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LOKI, THE *VÄTTE*, AND THE ASH LAD: A STUDY COMBINING OLD SCANDINAVIAN AND LATE MATERIAL

Eldar Heide

1. Overview

It seems that there were two Lokis. One was a *vätte* ‘domestic spirit’ living under or by the fireplace, helping farmers with the farm work and attracting wealth to the farm. The other, the mythical character, was very different but still derived from the *vätte*, and many Loki myths allude to the *vätte*. The *vätte* Loki is most easily seen in late traditions, but there are strong reasons to believe that he existed in medieval traditions, too. Factors within the late corpus and its relation to other late material indicate ancientness, and essential parts of it can be anchored to medieval material. Still, this *vätte* Loki is hard to accept because he is so different from Loki in the Old Norse (ON) myths. However, in the late traditions we also find Loki as the fairy tale character the Ash Lad, who largely overlaps with the mythological Loki. This may have been the case in the Middle Ages as well, although the two probably were never identical. The Ash Lad may help us understand the discrepancy between the two Lokis because the same dualism can be

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Abstract: This article argues that post-medieval material is a key to understanding the enigmatic Old Norse god Loki. It seems that there were two Lokis: the mythological character and a *vätte* ‘domestic spirit’ living under or by the fireplace. The mythic character derived from this *vätte*, via the figure of the youth by the fireplace, parallel to the fairy tale Ash Lad who extensively overlaps with the Loki of myths. Loki and the Ash Lad are both indispensable super-providers yet unacceptable to the establishment; they are essentially ‘semi-otherworlders’. Hence there is no real contradiction between their beneficial and destructive activities.

Keywords: Loki, Nál, Old Norse mythology, folklore, Ash Lad fairy tales, Snaptun hearth stone, retrospective methodology

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found within the Ash Lad. The predominant Scandinavian term for the Ash Lad — *Oskefis(en)~Ask(e)fis(en)* — also refers to a *vätte* under the fireplace, manipulating the fire. Hence, both Loki and the Ash Lad are both *vättes* under the fireplace and narrative characters. This parallelism makes it problematic to reject the *vätte* Loki. The connection between the narrative characters and the *vätte* appears to be found in their youths by the fireside. Because the Ash Lad stayed near the fireplace and tended the fire, he was given the *vätte*'s name. In the same way, Loki may have been given the *vätte*'s name *Loki* because of a childhood as a lazy 'mummy's boy' by the fireplace. Sadly, we have very limited information about the mythological Loki's early days, but some Loki myths support this image. The overlap between the narrative characters Loki and the Ash Lad and the abundant information on the latter can help us understand Loki's role in the mythology. For both characters, it seems that there is no real contradiction between their beneficial and destructive sides because both aspects derive from the characters' being essentially 'semi-otherworlders'. Because of this, accepting them into the establishment amounts to opening it to a Trojan horse and thus implies its downfall. But this is inescapable because they, for the same reason, are the only ones capable of bringing absolutely necessary objects and persons from the otherworld. Their association with the *vätte* under the fireplace makes them ideal as links to the otherworld.

2. Introduction

In the majority of the myths about Loki, he provides the gods with priceless treasures from the otherworld; thus, he is one of the most beneficial of the gods. But he also engages in all kinds of tricks and both begets and gives birth to enemies of the gods, and he sides with the giants at Ragnarök. This ambiguity and the limited information about his background make Loki an unsolved problem, in spite of more than a century of intense research. The information provided by the ON texts seems to be insufficient. This should not be surprising as it is likely that only a small proportion of medieval myths has survived in the written accounts from the Middle Ages, and notions and beliefs not connected to narratives are under-represented in these sources. Accordingly, the ON texts provide only some of the pieces to the puzzle. In this situation I believe our best option is to supplement the medieval texts with later material. There is a substantial amount recorded from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries mentioning the name *Loki* or the common noun *loki*. Since the interwar period, most scholars have rejected such material as a source for pre-Christian Scandinavian beliefs, but this rejection is now in retreat.

Late Loki traditions may have preserved ancient relics, and there are ways to validate the information. However, no one has been able to make the late Loki fit together with his ON counterpart in a cohesive interpretation. In this article I will attempt to do this. I cannot discuss all the late material here, although I will in a later monograph, and I believe that most of what I omit here can fit into the proposed model.

3. *The Late Evidence for Loki*

3.1. Previous Research Making Use of Late Evidence

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several theories of Loki relied heavily on contemporary popular beliefs. I will begin with a brief overview of these.¹ The largest study is that of Celander (1911, 1914).² He discussed the mainland Scandinavian traditions about *Lokke*³~*Luki*~*Luku*~*Loke*, which seem to be the same name as the ON *Loki*. The variants with the stem vowel *-u-* lack *a*-mutation because they are eastern (cf. Swedish *udde*, Norwegian/Danish *odde*); the proto-Germanic root is **luk-*. Celander argued that Loki basically is a *vätte*, which is Celander's analytic term (Swedish, masculine; definite singular *Vätten*) for the supernatural helpers and providers at the farms, modest in appearance but surprisingly effective, known as *Tomten* or *Tuftekallen* 'the man of the house lot', *vättarna* 'the sprites', *Kullebonden* 'the farmer in the hill', *ellefolk* 'elf people', *Nissen*, and so forth. Sometimes the accounts tell of an individual, male or female, and other times a collective.

Celander had two arguments. First, the traditions of Loki are always variants of *vätte* traditions. Here are a few of Celander's examples. In Denmark and southern Sweden, heat hazes, especially above newly ploughed or harrowed fields in spring, are attributed to the flock of *Lokke* (or 'Lokke driving his flock' — sheep or goats, sometimes pigs) and to the flock of *Kullebonden*, *Bjergmanden* 'the man in the hill', along with similar figures (Celander 1911, 53–57; Rooth 1961, 198–99; cf. Schoonderbeek 1996; in many variants the heat haze is 'Lokke sowing

¹ For an exhaustive presentation of the research on Loki, see Bonnetain (2006).

² Hilding Celander (1876–1965) was working on a new thesis about Loki in his last years, inspired by Rooth (1961). Sadly, the manuscript is lost (pers. comm., Fredrik Skott, September 2009, at DAG, which was founded by Celander).

³ I use the spelling *-kk-* even in Swedish attestations of the word (also in the variant *Nokk(e(n))*).

oats': Olrik 1909, 71).⁴ A further example appears in Jutland: when the birds shed their feathers, one might say that they 'går i Lokkis arri', which in all probability means 'end up in (are caught in?) Lokki's harrow'.⁵ This corresponds to the fact that, according to southern Swedish folklore, *Lokke* helped the farmers harrow the fields in spring (Rooth 1961, 198), and it can be explained, Celander points out, if *Lokke* was a *vätte* because the *Vätten* was believed to cause the birds' and animals' loss of feathers, wool, and fur (Celander 1911, 59–60, Setesdal and Västergötland; also Luf M5821, 2 and Luf M6442, 5–6, Småland). Another example is that in many parts of Sweden and Norway people attributed the crackling or whistling of a fire, or the sudden flare of a fire from the embers, or the blowing of ash, to the *Vätten* — he was blowing on the ashes or the fire, or spanking his children, causing them to scream (= the crackling/whistling).⁶ In Telemark, Norway, as Celander points out, some of these phenomena were attributed to *Loke*. He gives the example of Setesdal, next to Telemark, in which small 'sacrifices' of food were made to the *Vätten* in the fire (*vetti*, feminine definite); and in Telemark itself, the recipient of this was *Loke* (Celander 1911, 47, 49; Skar 1903–16, III, 27). This is related to a common custom throughout south-eastern Sweden and the Swedish-speaking

⁴ One of Olrik's examples, from Molbech (1841, 330, my translation): "The phrase "Lokke is sowing oats today" or "Lokke is driving his goats today" refers to that spring sight in sunshine when the heat starts to produce plentiful vapours from the ground, and they can be seen on the horizon in flat areas as if they are wavering or hanging in a waving movement above the ground, like the hot steam which can be seen in such a movement over a kettle or an intensely burning fire." An example from Hansen (1941, 183, my translation): "I think the *Bjergmend* ['hill men'] were the supernatural beings that the herdsmen knew best; at least everyone knew the characteristic flickering which can be seen above crests on hot summer days, and everyone knew that it was the *Bjergmand* or *Lokke* — others said *Lokkeleymand* [unexplained] — who was sowing oats or who was driving his sheep and goats."

⁵ Celander 1911, 59; cf. Molbech 1841, 331; Olrik 1909, 78; and several entries at the Peter Skautrup centre, Århus, Jutland, with the form *bar* or *barre*; *rv* is assimilated to *rr* in the dialects in question.

⁶ Celander 1911, 46–53; Olrik 1909, 78; Storaker 1921, 78 (*buldra*); and below here. Hyltén-Cavallius 1863–68, I, 272 (my translation): "Like the earth *vättes* the farm *vättes* live under the ground, although within the house or house lot. In the same way as the *penates* of the Ancient peoples, they mostly stay in the vicinity of the fireplace. Sometimes at night in the house one gets to see them vaguely in the dark, nearly like moonshine. From time to time they can be seen lighting between the cracks in the floor. The people then say, according to traditional usage, that it is the *Vätten* burning candles. Often it also happens that the fire in the fireplace, after it has been covered with ashes [for the night], again flares up. Then the old believe that it is the *Vätten* who is lying there blowing on the fire."

areas east of the Baltic: milk teeth are thrown into the fire during the recitation of a rhyme that addresses *Lokke~Luku~Luki~Nokk(e)* (Vendell 1904–06, 559; Olrik 1909, 78; Celander 1911, 47; Levander and Björklund 1961–, vol., 1412): ‘Locke, Locke, gif mig en bentand! | Här har du en guld-tand’ (Hyltén-Cavallius 1863–68, I, 235) (Lokke, Lokke, give me a gold-tooth | Here you have a gold tooth).

Celander’s second argument was that this Loki in the fireplace in Swedish Finland was explicitly identified with *Vätten* (*Tontn = Tomten*; Celander 1911, 50). The basis for Celander’s work was provided by Olrik, who presented most of the late Loki traditions in two articles (1908; 1909). Olrik argued that Loki was originally a ‘flame / light spirit’ (cf. Olrik and Ellekilde 1926, 261) because of his connection with the fireplace and heat hazes, and the etymological identification of *Loki* with *logi* ‘a flame’, which was then widely accepted (Grimm 1953, I, 199–200; Kock 1899). Celander rejected this theory. Sacrifices to Loki in the fireplace do not necessarily mean that Loki is the fire, just that he (and his people) live under or by the fireplace.⁷ This understanding is supported by the richer evidence of the *Vätten*: sacrifices may be deposited in the corners of the fireplace, not necessarily in the fire, and when the *Vätten* is blowing on the embers and the fire flares up again, the *Vätten* clearly is not the fire, even if he is closely connected to it (Celander 1911, 52; 1914, 76).

Several scholars (von der Leyen 1899, 32–46; Celander 1911, 108–09; Mo 1916, 121; Holtsmark 1962, 88; Henriksen 1966, 148) have pointed out striking similarities between Loki, both in the ON texts and the late material (Olrik 1908), and the Ash Lad of the fairy tales and sagas: *Kolbit(u)r* (ON, Icelandic), *Øskufisur~Øskudólgur* (Faroese), *Oskefis(en)*, *Ask(e)fis(en)* (Norwegian, Danish, Swedish); Low German *Aschenpuster*, High German *Aschenputtel* — or *Askeladden*, which today is the standard name in Norway, where this character is a national hero (> English *Ash Lad*). This name was rare in the popular traditions but was preferred by the collector Asbjørnsen because *Oskefis(en)* may mean both ‘the Ash Blower’ (cf. Icelandic *fisibælgur* m. ‘bellows’) and ‘the Ash Fart’, and hence sounded too vulgar for nineteenth-century readers. The Ash Lad is, as his (nick)names suggest, typically the youngest of three brothers, a work-shy, idle, dirty boy from a poor family,

⁷ The idea that the domestic spirit lived under or by the fireplace or was connected to it in other ways is found all over Europe (Småland, Sweden: Hyltén-Cavallius 1863–68, I, 272; Denmark: Grundtvig 1944, 278, 280, 301; Setesdal, Norway: Skar 1903–16, III, 27; Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia: Harva [Holmberg] 1952, 260; Europe in general: Liungman 1957–65, V, 34–36) — although he and/or his people could also live in other places on the farm or in its vicinity (Skar 1903–16, III, 27).

always sitting at home poking and blowing on the fire (e.g. ‘Gullslottet som hang i lufta’, Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 248; see further § 4.1). Traditionally, the act of tending the fire — putting on wood, poking the fire, and blowing to keep it alive — was considered work of low status and often the responsibility of a young child or another person considered unfit for more demanding tasks. The Ash Lad is often the favourite of his mother and supported by her, but is regarded by others as a disgrace to his family because he refuses to take part in manly work. Eventually, however, he surprises and comes out ahead of everyone because of his cleverness; efficient, low-status handling of problems; and/or unexpected courage. In the end, the king must give him the princess and (half) the kingdom because he passes impossible tests, or he gains a fortune by outsmarting and killing a troll (§§ 4.1.1 and 4.2).

