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Magic and Memory in the Medieval North

Memory and magic are topics about which a number of scholars have written,[1] but we have not yet seen modern international memory studies applied in a comprehensive fashion to Nordic magic, where I believe the prospects for successfully tilling well-worked fields are great. What would such a study imply and what new understandings might emerge from such an undertaking? In the following remarks, I look to sketch out some key considerations for the study of Nordic memory culture as applied to that broad category we call magic.

The locution 'the medieval North' – perhaps even better, 'the premodern North' – may not seem to delimit the range of this topic very much. Why then use it and not some more obvious designation? To me, that phrase, despite (or perhaps through) its ambiguities, avoids

I take this opportunity to express my deep thanks to the editors of *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland* for the opportunity to publish this revised version of my presentation at The Jarl Gallén Prize Seminar Programme at The Great Hall of the Finnish Literature Society on 5 November 2019, as well as to the selection committee itself for the honor of being awarded the 2019 Jarl Gallén Prize. The topics here –'magic' and 'memory' – are inherently important, and they continue to demand my attention: some months ago, my lengthy collaboration with Pernille Hermann (Aarhus University) and Jürg Glauser (University of Zurich) resulted in *The Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies. Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Berlin 2018); together with Louise Nyholm Kallestrup (Southern Denmark University), I currently serve as series co-editor of a six-volume set called *A Cultural History of Magic*; and recently, the Memory and the Pre-Modern North Research group established the monograph series *Memory and the Medieval North* at de Gruyter. I should stress that the retrospective character of this essay necessitates that in it I have borrowed from, built on, and extended a number of previously published works, as indicated. I note too that I am very grateful to Anita M. Geritz for her assistance in the preparation of this essay.

1. Both Jonathan Roper, 'Charms, change and memory. Some principles underlying variation', *Folklore. Electronic Journal of Folklore* 9 (1998), at http://www.folklore.ee folklore/vol9/roper.htm (accessed most recently on 28 February 2020), and Lea T. Olsan, 'Charms in medieval memory', Jonathan Roper (ed.), *Charms and Charming in Europe* (London 2004), pp. 59–88, for example, address the question of memory and charms in the medieval and modern English tradition.

the many pitfalls that more specific language necessarily invites. It thus circumvents discussions about shifting political borders over time – e.g., the status of Skåne, Slesvig, Shetland, or Ostrobothnia – or whether the dominant language is this or that regional form of North Germanic, or even whether the concept must be defined according to such external events as Martin Luther's famous nailing of his 95 theses on the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg in 1517. All of these and similar cultural isobars have their place, of course, but my own preference is to shun nationalistic and other divisive filters and to view the region inclusively as a whole over very long periods of time, while at the same time acknowledging the reality that there will have been regional, class, and other variations.

In general, I conceive of that part of the 'the medieval North' on which I focus as consisting of, as I have written elsewhere, 'speakers of the North Germanic dialects, communities of the pre-modern era (mainly the Viking and Middle Ages) living not only in the modern Nordic countries but also, for example, in various outposts and settlements along the Baltic perimeter (e.g., Estonia) and in the North Atlantic (e.g., Greenland, Shetland, Orkney, the Isle of Man, the Hebrides). These widely dispersed settlement areas consisted of significantly diverse sub-cultures, especially given their often extensive contacts with neighboring social groups, yet the Nordic peoples of these regions generally recognized that a broad linguistic continuity existed between and among the groups, and that they shared numerous cultural traits and traditions; moreover, they were frequently aware of and honored their historical and genealogical affinities'.[2]

Memory and Memory Studies

The simplex 'memory' I use as shorthand for a variety of related but not necessarily identical concepts. By memory, I refer to several different things: memory as the word is employed in common usage, memory as a focus of, and an important concept in, the study of folklore and tradition, and memory as the central component of so-called 'modern international memory studies'.

2. Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Folklore studies', Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann & Stephen A. Mitchell (eds.), *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies. Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Berlin 2018), 1:93.

