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## Magical Fishing in *Historia Norwegie*

### Incomprehensible without Late Folklore

*Eldar Heide*

In *Historia Norwegie* from the late twelfth century, there is a passage about how the Sámi in some supernatural way catch a large amount of fish. The editors of the work have not been able to make sense of the passage and have argued that the text is somehow corrupt. In this chapter, I will use legends recorded in Iceland and Northern Norway in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in an attempt to find a key to the passage. I do this firstly because, if the passage can be "unlocked", this could give us additional information about medieval ritual practices and beliefs (Sámi or shared Sámi / Scandinavian), and secondly because, if successful, such an attempt could give us an interesting case study of retrospective methods, i.e. approaches using late material as parts of arguments aiming at reconstructing earlier cultural phenomena. From the point of view of retrospective methods, the case is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it seems relatively clear that the late material used here is independent of the medieval text that I want to illuminate (uncertainty about this is often the weak point in retrospective arguments). Secondly, the fact that the medieval text passage is considered corrupt and as not making any sense has implications for the status of new suggestions. If, in this situation, an interpretation based upon a retrospective argument is accepted, it will be an example that retrospective reasoning can not only be useful but may be even necessary in some cases. The present chapter is only a case study, an example, to illustrate the potential of post-medieval material in medieval studies (for a proposal of criteria for sifting out valuable late material, see Heide 2009).

### The *Historia Norwegie* Passage and Its Problems

*Historia Norwegie* is a short history of Norway written in Latin, probably in the period 1160–1175. Only one manuscript survives, dated to around 1500. It was found by P. A. Munch in Scotland in 1848 (Mortensen 2003b: 24, 28). In

the present chapter, I am going to discuss the following passage (a translation of which will follow further below):

‡ Item dum Finni unacum christianis gregem squamigeram hamo carpere attemptassent, quos in casis fidelium pagani perspexerant, sacculis fere plenis unco suo de abyssu attractis scapham cum piscibus impluerunt. †

Mortensen 2003a: 62

As can be seen, the editor has added a cross on either side of the passage, indicating that the text is corrupt in some way. Mortensen discusses the way he came to this conclusion as follows:

The period entails a number of textual problems; perhaps a whole clause is missing somewhere. The two main problems are: what is the point of the story? what is the correlate of **quos**? [...] The previous translations (Storm *in notis*, Koht, Salvesen, Kunin) take *quos* with the subsequent **sacculis** (*saccus*, 'a sack' in the diminutive, 'a fish trap' (ML)), *i.e.* the Lapps drew from the deep the almost full nets they had noticed in the Christians' sheds. Not only is this an awkward story but it is also very irregular to have the correlate long after the relative pronoun. It is tempting to look for a correlate in the previous sentence: it could be *hamus*, *i.e.* the heathens had seen a certain type of hook in the Christians' houses, but this would demand much textual surgery; a far easier correction would be to read *squamigerum* (subst. gen. pl.) instead of the adjective **squamigeram** (which in itself calls for attention because the two other instances of **grex** in *HN* are the standard masculine (VII 2, X 7)): thus the Lapps would have seen (a certain kind of) fish in the sheds of the Christians, which they then caught in nets. However, the logic or punchline of the story does not become much clearer. [...] it seems the better solution to provide the passage with a *crux*.

Mortensen & Ekrem 2003: 124

Fisher and Mortensen's attempt at a translation of the passage above runs like this:

Again, when the Finns [= Sámi], together with the Christians, had gone about catching by hook a flock of fish such as these heathens had seen in Christian dwellings, they drew almost full traps out of the deeps with their wand, and so loaded the boats to capacity.

Fisher 2003: 63

This passage follows the more famous and longer passage about *gandus*. This word is a Latinization of Old Norse *gandr*, which refers to helping spirits or a free-soul sent forth by a ritual specialist in order to obtain information, attract resources, fight against other ritual specialists, etc. (Heide 2006: 300–314). Part of the problem in the magical fishing passage is how we are to understand

the relationship between it and the *gandus* passage. As you can see in the Latin quotation above, the fishing passage starts with the word *item*, which means 'likewise' or 'similarly', so apparently, the author sees this passage as another example of something he has just described, that is *gandus* (Mortensen & Ekrem 2003: 124). But it is not easy to see how this can be the case.