By contrast with Celander, Rooth’s (1961) point of departure was the Old Swedish and modern Swedish dialect meaning ‘spider, daddy-long-legs (i.e. members of the family *Opiliones*)’ of *Lokke~Luki*; the Swedish word *lokkanät* ‘cobweb’, literally ‘web of *lokke*’; and Faroese parallels for these: *Lokkanet* is the term for ‘cobwebs’, while *lokki~grindalokki~grindalokkur* is a term for the spider-like daddy-long-legs/crane fly (i.e. members of the family *Tipulidae*). (The distinction between *Araneae*, *Opiliones*, and *Tipulidae* was only introduced by modern entomology.) As cobwebs resemble fishnets both in appearance and function (and may have given the idea for the fishnet), Rooth linked this to the ON myth where Loki invents the fishnet (see § 4.1.2). She adopted the theory that Loki is a trickster (from de Vries 1933) and linked it to Native American traditions where the spider along with other animals such as the raven, the mink, and the rabbit are tricksters (Rooth 1961, 194–210, 245–48). She concluded that ‘spider [...] was the original meaning of [...] the god Loki’ (246).

None of these theories is given much support today, for several reasons:

1. Scholars who put emphasis on late material rarely explained why we should trust it to provide information about ancient times. This is a fundamental methodological failure, which in the interwar period led to a general rejection of late material in studies of Old Scandinavian religion. The main argument was that after a millennium of Christianity, it would be so corrupted that it could be of no use (Heide 2009).
2. Loki in the late traditions is quite different from Loki in the ON myths, and this has not been explained in a convincing way.
3. The late material differs substantially internally.
4. The theories that rely on the late material differ greatly as well.
5. Rooth’s use of late material presupposes an implausible ethnographic analogy.
6. The similarities between the Ash Lad and Loki are not discussed, just noted.

7. The most widespread form of the name Loki in late traditions has a geminate *k*: *Lokki*. No plausible explanation of this has been given,⁸ so it is not obvious that it is the same word.

I address these problems in what follows.

3.2. The Problem *k* : *kk*

In Faroese the geminate form *Lokki* undoubtedly refers to the ON god. In the ballad *Lokkatáttur* (Hammershaimb 1851, I, 140), *Lokki* appears with *Óðin* and *Hönir* in a triad, as in some ON myths (Simek 2006, 199), and *Lokki* in the fairy tale *Risin og Lokki* has much in common with the ON god (§ 4.1.3). The geminate form *Lokke* also occurs in a Danish saying that reflects the ON Loki, first attested from the seventeenth century: ‘to carry Lokke’s letters’ means ‘to secretly inform against, accuse, slander’,⁹ and ‘to listen to Lokke’s fairy tales/fibs’ means ‘to listen to lies/fibs’ (‘at høre på Lokkens eventyr’, Olrik 1909, 71, 78). This corresponds to the ON Loki’s role as *rógberi ásanna* ‘slanderer/accuser of the gods’ (*Gylfaginning* 19), as in the Eddic poem *Lokasenna* (§ 3.4). (The ‘carrying of letters’ may be a metaphor for ‘spreading information in a covert way’.) *Lokke* is also Loki’s name in the Swedish and Danish versions of the ballad derived from *Drymskviða* (*Tor af Havsgård / Torsvisan*), first attested in the sixteenth century (Olrik 1909, 76; Bugge and Moe 1897, 16–26, 91). As we can see, in several cases the geminate form is indisputably connected to the Old Scandinavian god. Conversely, forms with a single *k* are found in many of the late traditions that are seen as irrelevant to the god: *Loke*, *Luki*, *Luku(r)* in Telemark, Dalarna (Sweden), and parts of Swedish Finland.¹⁰ The alternation *k* : *kk* is present throughout the entire complex of the Germanic root **luk-* and the parallel **hmuk-*, and it can be explained linguistically,

⁸ The geminate does not result from a lengthening of the consonant instead of the vowel in the Middle Scandinavian quantity shift, which is the rule in some dialects; the geminate is also found in dialects that lengthen the vowel, and in Danish, where *Loki* would have given **Loje* / **Lowe*, and in Old Swedish (‘a spider’).

⁹ *At bære Per Lokkes breve*: ‘hemmeligt angive, anklage, bagtale’ (*Ordbog over det danske sprog* 1918–56, XII, 219); *at føre Lokkes breve* (Olrik 1909, 71, 78). More common than *Lokke* is *Lakke*, influenced by the Low German loanword *lakke* ‘to accuse’. This can hardly be the origin of the saying, because the variant *Nakke* (*Ordbog over det danske sprog* 1918–56, XIV, 219) can only, and easily, be explained from the eastern Loki variant *Nokke* (end of § 3.3).

¹⁰ Aasen 1873, 458; Ross 1971, 486; Levander and Björklund 1961–, vol. 1412; Vendell 1904–06, 558–59.

as I will demonstrate in a separate article. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that *Lokke* and similar forms are the same word/name as ON *Loki*.

3.3. A Defence of the Late Material and Celander's *Vätte* Theory

I consider all the studies of the late evidence for Loki as useful. Olrik's collection of the late material is invaluable, although I agree with Celander's rejection of the identification of Loki and fire. It was based upon the idea that mythology in general refers to natural phenomena, which was abandoned a century ago. The etymological argument for the identification is doubtful, and I can see no other clear argument for it. Kock (1899) relied on the ON expression *fara sem lok yfir akra*. But *lok/Loki* in this expression can hardly mean 'fire' (§ 4.1.2), and Loki is obviously not the fire when he loses the eating contest against fire in *Gylfaginning* 29. As Celander pointed out (see § 3.1), the late material's connection between Loki and fire does not imply an *identification*, but rather an *association*, which fits with the *Vätten*.

Rooth's work is valuable because it takes Loki's spider connection seriously — it should not be ignored simply because it seems odd. But the idea that Loki the trickster is derived from the spider seems to have no foundation in Northern European traditions. However, the spider Loki can be seen as a subsection of Celander's *vätte* Loki (which Olrik 1911, 584 considered, although he rejected Celander's theory). In several parts of the Germanic-speaking area, cobwebs were believed to be made by the *vättes* (*vättar*, elves, dwarves), and many of the beliefs attributed to the *Vätten* are also attributed to *lok(k)e~luki* in the sense of 'spiders, daddy-long-legs': they — and their cobwebs — were believed to bring luck or wealth to the home or farm, and to help the farmers with herding and harvesting, exactly like the *Vätten*. Another correspondence is found in the general belief that the *vättes* did not appear in anthropomorphic shape (during the day) but as all kinds of animals: toads, grass snakes, other small animals, and in some traditions spiders and daddy-long-legs are referred to as *vättes*. A fundamental connection also seems to exist between the word *loki* and cobwebs and fishnets (§ 4.1.2). There are strong reasons to believe that at least some of these elements are ancient. I will elaborate on this in a separate article.

I support Celander's connection of the late Loki with the *Vätten*. It is evidenced firmly in Celander's thesis, and I have collected a considerable amount of material that points in the same direction, such as the notions connected to spiders/daddy-long-legs. In the following I present more evidence, supplied with arguments regarding the source-value of this late material. I adopt Celander's analytic term

Vätten but would like to adjust it. Celander (1911, 27–45) makes no distinction between the *Tomten*, *Nissen*, *Gardvorden*, and other such terms, on the one hand, and the *Vätten* or *vättes*, on the other. This is understandable. Landtman (1922, 9–10) remarked that it is nearly impossible to distinguish between them, but still points out three significant differences. First, the traditions accentuate that the *vättes* (*de underjordiska, underbyggare* = Northern Swedish *vitterfolket*, Norwegian *bulderfolket, de(i) underjordiske*, Danish *underjordsfolket*, etc.) live *under* the ground or buildings, whereas the *tomtes* typically live *in* the buildings. Second, whereas the *tomtes* are frequently *described* in the accounts — as anthropomorphic beings — the traditions rarely give information about the (true) appearance of the *vättes* (which coincides with their ability to appear in various shapes). Third, the *vättes* are more hostile and dangerous than the *tomtes*. They do help and protect the people of the farm, but are easily offended and turn against them. I would like to add that the *vättes* tend to have a more independent life, with their own farms and livestock underground, whereas the *Tomten* is part of the human farm. Loki in late tradition more closely corresponds to a *vätte*. For the sake of simplicity I use terms that refer to a single male, but the sources equally often refer to a single female or a collective. The term *Vätten* is not unproblematic, as it is a taboo term covering one or more underlying terms, and literally means ‘something very small’. De Vries (1933, 234) claims, to undermine Celander’s theory, that the term *vätte* in late tradition is applied to more or less any group of beings, but this is not the case. It is quite consistently used as an alternative term to *underbyggare* and similar terms (which are themselves taboo terms), and it is difficult to find a better term.

Celander’s connection of Loki with the *Vätten* living under or by the fireplace, manipulating the fire, can be made substantially stronger today. The identification of Lokke with the *Tomten* is now also known from Småland (ULMA 4537, Sunnerbo), and the attributing of the crackling and whistling of the fire to Loki (*Luki*) from Dalarna,¹¹ in addition to Telemark. In the Faroe Islands, a *lokkalogi* ‘fire of Lokki’ refers to ‘the first flame from a newly lit fire’ (Jacobsen and Matras 1961, 262). This makes sense if Lok(k)i was a *vätte* like the one mentioned in note 6, or an Ostrobothnian Lokk(e) (Nokk(e)) in the fireplace, identified with *Vätten* (above). This type of Loki has been adopted into adjacent Finnish areas:¹² *Lukki* is a *haltija* ‘*vätte*’ living by the fireplace (Ostrobothnia, SKS KRA KT167, 7;

¹¹ Whistling in the fire = Luki spanking his children, ULMA 11288, 2 (Mora); Luki = ‘personification of fire’, Levander and Björklund 1961–, III, 1412 (Malung).

¹² See Setälä 1912, 251–55.

KT180, 80), generally believed to tend the fire (Haavio 1942, 217–18). Thus, we seem to find (reflections of) Loki as a *vätte* living under or by the fireplace in four isolated areas: the Faroes, Telemark (Norway), Dalarna (Sweden), and Ostrobothnia (Finland). As these areas have always been isolated from each other, it is unlikely that this is the result of borrowing; rather, it is a relic of an ancient, common tradition, preserved only in these areas, which are among Scandinavia's most conservative. This seems to be confirmed by the Viking-Age hearth stone from Snaptun in Denmark (§ 4.1.2).

Other aspects of the Finnish *Lukki* support the interpretation of Loki as a *vätte*. In charms against rickets (*riisi*), Lukki is mentioned among the causers of this disease (Setälä 1912, 352). Children with rickets were believed to be swapped *vätte* children (*(bort)bytingar*, changelings; Reichborn-Kjennerud 1928–47, I, 9, 51, 55, II, 97, 100), so if Lukki caused rickets, he would be a *vätte*.

The tradition of throwing milk teeth to Lokke/Luki points in the same direction. It supports the impression of Loki as a *vätte* living under or by the fireplace, and the distribution of the tradition indicates that it is old. It is known from southeastern Sweden (Scania, Blekinge, Småland, Närke, Västmanland, Dalarna), Swedish Finland, and Swedish Estonia, in eastern areas sometimes with the variant *nokk(e)* (Celander 1911, 23, 47; Levander and Björklund 1961–, vol., 1412; ULMA 7612, 37). But it is also recorded in interior eastern Jutland (Ring near Silkeborg), addressing *Lokkemand* (Ellekilde and Tang Kristensen 1923, 105), and interior eastern Norway near Hamar, addressing *Lokke*.¹³ Accordingly, this tradition is found in one large area in the south and east of the Swedish-speaking area and in two isolated 'islands' to the west and north of this. It is unlikely that these 'islands' represent late influence from Sweden. Fairy tales and other narratives spread easily, partly because they can be adapted to local conditions. In this case, however, we are referring to a fixed *ritual* connected with a specific name (*Lokke*). To establish this in a foreign country takes a great deal more. It can occur, for example in immigrant societies like the United States in the nineteenth century, where new traditions were formed through a mixture of various immigrant traditions. But the societies in question here are ancient, stable, conservative, without major immigration from the area where the tradition is most widely attested. If in spite of this the tradition did spread once, it is unlikely that it would happen twice. Moreover, borrowing should produce the form *Lokke*, even in Denmark, where we

¹³ Stange: NEG 114, 21814; Elverum: Kristian Grafsrønningen (born 1924) by telephone 17 February 2010. Schmidt (1951, 145) and Olrik and Ellekilde (1926, 262) refer to the same unnamed informant (born 1808).

find *Lokkemand*. Again, the traditions where Loki appears as a *vätte* are most easily explained as scattered relics of an ancient common tradition.