With respect to the common sense of the word, in everyday usage, English 'memory' refers to both the human faculty of mind which stores information, as well as those things which are remembered or recalled – thus, for example, one might use the same word for such related but differing senses as 'My memory is not as good as it used to be' and 'I have an early childhood memory of going fishing with my father'. As to the other ways in which I use the term, keeping the folklore-oriented and more recent theoretical usages distinct is something of a desperate enterprise, given their interconnectedness – broadly speaking both tend to be concerned with 'cultural memory'. As heavily influenced, and impressed, by the contributions of modern memory studies researchers as I am, I remain mindful of the fact that our contemporary questions and answers are often anything but new to those familiar with the history of folklore research.

Folkloristics is, after all, a field historically concerned with the reception, perception, use, and reconfiguration of cultural forms inherited from the past (or believed to have been inherited from the past), meaning that folklore scholarship often anticipated by decades many of the concerns and approaches we today associate with modern memory studies.[3] As Henning Laugerud notes, 'Folklore studies have in one sense always been concerned with memory as a cultural phenomenon. The term folklore describes a certain kind of transmitted and collectively shared memory'.[4] Folklore (or 'Folk-Lore' in the original) was proposed by the English antiquarian William Thoms in 1846 as a calque on German *Volkskunde*. Now widely used in international scholarship, the global status of this term can sometimes mask telling native phrases. Importantly, I note that one especially common term in the North, known since the 1830s, specifically builds on the compound 'folk memory' in the various Nordic languages (i.e., *folkminnesforskning, folkeminnesforskning, folkemindeforskning, þjóðminjafræði* – although this is notably not the case for Finnish).

3. Cf. my comments in Mitchell, 'Folklore studies', pp. 93–106, as well as in Stephen Mitchell, 'Orality and oral theory', Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann & Stephen A. Mitchell (eds.), *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies. Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Berlin 2018), 1:120–131.
4. Henning Laugerud, 'Memory stored and reactivated. Some introductory reflections', *Arv. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 66 (2010), p. 19.

Still, despite my sense that folkloristics and memory studies are often discussing similar issues, through its fresh thinking and expanded reach, a singular contribution of modern memory studies has been to provide us with newly-minted nomenclature and a range of helpful typologies. Thus, the well-established expression 'folk group' has been given an interesting and useful twist in memory studies by substituting the phrase 'memory community'.[5] It is an expression I have come to appreciate increasingly, since, although generally meaning the same thing as 'folk group', 'memory community' moves us away from an underlying, implied Herderian sense of shared ethnicity, language, religion, and so on, assumptions which have dogged the expression 'folk group' in modern usage – this despite the fact that scholars have been clear for a very long time that these were not the factors that defined 'folk groups'. After all, already in 1965, Alan Dundes had typified such communities as 'any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor'.[6]

In a similar vein, shortly after the key notion of 'collective memory' was proposed by Maurice Halbwachs in 1925,[7] the distinction between, and significance of, what we would today, following Jan Assmann, refer to as *kommunikatives und kulturelles Gedächtnis* ('communicative memory' and 'cultural memory'),[8] was anticipated among Nordic folklorists. In this lively discussion in the 1930s, the processes by which an encounter with the supernatural is initially related by the individual as a first-person experience and subsequently undergoes narrativization within the tradition, increasingly conforming to and thereby becoming part of that tradition,[9] was considered, resulting in what folklorists

5. Ann Rigney, 'Plenitude, scarcity and the circulation of cultural memory', *Journal of European Studies* 35 (2005), pp. 24–26.
6. Alan Dundes, 'What is folklore?', *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs NJ 1965), p. 2.
7. Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Travaux de l'Année sociologique (Paris 1925), transl. as *On Collective Memory*, transl. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago 1992).
8. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich 1992), transl. as *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization. Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge 2011).
9. E.g., Carl W. von Sydow, 'Kategorien der Prosa-Volksdichtung', Harry Schewe & Erich Seemann (eds.), *Volkskundliche Gaben. John Meier zum siebzigsten Geburtstage dargebracht* (Berlin 1934), pp. 253–268; Gunnar Granberg, 'Memorat und Sage. Einige methodische Gesichtspunkte', *Saga och Sed* (1935), pp. 120–127.

today, using von Sydow's terminology, describe as a *memorate* which over time becomes a *fabulate*.[10]