It is hard to grasp what is happening here. The only thing that is clear is that the passage tells of an encounter between the Sámi and the Norwegians, and that the Sámi make use of some kind of supernatural fishing method. The reason why the previous translators have taken *sacculis* as the correlate of *quos* is, of course, that it is odd to see 'a flock of fish' inside a house. Moreover, it is hard to detect a logical connection between what the Sámi have seen in the Norwegians' houses and what they later pull out of the sea. Therefore, there does not seem to be much of a point to the story. Why would the author want to spend precious parchment on this?

### Late Legends that Could Help Us?

I believe legends recorded in Iceland and Norway in modern times can throw light on this puzzle. One is a legend recorded by Jón Árnason in Iceland in the mid-nineteenth century:<sup>1</sup>

In Lónkot in the parish of Hálfðan the priest at Fell there lived an old woman who was called Ólöf. She knew a great deal of magic and she and Hálfðan had many quarrels with one another. One autumn, Hálfðan rowed out to the fishing with his men and they caught a great flounder. At the time, the weather was very chilly, and the fishermen got cold. Then the priest said as they were complaining about the cold: "What would you give me now, boys, if I were to haul in a hot black pudding [*blóðmör*] for you to comfort yourselves with?" They said that he would not be able to do that even if he wanted to. But a little later the priest catches a steaming hot black pudding on his hook. Then everyone on board ate from it and they all liked it. But in the meantime, the flounder disappeared out of the boat. Then Hálfðan the priest says: "The old woman wants something in return." Hálfðan got the black pudding from Ólöf by magical means [*seiddi*, infinitive *seiða*], but she then took the flounder from him in the same way.

Jón Árnason 1958–1961 [1862–1864]: I, 500

Similar legends were recorded in Vesterålen, Northern Norway, in the 1960s:

<sup>1</sup> The legends and the definitions from Fritzner's and Heggstad's dictionaries are my translations.

One day in the autumn one year, during the slaughtering season, the same wife was cooking black pudding. Now it happened that on this day, her husband finally wanted to go out to Otervika to catch a bit of fish. But she opposed him and said that he was not allowed because today, they were having black pudding for their dinner. But he insisted, and in the end, she got angry and told him to just go. It would turn out the same regardless. And he was not going to stay out there long either!

He got his son to come along and rowed off. Once out on the sea he got his fishing tackle sorted and began, but he did not catch any fish. He got angry, the husband, since his wife had predicted such bad fishing luck for him, and he moved to another fishing spot. But there was nothing to catch there either. Anyway, as he sat there pulling his line a little and letting it go a little, he clearly noticed that the hook had caught something. It seemed odd, though, he thought, because it wasn't tugging at the line the way fish do – it was just there as a steady weight. When he hauled it in it was a black pudding!

And it was hot – so hot that steam was coming off it. Then the husband took out his knife, cut off the hook as well as what was on it – and he spat at the mess before it sank. Then he wound up his fishing line and rowed ashore. It was early in the day, just as his wife had also predicted.

But when he got ashore, he fell on the road and broke his hip. That was his punishment for not taking the black pudding and for not doing as his wife had told him.

Myrvang 1964: 96

From the same area in Northern Norway, there is also a version with the opposite moral:

The wife wanted her husband to row out on the sea to get some fish. In those days they easily caught more than enough for cooking, between the island and the mainland. But that day the old wife was cooking black pudding. The old man did not want to row off and away from the nice hot pudding, and he told her so. "Oh, just you go," she said, "black pudding it will be anyway!" Well, then he got going, put his boat out on the sea and dropped his line in. And just as he was sitting there, he noticed that he had caught something. – And when he hauls it in, he's got a steaming hot black pudding on the hook.

Myrvang 1964: 104–105

In the Northern Norwegian stories, it is the wife, not the fisherman, who has supernatural skills, and in one version, the fisherman does not accept the black pudding. But the essence in the Icelandic and the Northern Norwegian stories is the same: a fisherman catches steaming hot black pudding on his line at sea, and it comes from a woman ashore.