The alternative fate of milk teeth supports the connection with *Vätten*. In Germany, the Baltic countries, and Scotland, and elsewhere in mainland Scandinavia, the teeth are normally given to ‘Mouse’ in the fire. In Scandinavia this is accompanied with the above-mentioned rhyme, addressing ‘Mouse’ instead of Lokke~Luki.¹⁴ Von Negelein (1900, 292), Christiansen (1913), and de Vries (1933, 230) have independently suggested that this is because mice living in the house were taken to be appearances of domestic spirits. I can add that this idea is attested (Grundtvig 1944, 212; Reichborn-Kjennerud 1928–47, I, 189), and that other small animals associated with the house or its hearth were understood in the same way. In Estonia, the house cricket (*Acheta domestica*) was addressed with the rhyme when a tooth was deposited near the oven (Christiansen 1913; Looorits 1949–57, I, 59, II, 58), because the house cricket was understood in this way, as in Norway and other places, where people sometimes fed the house crickets (Jonassen 1989, 6). The logic behind this is that house crickets lived in cracks in the chimney or in other warm places near the fireplace. (They are native to Africa and were introduced to Europe by the Romans.) In Setesdal, southern Norway, people said that the house cricket was spanking his children when whistling or crackling was heard in the fire (Storaker 1921, 78). The alternative approaches to the disposal of teeth support the idea that the receiver was a domestic spirit: they could be dropped into cracks in the floor (while the rhyme was read to ‘Mouse’, e.g. Luf M2197, 25, Luf 2176, 17, Småland) — which corresponds with the *vättes* revealing themselves by light through those cracks (see note 6) — or under the bed (Olrik and Ellekilde 1926, 262) or in cracks in the walls of the house (Árni Óla 1964, 191, Iceland). In Swedish Finland, the receiver of the teeth varies between Lokk(e)/Nokk(e) (most common) and Tomten/*Tomtegubben*~*Gubbtomten*~*Gubben*, both in Ostrobothnia and in Nyland (Landtman 1919, 727–29; Forsblom 1927, vol., 155–59), which are, of course, domestic spirits, more or less the same as the *Vätten*.

The *vättes* could also show themselves as weak lights elsewhere in the house (see note 6), and they were believed to be the cause of mystical light phenomena (Luf M3022, 14, Scania; Luf M2885, 84). Thus, petrified fossilized belemnites, resembling candles, were known as ‘*vätte* candles’ in southernmost Sweden and Denmark. Such notions may be the key to an unexplained Loki tradition: when the sun shines

¹⁴ Olrik 1909, 79; Olrik and Ellekilde 1926, 262; Kanner 1928, 47–53; de Vries 1933, 229; along with unpublished material from the School of Scottish Studies Archives at the University of Edinburgh.

into a puddle and is reflected onto a wall, the spot of light on the wall — a *solkatt* in (standard) Swedish — is referred to as *Lokke lejemand* on Zealand (Olrik 1909, 70) and as a *luki* in Dalarna (Levander and Björklund 1961–, vol., 1412). In Småland, a reflection from the fire on objects (especially inside a room) traditionally was referred to as the *Bovätten*¹⁵ ('the *Vätten* of the farm'). Such a reflection is a *solkatt*, inside a room and with light from the fire rather than the sun. Thus, *luki*~*Lokke lejemand*' reflected spot of light' is easily explained if *Luki*~*Lokke* used to be a *vätte*. Again the occurrences appear to be 'isolated relic islands', indicating antiquity, as it is difficult to explain the connection from borrowing in recent times. The terms are too different for that (*luki*, pronounced 'lutji': *Lokke lejemand*), and contact between Zealand and Dalarna has always been minimal.

The same logic can be used for other elements of the late Loki traditions: In Iceland and the southernmost Danish islands Loki is associated with tangles that appear when sewing or spinning, but in such differing forms that the one can hardly have been borrowed from the other. This tangle-Loki can easily be explained from the *Vätten* (see § 4.1.2).

The saying 'Lokke sowing oats' — a variant of 'Lokke driving his flock' (§ 3.1) — is another example. It is known from Jutland (Schoonderbeek 1996) and the southern Danish islands (Fyn, Lolland/Falster; DFS 1906/23; Tholle 1936, 135) and from places that never had much contact with this area: eastern central Småland (ULMA 1654: 2, p. 3, Uppvidinge) and Stange near Hamar in eastern Norway (Hagen 1922, 6, 66; Visted 1923, 328). In this case it seems that antiquity can be confirmed by Old Icelandic texts (§ 4.1.2).

Antiquity is also indicated by the fact that although we find many of the same or similar elements in different 'relic islands' of the Loki tradition, they are combined in varying ways. An incomplete overview: in Iceland we find Loki as the causer of tangles and as the trickster in narratives (§§ 4.1.2 and 4.1.1); in the Faroes as the trickster and the 'spider' and possibly the *Vätten* under the fireplace (§§ 4.1.1 and 3.3); in Telemark as the food-receiving *vätte* under the fireplace and as the trickster (§ 3.3 and Olrik 1909, 81); in the Hamar area as the oat-sower and the receiver of milk teeth under the fireplace; in Dalarna as the tooth-receiving and fire-manipulating *vätte* under the fireplace, the 'spider', and the trickster (§ 4.1.1). In

¹⁵ 'When the gleam from the fire or from a lit candle shone on some object within the dwelling, which reflected the light, it was believed that it was *Vätten* of the farm (*Bovätten*) who had lit [a candle]. Then people would say: "The *Vätte* of the farm is burning candles." From the reflection, people in the past would draw the conclusion that *Vätten* lived invisibly within the dwelling house, and from this the term "*Vätten* of the farm" arose' (Luf 6442, 5, my translation).

southern and eastern Sweden we find the receiver of milk teeth under the fireplace and the spider; in Småland and Scania the same, along with the goat- or sheep-herder or oat-sower; in Småland the *Vätten* as *Tomten*; in the southernmost Danish islands the goat- or sheep-herder and tangle-causer, as also in Jutland, where in addition the *Vätten* is the oat-sower and the receiver of milk teeth under the fireplace; in Swedish Finland the receiver of milk teeth under the fireplace, the *Vätten* as *Tomten*, and the spider. This distribution of elements would be surprising if the Loki traditions resulted from spreading in recent times. In that case they should be far more uniform. We are observing what we should expect from ‘relic islands’ that stem from an ancient, common Scandinavian tradition: the elements are preserved sporadically — some in small areas far apart, others in larger, continuous areas; some are found throughout the larger areas, others only in parts of them, and so forth.

Finally, antiquity is indicated by the existence of an eastern variant *Nokk(e)~nokk(e)* in Swedish Finland, Swedish Estonia, and south-eastern Sweden down to Scania (Olrik 1909, 79; Celander 1911, 22–23), referring to the *Vätten* living by the fireplace (Finland), to the receiver of milk teeth thrown into the fire (most of the area), and spiders/*Opiliones* (most of the area, Celander 1911, 22–23). In Denmark, *Nakke* refers to the slandering Loki (§ 3.2). The variant with an initial *n-* has been viewed as a problem but should not be, because the variants are distributed in roughly the same way as *lykill* (western Scandinavia) and *nokkel* (eastern mainland Scandinavia, recently spread to most of the mainland), meaning ‘a key’. Formally, *nokke* corresponds to *nokkel* as *loki~lokke* to *lykill*. The former are reflections of the Germanic root **bnuk-*, whereas the latter are reflections of the Germanic root **luk-*. These roots are semantically close to each other; both essentially refer to something shaped like a hook or loop (the earliest keys were hooks, cf. *Nál* in § 4.1.2 and a forthcoming article on these etymologies). Thus, *lykill* and *nokkel*, and *loki* and *nokke*, are different ways of expressing the same idea. For reasons unknown, **bnuk-* dominated in some meanings in eastern Scandinavia, while **luk-* expressed these meanings in the west. This means that *Nokke* is an eastern variant and not a corruption. It also indicates that the east/west distribution of *Lok(k)e* and *(H)Nokke* reflects a Proto-Scandinavian or early Common Scandinavian state, like that of *lykill* and *nokkel*. This again suggests that the traditions connected to these names/terms also have an ancient basis, not only those that happened to be recorded in Old Icelandic manuscripts.

As we can see, there are many reasons to believe that the late traditions of a *vätte* Loki are the remnants of an ancient, common Scandinavian tradition. (I have mentioned at least twenty here.) Some of them may prove invalid, and sceptics may reject individual points. Nevertheless, a *pattern* exists, formed by the coalescence

of many indications. How could so many (parts of) traditions be corrupted *in the same way*, independently throughout most of Scandinavia? This could be comprehensible if the result conformed to a known, major force of influence. For example, if the late Loki everywhere resembled the Christian devil (see de Vries 1933, 233, 246), that would stem from the Christian demonization of the pagan gods. But the *vätte* Loki cannot be the result of Christian influence, nor can I recall any other post-conversion trend that could explain him. On the contrary, he is sometimes found eschewing strong trends. In most of Norway, the whistling and crackling in the fire is attributed to *Eldbjørg*, *Eldmora*, or *Eldgrim*,¹⁶ and in Sweden commonly to *Askfis(en)* (*Ordbok över Sveriges dialekter* 1991–2000, III, 173). These names are examples of Eskerød's *traditionsdominanter* 'tradition dominants' (1947, 79–82, 117, 132), that is, the characters who supplant others and come to dominate the traditions. Loki, as the cause of the sounds in the fire, should be replaced by these standard names, but in Telemark and Dalarna, despite this pressure, *Loke~Luki* persisted until the twentieth century. Thus, Loki is the *lectio difficilior* of the tradition (Heide 2009, 365). The very fact that the name is present indicates that it is a remnant of something ancient rather than a corruption. The same may be said of Lokke as the recipient of milk teeth in eastern Norway and in Jutland. To my knowledge, 'Mouse' is the recipient everywhere else in Norway and Denmark, as in most of Sweden.

3.4. A Defence of the Late Material and the Ash Lad Connection

There are strong and numerous reasons to posit that the *vätte* Loki existed in medieval traditions. However, he is very different from Loki in the ON myths, and therefore difficult to accept. But there is one more major aspect of the late Loki: his overlap with the Ash Lad (§ 3.1), who is called Lok(k)i in two fairy tales. One is the Faroese *Risin og Lokki* 'The Giant and Lokki' (Jakobsen 1898–1901, vol. 265–67), in Norway known as *Oskeladden som kappåt med trollet*, in Sweden as *Krama vatten ur en sten*.¹⁷ The second is the Icelandic *Lokalygi* 'Lie of Loki', also widely known, in Norway as *Oskeladden som fekk prinsessa til å løgste seg*. Olrik

¹⁶ Olrik and Ellekilde 1926, 256; Storaker 1921, 78; Reichborn-Kjennerud 1928–47, II, 112; *Norsk Ordbok* 1966–, VIII, 954; and the series *Norsk folkeminnelags skrifter*, Oslo.

¹⁷ Asbjørnsen and Moe, 1965, II, 79–82; Skar 1903–16, VI, 65–69; Liungman 1949, I, 388, 396, 405, II, 243–45; Danish version Christensen 1963, 34–36; Arne and Thompson 1961, no. 1088.

(1908, 197–98, 206; cf. de Vries 1933, 240) argues that the name Lok(k)i in these fairy tales is a corruption. But there are six major reasons to assume the opposite. First, the myths of Loki contain a great number of motifs that are later found in Ash Lad fairy tales (§ 4.1.1). Second, Loki's traits in these fairy tales match those of Loki in the myths. A discussion of *Risin og Lokki* follows in § 4.1.3. In *Lokalygi* and the versions of it, Loki/the Ash Lad play a similar role to Loki in *Lokasenna* and *Þórsdrápa*, which remarks that Loki was a tremendous liar ('drjúgr var Loptr at ljúga').¹⁸ In the fairy tale a certain king is so gullible that no one can make him say 'That's a lie!'. He promises his daughter to the man who is capable of achieving this — which turns out to be none other than Loki/the Ash Lad. In variants it is the princess or a farmer who make this promise or a bet.¹⁹ Loki/the Ash Lad tells spectacularly improbable stories, but not until he includes the king/queen/princess/farmer in a shameful situation does the victim say 'That's a lie!'. This corresponds with the mythological Loki's role as *rógberi ásanna* 'slanderer/accuser of the gods' (§ 3.2). Third, *Loki* as the name of the fairy tale character is supported by the term *lokalygi* 'enormous lie', literally 'lie of Loki' (Sigfús Blöndal 1920, 1039 / 305), which seems to derive from this fairy tale (cf. § 3.2 with note 9). Fourth, there is a connection between the name Loki and the Ash Lad in mainland Scandinavia, too. In Dalarna, *luki* can also mean 'a boy lounging about although he is too grown up to do so; a loafer' — a fitting description of the Ash Lad before he leaves home.²⁰ This meaning of *luki* can hardly be a loan from Iceland or the Faroes; it is rather a relic of a common Scandinavian tradition preserved in Dalarna's 'culture freezer', as on the Atlantic islands. This is supported by the fact that this meaning of *luki* seems closely connected to the following: 'A rowdy, a person who is up to tricks/pranks' ('ställer till med galenskaper'),²¹ which would be an apt description of the mythological Loki. Fifth, the trend from the conversion onwards was that Loki was forgotten (although quite a bit of material associated with him has survived). Why, in the course of this process, would the name Loki be *introduced*

¹⁸ *Skáldskaparmál* 27; Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, BI, 139.