In general, modern scholarship tends to use the phrase 'cultural memory', following Assmann, but there have been many related expressions, generally meaning the same thing, variously seeing memory as social, shared, and collective. In 1977, the historian Jacques Le Goff took stock of the results of anthropological research on the role of memory in pre-literate societies by, among others, Jack Goody, and adopts the phrase 'ethnic memory' to refer to 'the collective memory of people without writing'.[11] In a locution which appears to have gained popularity in recent years, cultural memory is in some sense maintained within what Lauri Harvilahti, Frog, and other scholars have referred to as an 'ethnocultural substratum', that is, 'archaic features long preserved in a tradition'.[12] The social engines that drive these forces are much debated but generally appear to be seen as the performative dimension of collective memory and the ways in which practices carry, shape, and maintain the shared memories of groups of people, the sort of social dramas and performances generations of anthropologists and folklorists, such as Victor Turner and Richard Bauman, have discovered in both marked and more-or-less quotidian circumstances.[13]

10. Cf. Laurits Bødker, 'Sagn', Johannes Brøndsted et al. (eds.), *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingetid til reformasjonstid* (Copenhagen 1982 [1956–1978]). 14: cols. 660–661.
11. Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, transl. Steven Rendall & Elizabeth Claman (New York 1992), p. 55. In suggesting this term, Le Goff is following André Leroi-Gourhan, 'Les vois de l'histoire avant l'ecriture', Jacques Le Goff & Pierre Nora (eds.), *Faire de l'histoire*, Bibliothèque des histoires 1 (Paris 1974), pp. 93–105.
12. See Lauri Harvilahti, *The Holy Mountain. Studies on Upper Altay Oral Poetry*, Folklore Fellows Communication 282 (Helsinki 2003), pp. 90–115 (citation from p. 91); Frog, 'Ethnocultural substratum. Its potential as a tool for lateral approaches to tradition history', *RMN Newsleter* 3 (2011), pp. 23–37.
13. E.g., Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors. Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca NY 1974); Richard Bauman, 'Verbal art as performance', *American Anthropologist* 77 (1975), pp. 290–311. On the role social institutions may play, see, for example, Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge 1989), who generally sees social memory embodied in elite society's commemorative ceremonies, while Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Arts of Memory* (Cambridge 2011 [1999]), p. 6, argues that 'Living memory thus gives way to a cultural memory that is underpinned by media – by material carriers such as memorials, monuments, museums, and archives'.

There is little doubting that there has been, as one noted scholar comments, a 'memory boom' in recent years.[14] That uptick in serious scholarly attention is one which a number of students working on the pre-modern Nordic world have strongly embraced in recent years, leading to the following view in the recently published reference volume on Nordic memory studies: 'This so-called memory turn has presented conceptual frameworks and a vocabulary that make it possible to investigate the memory-based cultures of the North in new, and more meticulous and systematic, ways […] it has become possible to penetrate more deeply into the forms, functions, and implications of memory in the pre-modern Nordic world. Or in other words, to investigate its broader philosophical implications'.[15]

Magic: Approaching a Definition

Despite the fact that magic is a topic that attracts much attention and has historically been much debated, it is also a cultural category about which little certainty exists, including whether it is indeed a distinct cultural category and, if so, what would constitute a satisfactory definition of the term. Owen Davies, for example, famously quipped some years ago that magic is 'beyond simple definition'.[16] Echoing this view, Richard Kieckhefer recently opened a discussion of the topic in *The Routledge Handbook of Medieval Magic* by commenting, 'What is magic? We know perfectly well what it is if no one asks us, but when someone asks and we try to define it, we are confused'.[17] The palpable and cautious frustration expressed by Davies and Kieckhefer derives from and reflects a century and a half of debates concerning the nature, definition, and uses of, as well as the prejudices about, a term like 'magic', concerns that raise the question of whether scholars can ever agree about the existence of a cultural category largely consisting of efforts to know and/or influence future events. And can such a con-

14. Marek Tamm, 'Beyond history and memory. New perspectives in memory studies', *History Compass* (2013), p. 458.
15. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann & Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Pre-modern nordic memory studies. An introduction', Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann & Stephen A. Mitchell (eds.), *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies. Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Berlin 2018), 1:5. Cf. the survey and literature review in the same essay, 1:12–22.
16. Owen Davies, *Magic. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2012), p. 2.
17. Richard Kieckhefer, 'Rethinking how to define magic', *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic* (London 2019), p. 15.

cept (or its definition) be de-coupled from the complex baggage that has tripped up and ensnared it over the decades, including: the colonial discourses of earlier eras; the apparent connection between magic and such related categories as religion and science; and the questionable utility of a category both broad enough to capture all the things we tend to mean by it, yet sufficiently well- and narrowly-described to be useful in a discussion of cultural developments that evolve over many centuries?

