

***New Focus on Retrospective Methods. Resuming Methodological Discussions: Case Studies from Northern Europe.*** Edited by Eldar Heide & Karen Bek-Petersen. FFC 307. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2014. Pp. 230.

#### REVIEW BY AÐALHEIÐUR GUÐMUNDSDÓTTIR

The present anthology is rooted in collaboration that began at the 14th International Saga Conference in Uppsala in 2009, where Eldar Heide discussed the need for greater methodological awareness in studies dealing with the use of post-medieval material in the study of Old Norse religion and mythology, and also of Old Norse literature and history. This was then followed up by the founding of the Retrospective Methods Network, which started by promoting a conference the following year in cooperation with the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Bergen and has been active since. *New Focus on Retrospective Methods* is a collection of articles that were originally presented as papers at the conference.

The anthology is firmly edited by Eldar Heide and Karen Bek-Petersen, who discuss the goal of the network, and hence the articles presented, in an introduction. In this, they touch upon a renewed interest in post-medieval material, which had fallen out of favour in the various branches of Old Norse studies, particularly regarding religion and mythology. This is followed by nine articles on various topics, a list of authors and an index.

First come two surveys, where Terry Gunnell and Jens Peter Schjødt evaluate the relevance of retrospective methods in Old Norse studies and pre-Christian Scandinavian religion. The authors of the subsequent five articles, Eldar Heide, Daniel Sävborg, Rudolf Simek, Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir and Frog each then approach an individual topic; these are very different in nature, yet all within the field of Old Norse studies. The last two articles are somewhat more distanced from the overall theme, where Hans Antonson and Janne Saarikivi use retrospective methods within their fields of historical geography and linguistics.

The term *retrospective methods* is in itself problematic; some of the authors discuss previous research in their own field that we might want to define within the given framework, and some of them comment on the term itself and related words in academic discussion. The introductory statement that the widespread use of post-medieval sources fell out of favour, but is now being reconsidered in the study of earlier

traditions, is also a bit problematic, as the extent to which this was true probably varied from one discipline to another. Coming from the field of Old Norse literature myself and having been taught at the University of Iceland by scholars such as Davíð Erlingsson, who followed in the footsteps of Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, I did not immediately recognize the alleged pattern of change in attitudes towards post-medieval material. Both of these scholars were known for their folkloristic approaches and their open-mindedness towards different materials and different fields in the study of culture and literature, and both were active within the period c. 1930–2000. Erlingsson's students (e.g. Jürg Glauser and Matthew Driscoll) have since carried their research further in various works. The statement may, however, apply to attitudes within other universities or, e.g., to mythology in particular. Nevertheless, a number of earlier, and also more recent studies, might be described as being based on “retrospective methods”, even if they have not been defined as such. Some of them are mentioned in Gunnell's article, in a broader perspective.

The focus of the present book is, admittedly, more on Old Norse religion and mythology than Old Norse literature – even if these two fields are inevitably close in many respects. This is evident from the articles themselves, where the authors use and refer to sagas and literary works such as the *Íslendingasögur*, *formaldarsögur*, *rid-darasögur* and medieval ballads. Various forms of folklore are also considered, such as legends and *þulur* (riggermaroles), and as Terry Gunnell points out, “... all pre-Christian Nordic religion and belief was itself a form of folklore” (p. 17).

As a professor of folkloristics, Gunnell gives an apt insight into the nature of folklore and the potential value of folkloristic methods for the study of Old Norse religion. He discusses briefly the different approaches practised by present-day scholars, some of whom are positive towards folkloristic methods, while others seem to rely solely on written evidence, and hence the learned tradition, rather than looking at the whole picture. In Gunnell's words, “... folklore brings us back to the heart of the living society, rather than its institutions” (p. 26). He then turns his attention to a case study by examining folk legends concerning burial mounds, an interesting topic previously discussed by H.F. Feilberg and other scholars. In his concluding remarks, he questions the general view, derived from *Snorri's Edda*, that all “Viking-Age warriors who died in battle went to Valhöll” (p. 35), since legends from oral tradition suggest otherwise.

In his article “Folkloristic material and pre-Christian Scandinavian religion”, Jens Peter Schjødt traces the changing premises of research in the field during the last century, and explains the reason why the highly influential scholar Jan de Vries was sceptical towards folkloristic methods. However, modern scholars' views on pagan religion have changed, and as we no longer consider Nordic religion to be static, or

to have an “original form”, folkloristic methods are applicable again. Modern scholars do not even assume that pre-Christian religion was understood by all in the same manner. As it abounds with different kinds of ideas, rituals and supernatural beings, the material itself calls for different approaches, where we should not hesitate to use all available methods and different sources, including recent folkloristic material. Because of the continuity of traditions, recent material may be as helpful in our research as older material, or as Schjødt puts it:

... even if there is a distance in time between the written Icelandic sources and modern folklore, it would be very hard to argue that such a distance has decisive theoretical implications. The difference is only of degree and it will be hard to argue that something decisive happened during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which created a significant difference between the period before and the period after this time. (p. 51)

Eldar Heide illustrates the methodological discussion as applied to a more circumscribed topic in his article on the semantic side of etymology. By showing some examples of Old Norse words, he compares elements “that constitute the semantic side of formally related words” (p. 59), and explains how words shared by the Indo-European peoples can throw light on their common habits and traditions. Heide speaks for the importance of a variety of approaches when studying past cultures; in his discussion, he outlines one of them, the semantic etymology approach, which can be applied to specific topics.

