The Retrospective Methods Network

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Newsletter

Conferences and Events

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Methodology in Mythology: Aarhus Old Norse Mythology Conference

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The so-called Aarhus Old Norse Mythology conference series landed in Bergen in late October in 2019. For this year, the idea of the conference was to present an overview of various theoretical approaches on the one hand and various disciplines (related to the types of sources) and their diverse methods and issues on the other hand. The goal was to answer the question: *Where does the study of Old Norse religion stand, and where can we go from here?* The organizers, led by the driving force behind the conference, Eldar Heide, decided to approach the architecture of the program from a point of view that would broadly showcase the cutting edge of Old Norse Mythology studies. The result was a well-balanced collection of presentations that covered the majority of contemporary trends and methods.

Margaret Clunies Ross (Universty of Sydney) started the conference's academic content after Heide bid everyone welcome to the conference. In her keynote lecture, she looked back on the origins of her pivotal book *Prolonged Echoes*, published 25 years before the conference, and offered her assessment of the 25 years of scholarly discussion following its publication. While she appreciated a number of new trends, she warned against extreme positions that denounce the principles of structuralism completely, throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Her position of defending the core of the structuralist project sparked engaging discussions with the audience, and it became clear that the debate on what the useful (or even indispensable) aspects of the structuralist approach are, along with its major weaknesses, is still ongoing.

This keynote presentation was followed by a dual presentation by Michael Stausberg (University of Bergen) and Olof Sundqvist (Stockholm University). Stausberg talked generally about the principle of comparison and comparativism in mythology and religion, stressing the fact that we cannot do without comparison, however uneasy it can make us. Small-scale comparison is not usually perceived as such and it is easier to control and can be more precise, while large-scale comparison is often seen as problematic. However, there is no clear delineation of where one begins and the other ends. Sundqvist followed the general introduction by focusing on smaller-scale intracultural comparison, specifically concerning the issue of the Christianization of Scandinavia, which is often studied with a focus on the outcome and not on the process itself. The specific processes and tactics of dismantling religious institutions – especially those connected to the roles of kings and chieftains – are intangible but valuable objects of intracultural comparative study.

In the next talk, John Lindow (University of California, Berkeley) reviewed the early scholarship and its conception of mythology, distinguishing two 'mythologies': 'mythology I' being the mythological stories and motifs

coming from the studied culture itself, and 'mythology II' ('mythography') being the 'science of myths', performed by the scholars. Lindow brought up some of the typical features of early scholarship – for example, the primary focus on texts, as a result of which religion was equated with mythology (as in the case of Jacob Grimm). Early mythologists tended to aim at producing coherent mythologies, and were in this respect not so far away from medieval scholars like Snorri Sturluson.

The next session started with Sophie Bønding's (National Museum of Denmark) presentation on the usefulness of typologies of religion. She outlined two widely used typologies: the two-fold typology of Jan Assmann (primary/secondary religion) and the three-fold typology of Robert Neally Bellah (tribal/archaic/axial religion) and argued that certain features are associated with certain types (for example, a textual canon with axial religions, but it is usually absent from non-axial religions). It thus makes sense to ask questions and search for features that are in accordance with the type. Typology thus helps us eliminate useless searches for features belonging to different types of religion, according to her.

Simon Nygaard (Aarhus University) followed with a presentation based on a similar theoretical framework – Bellah's evolutionary typology of religion. The idea is that two historically unconnected societies of a similar environment, social structure and technological development can arrive at a similar type of religion and mythology via 'convergent evolution'. Nygaard presented a case study of pre-Christian Hawaii as compared with pre-Christian Scandinavia, and showed a series of analogies between these two societies and postulated a specific sub-type situated between 'tribal' and 'archaic' religion called 'chiefdom', which fits both Hawaii and Scandinavia.

