



Conferences and Events

The Retrospective Methods Network

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Newsletter

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18th International Saga Conference: Sagas and the Circum-Baltic Arena

7th to 14th August 2022, Helsinki, Finland, and Tallinn, Estonia

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After the postponement made necessary by a certain other international event, the 18th International Saga Conference finally took place from the 7th–14th August 2022, with the theme of Sagas and the Circum-Baltic Arena. It was a much-anticipated event, not only due to its absence from our social calendars the previous year, but also because, for the first time in its history, the conference would be hosted by two countries: Finland and Estonia. The conference was organised thanks to the joint efforts of Folklore Studies, the Department of Cultures and the Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Helsinki, the Centre for History, Archaeology and Art History at the University of Tallinn, and the Department of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Tartu.

Another first was the conference's hybrid format, giving participants the option of virtual participation. The anticipated advantages and potential pitfalls of the arrangement were a subject of much discussion (especially considering online participation was not free of charge); however, such innovations can only truly be evaluated by putting them into practice, and treating the event as a positive experiment – an encouraging sign of new possibilities for making conferences more accessible. As shall be discussed, it was certainly an experiment that paid off.

A long-standing tradition of Saga Conferences has been the publication of a Pre-Print. Rather than organizing the publication of

proceedings following an event, the working papers to be presented and discussed at the conference were published in advance. This enabled access papers that were missed among parallel sessions or by those unable to attend and making the works immediately citable, as well as becoming the first publication of many young scholars. The practice was discontinued because the growth of the conference made the volumes unwieldy and burdensome to edit, but has been revived with flexibility of participation, published open-access at: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/346783>.

Upon reaching Helsinki on the 7th, in-person participants were first greeted with a champagne reception at Hotel Arthur in the city centre, hosted by the Embassy of Iceland in Helsinki and the Embassy of the Republic of Estonia in Finland. Ambassador of Estonia to Finland Sven Sakkov and Dean Pirjo Hiidenmaa from the University of Helsinki opened the event with speeches of welcome that provided key background information on the conference sites, as well as some history about the university itself. The reception provided a welcome opportunity for attendees to get reacquainted with long-missed colleagues, and to mingle, network and make new acquaintances among their peers. A great time was had by all, and, as the feeling of community resolidified, anticipation for the event became even keener.

The first day of the conference dawned promisingly clear and warm; the participants gathered at Porthania for the conference

introduction, given by Kendra Wilson (University of Turku), and keynote lecture. The latter was given by Neil Price (Uppsala University), who, through exploring what is (and has been) meant by the word ‘viking’, spoke on the variety of approaches and opinions within the field of Old Norse Studies, segueing into a wish for continued respect and open-mindedness within the multidisciplinary and broadly international academic community, as well as an acknowledgement of the complexity inherent in the field’s objects of study. These remarks were made in the light of more recent difficulties experienced by emerging career researchers in today’s challenging job market: far from sermonising or having the intention of shaming senior leaders in the field, this talk was clearly designed to make newcomers feel welcomed and empathised with, as well as to encourage more senior scholars to keep the difficulties facing their junior colleagues in mind. The importance of such reflections cannot be understated in the midst of an event of this scale, which, though a highly exciting and valuable opportunity, has the potential to make especially younger researchers feel at best under pressure, or at worst intellectually inferior and out of their depth. The day continued with plenary sessions at both Porthania and Metsätalo, encompassing a broad variety of topics ranging from magic, otherness, and ritual sacrifice, gender, Samic and Finnic studies, to language, text style, and reception. In-person participants concluded the day with a reception at the Banqueting Rooms at Unioninkatu for a reception from the University of Helsinki, and early career researchers were invited to convene afterwards at an informal reception held by NECRON (the Network for Early Career Researchers in Old Norse) nearby at the Thirsty Scholar.