Discussions of magic in Western scholarship over the past century and a half have been shaped by a variety of experiences, insights, and interests,[18] but in almost all cases they seem to have been predicated, intentionally or not, on the perspective held by the observers that they themselves are in some marked way – spiritually, intellectually, culturally, politically, economically – superior to those being scrutinized, a fact as true of the medieval period as of the modern. By way of a less complicated and more readily recognizable parallel, most people will be familiar with the old chestnut about how to tell the difference between a dialect and a language – the answer being that a language is a dialect with an army. A similar view appears to be at work in thinking about magic.

The distinctions within what has come to be the magic-religion-science triad are strikingly analogous, I would argue, in that they too are largely shaped by the power relationships of the various individuals and cultures involved. Literalists from the Abrahamic religions, for example, experience no difficulties in accepting spiritual ascendance in whirlwinds, fiery chariots, or other seemingly 'unscientific' phenomena as real and meaningful parts of their faiths, yet these same people can often be quick to see the belief systems of others as irrational, illogical,

18. With so many excellent overviews of magic theory in Europe and elsewhere, I merely touch here on a few of the more important developments in thinking about magic, but especially recommend Ronald Grambo, 'Models of magic. Some preliminary considerations', *Norveg* 18 (1975), pp. 77–109; Michael Winkelman, 'Magic. A theoretical reassessment', *Current Anthropology* 23:1 (1982), pp. 37–66; E. William Monter, *Ritual, Myth, and Magic in Early Modern Europe* (Athens OH 1983); Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 1989); Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton NJ 1991); Graham Cunningham, *Religion and Magic. Approaches and Theories* (Edinburgh 1999); Christa Tuczay, *Magie und Magier im Mittelalter* (Munich 2003 [1992]); Michael D. Bailey, 'The meanings of magic', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1:1 (2006), pp. 6–9.

or otherwise beyond clear-headedness. The same could, one suspects, be said of any larger group about those less powerful than themselves.

What then would provide us with a concept of magic broad enough to include what is and was emically perceived to be its substance, yet etically narrow enough to allow for meaningful comparisons and diagnoses? Attempts at just such a formulation are many and examining a few of them can offer a valuable grip on the issue. Excellent detailed surveys of this problem exist,[19] and the following is only meant to offer my own highly selective perception of its outlines before moving into the world of late medieval and early modern charm magic in the northern world.

A consistent element in almost all modern Western characterizations and attempts at defining magic is reference to concepts of power and will. From Aleister Crowley's famous formulation of *magick* as 'the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will',[20] to the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s 'activities or observances which are intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the natural world', to a text like the 2002 *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*'s characterization of magic as 'the purported art of influencing the course of events through occult means',[21] the perception of magic as a cultural category to be associated with the practitioner's volition and projection of personal desire dominate.

Earlier generations were apt to express this perspective in even more naked ways: *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, originally published in 1949, gave a rather unvarnished version of prevailing attitudes when it offered, 'The art of compulsion of the supernatural; also the art of controlling nature by

19. E.g., Randall Styers, *Making Magic. Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford 2004). Many of the key primary texts are conveniently brought together in Bernd-Christian Otto & Michael Stausberg (eds.), *Defining Magic. A Reader* (Sheffield 2012).
20. Aleister Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice* (Paris 1929), p. 127. The spelling of magic as *magick* was used by Crowley, and widely adopted by modern practitioners, to distinguish spiritual pursuits and ritual magic from the stagecraft of the 'rabbit out of a hat' variety. Cf. the comparable problem with modern Nordic terms like *trolldom* which, when not historically contextualized, suffer from the same melding of meanings.
21. Roy Willis, 'Magic', Alan Barnard & Jonathan Spencer (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (London 2002), p. 340.

