

More inroads to pre-Christian notions, after all?

The potential of late evidence

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The Old Norse written sources give us a rich impression of many aspects of pre-Christian Scandinavian culture and religion. But of some topics they do not give us enough evidence for a meaningful image. In such cases we seem to have two options: To give up or try to expand our material. I will argue in favour of the latter. I believe that 19th and 20th century material can provide breakthroughs in the study of pre-Christian notions. It is deeply problematic, and it is difficult to use such material but it is possible, and the alternative in many cases is less satisfactory. – I mean all kinds of late evidence, not least lexical material, although the focus in research has been on folklore.

Background / research history

It seems that most scholars today reject the use of late evidence in the reconstruction of pre-Christian culture and religion. But in the early 20th century central experts on Old Scandinavian religion based their interpretations heavily on 19th and 20th century folklore – like Olrik (e.g. 1901) Celander (e.g. 1911), and Lid (e.g. 1928). Jan de Vries more or less put an end to this in the 1930s (1931, 1932, 1933), arguing that a thousand years of Christianity had changed the popular traditions too much by mixing them up with Christian notions and practices.

Then followed a rejection of the Old Norse prose evidence, too, peaking in the 1950s and 60s (e. g. Sigurður Nordal 1940, Baetke 1951, and Olsen 1966). This hypercriticism was rejected during the 1980s and 90's (e. g. Schjødt 1988, 2000, Meulengracht Sørensen 1991a, 1991b, Bagge 2002). The late evidence, however, has not yet been reinstated, although there is a growing tendency to make use of it (e.g. Ström 1991, Bertell 2003, Ahola 2004, Bek-Pedersen 2006, 2007, Heide 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). Such works are still exceptions and occurred even during the hypercritical period (e.g. Rooth 1961). What is accepted within today's paradigm is, generally speaking, only Old Norse evidence and earlier ethnographic, archaeological and iconographic evidence.

Objections to the objections

The continued rejection of late evidence is somewhat peculiar, for several reasons:

- The arguments for rejecting the late evidence are in principle the same as those used for rejecting the Old Norse prose evidence: Because they are far younger than the pagan period they are untrustworthy evidence of pagan traditions. If one in spite of this accepts the Old Norse evidence it seems inconsistent to completely reject later evidence. There is a big difference of degree but no difference in principle. What we do is deeply problematic no matter what. There is no safe ground to seek refuge on.
- The rejection of late evidence also seems inconsistent with the broad acceptance of Indo-European studies. If it is possible to reconstruct parts of an Indo-European tradition after *thousands* of years of contamination, how can it be impossible to do something of the same after less than *one* thousand years?
- Finno-Ugric pre-Christian studies have always been dependent upon late evidence and remains a respected field in spite of this. Why are the same methods impossible in our field?

- Within Medieval Scandinavian history most scholars again accept the retrospective method that based upon 17th century evidence makes assumptions about farms and land distribution half a millennium earlier.

- Place-names are again accepted as evidence for pre-Christian religious conditions, even though many of them are not attested from the Middle Ages.

- Many scholars *occasionally* use late evidence although they seem to accept the ruling paradigm (e.g. Clunies Ross 1981: 379, Lindow 1990, Drobin 1991: 118 ff.). One might expect this to produce dissatisfaction with the paradigm or at least an explanation of why the late evidence is acceptable in those cases but this rarely happens.

- Some works relying on late evidence remain widely accepted or influential, e.g. Magnus Olsen's explanation of the proverb *reynir er björg Þórs* in *Skaldskaparmál* (*Edda Snorra St.*: 106), his explanation of the word *varðlok(k)ur* in *Eiríks saga rauða* (: 412), and his interpretation of *Skírnismál* (Olsen 1909, 1916, 1940).

Some scholars recognize the potential of folklore but ignore it because they believe it is impossible to “filter out” the valuable information from the rest (e.g. Ström 1985: 8, Steinsland 2005: 64). This view may be shared by many.