The point in the black pudding legends seems to be contradiction, as they essentially are structured around a set of contrasts:

1.	Away from home	Home
2.	Cold	Warm
3.	Sea	Land
4.	Supposed to catch wild, live food,	Receiving processed food,
5.	by pulling it up	by <i>seemingly</i> pulling it up, really sideways
6.	Nature	Culture

When fishermen pull out of the sea warm cultural objects that come directly from home, the dramatic point is the contradiction between being out on the cold, inhospitable sea and at the same time having direct access to home with its warmth and cultural goods.

If we return to *Historia Norwegie*, it seems that the confusing passage can be read as quite analogous to these legends – that is, if we follow Fisher and Mortensen's reading that what the Sámi pulled up from the deep is the fish that they had seen in the Norwegians' houses (the correlate of *quos* is *\*squamigerum* 'fish'). Then we can list the following set of contrasts:

	Black pudding legends	<i>Historia Norwegie</i>
1.	Away from home	Home The settlements ( <i>casis</i> )
2.	Cold	Warm +
3.	Sea	Land Land
4.	Supposed to catch wild, live food,	Receiving processed food, Receiving processed food (stored fish must be processed in some way, see below)
5.	by pulling it up	by <i>seemingly</i> pulling it up, really sideways by <i>seemingly</i> pulling it up, really sideways
6.	Nature	Culture Culture

However, there is still no point to this story, because no matter what the Sámi had seen in the Norwegians' sheds (be it fish or fishing equipment), there is no indication that it was hot when drawn up from the sea. Even so, there may be another, equally striking contradiction in the *Historia Norwegie* passage. Fish stored in sheds could, in the twelfth century, only be dried fish, because salt in large quantities did not become affordable until centuries later. And if dried fish is what the Sámi pull up from the sea, this is processed food that contrasts with the sea as much as does the steaming hot black pudding. And that could be the point of the story. I suggest that, in *Historia Norwegie*, the Sámi have seen stockfish in the Norwegians' sheds, and that when the Norwegians and Sámi are fishing together, the Sámi pull up nets from the sea (see Mortensen and Ekrem's first comment above) full of stockfish that had come from there.

This could also explain the odd formulation that the Sámi had seen “a flock of fish” (Fisher 2003: 63) in the Norwegians’ sheds.<sup>2</sup> How can you see a “flock” or school of fish in a shed? The explanation could lie in the double meaning of the Old Norse term for ‘stockfish’, *skreið* (f.). It is closely related to the verb *skriða*, ‘to creep, crawl; glide; slide, to move slowly’ (Heggstad et al. 2008: 561), and *skreið* etymologically means ‘a creeping, crawling; gliding, sliding, a movement’ (de Vries 1962: 502). Another derivation from the same root is *skriða*, f. ‘an avalanche, a landslide’. The reason why the word *skreið* came to mean ‘stockfish’, is that stockfish was made primarily from the large arctic cod that seek the shore waters in myriads to spawn in late winter,<sup>3</sup> and that this migration is a *skreið* in the literal / etymological meaning. In Old Norse, *skreið* is also attested in the meaning ‘a pack (of wolves)’, which is still common in the Norwegian dialects (Fritzner 1883–1896: III, 376; *Norsk Ordbok* 1966–2016: X, 115). Regarding fish, the only attested Old Norse meaning is ‘stockfish’ (*Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, s.v. ‘skreið’); the meaning ‘arctic cod migrating to spawn’ is not attested. But this meaning is the most common one in Modern Norwegian (*Norsk Ordbok* 1966–2016: X, 115), and it links up with the etymology, so this meaning of *skreið* must have been common in Old Norse. Accordingly, *skreið* in Old Norse meant ‘stockfish’ and at the same time ‘a flock, a shoal’. This implies that a twelfth century Norwegian writing in Latin, with an imperfect grasp of Latin (which applies to the author of *Historia Norwegie*),<sup>4</sup> could mistakenly have used the Latin word for ‘a shoal’ when he had ‘stockfish’ in mind. This would be analogous to how Norwegians today, when speaking or writing English, sometimes use the word *pear* for a (light) *bulb*, because Norwegian *pære* has both meanings – or *aim* instead of *measurement*, because Norwegian *mål* has both meanings. This is a well-known type of mistake.