¹⁹ Iceland (*Lokalygi*): Jón Árnason 1958–61, v, 263; Ólafur Davíðsson 1945, 172–73. Norway: Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, I, 246–48. Denmark: Bødker and others 1957, 28 (West Jutland). Sweden: Liungman 1949, I, 336 f., II, 392, 398–99; Aarne and Thompson 1961, no. 852.

²⁰ Mora, ULMA 376, 2; similar in ULMA 5414, 371, 460, ULMA 5416, 24, ULMA 2174, 22, p. 39. In Levander's and Björklund's dictionary (1961–, 1412) this meaning of *luki* refers to lazy males of any age, but in the primary material it is usually boys.

²¹ ULMA 11288, 2 (Mora); cf. ULMA 34391, 3, ULMA 1470, ULMA 5123, 35, ULMA 2803, I, p. 12.

into stories? Why would it spread during the retreat? Sixth, if someone were to change the name of the hero in an Ash Lad fairy tale, we should expect that it be replaced with the most common name (cf. Eskerød's 'tradition dominants' mentioned in § 3.3). In Faroese, this is *Øskudólgur*, and in Icelandic it is *Kolbitur*. Accordingly, Lok(k)i occurs in Ash Lad fairy tales despite a pressure to conform and is thus the *lectio difficilior*. Taking all these points together, it seems probable that the name Loki has been associated with Ash Lad fairy tales for a very long time. Accordingly, both Loki's *vätte* connection and his Ash Lad connection probably are ancient.

4. A Combined Interpretation

4.1. The Different Forms and Stages of *Oskefis(en)* and Loki

Loki's overlap with the Ash Lad may provide a bridge between the *vätte* Loki and the mythical Loki and thus make it easier to accept the former. The *vätte* Loki is closely associated with the fireplace, as we saw in §§ 3.1 and 3.3: he lives under the fireplace and manipulates the fire, and whistling and crackling sounds in the fire are attributed to Loki spanking his children. The same can be said of the Ash Lad. In mainland Scandinavia, the most common name of the fairy tale character by far is *Oskefis(en)*~*Ask(e)fis(en)*. As pointed out by Mo (1916), this word also refers to a *vätte* living in the fire(place), causing whistling or crackling, or spitting that makes the fire flare up or the ashes blow.²² One might say 'Askfisen is blowing on the embers and it starts burning again' (ULMA 34520, Uppland), or 'Askfis is spanking his children', referring to the whistling or crackling (Levander and Björklund 1961–, I, 51, Dalarna, Sweden; *Norsk Ordbok* 1966–, vol., 954, Valle, Setesdal, Norway). Such meanings of *oskefis* are found in a continuous area from Swedish Finland through Sweden to Trøndelag on Norway's west coast. In addition, it is attested from one place in conservative Setesdal, far to the south of Norway, at least 250 km away from the large area (see note 22). This probably represents a 'relic island', indicating that this meaning of *oskefis* is old.

This other meaning of *Oskefisen* implies that both *Loki* and *Oskefisen* have a double meaning. Both names refer to distinctly different beings: (1) a *vätte* living

²² Trøndelag, Norway: Mo 1916; Nordmøre, Norway: *Norsk Ordbok* 1966–, VIII, 954; Valle in Setesdal, Norway: *ibid.*; Sweden: *Ordbok över Sveriges dialekter* 1991–2000, III, 173; Swedish Finland: Ahlbäck 1976, 64.

under or in the fireplace, manipulating the fire; or (2) a trickster in narratives (myths and/or fairy tales). *Oskefisen* is not identical with *Loki* in either of the above forms. In (1), *Oskefisen* has a much narrower realm than *Loki*, restricted to the association with the fireplace. I know of no example of *Oskefisen* helping the farmers, herding their flocks, etc. Even so, in principle the same duality is found in both *Loki* and *Oskefisen*. This parallel makes it problematic to reject the *vätte* *Loki*. Rather, we should try to understand the duality.

Form (2) above is very different from form (1). The *Loki* who is staying with the gods and the Ash Lad who comes to the king clearly are not *vättes*. Even so, there must be a link between (2) and (1). This appears to be found in the childhoods of the characters. In the case of the fairy-tale character this seems clear because virtually all of his names reflect his intimate connection with the fire(place) as a child: *Oskefis(en)* ‘Ash Fart / Ash Blower’, *Tyrihans* ‘Firewood John’, *Kolbit(u)r* ‘Coal biter’, *Øskudólgur* ‘Ash Fool’, *Aschenpuster* ‘Ash Blower’, and so on. The same can be seen from a third meaning of *oskefis*: ‘the youngest son of the family, sitting by the fire and poking and blowing on it’ (see note 22; cf. § 3.1). The fairy-tale character clearly derives from this role, which makes sense because the lazy ‘mummy’s boy’ by the fireplace, tending the fire for his mother instead of doing proper men’s work, is an appropriate starting-point for a fairy-tale character who turns everything upside-down: the outsider who prefers effeminate, low-status approaches and maintains contact with outcasts, yet cuts ahead of everyone and threatens or overthrows the establishment — the trickster, if you like (§ 4.2). We can thus refine the above points. The Ash Lad is (1) a *vätte* living under the fireplace, manipulating the fire, and (2) a fairy-tale human character, initially (a) a lazy ‘mummy’s boy’ by the fireplace, manipulating the fire similar to the *Vätten*, then (b) a trickster in narratives.

The role overlap between *oskefis* (1) and (2) does not indicate which of them is primary, but it is most likely form (1) because this more easily explains the part *-fis*. It seems that the Germanic verb **fisan-* could mean both ‘to blow’ and ‘to fart’. *Oskefis* (2) could be explained by the blowing of the young boy to maintain the fire. But the term *oskefis* is also found in West Germanic languages — High German (*Aschenfister*), Dutch (*asch(e)vijster*), and Middle English (*Askefise*: Torp 1919, 479; Kurath and others 1956–2007, vol., 423) — in which apparently only the meaning ‘to fart’ is known (Torp 1919, 479; Bjorvand and Lindeman 2000, 224). Thus, the term *oskefis* seems to derive from the meaning ‘to fart’. The young boy certainly does not fart into the fire, but the ‘farting’ could suitably refer to the whistling sound made when steam escapes from burning green wood, which was

said to be caused by the *Vätten*. This is the phenomenon most frequently mentioned in connection with the common noun *oskefis* in the dictionaries.

Now I turn to Loki. Because of the extensive overlap between *Oskefisen* and Loki, we should expect that Loki (2) was derived from Loki (1) in the same way as *Oskefisen* (2) was from *Oskefisen* (1). In that case, I suggest that the Loki of the myths carried the *Vätten*'s name *Loki* because in his childhood he stayed near the fireplace and tended the fire, and thus overlapped with the *Vätten* and was therefore given the *Vätten*'s name *Loki*. In this case another argument indicates that form (1) is primary: Loki (2) shares his role as surprisingly being the best of providers with Loki (1), the *Vätten*, and this is one of the *Vätten*'s fundamental characteristics, at the same time as the *Vätten* is a more fundamental character than the Loki of myth. Thus, it is very unlikely that this characteristic of the *Vätten*'s derives from the mythological character. But it would make very good sense if the creation of the surprising super-provider in the myths was inspired by the surprising super-provider *vätte*. (This order should be regarded as schematic. Both 'stages' of Loki probably existed side by side long before our earliest sources.) The outlined understanding requires that Loki be all of the following: (1) a *vätte* living under the fireplace, tending the fire, believed to bring luck (= wealth) to the farm, and therefore given sacrifices; and (2) a mythological, anthropomorphic being, initially (a) a lazy mummy's boy by the fireplace, overlapping with the *Vätten*, and then (b) a trickster living with the gods.

This model would explain the relationship between the two distinctly different Lokis, and it would illuminate the Loki we meet in the myths. A lazy childhood by the fireplace in the middle of the female realm is an 'inverted' background that would fit *him* equally well as the Ash Lad in the fairy tales; and if he derives from the *Vätten*, no wonder he is the best of providers. The problem is that we have very little information about the mythological Loki's early days. However, thus far we have seen all these phases of Loki in the late material:

1. The *Vätten* under the fireplace in §§ 3.1 and 3.3.
- 2a. The young, lazy boy in § 3.4 — *luki* in Dalarna — and towards the end of § 4.1.3, by implication in the beginning of the fairy tales where the Ash Lad is called Loki. (The childhood is omitted, as is often the case in Ash Lad fairy tales because it was known to the audience.)
- 2b. The narrative character in § 3.4.

I argue below that not only is 2b found in the medieval material, but 1 and 2a as well. I will also give further documentation of the overlap between the Ash Lad and Loki in the 2b form. The order of the discussion is 2b, 1, and 2a.

4.1.1. *Similarities Between the Fairy Tale Ash Lad and the Loki of Myth*

The following is a comparison of Loki of the myths and the Ash Lad of the fairy tales (cf. §§ 3.1 and 3.4).²³ The Ash Lad does not belong at the king's court, and something similar seems to be the case with Loki at Óðinn's court. The Ash Lad definitely comes from 'the other', relative to the king and the court. He is low-born, as underlined by his dirty and ragged appearance, and he is an outcast even at home. Regarding Loki's initial connection with the gods we have no information, but it seems weaker than for most other gods, although according to *Lokasenna* 9, he and Óðinn became blood brothers in primeval times. Snorri counts him among the gods (*Gylfaginning* 11, 19), but Loki's father seems to be a giant, and he has strong connections with the giants and the otherworld in general. He is on friendly terms with all kinds of otherworldly beings, and he begets monsters, and sides with the giants at Ragnarök.

Both Loki and the Ash Lad are the court's best providers and reproviders. From dwarves and giants Loki brings priceless treasures, belongings, and tools, and he returns the goddess Iðunn and her apples of eternal youth to the gods, along with Þórr's hammer (Schjødt 1981; see § 4.1.2 below). The Ash Lad keeps more of the treasures himself, but he, too, is an important provider for the royal family. The seemingly impossible tests that he has to pass in order to gain the princess often win the king his kidnapped daughter or son²⁴ or treasures or magic possessions from a giant.²⁵ In one tale the Ash Lad turns into a falcon to achieve these treasures (Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 233), similarly to Loki when he rescues Iðunn and when he prepares for the rescue of Þórr's hammer. In this same fairy tale the Ash Lad flies to a distant place because of his curiosity and gets caught as a falcon while sitting and watching, like Loki in the Geirrøðr myth (*Skáldskaparmál* 27). On another occasion, the Ash Lad brings the king a magic ship made by a crooked, old, miserable man, similarly to Loki bringing Freyr Skíðblaðnir from dwarves.²⁶ In other stories the Ash Lad trades magic objects acquired elsewhere with the queen or princess(es).²⁷

²³ Some of the following has been pointed out by Olrik (1908, 194–99), Celander (1911, 108–09), or Holtsmark (1962, 88).

²⁴ 'De tre kongsdøtre [...]', Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 7–28; 'Gutten som gjorde seg til [...]', *ibid.*, 233.

²⁵ E.g. 'Askeladden som stjal sølvendene til trollet', Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, III, 117–22.

²⁶ *Skáldskaparmál* 44; 'Askeladden og de gode hjelperne', Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 360–70.

²⁷ 'Gjæte kongens harer', Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, I, 166–76; 'Det har ingen nød med den som alle kvinnfolk er glad i', *ibid.*, III, 230–41; and the 'indecent' versions of it, Høgset and Asbjørnsen 1996, 112–15.

Both the Ash Lad and Loki succeed because of their superior intellect, often by outsmarting giants,²⁸ and Loki is explicitly said to be slyer than others.²⁹ One aspect of this is his tolerance for what others consider low-status and humiliating, often feminine, roles. Loki even assumes female shape and gives birth,³⁰ considered for men among the most detestable of acts, according to ON ideology (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983). The Ash Lad is not equally pronounced in this way, but he too carries an association with the feminine and often applies low-status approaches. The feminine/unmanly is clearest before he leaves home when he dwells by the fireplace, in the centre of the female realm, neglecting masculine responsibilities. His mother in many cases is the only one who loves him and takes care of him.³¹ This is reflected in the Swedish Ash Lad term *kärringgrisen* ‘the fat favourite (literally ‘pig’) of the house mistress’ for the Ash Lad (Rietz 1862–67, 139) and the Norwegian *Smørbukk* ‘butter he-goat’ (Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 99). In the Icelandic tradition the Ash Lad’s mother provides him with the weapon that leads to his success, sometimes a poker or a sword she has used as a poker (see note 31). Often the Ash Lad only has a mother (e.g. ‘De tre kongsdøtre i berget det blå’, Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 11; ‘Enkesønnen’, *ibid.*, I, 218; Skar 1903–16, VI, 65). The Ash Lad continues his non-masculine or low-status approach after leaving home. Often all or most of his helpers are women;³² he works as a service boy for kitchen maids;³³ he accepts being a driver and servant for his brothers, and starves outside while they are served like kings (Høgset and Asbjørnsen 1996, 112–15); he picks up scraps;³⁴ or he accepts as his crew all kinds of strange characters (‘Askeladden og de gode hjelperne’, Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 360–70).