But a few scholars claim to reject late evidence on principle and completely. This position is an illusion, however, because there is so much in our understanding of the Old Norse texts that is based upon late evidence. Examples of this are *hræll* m., which is mentioned in *Dar-raðarljóð* and refers to a part in the warp-weighed loom; *gagl* n., which refers to a wild goose; *flannfluga* f., which refers to a woman running away from her fiancé, literally from the male member; the verb *rábenda*, which means ‘to bind together from both sides’ and is derived from the neuter **ráband*, which refers to robands (that attach the sail to the yard) but which is not attested in Old Norse, and many bynames, like *belligr*. Their meanings do not emerge from the Old Norse occurrences but are easy to reconstruct on the basis of the modern Scandinavian languages, and are accepted by everyone. Examples like these are abundant although it is often not realized because the explanations are seen as so obvious that the reasoning is not explicit. Mythological examples can be mentioned as well, e.g. the giantess Skaði's epithets *Qndurdís* and *Qndurgoð* (*Edda Snorra St.*: 31). Everyone agrees that *qndurr* m. means ‘ski’ and refers to Skaði's skiing. But this does not emerge from any Old Norse source. The meaning of *qndurr* is taken from the Modern Scandinavian languages (Fritzner 1883–96 I: 54, III: 1088). Other mytho-religious examples are the word *skeggbroddr* m., which has to do with the god Þórr's ability to raise a gale by blowing in his beard (Perkins 2001, Heide 2006a: 284 ff.), and *vörðr* in *varðlok(k)ur*, which refers to some kind of guardian spirit.

I hope this is enough to demonstrate that in some cases all of us accept late evidence. Then I think we should leave behind the question of *whether* it is possible to use such evidence and concentrate on how and to what extent it is advisable and desirable.

Why is it necessary and possible? The nature of our evidence

Late evidence is valuable because lack of information is an even bigger problem for us than unreliable information. Our oldest evidence represent only a small piece of past reality. Even in Iceland only a small part of the traditions that existed in the 13th and 14th centuries were written down in manuscripts that have reached us. From the rest of Scandinavia virtually nothing has reached us. Accordingly our most reliable sources are completely insufficient. Of most past notions they give us no image at all; of others they give us an image that we cannot understand because it is too scant. But parts of what was not written down may have survived in popular traditions until it was collected by folklorists, lexicographers, and others in modern times. Of course most of the pre-Christian traditions were gone by then but it appears that

fragments have survived, especially of simple and basic notions. Such fragments may help us a lot.

I will give an example. According to the Old Norse evidence one of the names of Loki's mother was *Nál* (also *Laufey*. *Edda Snorra St.*: 34, 100, *Sörla þáttr*: 275). It apparently means 'needle' but there is nothing whatsoever in the Old Norse evidence nor archaeology nor iconography that can tell us how this is to be understood. But in 19th and 20th century traditions there is. In Sigfús Blöndal's Icelandic dictionary (1920: 511) there is a saying which connects Loki to the sewing needle: If one licks the end of a thread in order to thread a needle, one "licks Loki's backside" (*sleikja rassinn á honum Loka*) – as if Loki could be conceived of as a thread. In that case his mother being a needle makes sense. In popular notions we also find a link between sewing needles and motherhood: One should never give a woman a needle without the thread in it because that would cause her never to have any children (Scotland, MacCulloch 1936: 255), or: A woman should never let someone else thread the needle for her because this would give her difficult deliveries (Sweden, ULMA 10071, p. 37). In both cases there is apparently an idea that the thread is the baby and the needle 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 very suggestive of the female genitals. This again corresponds to the comparison between threading a needle and sexual intercourse, which is widespread. Icelandic tradition also has an explicit connection between *Nál* as the name of Loki's mother, and threads and sewing. In Icelandic, the appellative *loki* m. among other things means 'a knot or tangle (on a thread)', which could be personified and identified with the person *Loki*. When a knot appeared on a thread during sewing or spinning, a verse was pronounced, during the disentangling of the knot:

“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 1954: 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 of this verse Loki's mother is called just *Nál* 'needle', like in the Old Icelandic accounts (Recording SÁM 85/585, Sigríður Gísladóttir, 1970, Hólmavík).¹

Are we really better off without material like this? Without it we seem to have *no* chance of success but with it there is at least a theoretical chance. I prefer uncertain possibility to certain impossibility.

To this some may object that we do not usually face a situation like this. In most cases the Old Norse sources, perhaps supplemented with other early evidence, give enough information for a meaningful image. Therefore, in most cases late evidence is not needed. Certainly but there are also many problems that have not been solved during more than a century of ingenious study of the Old Norse sources – like the god Loki and the sorcery form *seiðr*. The Old Norse sources give a lot of information about these things – but apparently not enough. Supplementary information from late evidence might help us.