Parallel sessions continued on Tuesday, with a similarly varied set of themes. Mythic and sacred discourse, agents, and objects were important themes in multiple sessions, as were interactions across the Baltic Sea region; the Old Norse Emotions Network also held a session and a roundtable speaking to intersections of emotion, body, and language. On this day, participants could also explore a poster presentation, as well as an exhibition

sponsored by the Kalevala Society and curated by Frog (University of Helsinki), exploring Finnic traditions and how they can be of interest for scholars of Old Norse.

A day of rest followed, during which in-person participants had the opportunity to go on excursions in either of the host countries. In Finland, this meant a half-day trip to the fortress island of Suomenlinna, a UNESCO World heritage site, and to the colourful medieval centre of Porvoo, which still boasts a row of authentic wooden house fronts by the river. Participants who went on this trip were first treated to a tour of the national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg’s house, complete with writing samples and enough paintings to fill a small gallery, and then some time in town, stopping to take in the beautiful Lutheran cathedral, which has parts dating from the 13th century and boasts an intricate array of murals, including a unicorn – apparently rare in Finland. In Estonia, participants explored ancient and medieval Tallinn, beginning at Proosa Cemetery, in use from the Bronze Age up to the beginning of the thirteenth century, continuing on to the Iru Iron Age hillfort and the Convent of St Birgitta, before exploring the history of Tallinn itself, beginning in the Old Town and continuing at the Kiek in de Kök Museum.

On the morning of Thursday the 11th, participants made their way to the impressive Astra building at the University of Tallin. Its state-of-the-art lighting and screens made the opening of this half of the conference by Marika Mägi (Tallinn University), Tallinn University’s Vice-Rector for Research Katrin Niglas, Daniel Sävborg (University of Tartu), and the Ambassador of Norway to Estonia Else Berit Eikeland, particularly impressive. Their joint remarks were a much-needed reminder that, in studying the Old Norse world, we cannot fall into the trap of letting our thoughts remain centred too firmly in the North and West: our thinking, and our horizons, must expand. This day’s keynote lecture was given by Haraldur Bernharðsson (University of Iceland), who spoke on the transmission of texts and the visible contrasts between scribes who are transmitting as part of living language use versus those who are copying ‘relic texts’, where much more importance rests on the

faithful maintenance of the source text. Haraldur reminded his audience that there is agency in transmission, and the choices that scribes make in the course of their work can reveal important aspects of language and reception at various points in time.

The final day of the conference began with a keynote lecture from Stephen Mitchell (Harvard University), who reflected on “Folkminnesforskning och filologi” (‘Folklore Research and Philology’), referring to Dag Strömbäck’s influential work of that title. Mitchell offered an overview of how deeply integrated philology and folklore research had been from the outset, tracing the transformations of their relationship across the second half of the 20th century and the new turn in interest of the 21st. On both Thursday and Friday parallel sessions continued, maintaining the themes of cosmology and mythology but also including papers on law, archaeological methods, manuscripts, human-animal relationships, and circum-Baltic networks. The official conference concluded with a business meeting, followed by a dinner at Seaplane Harbour. Those who went on the post-conference excursion spent the weekend travelling first to Noarootsi/Nuckö and other

archaeological sites in Western Estonia, and then to various sites in Saaremaa, including to Salme, where two Scandinavian boat burials from the eighth century were excavated (and which Neil Price had mentioned in his Monday keynote).

A constant theme during the conference was using new tools to not only learn more about the past, but also to communicate it to new and ever-varying audiences. It was gratifying to see that a new, hybrid format and all the challenges presented by it only served, for the most part, to increase camaraderie and strengthen participants’ efforts to support and accommodate one another to their best abilities. Occasionally, as ever, there would be a temporary glitch in proceedings due to signal or other issues, but these were rare, which is testament to the tireless work and careful preparation of the technical teams from both host countries. As we move forward as a scholarly community, it may be hoped that conference organizers continue to show sensitivity to the various challenges that may prevent scholars from attending conferences, and embrace the possibilities that hybrid conferences can offer.