²⁸ ‘Askeladden som stjal sølvendene til trollet’, Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, III, 117; ‘Askeladden som kappåt med trollet’, *ibid.*, II, 79–82; etc.

²⁹ *Haustlǫng* 5–6; Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, BI, 14–15; *Lokasenna* 54; *Gylfaginning* 19; *Sörla þáttr* 275.

³⁰ *Gylfaginning* 25, 33; *Hymduljóð* 41; *Brymskviða* 15–30; *Lokasenna* 23; *Sörla þáttr* 276; Olrik 1908, 198.

³¹ For instance Jón Árnason 1958–61, II, 467, IV, 614, V, 51, 74, 112, 134 (Iceland); Kamp 1877, 228 (Denmark); Christensen 1963, 162 (Denmark); Kuhre 1938, 16 (Bornholm).

³² E.g. ‘Risen som ikke hadde [...]’, Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, I, 98–106; ‘Gjæte kongens harer’, *ibid.*, I, 166–76; ‘De tre kongsdøtrene [...]’, *ibid.*, II, 7–28; ‘Soria Moria slott’, *ibid.*, II, 52–64; ‘Rødrev og Askeladden’, *ibid.*, II, 266; ‘Gullslottet [...]’, *ibid.*, II, 255–61; and note 27 above.

³³ ‘Askeladden som stjal sølvendene til trollet’, Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, III, 117; ‘Rødrev og Askeladden’, *ibid.*, II, 266; ‘Tyrhans som fikk kongsdatteren til å le’, *ibid.*, I, 268; ‘Enkesønnen’, *ibid.*, I, 222.

³⁴ ‘Prinsessen som ingen kunne målbinde’, Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 75–78.

Such kindness towards outcasts is another aspect of the Ash Lad's success-giving intellect; he helps hags and ogresses, poor, miserable, old people, or animals that he meets in the wilderness.³⁵ The mythological Loki has a good relationship with similar creatures. He begets children with the ogress Angrboða (Schjødtt 1981, 51), at Ragnarøk, he sides with the giants (*Gylfaginning* 37–38), and it appears that the dwarves give him for free the spear Gungnir, Sif's golden hair, and the ship Skíðblaðnir (§ 4.1.2; *Skáldskaparmál* 44).

Both the Ash Lad and Loki belong to a triad — the Ash Lad with his brothers, Loki with Óðinn and Hónir in both the Þjazi myth (see below) and the Andvari myth (*Skáldskaparmál* 47), and in the Faroese ballad *Lokkatáttur* (§ 3.2). Unlike Loki, the other gods are not low-achievers, but they do have a passive and subordinate role in these myths, making Loki the main character, and *Lokkatáttur* follows the same pattern as the fairy tales: the others fail before Lokki succeeds.

In the preserved ON accounts, Loki's similarity with the Ash Lad reaches its peak in *Sörla þáttur* (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger 1860, 275–76 — as pointed out by Celander 1911, 108). Loki is small, comes to Óðinn, becomes his errand boy, and has to solve all kinds of difficult tasks such as stealing Freyja's necklace from her locked house. As this is considered impossible, Loki's enviers enjoy themselves.³⁶ But Loki succeeds by turning into a fly and creeping through a narrow hole. The Ash Lad does the same, in the shape of an ant, to get into the locked-up residence of a kidnapped princess.³⁷

An entire sequence of 'Ash Lad motifs' is found in the following Loki myth(s). In *Skáldskaparmál* 2, Loki, Óðinn, and Hónir are wandering in the wilderness, and they kill an ox which they cook in a cooking-pit (*seyðir*). However, the meat never becomes fully cooked, and they realize that an eagle sitting in the tree above them (who is in fact the giant Þjazi) is causing this. They agree with the eagle that it may eat its fill of the ox if it allows it to finish cooking. The eagle takes more than Loki is willing to allow, and he hits the eagle with a pole. The pole becomes stuck to the eagle, and Loki's hands stuck to the pole, and so the eagle flies off with Loki dangling beneath. Loki has to promise to bring Þjazi Iðunn and her apples of eternal youth. Later he is forced by the gods to retrieve her, which he does in the shape of a falcon, chased by Þjazi, who is killed. Then Þjazi's daughter Skaði comes to avenge

³⁵ 'Die drei Federn', Grimm 1843, 400–03; 'Gullslottet som hang i lufta', Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 248–61; 'Rødrev og askeladden', *ibid.*, 266.

³⁶ Cf. 'Rødrev og Askeladden', Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 266; 'Askeladden som stjal sølvendene til trollet', *ibid.*, III, 117–18.

³⁷ 'Gutten som gjorde seg til løve, falk og maur', Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 233.

him and accepts compensation: she may choose one of the gods for a husband, and the gods have to make her laugh. Loki ties a rope around his genitals (*bredðjar*) and the other end around the beard of a she-goat. They pull and scream until Loki falls onto Skaði's lap, and she laughs.³⁸ Von der Leyen (1899, 33, 37) points out that Loki's being stuck to the eagle and his making Skaði laugh correspond to the fairy tale best known as 'Die goldene Gans' (Germany) and 'Tyrihans som fekk kongsdottera til å le' (Norway),³⁹ in which the Ash Lad makes the princess laugh by dragging a row of people stuck to a supernatural bird past. Lindow (1990) draws attention to a variant (from Telemark, Bødker and others 1957, 29–30) with an 'indecenty' similar to that of the myth, making it resemble Loki's approach quite closely. I would add the censored fairy tales where the Ash Lad, similar to Loki, uses his penis as a literal pulling tool when attracting girls and the princess.⁴⁰

Loki and the Ash Lad differ in some significant ways. The latter receives sympathy, the former not. The Ash Lad does no harm, but Loki certainly does when he brings enemies of the gods into the world, making problems for the gods, and when he sides with the giants at Ragnarøk. To be sure, in several myths Loki is a problem-solver, but he often causes those problems himself (Schjødt 1981, 53–54). To a great extent, however, these differences result from genre differences. The fairy tales are told from the perspective of the lower tiers of society, viewing the king as an antagonist. Consequently, overthrowing the establishment by bringing the king to his knees, becoming king, and marrying the princess are praiseworthy acts, even if achieved with the help of hags and ogresses. On the other hand, when the giants try to achieve similar things in the myths (Clunies Ross 1994, 107–27) they are enemies because the myths are told from the perspective of King Óðinn and his court. As Loki sides with the giants at Ragnarøk, and helps them or other non-gods prior to that, he is in the wrong, no matter how many favours he does for the gods. This will be discussed more fully in § 4.2.

The similarities between the Loki of myth and the fairy-tale Ash Lad may be summed up in this way: both are tricksters who turn things upside-down — in their approaches as well as in their results. They oppose the conventional, prefer

³⁸ *Skáldskaparmál* 2–3; cf. *Haustlǫng*, Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, BI, 14–15.

³⁹ Grimm 1843, 367 (no. 64); Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, I, 266–71; Aarne and Thompson 1961, no. 571.

⁴⁰ Versions of Aarne and Thompson 1961, no. 580, 'Beloved of Women': 'Det har ingen nød med den som alle kvinnfolk er glad i', Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, III, 230–41; and Aarne and Thompson 1961, no. 900, 'Håken Borkenskjegg', namely Høgset and Asbjørnsen 1996, 112 ff. (Norway), Bødker and others 1957, 34 ff. (Jutland), and Afanasev 1993, 74–81 (Russia).

effeminate, low-status approaches, and maintain contact with outcasts; they are unwanted outsiders who are in a class of their own as providers, reproviders, and problem-solvers; and in the end they (help) overthrow the establishment. Loki is not identical with the Ash Lad, but they overlap to a great degree and probably derive from related ideas. The significance of this is discussed in § 4.2.

4.1.2. *Reflections of the Vätte Loki in the Medieval Material*

My proposal is that the mythological Loki derives from the *Vätten* who lives under the fireplace and helps the farmers. If the *vätte* Loki is that old, we should also find reflections of him in the ON texts when looking specifically for him and not just for a member of Óðinn's court. I believe we do. There seem to be attestations of the *vätte* Loki in non-mythological ON texts, and there seem to be 'echoes' of or allusions to the *vätte* Loki in the mythological material. One has already been mentioned: Loki's role as a provider, which is the most common Loki motif in the myths (Schjødtt 1981; § 4.1.1), probably is inspired by *Vätten* (§ 4.1).

In *Lokasenna* 23, Óðinn accuses Loki of having been 'eight winters below the ground, being a woman, milking cows [or being a milk cow and a woman], giving birth to children'. This does not reflect Loki's life among the gods; it occurred in primeval times (st. 25). But it fits as an 'echo' of his alter ego: the *vätte* Loki, who lives under the fireplace or other places underground (cf. how the phrase 'below the ground' designates a dwarf's dwelling-place under a boulder in *Alvíssmál* 3). The effeminate tasks fit with the *vättes* because even male *vättes* do female tasks in the popular traditions (Feilberg 1918, 55–57, 66; Müller-Bergström 1938–41, 1057–58). If a *vätte* was the basis for the mythological Loki, it would be fitting to say that this was something in Loki's past. (In that case, the 'eight winters' should be understood as 'a long time'; see von See and others 1997, 427.) A parallel example is found in *Fjölsvinnsmál* 26. (The view that this poem is a late pastiche is unfounded; see Heide 1997.) It relates how Loki (Loptr) obtained the magical weapon *Levateinn*:

He got hold of it somewhere down in the earth.

He *gerði rúinn* = *rúði* the weapon, 'tore it off', like tearing the wool or fur from an animal (*ryja* Fritzner 1883–96, III, 141).

This wording has been considered so irregular that most editors have changed it. However, the phrase is part of a myth that seems to parallel the Baldr myth (Heide 1997, esp. 162–73), in which the corresponding point is nearly synonymous, and nearly as conspicuous: Loki *sleit upp* 'tore up' the mistletoe (*Gylfaginning* 33). This parallel makes it problematic to reject *gerði rúinn*, and it becomes less conspicuous

if the background of the mythological Loki was a *vätte*, because they were believed to tear off the animals' feathers, wool, and fur (§ 3.1), and to live underground.⁴¹

The *vätte* Loki driving his sheep/goats (Celander in § 3.1) seems to be reflected in the ON phrase *ganga sem Loki yfir akra*, literally 'to walk like *Loki* (walking) over the fields'. There has been disagreement on the original form and understanding of it, but this is probably because only the form *ganga sem lok yfir akra* has been known. Fritzner understands this *lok* as weeds ruining the fields, on the basis of Old Swedish *lok/luk* 'some kind of plant' (1883–96, II, 556); to this I will add the Faroese *lok* 'weed' (Jacobsen and Matras 1961, 261). Kock (1899) finds this improbable because it would be odd to say that 'the weeds walk over the fields'. He suggests that *lok* is a corruption of *Loki*, caused by a collision of palatals in this fixed expression, and that the meaning is 'fire' (cf. the identification *loki* and *logi*, § 3.1). This emendation can now be confirmed. *Sem Loki yfir akra* is attested in the fourteenth-century (*H*)ectors saga (Loth 1962, 117–18) but was left out of the dictionaries and thus of the discussions. There is nothing irregular about the loss of the *-i* because in unstressed words like *fyrir* and *yfir*, unrounding (to *fírir* and *ifír*) had already occurred by the thirteenth century. Accordingly, in the pronunciation of *sem Loki ifír akra*, the *i*-s would melt together completely, and in a fixed expression like this the pronunciation form could easily be 'lexicalized' even in writing. This can be compared to ON *sá ek* > *sák* (preserved in poetry) and Modern Icelandic *ofan í* > *oní* (frequent in writing in spite of the norm). A parallel fixed expression is Icelandic *ganga á vonarvöl* > *ganga vonarvöl* 'be brought to beggary' (Halldór Halldórsson 1954, 55).