Some scholars fear that the acceptance of late evidence will lead to speculative interpretations because we will be lead astray by false evidence. This certainly is a risk but a strict source criticism may lead to the same because the smaller the amount of evidence, the fewer interpretations are contradicted by it – and the smaller the chance that it contains the necessary material (cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1991b: 243). My experience is that I am guided by the material as it accumulates, even if parts of it come from late evidence. The low reliability of 19th and 20th century information does not mean that it is worthless. It only means that we

¹ Thanks to Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir at Iceland's Arnarnagæan Institute for this information.

need more pieces of information in order to build something that we can believe in. But that is OK because there are ten times more of them available.

We should not ignore the difficulties of late material but neither should we ignore the possibilities. There is so much evidence out there that we do not even know about but which may hold keys to our problems – like the notions of needles and threads, which have not been taken into account in any discussion of Loki. Why should we not even look for this kind of material?

How can we do it?

In order to find useful late material, we have to look for it – in dictionaries, folklore collections, archives, and so on. Because of the long-lasting negative attitude towards late evidence it is easy to find new and interesting material.

The problem is to determine if the material is of value for a certain interpretation. One cannot just assume that a certain piece of late evidence is valid for ancient times. That will always have to be demonstrated in some way or other. I will discuss some of those ways. De Vries was willing to accept folklore when it gave the same picture as the Old Norse sources because in that case it could support interpretations of the Old Norse material (de Vries 1931: 60 ff.). This may be so, but in my opinion *different* information is even more valuable because we are most in need of information that can give more parts of the image. Such information is more difficult to use, of course, but its potential is bigger. Schjødt (2000) points out a criterion that seems fruitful: If individual pieces of information that we do not trust one by one, together form a *pattern* that corresponds to something we know from reliable sources, then we may believe in the information. Schjødt discusses the legendary sagas but the reasoning should be universally valid. But in 19th and 20th century traditions, most of the potentially valuable material does not belong to such patterns. Therefore, what we need most is criteria for validating isolated evidence. I will mention some ways to do this; first some ways to infer from late evidence alone:

- *It explains the evidence.* This may seem like a problematic criterion but in some cases is not, for instance in *qndurr* in *Qndurdís* and *Qndurgoð*. The meaning ‘ski’ is accepted because it fits perfectly; it explains all the occurrences in a consistent and plausible way.

- *Occurrences geographically far apart,* for example: The word *gand-* may mean ‘staff, pole’ in Iceland as well as in Swedish Ostrobothnia in Finland but not in the areas between. This common meaning can hardly be borrowed in recent times because there never was much contact between Iceland and the Gulf of Bothnia. Therefore the *gand-* meaning ‘staff, pole’ probably is a common heritage, i.e. from Proto-Nordic times or earlier – even if it is not attested in Old Scandinavian manuscripts (Heide 2006a: 124).

- *Widespread motifs.* In other cases the widespreadness of a motif can tell us that it is ancient. One example of this is the notion that the soul or spirit is the same as a person’s breath (Heide 2006b). We have no evidence telling us that in the Viking Age there was a notion of a “breath soul”. But still we can be quite sure that it was there because there is abundant evidence of the connection between soul and breath in late traditions and languages from northern Europe, the Classical world and most of the rest of the world. The derivation of the soul from breath seems to be nearly universal. In that case it is farfetched to claim that this notion is borrowed from somewhere in recent times.

- *Differing forms of a word,* for example: A word **alfskot* is not attested in Old Norse manuscripts but in all probability it existed, because the modern Norwegian dialect forms of this word differ so much: *alvskot*, *algskot*, *ælmskot*, *ølskot* etc. (ibid: 229).

- *Cultural fossils* may be utilized with the help of etymology. Place names are the best known example. For instance, farm names like *Ullevi* and *Torshov* are petrified fragments

from pre-Christian times, handed down to us through the centuries and still telling us about religious conditions back then (cf. Olsen 1915). In the same way names of plants, birds, insects, stars, stellar constellations etc., may be cultural fossils from ancient times. One example is terms like Norwegian *soluly*, Swedish *solvarg*, English *sundog*, Norwegian *(sol)gil*, Icelandic *gill / gýll, úlfur*, etc., which refer to parhelia or mock suns to the left and right of the sun under certain atmospheric conditions. These terms seem to be reflections of the same ancient traditions as we see in *Grímnismál*'s account (st. 39) of the wolves trying to swallow the sun (Heide 2006a: 206 ff., 220 f.).