supernatural means'.[22] The idea is nowhere – with the possible exception of Crowley – more boldly articulated than in Nathan Söderblom's declaration of the supplication-manipulation model, noting that, 'The essence of religion is submission and trust. The essence of magic is an audacious self-glorification'.[23] Yet this is seen as a false division in the view of Dorothy Hammond, who concludes that, 'Magic is not an entity distinct from religion but a form of ritual behavior and thus an element of religion'.[24]

Signaling the impact of the rationality debates, definitions began to reflect issues of irrationality and perception. Among the earliest of these is the Swedish folklore dictionary (*Svenskt folklivslexikon*) which describes magic as 'the exercise of sorcery (*trolldom*) toward a specific end, an irrational action which however to the practitioner seems logical and rational'.[25] Tanya Luhrmann takes a similar approach in *The Dictionary of Anthropology*, writing 'magic describes supernatural actions done to achieve instrumental ends, such as acquiring love or money, punishing an enemy, or protecting a friend. It seems to rely on causal connections that a rational observer would describe as irrational; that is, it asserts causal connections that have no demonstrable existence in the natural world'.[26]

One senses that the desire to accommodate the rationality issue, and address it, substantially shapes the approach taken by one of the most insightful guides in the often tangled areas of such materials, Karen Jolly, who opens her treatment of the issue in *Medieval Folklore. An Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, as follows:

22. Maria Leach & Jerome Fried (eds.), *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* (London 1975 [1949]), p. 660.
23. Crowley, *Magick in Theory*; Nathan Söderblom, *The Living God. Basal Forms of Personal Religion*, Gifford Lectures 1931 (Oxford 1933), p. 36.
24. Dorothy Hammond, 'Magic. A Problem in Semantics', *American Anthropologist* ns 72:6 (1970), p. 1355. Cf. the similar conclusion, if for fundamentally different reasons, already in Erland Ehnmark, 'Religion and magic – Frazer, Söderblom & Hägerström', *Ethnos* 21:1–2 (1956), pp. 1–10, although certainly there are dissenting views, e.g., Rodney Stark, 'Reconceptualizing religion, magic, and science', *Review of Religious Research* 43:2 (2001), pp. 101–120.
25. 'Magi, utövande av trolldom i visst syfte, irrationell handling som dock för utövaren ter sig logisk och förnuftsmässig', Julius Eugen Ejdestam, *Svenskt folklivslexikon* (Stockholm 1975), p. 99.
26. Tanya Luhrmann, 'Magic', Thomas J. Barfield (ed.), *The Dictionary of Anthropology* (Oxford 1997), p. 298.

> Magic. An alternative form of rationality, frequently portrayed as deviant because of its divergence from the religious and scientific rationalities; a cluster of practices (ranging from astrology and alchemy, to the use of charms and amulets, to sorcery and necromancy) that all operate on the principle that the natural world contains hidden powers that human beings can possess or tap for practical purposes, both good and evil.[27]

I cite Jolly's text precisely because it is such a useful and clear statement, a view also partially mirrored in Bente Alver's 2008 study.[28]

In *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Richard Kieckhefer handles magic by describing it 'as a kind of crossroads where different pathways in medieval culture converge. First of all it is a point of intersection between religion and science […]. Secondly, magic is an area where popular culture meets with learned culture. […] Thirdly, magic represents a particularly interesting crossroads between fiction and reality'.[29]

As I have argued elsewhere,[30] I find it difficult to see much difference between the sort of magic elite members of society believed was being used by their social, intellectual, and economic inferiors, what they usually termed 'superstitions', 'errors', and so on, and the magic they themselves venerated, such as 'miracles'.[31] Of course, there is a key difference between these categories, one of critical importance to church authorities, because nothing mattered so much in their eyes as the source of power that made such supernatural events effective. If God and the angels cannot be commanded to do what the practitioner wants, then the observable results of magical practices must be accounted for by other sources of power. Into that logical void church writers had long since promoted the image of demonic assistance, a view of magic which necessarily demanded, as one noted scholar of magic in the medieval West, Valerie Flint, has written, that it is 'the

27. Karen Louise Jolly, 'Magic', Carl Lindahl, John McNamara & John Lindow (eds.), *Medieval Folklore. An Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Santa Barbara 2000), p. 250; see also her comments in Karen Louise Jolly, 'Medieval magic. Definitions, beliefs, practices', Bengt Ankarloo & Stuart Clark (eds.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. The Middle Ages* (Philadelphia 2001), pp. 1–71.
28. Bente Gullveig Alver, *Mellem mennesker og magter. Magi i hekseforfølgelsernes tid* (Oslo 2008).
29. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 1.
30. Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia 2011).
31. Cf. Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, p. 33.