If the understanding thus outlined is correct, the connection with the previous passage is not only that both tell of the Sámi and their supernatural skills; both also tell of how the Sámi can use such skills to work from

- 2 *Gregem* is accusative singular of *grex* [m.], “1 flock, herd (of sheep or other animals); b (of birds). c shoal (of fish). d swarm (of bees). e litter, brood” (Latham and Howlett 1975–2011:1107), and *\*squamigerum* is masculine genitive plural “fishes” (Mortensen & Ekrem 2003: 124). Thanks to Aidan Conti and Terje Torgilstveit for help with the Latin text.
- 3 The etymology of Old Norse *stokkfiskr* / English *stockfish* / German *Stockfisch* in all probability is not ‘fish dried on a log’ (German *Stock*), as is commonly believed, but ‘fish dried round (like a log) not split’, as opposed to Old Norse *\*ráskerðingr*, ‘fish split to make it dry faster’. If so, the word is originally Old Norse, not Low German, as is commonly assumed. See Heide 2015.
- 4 As is evidenced by choice of words, syntax and other aspects of the language: see Skard 1930: e.g. pages 9, 11, 23–25, 27, 30, 34, 58, 60, 62.

a distance and attract valuables from far away. To this, one might object, regarding the attraction part, that most of the *gandus* passage relates only how a Sámi ritual specialist – a *noaidi* (in the terminology we know from later sources) – can send forth his *gandus* (*gandr*) to faraway places and what can happen then. But the story about this is placed immediately after this statement: “Furthermore they attract to themselves desirable objects from distant parts in an astounding fashion and miraculously reveal hidden treasures, even though they are situated a vast distance away” (Fisher 2003: 61). This, the Sámi’s ability to attract valuables, seems to be the author’s main interest, and the story about how the *noaidi* can send forth his free-soul should then be seen as a description of the means that give the Sámi this ability. Also, *gandr* in the Old Norse sources sometimes seems to be a term for the free-soul or helping spirits that a ritual specialist can send forth during *seiðr* (*Vǫluspá*, st. 22; Unger 1853: 303–304; Jónsson 1943: 243; Heide 2006: 185–196), and *seiðr*, in about half of the occurrences described in the Old Norse sources, is about attracting persons or resources (Heide 2006: 130, 235–262). In the Icelandic black pudding legend, the verb *seiða* is used.<sup>5</sup>

The link between the fishing passage and *gandr* (*gandus*) is also supported by the term for the tool with which the Sámi draw the fish from the deep and from the sheds ashore: it is an *uncus* (‘a hook’) (Latham & Howlett 1975–2011: 3552; Fisher & Mortensen [2003: 63] translate it as “wand”). This comes close to the *krókstafr* that looks like an *elzkara* (‘hooked staff’) that in turn looks like a “poker”, which in Old Norse and Modern Icelandic (pokers and hooks) is mentioned as a means for supernatural *gandreid* travel<sup>6</sup> – which belongs to the same category as the *gandus* travel in *Historia Norwegie* (Heide 2006: 143–146, 196–205).<sup>7</sup> Seen against this background, *Historia Norwegie*’s *uncus* may connect the magical fishing passage to the ritual

- 5 Strömbäck (1935: 78) mentions *Historia Norwegie*’s magical fishing passage as an analogue in his discussion of *seiðr*. Almqvist (2000: 263) mentions the Icelandic black pudding “fishing” in his discussion of *seið(ur)* (as we saw above, it uses the verb *seiða*), but neither has noticed how the black pudding legends story can throw light on the *Historia Norwegie* passage.
- 6 Munch 1827: 176; Jón Árnason 1958–1961 [1862–1864] II, 435–436, 442; Heide 2006: 204–206.
- 7 *Gandreid* literally means ‘*gandr* riding’, and the Old Norse source that combines *gandreid* and *krókstafr* (Munch 1827: 176), describes *gandreid* as literally riding on a hooked staff. One could argue that this is not the same as *Historia Norwegie*’s *gandus* travel in the shape of a whale and the encounter with another *gandus* in the shape of sharply pointed stakes (Mortensen 2003: 62–63). However, in the sources for Sámi and Old Norse ritual practices, it makes no difference if the spirit sent forth rides on or is inside of the means of travel (Heide 2006: 143–146) – as is illustrated in *Historia Norwegie*’s supernatural *gandus* travel; the same passage also lists means of travel that are ridden.

practices surrounding the *gandus* in the previous passage. The hooked staff clearly is thought to have some way of reaching all the way to the sheds ashore. And to judge from the rest of our material, this extension would be the hooked staff representing the means of travel that the spirit sent forth uses on its journey to far-away places.