- *Motif cannot be derived from Christianity*. One example of this is dialect-Swedish month names like *jultungel* and *dis(tings)tungel* (Dalarna), which seem to be relics of the pre-Christian calendar and give us information of that (Nordberg 2006: 15 ff.). This we can know because they cannot be derived from the Christian calendar.

- *“Freezer” in neighbouring culture*, for example: Scandinavian names of gods are recorded in the 18th century evidence for Saami religion, e.g. *Hovrengaellies* (“*Horagalles*”) from **Þórkall*. This may give information of the Scandinavian gods.

- *Motif is not “tradition dominant”*. If a motif appears to be dominant in a certain tradition, there is a good chance that it has spread to more characters and narratives than were attributed to it in earlier times (Eskeröd 1947: 79 ff.). If, on the other hand, the tradition only contains scattered information about a motif, the chance is high that that information is a relic of something old. It is the *“lectio difficilior of the tradition”*, so to speak.

In most cases, however, one will combine late and early evidence in a way that seeks to anchor the late evidence in the past. For instance, the name *Nál* of Loki's mother indicates that notions of needles and thread and motherhood existed at least as early as in the 13th century; probably earlier. Another example is the ‘staff’ etymology of *gand-*, which may be anchored by place-names containing the element *gand-*. They are strikingly associated with staff-shaped fjords and lakes, and of course their shape was the same in the past. In most cases the “anchor” will be evidence from early written evidence and archaeological finds but it may be other things, like topography in this case. *Distinctiveness* is a criterion for making such connections: The more distinctive a motif is, the less likely is it that it is found in separate areas or periods without connection. One can also use late evidence as an “idea bank” in the interpretation of the oldest written evidence. Once one has seen a certain pattern in the richer late evidence, one may discover it even in the scatter, early evidence; details that have escaped one's notice may get a new meaning and fit into a pattern that one has seen in the late evidence (e.g. yawning in Old Norse evidence, see Heide 2006b; cf. Schjødt 2000: 38).

With the help of criteria like these it is possible to extract probable data about pre-Christian times from late evidence. But still, of course, such data are less reliable regarding pre-Christian times than a clear statement from e.g. an Eddic poem. Therefore, many pieces of evidence of this type are needed to support each other, preferably in combination with early, more reliable evidence. Because of this one should seek to scan through large amounts of data when utilizing late evidence. But then success seems possible. If a pattern that one sees is confirmed again and again, even by unreliable evidence, one might be on to something.

The culture-etymological approach

Olrik's generation produced many works that made extensive use of late evidence. Some of them are influential today, but most of them are not. This may be because the scholars were led astray by the late evidence. But it may also be because the late material was not used in the best way. It was not common to seek to validate late information with the help of criteria like those listed above. But more importantly, one did not demand that all the information of a

phenomenon be seen in relation to each other. This is not customary today, either, but in my opinion this demand is essential.

As an illustration, I will take *gandr*, or *gand-(ur)*, which was the topic of my PhD dissertation, and which is found in Old Norse sources as well as modern Norwegian, Faroese and Icelandic traditions, and in the evidence for Saami religion. It struck me how much the results on *gand-* differed and how this seemed to result from the scholars studying different parts of the evidence. Because of this I decided to study all the forms of *gand-* in relation to each other (cf. Rooth 1961: 8), as they all ought to be connected in some way. There ought to be a link between the variants, close or distant, because they all contain the word *gand-*, which can hardly have arisen by mutation.

In this perspective the variants of *gand-* may be compared to the branches of a tree, or the preserved manuscripts of a textual critic, or the ramifications of languages in a language family, or the ramifications of a word in etymology. Some traits probably are “snagged on” the *gand-* tradition secondarily but still there must be a reason why just that trait got snagged on *gand-* in particular rather than some other phenomenon. We can assume that the early *gand-* tradition had similar traits, making it natural to associate the “new” trait with *gand-* in particular. Accordingly, even corruptions have some information value. Therefore I tried to find a model that could explain the total evidence of *gand-*, the relationship between the different forms. This meant an essential cluster of notions from which the variants may be understood as representations or derivations, similar to the archetype in text criticism or the reconstructed forms marked with *asterisks in etymology.

As an illustration I will take the excerpt from my dissertation that I presented in Durham (Heide 2006b). The main meaning of *gandr* in the medieval evidence is ‘soul or spirit sent forth (in shape)’. But in 19th century Shetlandic, *gander* has meanings that appear to deviate completely: ‘strong gust of wind’, ‘sudden powerlessness’, and ‘nausea, vomiting’. I suggested that these meanings are derived from a cluster of notions that can be reconstructed as follows:

Spirit = breath = air in motion, wind.

