection with the *Bárðar saga* legend, but it is also difficult to believe that the Norwegian legends derive from an Icelandic saga. Had it only been found in Iceland, it could have derived from *Bárðar saga*, because the sagas have been read by the Icelanders ever since the Middle Ages. But in Norway, it seems that the sagas of Icelanders were largely or wholly unknown even in the Middle Ages. Also, if *Bárðar saga* were the source for the Norwegian legends, they should have been more like the saga version, but they are very different. From this it follows that:

- The *Bárðar saga* episode is unlikely to be purely the invention of a medieval author
- The episode probably reflects an oral tradition that existed throughout (at least) Western Scandinavia in the Middle Ages, although it was only written down in *Bárðar saga*
- The similar legends recorded in Norway in the 19th and 20th centuries probably

are independent, late attestations of this common tradition

On the basis of this and other data from 19th and 20th century folklore, Sävborg with quite high probability reconstructs an oral tradition behind the ‘post-classical’ sagas of Icelanders. This will, alongside with his other arguments, lead to a radical change in our view of these sagas.

This brings us to the second argument in the list above. We can all agree that it is *difficult* to use folklore, and in many cases impossible. However, in many other cases it is possible, as the example just discussed illustrates. The *Bárðar saga* fishing spot verse is just one example (as the works of many other scholars can illustrate). It is not unusual that folklore data can be demonstrated, with high probability, to reflect ancient times, for reasons like those mentioned in the *Bárðar saga* example, or other reasons – as many of us know.

Still, because post-medieval folklore is clearly far less reliable for the medieval period than medieval texts, some claim that *cautiousness* should make us leave late folkloric material aside. However, those who are most sceptical about folklore are usually those who have the most limited knowledge of it. One could argue that it would be more cautious to try to examine and consider all the potentially relevant data before a conclusion is drawn than to reject a certain type of data *á priori*.

Notes

1. The specific details presented in this verse are not relevant to the present discussion. It is not reproduced and closely translated here as the details of the complicated text would only distract from discussion and the text may also be corrupt (Bjarni Vilhjálmsson & Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1991: 124–125).

Works Cited

- Bjarni Vilhjálmsson & Þórhallur Vilmundarson (eds.). 1991. *Bárðar saga [Snæfellsáss]*. In *Harðar saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 13. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag. Pp. 99–172.
- Hovda, Per. 1961. *Norske fiskeméd: Landsoversyn og to gamle médbøker*. Skrifter frå Norsk stadnamnarkiv 2. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
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Published Articles

Saga Motifs in Medieval Art and Legend

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The paper "Saga Motifs on Gotland Picture Stones: The Case of Hildir Högnadóttir", published in Gotland's Picture Stones: Bearers of an Enigmatic Legacy, edited by Maria Herlin Karnell, Gotländsk Arkiv 84, Visby: Fornsalen Publishing, Gotland Museum, 2012, pages 59–71; also published in Swedish as "Sagomotiv på de gotländska bildstenarna: Fallet Hildir Högnadóttir", in Gotlands bildstenar: Järnålderns gåtfulla budbärare, edited by Maria Herlin Karnell, Gotländsk arkiv 84, Visby: Gotlands Fornsal, 2012. Pp. 59–71.

The paper "Gunnarr and the Snake Pit in Medieval Art and Legend", published in Speculum 87/4 (2012): 1015–1049.

The article "Saga Motifs on Gotland Picture Stones: The Case of Hildir Högnadóttir" examines the legend of Hildir Högnadóttir. This legend forms part of the account of the Old Norse 'Everlasting Battle', known as the *Hjaðningavíg* ['Battle of the Hjaðnings'], and how it originated – i.e. the story of Freyja's necklace, the *Brísingamen*, which includes an account of the abduction of a woman and the resulting conflict. This includes a sequence that consists of an abduction and battle, a sequence that is sometimes simply referred to as 'the Hildir legend'. The legend is best known from sources such as the skaldic poem *Ragnarsdrápa* (9th century, containing not only kennings referring to the legend, but also the plot itself), Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (13th century) and the legendary saga *Héðins saga ok Högna*, or *Sqrla þátr*, now preserved in a manuscript from the 14th century.

The article deals with the different manifestations of this legend in poems, written saga texts and archaeological remains, in order to explain how they all influence our understanding of the preservation process. Not only do these sources show that the

material was known among the Anglo-Saxons in the 7th century and among the people of Scandinavia a couple of centuries later; they also show that it had been disseminated over a considerable area and was popular. The main theory presented is that the preservation process supports the interpretation that scenes depicted on the Gotland picture stones *Lärbro Hammars I* and the *Stenkyrka Smiss I* contain references to the Hildir legend.

The article "Gunnarr and the Snake Pit in Medieval Art and Legend" focuses on Gunnarr Gjúkason of the *Völsunga saga*, and traces the legend of his death – i.e. the motif of Gunnarr in the snake-pit – all the way from the oldest possible indications of its existence to late medieval textual references. The survey includes iconographic representations. In order to shed light on the development of the motif, the sources in question are examined with the conclusion that Gunnarr's death in the snake-pit is mentioned in eleven written sources, while the number of visual sources is less certain, as described in the discussion.