If we read the passage in this way, it can be read in the grammatically most natural way (cf. the correlate of *quos*), and it acquires a point equally good to the one in the black pudding legends. The connection between the “flock of fish” that the Sámi see in the houses and what they later pull up from the sea is explained. The connection to the previous passage becomes clear, because then both passages tell of how the Sámi are able to attract resources by sending forth spirits that use different shapes as their means of travel.

My argument depends upon the black pudding legends being independent of *Historia Norwegie*. Could they, however, derive from *Historia Norwegie*? Few things are impossible, but it seems very unlikely that this should be the case, for two reasons. Firstly, the *Historia Norwegie* passage does not make sense alone, as we have seen. Nobody has been able to see a story similar to the black pudding legends in the passage – or any story at all – without using the black pudding legends themselves as a key. Secondly, *Historia Norwegie* seems to have been little known. This text was lost for centuries until one manuscript was found in Scotland in 1848. So how could the black pudding legends derive from the *Historia Norwegie* passage?

The most plausible understanding of the relationship between the *Historia Norwegie* passage and the black pudding legends seems to be that the legends stem from oral traditions that were related to and coexisted with the *Historia Norwegie* version in medieval times but not recorded until much later. The substantial differences and geographical distance between the versions of the black pudding legends also point to this tradition being ancient. The potential existence of the black pudding legends in medieval times is impossible to prove, of course, and we can only note that it is probable.

*Historia Norwegie* attributes the supernatural fishing techniques to the Sámi. However, although the Sámi (in the way peoples living outside of a larger society often are) were clearly understood as particularly skilled in supernatural techniques, there is reason to believe that the techniques and/or beliefs in question were shared by the Sámi and the Scandinavians (as the black pudding legends seem to illustrate). They belong to the shamanistic complex, which was essential to Sámi religion, but of which we also find elements in Old Norse religion – at least partly as a consequence of contact with Sámi religion (Strömbäck 1935, Heide 2006).

## Conclusion

*Historia Norwegie*'s passage about magical fishing does not make sense on its own. However, read against the background of nineteenth and twentieth century Icelandic and Northern Norwegian legends, it seems to make good sense and fit in with other Medieval information. These legends may stem from medieval oral traditions related to those that were written down in the *Historia Norwegie* passage. Should this be the case, these legends are an example of how oral tradition can be rather stable from medieval until modern times.

*Historia Norwegie*'s passage about magical fishing interpreted in light of the black pudding legends seems to be an example of how post-medieval popular traditions can help us understand medieval texts and medieval culture, or even pre-Christian culture. In addition, *Historia Norwegie*'s passage about magical fishing interpreted in light of the black pudding legends may expand our understanding of the shamanistic elements of Old Norse religion and such elements shared by Old Norse and Sámi religion. The above statements do not imply a claim that all legends recorded in post-medieval times have been relatively stable from medieval times, or that all post-medieval legends can help us solve medieval or pre-Christian problems. Obviously, such cases are exceptions. However, the statements do imply that, when working with medieval questions, we should be open to the possibility that post-medieval material could be useful and that we should therefore look for such material.

As emerges from Lindow's article in the present volume, there is no shortage of pitfalls when attempting to use later folklore sources to fill in gaps in earlier sources. Throughout research history, studies using this approach have, in most cases, been done in ways that fail to convince scholars today. In an earlier paper (Heide 2009), I listed some criteria that may help reduce the problems of using late material. It is not possible, however, to set up a formula which, when followed, will systematically lead to convincing results. No method is watertight, and retrospective reasoning is unusually challenging. Instead, I believe we should turn the question around. Whether or not a method is advisable can, in principle, not be decided beforehand. What matters is how it works. If a method leads to convincing results, most scholars will eventually accept it, even if they are surprised that it worked. In the same way, a method that fails to produce convincing results will lose ground. This may seem like circular reasoning, but in reality, I believe, this is how it functions.

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