The typological-comparative session was closed with a two-presenter paper by Luke John Murphy (University of Iceland) and Giulia Mancini (independent). Mancini chose the example of the goddesses Diana, Artemis and Skaði to show how comparison can be done by assessing both similarities and differences. While comparativism may often be used to focus only on similarities, Mancini's approach resulted in presenting more differences. Murphy then followed with a comparison of household rituals in medieval England and Scandinavia, again assessing similarities side-by-side with differences. Both presenters then concluded with general observations on the pros and cons of comparisons of this sort.

Joonas Ahola (University of Helsinki) presented the audience with general questions of mythology research, approaching the topic from the perspective of Finland. Ahola was concerned with the fact that Finnish religion was constructed from later sources and analogies; he asked questions about the definitions of mythology and religion, as well as what was considered Christian or pre-Christian. He discussed how these definitions were constructed within theoretical frameworks by Finnish 19th-century mythologists such as M.A. Castrén and later reinterpreted according to the perspectives of their successors.

The scholarly talks were followed by a musical performance by Einar Selvik of Wardruna. Selvik performed several examples of eddic poems turned into songs using various historical instruments including a harp and a ram-horn trumpet. He explained that he is well aware that we have no records of melodies from the Viking Age and that his interpretations have no claim to historicity. However, he showed that most of the instruments have certain specific features and their own musical 'logic', which at least puts constraint on the scope of the musician's creativity and grounds it in the physicality of the instruments themselves.

The next session started with a paper by Andreas Nordberg (Stockholm University), who discussed past scholarship of folklore and its relation to the study of mythology, with a focus on traditions connected to the 'last sheaf'. Nordberg remarked on the usual directions of comparisons which tended to go towards Finnic, Sámi, Vedic or Greek cultures, but not toward later folklore. He also singled out the famous Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, who interpreted large parts of folklore as a result of hallucinations and products of mental illnesses among the people.

The next speaker in the last session was Else Mundal (University of Bergen), who talked about *Vǫluspá*, stressing the fact that *Vǫluspá*

is one of the most interpreted poems in the Old Norse corpus, but also raises more questions than others. She proposed two principles for analysis: genre and the relation between individual parts and the whole. One of the problems of the poem is its authorship and aim – who put the poem together? And for what reason? The poem seems to be partly inspired by Christian prophetic texts, but in the end provides a surprising structure of Old Norse cosmology.

The last speaker of the first day was Haukur Þorgeirsson (Árni Magnússon Institute), who talked about the dating of eddic poetry. The talk put questions of dating and oral memory into perspective by showing cases from other oral traditions, especially Ancient India, but also Classical Antiquity, stressing the fact that oral traditions can be both surprisingly good at preserving very old text but also always present themselves as ancient while containing layers from various eras. The layers can then be distinguished through the analysis of stylometric criteria: verse forms, formulas and other formal aspects.

The second day of the conference started with questions about interpretations when working with historical, mainly textual materials. Jens Peter Schjødt's (Aarhus University) talk on the interesting theme of absence in retrospective research materials opened the session. He brought the audience to ponder over the credibility of asking questions about the lack of material and asked whether it was possible to deduce certain aspects of Old Norse mythology from typological comparisons, despite them not being mentioned in the sources. Schjødt's discussion on *argumenta ex silentio* was an interesting opening for the day.

A presentation that sparked a lively discussion was given by Amy Franks (independent) and examined the possibilities of applying queer theory to Old Norse studies. Franks gave a short presentation of the premises of using queer theory in academic scholarship and then continued to discuss alternate approaches to certain aspects of Old Norse mythology, where using queer theory could reveal new interpretations that contest previously established ones.

Jan Kozák's (Charles University) presentation on the use of bodily metaphors and cognitive studies in interpretations of Old Norse mythology brought another new approach to the table. One of the main points of this presentation was to show that most myths about bodies in the eddic corpus can be classified into four types corresponding to the four 'master tropes': metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Myths are so surreal, because they turn these tropes into stories and concrete attributes.

Following Kozák's talk, three up-and-coming researchers presented their ideas for research projects in the form of posters. They held a short presentation on their projects and discussed them informally with more senior researchers.