Spirits (= breath) can leave and enter body through respiratory passages / throat.

Entering spirit replaces body’s own spirit => powerlessness.

Spirit entering down throat forces out stomach content; = vomiting.

This is all logical if one conceives of a person’s spirit as the same as the person’s breath, and this conception can be supported by a lot of material from Old Norse evidence as well as Northern European folklore and Eurasian comparative material.

This approach is not using late evidence in the interpretation of Old Norse evidence. One should rather conceive of all the evidence, including the Old Norse evidence, as reflections of an original or essential cluster of notions which is the objective of the reconstruction. Therefore, this may be called a culture-etymological approach. One should only try to reconstruct notions not narratives so this is not the same as the historic-geographic method of classic folkloristics.

The outlined approach does not imply a claim that “all evidence really is ancient” or that “all evidence is equally valuable”. It just recognizes late attestations and late forms as adequate input in calculations, and demands that all forms are accounted for, placed in relation to the rest of the material. Some forms may be connected more closely to the essential cluster of notions, others may be identified as digressions or corrupted variants – just like some of the word forms, manuscripts and languages in etymology, textual criticism or language history are more distant from the origin than others. But they, too, have to be accounted for and placed in relation to the others as part of the total reconstruction.

In the mentioned disciplines, this goes without saying. It should not be the other way around in the reconstruction of pre-Christian Scandinavian religion and culture. We should

base our interpretations upon the total evidence for the phenomena we are studying, also the late examples. This not only will give us more evidence – like the Shetlandic forms of *gand-*. It may also make it easier for us to break out of the limitations of our presuppositions and our 21st century western middle class backgrounds. We should not allow ourselves simply to ignore the evidence that appears not to fit in.

A cluster of notions reconstructed in this way cannot be placed very accurately in time or space. It is hypothetical and it is not always certain that it ever existed. This may seem like a serious objection to the approach but the same is usually the case with the reconstructions of etymology and textual criticism, too. (For example, the *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* that we read is reconstructed on the basis of late manuscripts.) If it is acceptable there, it should be acceptable here. A hypothetical “archetype” may be methodologically necessary and the best we can aim at. But of course it is important to be aware of the status of our results. It is also important to be aware that this kind of reconstruction only gives one part of the image. Still, that part can be interesting.

I use the comparisons with etymology and textual criticism to illustrate a way of thinking and as examples: It is not impossible to reconstruct something from a remote past on the basis of material that is far later and in addition is scattered geographically and chronologically. But of course there are significant differences. What one seeks to reconstruct in those disciplines is more focused than what can be reconstructed with a culture-etymological approach. It is a specific word(form) or text rather than a loose cluster of notions. Moreover, religious or cultural reconstructions cannot be based upon sound-laws and common errors, although sound-law reasoning can be useful in such studies. Instead, association and common sense will have to do, alongside with the criterion that the model of understanding that explains most of the evidence should be preferred. This may sound flimsy but the semantic half of etymological reasoning is in exactly the same situation. (The change in the *meanings* of word forms is as arbitrary as that of cultural change.) However, the decisive criterion is the inter-subjective judgement of the scholarly community. Can a culture-etymological approach produce interpretations that many competent scholars find interesting and plausible?

The utilization of late evidence is not something that has been tried once and for all and proven impossible. There are better ways to use it and there is a lot of material that has yet to be discovered. I would like to invite those of you who recognize the potential of late evidence to join me in the forming of a network that can develop and stimulate the utilization of such evidence. The time and place for a meeting will be announced at the conference.

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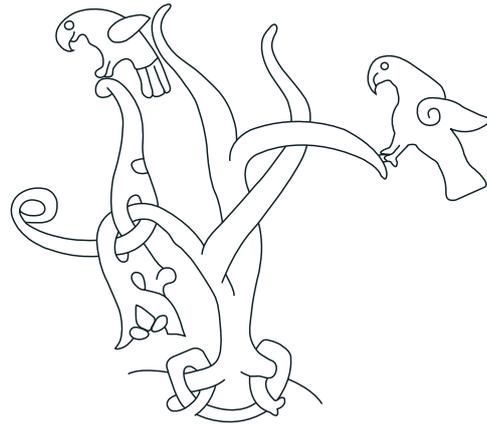
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