The next article, written by Daniel Sävborg, deals with Scandinavian folk legends and post-classical sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*). The author throws doubt on previous interpretations where scholars believe that similarities between different medieval sagas should be explained in terms of influence from one of the sagas on the others. Instead, he suggests that legends from oral tradition may just as well lie behind these. He believes that there are certain similarities between written sagas from the fourteenth century and oral traditions recorded in later times, even if they are probably independent of each other. In some cases these consist of whole stories or whole episodes in the *Íslendingasögur*, and their parallels in folklore seem to be much more prominent than in contemporary saga literature, the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*. The common features must therefore have been rooted in oral legends that were already in circulation in medieval times.

Rudolf Simek takes us to yet another dimension of Old Norse studies in his article on *guldgubber*, Scandinavian gold foil figures. In his attempt to unravel their func-

tion and symbolism, he believes that a systematic comparison with contemporary iconographical and literary sources is the ideal way to study these artifacts – when possible – but that in certain cases, a comparison with later parallels can lead to more reliable results. As an example, he compares certain positions and/or gestures of the figures to a manuscript illumination from the Middle High German *Sachsenspiegel*, and points out a certain continuity in iconographic tradition from the Migration Age down to medieval times. As with Sävborg’s article, Simek’s considerations are highly interesting, albeit rather speculative, and in both cases, a more extensive treatment would strengthen their arguments.

A more detailed examination is offered in the next article, where Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir presents an analysis of post-medieval rigmarole verses. Helgadóttir uses comparative and retrospective methods to explore the roots of post-medieval Icelandic *þulur*, and to shed light on rigmarole traditions from the West Norse area. She believes the post-medieval Icelandic *þulur* to be rooted in Old Icelandic *þulur* to some extent, and the same applies to post-medieval Scandinavian rigmaroles. In both cases, the Old Icelandic *þulur* are, however, not the only ancestors. As *þulur* are very flexible, they are easily influenced by other kinds of poetry, motifs or text blocks. Helgadóttir’s conclusion is that in the case of the Icelandic *þulur* tradition, retrospective methods can be helpful in order to demonstrate “that at least some groups within the tradition of post-medieval Icelandic *þulur* ... can be firmly anchored in the thirteenth century” (p. 116). Further, she believes that retrospective methods can shed light on the development of the tradition in the Nordic countries, even if they certainly have their limits.

In his article on Germanic traditions of the theft of the thunder-instrument (ATU 1148B), Frog focuses on the Old Icelandic *Þrymskviða*, which he believes to be rooted in a tale of the type ATU 1148B (according to the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification of folktales), while being composed for a Christian cultural milieu. Like Helgadóttir’s article, this one presents a detailed study with in-depth knowledge. Frog’s topic is vast, and while illustrating the usefulness of retrospective methods, the article also reminds us how limited they can be. While the comparison of the material to ATU 1148B is convincing, other kinds of folklore material also come to mind as appropriate comparative material, such as ATU 311, at least in some Icelandic variants of *Sagan af Kolrössu krókríðandi*, which describes a mock wedding of a peasant girl and a giant in the giant’s cave. Other candidates for comparison include legends about the German goddess Berhta (Perchta), since in certain European districts the sound of thunder was explained as being caused by Bertha spinning flax at her wheel, and Norwegian legends about fiddlers who make furniture and household items dance

to their music might also be relevant. One of Frog's conclusions, that the tradition of Geirrǫðr as according to ATU 1148B could reflect a Germanic Iron Age form of the given type, with a continuity of centuries is, however, compelling, and the overall presentation laudable.

Hans Antonson draws our attention to the diverging use of the word *retrospective* within different historical disciplines. In his own field, historical geography, e.g., it is used in an opposite way to the definition given in the above articles, and indicates a procedure in which earlier sources are used to throw light on later times. In the main part of this article, he explores the use of post-medieval historical maps as a source for research on land issues, which proves to be productive and to provide information about medieval landscapes; while the approach adheres to the retrospective methods discussed in the previous articles, "retrogressive methodology" would be the apt term in historical geography. But while the methodological discussion presented here, highlighting the difference between disciplines, may be of value for Old Norse scholars, the topic stands at a distinct distance from those covered in the previous articles, and makes the book, with its focus on Old Nordic religion and mythology, and in some cases Old Norse literature, a bit disjointed.

The same can be said of the last article, by Janne Saarikivi, where the author introduces similar approaches used in her own field, historical linguistics, before focusing on a more specific topic, based on Western Uralic Languages. She explains how languages can spread by language shifts instead of by migration and demonstrates how place-names and systematic comparative linguistics can illuminate cultural and religious history. Her study indicates that areas where a language has been spoken over a long period of time tend to have the greatest dialect variation. In contrast, areas with uniform dialects often represent a relatively recent linguistic heritage.

As is maintained in the introduction, it can be highly problematic methodologically to throw light on earlier times on the basis of late material. Hence, a greater methodological awareness is needed, and a scholarly discussion of the problem. With the exception of Heide's article, where the author introduces an innovative method in his attempt to solve aspects of a highly specialised problem, the collection of articles in this book does not, however, present a lot of new methodology convenient for those who want to give retrospective methods a try. Most of the authors use, first and foremost, comparative and interpretive methods similar to those that have been used in Old Norse studies so far. However, what the book does is to show us various examples of possibilities when using late material. Even if these are in most cases conventional, they provide us with a useful overview, together with speculations about different disciplines, methods, and the advantages of retrospective methods in

general, and in doing so, the anthology brings retrospective methods under a new focus. In the end, however, Jens Peter Schjødt's article is probably the most thought-provoking, and it is appropriate to cite the editors' summary in the introduction, where they discuss his topic: "all of the material we have at our disposal is problematic ... in fact, all of our results remain uncertain" (p. 13).

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