However, there is no evidence that Loki could be identified with the fire (§ 3.3), and the meaning 'fire' does not fit with the context of the passages. *Fundinn Noregr* (Guðni Jónsson 1954a, 89) relates that King Nórr wins a battle, and then 'allt fólk fell þar eða flýði, en Nórr ok hans menn gengu yfir sem lok yfir akra' (all the people were killed there or fled and Nórr and his men walked over like *Loki over the fields). *Fóstbræðra saga* (Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, 149–50) tells how Þorgeirr and Þormóðr 'váru þat sumar á Ströndum, ok váru allir hræddir

⁴¹ This understanding could shed light on Loki's mother's name, *Laufey* 'foliage island', which is unexplained (Simek 2006, 242–43). The basis for this could be the concept of a world-representing island in the ocean with a tree in the middle. Such concepts are well known from Finnic traditions (Straubergs 1957), and the ON island name *Algrönn* 'all green' (*Hárbarðsljóð* 16) is often understood in the same way (von See and others 1997, 194; Nordberg 2003, 131). *Barrey* 'conifer island' and *Lyngvi* 'the heath-y one' (Simek 2006, 44, 259) may be parallels. The *vätte* Loki could be understood as a 'son of the earth'. The name *Nál* is discussed below.

við þá, ok gengu þeir einir yfir allt sem lok yfir akra' (were that summer at Strandir, and everybody was afraid of them, and they alone walked over everything like *Loki (walking) over the fields). In *Ectors saga* (Loth 1962, 117–18) everyone flees from a bewitched and invulnerable she-wolf: 'gengr hon hér yfir sem Loki yfir akra; þorir engi í móti hana at ráða' (she walks over here like Loki over the fields; nobody dares to fight against her). In all these passages, *ganga sem* (*) *Loki yfir akra* refers to situations where powerful combatants are driving groups of inferior men ahead of them. It does not refer to the destruction of enemy land.⁴² Thus, nothing supports the meaning 'fire'. The same can be said of 'weeds' — they do not drive anyone ahead of them and do not even spread from one side of the field to the other, but rather pop up randomly. In addition, the understanding 'weed' presupposes the form *lok*, which itself seems to be a corruption: in Modern Icelandic this saying has turned into *ganga sem logi yfir akra*, literally meaning 'go like a flame across the fields' and in practice meaning 'to ruin' (Sigfús Blöndal 1920, 510). Apparently, *sem lok yfir akra* did not make sense, and a folk-etymological alteration was therefore needed.⁴³

However, the driving in the saying 'walking like Loki over the fields' fits very well with the *vätte* Loki seen in the heat haze (§ 3.1). He is driving his herd of sheep or goats ahead of him, and he is most often seen over the ploughed and/or harrowed fields, ON *akrar*. In the ON saying, Loki is driving fleeing or fearful men while walking, and in ON, such men were frequently compared to (fleeing) goats (Fritzner 1883–96, I, 574) or a herd of (fleeing) sheep (e.g. Kölbing 1878, ch. 25). It would thus be appropriate to compare warriors chasing other warriors with the *vätte* Loki driving his sheep or goats over the *akrar*. The early corruption of the saying that we seem to observe in Icelandic tradition may stem from Iceland's natural conditions: *akrar* were small and few, and in the cool and moist climate, the heat haze would not have been seen often.

Both the *vätte* Loki under the fireplace and his 'echo' in the mythological Loki can probably be seen on the Viking-Age hearth stone from Snaptun, Denmark, shown in Figure 1, from a smithy. The bellows would blow the air into the hearth through the hole below the face on the stone, which would shield the bellows from the heat. The face has been identified with Loki in a myth in *Skáldskaparmál* 44: Loki has cut the hair off Þórr's wife, Sif, and is forced to replace it with golden hair

⁴² The late medieval *ríma Griplur* (III, 7) also has the form *Loki* in most manuscripts. The meaning seems to be the same although it is not equally clear: 'Snemma var hann [Þráinn] í ilsku ern | um ásku tíma vakra, | og með grimd yfir garpinn hvern | hann gekk sem Loki yfir akra (Finnur Jónsson 1905–22, I, 371).

⁴³ Because the 'flame' is folk etymology, this form does not support the meaning 'fire' for *lok*.

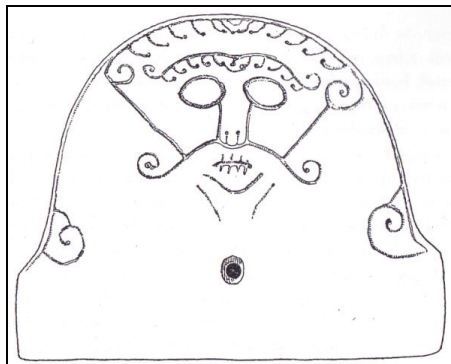


Figure 1. The Snaptun hearth stone, possibly depicting Loki; *c.* 20 cm high. Glob 1959, 71.

from the dwarfs. They make him the hair, and the ship *Skíðblaðnir* and the spear *Gungnir*, with magical properties. Then Loki makes a bet, putting his head at stake, with the dwarf *Brokkr*, that *Brokkr*'s brother *Sindri* will not be able to make three equally good objects. *Sindri* begins to make the objects, instructing *Brokkr* to pull the bellows without stopping because that would ruin the objects. Loki turns into a fly who bites *Brokkr*, but *Brokkr* keeps pulling except for during one second while the last object is being made, which is the hammer *Mjöllnir*. The other objects are the gold boar *Gullinbursti* and the gold ring *Draupnir*. The gods declare that the hammer is the best object (although its handle is a bit short due to the interruption in blowing), and Loki has lost the bet. *Brokkr* tries to cut off his head, but Loki claims that he only lost his head and not his neck. *Brokkr* instead stitches up Loki's mouth. In this myth, Loki is associated with stitched-up lips, smithing, and blowing into the hearth with the help of bellows — the elements of the Snaptun stone. Therefore, *Gísli Gestsson* (1961) suggests that the Snaptun face depicts Loki, which seems plausible because the lips clearly are stitched up — as clearly as possible on a 2.5 cm wide mouth carved in stone. Glob (1959, 73) understood the lips as stitched before anyone mentioned Loki. In addition, 'stitched-up lips combined with hearth bellows blowing' is an extremely specific motif. However, in this myth, Loki does *not* pull the bellows or blow into the hearth, as the face on the Snaptun stone does. On the contrary, Loki tries to stop the blowing, and the stitched-up mouth on the stone would not have been able to blow at all. Depicting Loki on a hearth stone is only natural as a reference to the Loki who is a variant of *Vätten* living under the fireplace, blowing on the ashes to make them flare up again, and manipulating the fire in other ways (§ 3.1, cf. § 4.1). Therefore, the Snaptun stone seems to anchor those sides of Loki in the Viking Age. The stitched-up lips, on the other hand, only match the mythological Loki's encounter

with Brokkr. Accordingly, the Snaptun stone seems to refer simultaneously to the mythological Loki and the *vätte* Loki.

The *vätte* Loki can also help us understand the myth of Loki inventing the fishnet in *Gylfaginning* 36. After he caused the death of Balder he seeks refuge in a house on a mountain top, hiding by day in the shape of a salmon in a river or waterfall. One day while sitting by the fireplace he invents the fishnet, but he sees the gods approaching, throws the net on the fire, and jumps into the river. The gods reconstruct the fishnet from the ashes and with it they catch Loki in the river, pulling it with their hands. Rooth (1961) explained the meaning ‘spider/daddy-long-legs’ of *lokke~lokki~loke~luki* from this myth (§ 3.1) but regrettably based it upon a far-fetched analogy. Had she checked northern European traditions more closely, she would have found a more plausible link between Loki’s fishnet and cobwebs. The fishnet invention is not isolated. In the myths, Loki is strikingly associated with fishing and hunting (as Olrik 1911, 569, pointed out), partly with the help of nets. In the introduction to *Reginismál*, Loki catches the dwarf Andvari in a fish shape with a net. In *Skáldskaparmál* 47, Loki catches an otter and a fish. In the Estonian version of the myth of the theft of Þórr’s hammer, Loki’s cognate is a fisherman who catches the thief in a net (Anderson 1940, 72–73; *Þrymskviða*; Heide 2006, 292–94). Fishing seems to be a speciality of Loki’s in the Faroese *Lokkatáttur*, too (Hammershaimb 1851, I, 140), and in the Shetland Islands, *Lokki’s lines* refers to a thread-like seaweed used for fishing (Jakobsen 1928, 521; Pratt 1853, 124–25; *Marine Botany* 1861, 26). Cobwebs and spiders are widely associated with good luck in fishing (e.g. SKS KRA KT 175, 82, *lukki* (*Opiliones*), Finland). The appearance of many cobwebs in the grass when you go to the sea in the morning means that you will catch many fish (Celander 1914, 85–86; ULMA 18067, Gotland; ULMA 8788, 8, Södermanland). Fishermen would add cobwebs to the bark concoction used to preserve fishnets in order to ‘get as many fish as the spider in the cobweb’ (SKS KRA KT 148, 114, Finland). The spider is referred to as a fisherman ‘rowing’ up and down his silk threads. The former notions/practices are recorded around the Baltic Sea, the latter in western Norway and Iceland.⁴⁴ Such ideas about catch-bringing cobwebs and spiders seem closely related to those that I sketched in § 3.3: luck/wealth was brought by cobwebs and spiders/daddy-

⁴⁴ Jón Árnason 1958–61, II, 525; *Sarpur*. Icelandic *dordingull* and *fiskikarl* ‘fisherman’ are synonyms and mean ‘(house) spider’ (Sigfús Blöndal 1920, 136). The former comes from *dorgdingull* ‘fishing line dangler’ (Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989, 120–21), which refers to the spider dangling in its silk thread. North of Bergen, a *Tipulida* is referred to as a *fiskar* ‘fisherman’ (pers. comm., Ingvil Brügger Budal, Austrheim, December 2009).

long-legs (*lokke~lokki~loke~luki*), who helped the farmers with the herding and the harvest, like the *Vätten*, and in some traditions they were explicitly identified with the *Vätten*. Taken together this strongly indicates that a medieval audience would have seen Loki inventing the fishnet as an ‘echo’ of the *vätte* Loki. The fact that he sat by the fireplace while doing this would not have discouraged this association. One could object that the connection between cobwebs and fishing luck is not attested from the Middle Ages. But as so little of this kind of lore was written down, when we find such notions in recent times in Iceland and western Norway and around the Baltic it seems easiest to understand this as ‘relic islands’ of a previously contiguous area. One could also dispute the existence of a medieval meaning of *loki* in western Scandinavian as ‘spider and the like’. But when we in recent times find it in Faroese and the southernmost dialects of Norway (*Norsk Ordbok* 1966–, VII, 637, *Opiliones*), as well as in Swedish dialects and Old Swedish (Söderwall 1884, I, 776; Söderwall and others 1925–73, I, 467), it seems most probable that it also existed in ON.

Loki brought the gods many magical and sought-after objects, but his only invention was the fishnet. Why the fishnet? And why was it not invented by some other god? I suggest that this is because from ancient times Loki was intimately associated with (the forming of) knots and loops on threads, of which fishnets are made. In Icelandic tradition, when a knot or tangle appeared on a thread during sewing or spinning, Loki was blamed, and a threatening verse about his family was pronounced during the disentangling (see below). Essential to the understanding of this is the Icelandic and Shetland English (from ON) *loki* m. ‘a knot or tangle (on a thread)’ (Sigfús Blöndal 1920, 511; Jakobsen 1928, 521, *lokki*), or ‘a hard knot with a loop out from it, on a twisted thread’ (*Sarpur*, no. 7758, p. 18, Iceland). The Icelandic custom reflects how this appellative could be personified and identified with Loki. A Danish saying first attested in the seventeenth century seems to reflect the same idea: when something in a yarn or the like became tangled, making it useless, people would say, ‘Lokke gets something to fix his pants with’⁴⁵ — which appears to mean that Lokke caused the tangles in order to obtain repair material.⁴⁶ If so, the Danish tradition blames Loki for tangles on threads as well (or

⁴⁵ ‘*Lokke faar noget at bøde sine buxer med* (naar noget bliver uredt i garnet eller slikt, saa at det ej duer)’ (Peder Syv in Olrik 1909, 71, cf. 77; Grundtvig and Olrik 1853–65, IV, 578; Jørgensen 1930).

⁴⁶ This is Olrik’s understanding (1909, 77). Celander (1911, 60–61) argues that the repair material should be seen as a sacrifice to *Vätten* (Lokke), as in many parallels: the first lock of wool was for *Vätten* to dress his children (or the mother of the crying children in the whistling or crackling

at least connects Loki with them). An Icelandic saying implies the related idea that Loki himself was a *loki*: if one licks the end of a thread in order to thread a needle, one ‘licks Loki’s backside’ (Sigfús Blöndal 1920, 511). This presupposes a threading of the needle with a folded thread (which is a common technique), because only then would the licked part correspond to the backside of a person. A folded thread is a *lykkja*, which comes close to a *loki* both etymologically (**luk-* > *lykkja* and *loki*) and semantically — *lykkja* is used synonymously with *loki* in a nineteenth-century account of the *loki*/tangle verse (Guðni Jónsson 1954b, 189). The (shape of a) loop is essential to the root **luk-* and hence to the etymology of Loki, as I will demonstrate in a later article.

As we can see, there is quite a bit of evidence that Loki in premodern society was thought to be the causer of knots/tangles/loops, or himself a knot/tangle/loop. Hence, it is natural that *Loki* is the inventor of the fishnet, which consists of loops and knots, and that the word *loki* (*lokke, lokki, loke, luki*) is a term for makers of cobwebs: spiders and the like.