The second session of the day was reserved for studies of performance and orality. Frog (University of Helsinki) began the session with his discussion of orality in mythological source texts. He discussed both kalevalaic and eddic poetry in terms of orality and performance in relation to the textual forms in which they are mostly analyzed. The questions of context and meaning in oral vs. written sources were taken up in an in-depth analysis of verses and their oral performance. Going deeper into the aspects of performance, Terry Gunnell (University of Iceland) provided the audience with an interesting reconstruction of how mythological poems were performed in Old Norse society. Similar themes to those in Frog's discussion emerged, and the analysis of texts without a consideration of their performative contexts was put into question in a productive manner in Gunnell's presentation.

The day's third session looked at diverse approaches to Old Norse studies. Pernille Hermann (Aarhus University) took the stage with a presentation on memory studies. She showed the audience a glimpse of how memory works in culture and how aspects of memory are visible in both Old Norse myths and the form in which they have been preserved, and how memory studies and Old Norse studies can benefit from each other. Her presentation highlighted how fundamental memory is to Old Norse studies, although it is an aspect often overlooked.

Pierre-Brice Stahl (Sorbonne University) was up next with an overview on how reception plays a great role in interpretations of

mythological texts. First providing an introduction to the hermeneutical background of reception studies, Stahl proceeded to discuss the complexity of reception and the fruitful applications of reception studies to Old Norse mythology.

The last presentation of the session was held by Kendra Willson (University of Turku), who talked about the fruitful, yet often misused etymological approach to mythology. Presenting some of the past pitfalls of etymological analysis and its potentially fruitful future applications, Willson discussed the possible contact points of historical analysis and etymology, presenting how etymological analyses can be seen as indicators of cultural contacts and historical phenomena in the analysis of mythologies.

Picking up partly where Willson left, Stefan Brink (University of Cambridge) started the last session of the conference with an interesting look at toponymy, the study of place names. Presenting an overview of the history of place name research, Brink provided the audience with some points as to why toponymy can provide researchers with information on Old Norse religion. He contemplated the lack of current research on place names despite the potential it holds for studies of landscapes and mindscapes and their relations to historical studies of Old Norse religion.

Brink's presentation functioned as a bridge from linguistics to archaeology, which was the topic of the two last presentations. Laurine Albris (University of Bergen) discussed the use of place names in archaeological research in her presentation, where she presented the audience with some Danish examples of sacrificial sites with mythological place names. She pondered over the links between landscape and mythology and concluded that it was important to look at long term processes and suggested place names to be looked at as biographies.

Anders Andrén (Stockholm University) closed the session with a look at ritual and materiality from an archaeological point of entry. He discussed the upsides and downsides of archaeological interpretations and the limitedness of archaeological remains as witnesses to ritual processes. Presenting some interesting case studies and new methods in archaeology, Andrén provided the audience with a look at what questions archaeology can answer, and what is left to interpretation, thus communicating some of the most important discourses within Old Norse studies from an archaeologist's point of view.

After Andrén's presentation, Heide closed the conference by thanking the audience and the speakers, summing up some of the main threads visible in current studies of Old Norse mythology. After the conference came to an end, the idea of publishing a volume of articles based on the conference was raised, and a group was assembled to take on that task. It therefore seems that also those who were not present will soon be able to tap into the latest research in Old Norse mythology in textual form.

According to the wide array of disciplinary and methodological approaches presented at the conference in Bergen, the study of Old Norse mythology is a vibrant field and as relevant as ever. Ranging from linguistic and cognitive approaches through typological and comparative ones, without forgetting the importance of materiality and lived religion, the conference reached its aim in showcasing the current state of Old Norse mythology studies.

Some of the main threads that could reflect current trajectories in the field could also be followed through the conference. One of the major thematic and theoretical approaches was related to comparative typologies. At least Bønding's, Nygaard's and Schjødt's presentations, and to an extent also Murphy's and Mancini's, took this point of view and showed how typologies could be used as heuristic tools. Another such thread was the consciousness of the roots of mythology research. For example, Lindow's, Ahola's, Nordberg's and also Franks's talks looked to the history of studies of mythology and the foundations on which our knowledge stands, shedding light on them more or less critically.