However, this knot(-maker) Loki does not fit with the mythological, Old Icelandic evidence, although one could say that the mythological Loki causes *metaphorical* tangles on the *Æsir*’s thread. But the knot(-maker) Loki makes good sense as a reflection of the *vätte* Loki. The making of unwanted *lokis* (tangles) fits with the *Vätten* because tangling the thread of spinning or sewing women belonged to what the *Vätten* would do when angered,⁴⁷ alongside halting his deliveries of resources to the farm, overturning kettles on the fireplace, and so on (Feilberg 1918, 23, 26); and the giving of tangles to Lokke in Danish tradition corresponds to sacrifices to the *Vätten* (see note 46). The making of desirable *lokis* (the fishnet) also fits because the *vättes* often helped humans with activities such as spinning and carding (von Sydow 1935, 138; Celander 1914, 81; Feilberg 1918, 55–57, 66; Müller-Bergström 1938–41, 1057–58). At the same time, Loki the knot-maker

fire was given a lock of wool, which was put into the fire, to dress them to stop them from crying; Hveding 1935, 10); spilled milk was for *Vätten*; etc. There is no contradiction between these understandings. The tangles may be sacrifices to Lokke (*Vätten*), even if he is the cause of them, to ensure that he gets his share. There are many examples of *Vätten* obstructing the humans’ work because he is not satisfied in order to cause the humans to give the sacrifice that they have neglected; see below.

⁴⁷ Feilberg 1918, 26; ULMA 2258, 1, p. 44 (Småland): “They refer to it as “*troll* knots” when the yarn got tangled for the maids. They believed that it was “*fjask*” (supernatural beings) who did it. Then they would increase the fire in the fireplace, to make it burn properly.’ Similar in ULMA 5621, 25, Dalarna. ‘*Fjask*’ means ‘a man who is good nearly for nothing’ (Rietz 1862–67, 140), as the Ash Lad by the fireplace before he leaves home?

(helping or revenging) seems to be embodied in the knots. This *vátte* Loki is ‘echoed’ in the myth of Loki and the fishnet.

It is unlikely that Loki’s association with knots is a late corruption. The Danish and Icelandic traditions about Loki and tangles are most easily explained as relics of a common Old Scandinavian tradition because they are too different to have been borrowed from each other. In addition, Loki’s knot and loop association seems to be anchored in the Middle Ages by the myth of the fishnet invention, and by the name *Nál* ‘a needle’ of Loki’s mother (*Gylfaginning* 19; *Skáldskaparmál* 24; Guðbrandur Vigfusson and Unger 1860, 275; cf. note 41). This name is unexplained, but late Icelandic information exists for it (cf. Heide 2009, 363). The verse for the disentangling of knots caused by Loki is as follows:

Styr heitir hann faðir þinn.
Skónál heitir hún móðir þín,
þau skulu bæði stinga í rassinn á þér,
ef þu ferð ekki upp af þræðinum. (Guðni Jónsson 1954b, 189)

[Spearhead your father is called. Shoe needle your mother is called. They should both prick you in the arse if you will not leave the thread.]

In one version Loki’s mother is called just *Nál* ‘a needle’, as in the Old Icelandic accounts.⁴⁸ The idea could be that knots are caused by the work of needles; they ‘come from’ needles (whether by mistake, or deliberately, as with making nets). But there is another possibility, namely the widespread link between needles and motherhood: one should never give a woman a needle without the thread in it because this would cause her to never have children (Scotland, MacCulloch 1936, 255); or a woman should never let someone else thread the needle for her because that would give her difficult deliveries (Sweden, ULMA 10071, 37). In both cases there apparently is an idea of the thread as the baby and the needle as the mother. This makes sense because the needle is a natural symbol of women and their traditional work, and the eye of the needle has a shape suggestive of the female genitals. This corresponds to the comparison between threading a needle and sexual intercourse, which is widespread.⁴⁹ If we now keep in mind that the licked folded thread is Loki / a *loki*, he is literally ‘born’ from the eye of the *Nál* when it is threaded. The name *Nál*, like the fishnet invention myth, anchors Loki’s association with

⁴⁸ Recording SÁM 85/585, Sigríður Gísladóttir, 1970, Hólmavík. Other versions: Ólafur Davíðsson 1898–1903, 231; *Sarpur*, no. 7758, p. 18; no. 1131, p. 22. Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir, Arnarnæan Institute, informed me of the first two.

⁴⁹ E.g. Verdier 1995; Thompson 1989, Z186.

knots/loops in the Middle Ages. Both are mentioned in Snorri's *Edda*, so this association was apparently well established before *c.* 1220, which is also indicated by the etymology.

It is paradoxical that the gods catch Loki in a fishnet that he invented, and it is conspicuous that he once caught a fish in the same way: in a river/waterfall with a net that he held in his hands (introduction to *Reginsmál*). It seems to be a pattern in the Loki myths that his opponents turn his own specialities against him — possibly because turning everything upside-down is characteristic of him (§ 4.1.1). The smithy myth provides another example: the stitching up of Loki's mouth seems incomprehensible in Snorri's account but makes good sense against the background of the *vätte* Loki: what Brokkr does is to block Loki's speciality (or his alter-ego *vätte*'s speciality) of blowing on the embers to stimulate the fire. Earlier in the myth, Loki's opponents turn this speciality against him, when the smith accentuates the importance of blowing on the embers, thereby forcing Loki to attack the blower. Another example can be found in the myth about the cooking pit, in which Loki is the most active of the gods (end of § 4.1.1). A medieval audience would probably see the halted cooking as an ironic allusion to the *vätte* Loki because in the popular traditions, the *Vätten*, if not satisfied, would, for example, stop food from being cooked, beer from yeasting, or cream from turning to butter (Feilberg 1918, 22–23, 26; Skar 1903–16, III, 27–29). These notions probably have ancient roots because they are intimately connected with ancient ways of subsistence and cannot be derived from Christianity. Other inverted Loki motifs can, I suggest, be identified, and I will explore these in my forthcoming monograph.

I conclude this section by stating that there is quite a bit of medieval material that seems to reflect the *vätte* Loki. None of the examples are beyond refute, but to demand that would be a methodological misunderstanding; the question should be whether alternative understandings are more plausible. Sceptics risk a circular argument: 'These cannot be examples of a *vätte* Loki in the medieval material because there are no such examples.'

4.1.3. *The Mythological Loki by the Fireplace*

No ON myth speaks directly of a Loki corresponding to the Ash Lad in his youth: a lazy mummy's boy sitting by the fireplace, tending the fire. But there is indirect evidence, suggested by the Faroese fairy tale *Risin og Lokki* (Jakobsen 1898–1901, I, 265–67). A giant hires a boy called Lokki as a farmhand, but Lokki tricks him into doing all the work himself (cf. §§ 3.4 and 4.1.1). They slaughter an ox for lunch and, when the kettle starts to boil, the fat begins to float on top. The giant divides it with a line across the kettle; each is to have the fat on his side, and

each takes a piece of bread to stick into it. Lokki pours water into the fire on his side, to stop the boiling there, and makes the giant put more wood under the kettle on his side, and all the fat drifts over to Lokki. When the meat is done they put it in a trough, and the giant asks Lokki to divide the meat. Lokki puts the bones in one portion and the meat in the other one, but spreads a big, fat piece over the bones. The giant grabs for the fat portion, and Lokki is happy, but the giant is sullen because he gets too little. At night, Lokki kills and plunders the giant. The focal point of this story is paralleled by two ON myths. One is the encounter between Þjazi on the one hand and Loki, Óðinn, and Hónir on the other summarized in § 4.1.1, where Loki attacks Þjazi because he takes more than Loki is willing to allow. The other is the eating contest in Útgarða-Loki's residence: the competitors eat from either end of a trough full of meat, and Loki eats half of it but loses because his competitor turns out to be the wildfire, which 'eats' the bones and the trough as well (*Gylfaginning* 29). In all these stories Loki is associated with fireplaces and cooked meat and tries to get more than his share and/or deny the giants their share. This is clearest in the Útgarða-Loki myth: the eating contest is Loki's suggestion, so he is apparently especially suited for the task, like Þjalfi for the run and Þórr for the drinking, lifting, and wrestling. This appears to be confirmed by the Icelandic term *lokastjörmur* (f. pl.). Literally meaning 'Loki's stars', it refers to the drops of melted fat in soup (Sigfús Blöndal 1920, 305). This term seems to be a petrified reflection of the Loki role we see in *Risin og Lokki*, also reflected in the Þjazi and Útgarða-Loki myths: the spoilt boy very familiar with the fireplace and the manipulation of the fire — the *kárringgrís* (see § 4.1.1).

Other information in the ON texts supports this impression. A reflection of Loki the expert manipulator of the fire seems to be found — inverted — in the smithing myth (end of § 4.1.2, although this also seems to allude to the *vätte* Loki). That the mythological Loki is named after his mother — *Laufeyjarson* (*Þrymskviða* 18, 20; *Lokasenna* 52) — suggests that Loki was a mummy's boy (§ 4.1.1). It also fits that Loki is said to be small,⁵⁰ like the Ash Lad, who is the youngest in the family. In *Skáldskaparmál* 27, Loki dangles from Þórr's belt when they cross a river. The late medieval Icelandic *Þrymlur*, however, characterizes Loki as 'long and slim' (*Rímnaþafn* st. 4/5). This is not necessarily contradictory. In Dalarna, the *luki* meaning 'a boy lounging about although he is too big to do so' (§ 3.4) sometimes includes 'long' (ULMA 5416, 24 and others). The lazy teenager who does not

⁵⁰ *Sörla þátr* 275: *ekki mikill vöxtum*. One version of *Tor af Havgård*, derived from *Þrymskviða*: *liden Lokke* 'small Loki', Bugge and Moe 1897, 26, 92.

respect authority can be both small and lanky, and Loki's antimacho and unconventional approaches (§ 4.1.1) correspond to this understanding of him.

The Old Icelandic texts do provide support for the image of Loki as a parallel to the Ash Lad even in his youth. Why is it not explicit? We have to keep in mind that only part of the thirteenth-century Icelandic mythological corpus has been handed down to us. Manuscripts were lost, and only a selection of material was written down in the first place. What was not considered important enough was summarized or left out. In the case of Loki's background (and childhood?) we happen to know of two examples of this. One is the name *Nál*. We can see from what survived in Iceland and Denmark until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (§ 4.1.2) that there was a tradition around this, but not a word of it has reached us in written accounts from the Middle Ages. The other example is Snorri's omission of Loki's effeminate activities underground in primeval times, alluded to in *Lokasenna* 23 (§ 4.1.2) — and perhaps of background information that would have made that more comprehensible? Given the tradition of an underground (*vätte*) Loki that has survived until modern times (§ 3.3, cf. § 4.1.2), it is probable that Snorri had such information. He may have excluded it because his space was limited and he wanted to tell of the gods. If so, what Loki did before he came to the gods may not have been important enough. It may also have been considered unnecessary to write down this information because everyone knew it. Actually, this part is often left out even in the Ash Lad fairy tales (e.g. Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, I, 246, II, 75, 162, III, 317). The name 'Ash Lad' (or variants of it) apparently is enough to give the background. In the versions where the Ash Lad is called Lok(k)i (§ 3.4), the introduction is also left out. It is possible that when told, the myths of Loki sometimes contained an introduction about Loki's childhood by the fireside, sometimes not, as in the Ash Lad (and Loki) fairy tales. But to judge from the Ash Lad parallel, there would not have been separate myths of Loki's childhood.

4.2. Consequences for our Understanding of the Mythological Loki

The late Loki material can help us understand the mythological Loki's background in a wide sense (§ 4.1), and it can help us understand many pieces of ON information about Loki, such as *sem Loki yfir akra*, *Nál*, his invention of the fishnet, and his name (§ 4.1.2). But the lack of ON information also makes it hard to understand the relationship between the mythological Loki's beneficial and damaging sides. However, the Ash Lad seems to be a parallel (§§ 4.1 and 4.1.1), and the information about him is abundant. Therefore, I will here attempt to use the Ash Lad to throw light upon the mythological Loki.

Why does the king let the Ash Lad into the establishment? In many fairy tales the king promises his daughter and (half) the kingdom to the man capable of achieving something he desperately wants. Usually it is having his daughter(s) or son(s) saved from a troll,⁵¹ but it may be different things, like defeating an army ('Enkesønnen', Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, I, 218), or obtaining a ship that can sail on both land and sea ('Askeladden og de gode hjelperne', *ibid.*, II, 360) or other treasures or magic objects.⁵² The Ash Lad solves the problem, but the king refuses to keep his promise. He invents another test, and a third (obtaining more treasures or advantages), before he finally gives in. It is understandable that the king is unwilling to accept as his son-in-law and successor on the throne a dirty, ragged, poor, low-born boy who is comfortable with effeminacy and humiliation and who is supported by oddballs and hags, and animals from the wilderness (§ 4.1.2). Accepting the Ash Lad amounts to a revolution. So why does the king still promise this unacceptable person the impossible reward? For this, there are two reasons: the king desperately wants to retrieve his child or the treasure(s), and he rules out the possibility that an unpromising character like the Ash Lad can achieve this. But, as it turns out, not only is the Ash Lad capable of doing this, he is the only one who is. The reason for this is, paradoxically, precisely the fact that he is a loser — the fact that he is and does the reverse of the other candidates. He succeeds *because* he is a negation of the conventional, patriarchal, hierarchic, and snobbish establishment (§ 4.1.1). This contrast with the competitors is a key point in the fairy tales. The explanation of this inverted logic can be found in the nature of the tasks. The desired persons or objects are located in what may loosely be designated as the otherworld (typically with a troll or ogress living at the world's end), or the desired results can only be achieved with the guidance of beings that come from there (typically hags and the like encountered in the wilderness) and (magic) tools/objects that they provide. This means, for three interlinked reasons, that only a person like the Ash Lad can do it. First, the otherworld is a place beyond society and civilization; thus, only a person belonging to the margins of society and civilization has access to the border. Second, the otherworld is in most cultures to a greater or lesser degree imagined as the inversion of this world. In the clearest cases people are left-handed, wear their clothes inside-out, or walk backwards and upside-down, or rivers flow upstream (Holmberg 1925; cf. Heide 2011). Accordingly, only an

⁵¹ E.g. 'De tre kongsdøtre i berget det blå', 'Rødrev og Askeladden', 'Grimsborken', and 'De syv folene': Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 11, 208, 266–71, III, 208, 255–62.

⁵² E.g. 'Gutten som skulle tjene tre år uten lønn', Asbjørnsen and Moe 1965, II, 220–25; 'Per, Pål og Espen Askeladd', *ibid.*, III, 317.

inverted person can go to the otherworld, one who negates the norms of this society. Third, only a person resembling otherworldly beings can make friends with them and in doing so obtain their help and magical objects. The Ash Lad is a ‘semi-otherworlder’ and thus a mediator or ‘bridge’ between this world and the otherworld. This is what makes the Ash Lad indispensable to the establishment, and it is what makes him unacceptable. One has to let him in, but he is a Trojan horse, so this implies the establishment’s suicide.

If we transfer this model of understanding to the mythological Loki, it makes good sense. In fact, several scholars have identified him as essentially a mediator between the gods and the giants (Haugen 1967; Meletinskij 1973a, 1973b, 76; Schjødt 1981, 76–84). Schjødt’s understanding of Loki in particular comes close to my understanding of the Ash Lad: Loki’s norm-breaking nature gives him his abilities; he essentially is a mediator of opposites (Schjødt 1981, 83), and the gods accept him because they benefit greatly from him in the short term, even though he is disastrous in the long term. Schjødt reminds us that Loki helps the gods in critical situations and is the one who provides or re-equips them with most of the valuables that they obtain from the otherworld. Loki may even be decisive for the main gods’ distinguishing traits: Loki provided and re-equipped Þórr with his hammer, which represents his physical power, and it may have been Óðinn’s mingling of blood with Loki (§ 4.1.1) that gave Óðinn his transgressive abilities, giving him knowledge and thus intellectual power (Schjødt 1981, 56–57, 83). Schjødt (1981, 84) concludes that Loki’s role is to represent the deterioration of the society caused by the reconciliation of opposites that should not be reconciled.

However, why bother about the Ash Lad and the late material if this can be seen from the ON texts alone? Even a confirmation based upon different material is valuable because Schjødt’s understanding is not universally accepted, and in my opinion, the late material can also adjust and supplement this understanding. First the adjustment. For the king in the Ash Lad fairy tales, there is no way of obtaining only the treasures. The overthrowing of his regime is the other side of the coin, although he does not understand this initially. If we can transfer this to the mythology, it counts against the understanding that the opposites should not be reconciled and everything would have gone fine if this had not happened. The founding and development of the gods’ society *requires* the exploitation of the dwarfs and giants, and hence a reconciliation of the fundamental opposites — although this eventually leads to disaster. If we turn to other ON myths, the idea that there is no such thing as a free lunch is clear. Meulengracht Sørensen (1977) and Steinsland (1991, esp. 231) have demonstrated this pattern in several literary genres: new, powerful breeds are created by the sexual amalgamation of gods and giants and

therefore contain tremendous tensions that often lead to a tragic fate. Mundal (2001, 206) has drawn attention to a group of myths where the gods give away invaluable objects or properties to the giants in order to build their society: Óðinn trades one of his eyes for knowledge, the gods' guard Heimdallr pawns his hearing, and the war god Týr sacrifices his right hand to have the monster wolf Fenrir bound. Freyr's sacrifice of his sword to get the giantess Gerðr (*Skírnismál*, *Lokasenna* 42, *Völuspá* 52) falls into the same pattern. These losses give short-term gains but weaken the gods. I hope these examples are enough to make this point: it seems that in order to build their society the gods *must* accept losses or disadvantages that prove fatal. This pattern may confirm the understanding of Loki that can be derived from the Ash Lad fairy tales: a contradiction between Loki's beneficial and damaging sides does not really exist, because they both reflect his intermediate status, or — from the establishment's point of view — his perversion. Loki, like the Ash Lad, is a bridge to the otherworld because he is himself a semi-otherworlder, and *as such* he is both indispensable and unacceptable. He makes invaluable contributions to society, but allowing him into it means opening it to otherworldly powers. Loki's siding with the giants at Ragnarøk follows from his closeness to the otherworldly powers, which also makes him so beneficial to the Æsir that they cannot do without him. There is no such thing as a single-sided coin.

Then the supplement. In the fairy tales, why is the mummy's boy by the fireplace chosen as the bridge to the otherworld, rather than some other character? I can see two reasons: first, he is situated in the midst of the female realm, and the feminine is a form of inversion when seen from the view of the patriarchal establishment; second, the fireplace was conceived of as a passage to the otherworld both in the Middle Ages and later.⁵³ This was probably because the *vättes*, who were the closest and most significant otherworldly beings for the people of the farm, often lived under the fireplace and/or received sacrifices there. Accordingly, the person 'stationed' by the fireplace was in a good position to make contact with the *vättes* and the rest of the otherworld. This close association is reflected in the reference of the term *oskefis* to both the *Vätten* and the human tending the fire (§ 4.1). As we have seen (§ 4.1.3), the mythological Loki also has a connection with the fireplace, although his unpromising youth is less certain or comprehensive — and he, too, seems to derive from the notions of the *Vätten* living under the fireplace (§ 4.1). It would make good sense if this background was one of the factors in Loki's role as a link to the otherworld. Just as the Ash Lad receives help from otherworldly beings

⁵³ Fisher and Ellis Davidson 1979–80, I, 30; Grundtvig 1944, 247; von Geramb 1930–31, 1771.

because he can befriend them through his resemblance to them, Loki could have an advantage when dealing with otherworldly beings because he alludes to a *vätte* (§ 4.1.2) — for example when receiving invaluable magic objects from the ‘black elves’/dwarves (§ 4.1.1).

5. *Concluding Remarks on Approaches and Material*

I studied Old Scandinavian religion for almost ten years before I realized that late material referring to the gods exists. After it was rejected in the interwar period, this material was rarely mentioned, although folklorists like Strömbäck and Almqvist continued to use other post-medieval material in studies of other forms of early Scandinavian cultural history. During recent years, however, we have seen a trend towards making more use of post-medieval material in all kinds of studies. This may lead to substantial progress in the field of Old Scandinavian religion, as our biggest problem is a lack of information. Large amounts of material are waiting to be reinstated — and to be discovered in archives. The present study is an example of how post-medieval material can be used in combination with medieval material. It provides examples of how we can extract probable information about ancient times from late material and of how such information can shed light on enigmatic ON text passages or names and thus reveal unnoticed patterns. The study is based upon a few methodological principles, which I will try to account for here (cf. Heide 2009), taking the Loki example as my point of departure. The essential idea is that we need all the information that we can get; we cannot afford to reject certain types of information a priori.

- We should take into consideration all the material that contains the name/word *Loki/loki*. This word/name does not occur randomly: all its attestations must be connected, closely or remotely, to the old *Loki/loki*. In some cases it may be hard to see the connection, but that does not allow us to ignore occurrences. Some forms clearly are distorted; for example, *Luki* in Dalarna sometimes has been changed to *Lussi* ‘Lucia’, and in Scania and Jutland to *Lukas* ‘Luke’ (and sometimes further to *Markus* ‘Mark’ because of the time of the year), or the variant *Nokke* has been changed to *Noak* ‘Noah’ (§ 3.3; Olrik 1909, 72, 75; Luf M1325, 9, M13165, 2, M13285, 9, M13134, 29). But even these forms should be explained. The insistence on accounting for all the evidence can help us break out of our presuppositions and guide us in our choices: the interpretation that can account for the most material should be preferred. This requires that all the material be included, because otherwise the choice of interpretation will be less reliable. The research on Loki is illustrative of this. Most

interpretations would have been changed and many ruled out if measured against the total corpus of Loki attestations. I outlined this reasoning in Heide 2009 and 2006 (8–15) and will discuss it in depth in an anthology from the conference ‘New Focus on Retrospective Methods’, held in Bergen in 2010.

- When a motif or passage is hard to understand, we should seek, even in late or comparative material, additional information that might throw light on it. For example, when we do not understand how Loki in late Scandinavian tradition can be a *vätte* under the fireplace when he clearly is something different in the ON myths, we should investigate notions connected to the fireplace throughout northern Europe to have a wider picture. This is what uncovered the possible ‘Ash Lad bridge’ between the *vätte* Loki and the mythological Loki in the present study. It is a variant of the humanistic interpretative approach. Regrettably, in studies of Old Scandinavian religion, a source-critic paradigm has severely limited it for generations.
- We should try to use the understanding achieved through the late material as a key to the ON material. Does the ON material make sense (in a new way) if we look upon it this way (cf. Schjødt 2000, 38)? Examples of this are the reasoning in §§ 4.1.3 and 4.2, where I apply the understanding gained by the analysis of the Ash Lad to the mythological Loki. The patterns that I arrive at existed in the ON material but were invisible until the key pieces to the puzzle were introduced from the late material. When pieces of late material fit together in this way with early material, revealing an unnoticed picture, one may say that this picture anchors the pieces of late material in the past. The late pieces must be consistent with older, more reliable material. If not, this may indicate that they are corrupt, and we should be sceptical. But, as the case of Loki demonstrates, we should not give up too early on finding a model that they fit into.
- A substantial competence in etymology and in the history and dialects of the Scandinavian languages is a great advantage in studies of Old Scandinavian religion, especially when making use of post-medieval material. For example, it is decisive that we are able to determine whether *Loki*, *lokke*, and *luki* are different words or forms of the same word.
- We should not accept any information uncritically. Many traditions have changed a lot over the centuries, so only *elements* of the late material can be assumed to reflect pre-Christian beliefs or practices. But there are many ways to sift out such pieces of information, as exemplified in §§ 3.3 and 3.4. Another problem is fake information. But my experience is that fabrications or unconscious bookish contaminations are rare, and I believe that in most cases it is

possible or easy to expose them. In Lund's folklore archive I came across a manuscript giving rich information about Loki in the tradition from Småland, also including information about Þórr and Óðinn and the relationship between these three (Luf 2915, 34–37). However, the information was not found anywhere else in the popular traditions, but conformed to Snorri's *Edda*, so it was not difficult to see through it. In most cases, a material's authenticity is confirmed by its correspondence with other, independent material, or by its deviation from bookish presentations. Still, in spite of all possible precautions, the reliability of information from late traditions is low (as a source to ancient times), so we need many and independent pieces of such information pointing in the same direction, forming a pattern, before we can place any trust in them.

- Many demand that one always take the context of a certain piece of information into careful consideration. I agree that this is decisive when studying one or a few sources or passages in depth, for example, to understand the ideology behind them. One should always keep context in mind and sort out problematic cases. But when endeavouring to use late material in reconstructions of ancient times, it is more important to collect and combine as many pieces of information as possible. Contextual uncertainty is like other reasons for a low reliability of information: the more pieces that point in the same direction, the less uncertain is the combined picture.

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Eddic poems are quoted / referenced from Bugge 1867. The chapter numbers in the *Prose Edda* refer to Finnur Jónsson 1931.

Abbreviations

- DAG Dialekt-, ortnamns- och folkminnesarkivet i Göteborg, Gothenburg, Sweden
 DFS Dansk Folkemindesamling, Copenhagen, Denmark
 Luf Folkklivarsarkivet, Lund, Sweden; M = Manuskriptarkivet
 NEG Norsk etnologisk gransking, Norsk folkemuseum, Oslo, Norway
 SÁM Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Reykjavík, Iceland
Sarpur Electronic database with unpublished material in Þjóðháttasafn Þjóðminjasafns Íslands, Reykjavík, Iceland
 SKS KRA Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, Helsinki, Finland
 ULMA Dialekt- och folkminnesarkivet i Uppsala, Uppsala, Sweden

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