exercise of a preternatural control over nature by human beings, with the assistance of forces more powerful than they'.[32] These demonic forces were shaped from a combination of the *daemones* of antiquity and the biblical story of the fallen angels,[33] and for the church, these figures had become the real – and very threatening – source of power used by medieval and early modern magicians. Over time, this developed into a fully articulated learned mythology concerned about the pact with the devil (*pactum cum diabolo*).[34]

This elite mythology contributed to the distinction between magic, which was understood to be a form of power exploitation where the ritual practitioner could command 'the powers' to do his will, and religion, where one asked, pleaded and prayed for assistance, that is, the model of 'manipulation versus supplication', a view held within the church from the time of the patristic writers (e.g., Augustine). In this discussion, the arguments made by Rosalie and Murray Wax in a series of articles,[35] in which they suggest a different paradigm to account for 'magic', are highly useful. In their essay, 'The Magical World View', the Waxes pose this question about the traditional manipulation versus supplication division: 'Has our understanding been advanced by the attempted distinction between manipulation and supplication? We think not. The facts are that the cultic practices of the magical world exhibit a variety of relationships to beings of Power. Sometimes these are supplicative; sometimes manipulative; sometimes a forthright embodiment of kinship reciprocities; and so on'.[36] This argument, that the relationship to 'Power', is the key point to keep in mind, is deeply relevant in taking up Nordic charm magic, with its allusions to paganism and so on. Power, equated with effectiveness, is surely what magical practitioners were after.

32. Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, p. 3.
33. Cf. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca NY 1972), pp. 17–20, and Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites. A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (University Park PA 1997), pp. 154–162.
34. On this phenomenon in medieval Europe generally, see Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, pp. 18–19, 59–60, 65 et passim; for Scandinavia, see Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, pp. 118–136 and the literature cited there.
35. E.g., Murray Wax & Rosalie Wax, 'The notion of magic', *Current Anthropology* 4:5 (1963), pp. 495–518; Rosalie Wax & Murray Wax, 'The magical world view', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 1 (1962), pp. 179–188.
36. Wax & Wax, 'The magical world view', p. 187.

As in other instances, this results-oriented subaltern view of magic is by no means comparable to what learned elites thought: for the intellectual classes, such pragmatic perspectives were unthinkable, and as Richard Kieckhefer notes, they 'recognized two forms of magic: natural and demonic. Natural magic was not distinct from science, but rather a branch of science. It was the science that dealt with 'occult virtues' (or hidden powers) within nature. Demonic magic was not distinct from religion, but rather a perversion of religion. It was religion that turned away from God and toward demons for their help in human affairs'.[37]

An important lesson for us, as scholars of the medieval North, is to be reminded by Kieckhefer, Flint and others of the importance of the ecclesiastical perspective. It is, of course, a routine aspect of almost all our post-conversion texts, the provincial laws in particular. Thus, for example, *Grágás*, the medieval Icelandic law code, first condemns the worship of 'heathen beings' (*heiþnar vættir*), and then goes on to prohibit spells, witchcraft and lesser forms of magic (*Ef maþr ferr með galldra eþa gørningar. eþa fiolkýngi. þa ferr hann með fiolkyngi ef hann queðr þat eþa kennir. eþa lætr queða. at ser eþa at fe sinv*, 'If someone uses spells or witchcraft or magic – he uses magic if he utters or teaches someone else or gets someone else to utter words of magic over himself or his property'), specifying that using such magic, or getting others to use it, carries a penalty of lesser outlawry, whereas more serious magic, magic that causes the death of men or cattle, is punishable with banishment (*Ef maþr ferr með fordæs skap. þat varþar scogGang. þat ero fordæs skapir. ef maþr gérir i orðvm sinvm. eþa fiolkyngi sott eþa bana. fe eþa mavnnvm*, 'If a man practices black sorcery, the penalty for that is full outlawry. It is black magic if through his words or his magic a man brings about the sickness or death of livestock or people').[38]

This perspective (like most other medieval Nordic legal commentaries) both exemplifies and embodies the view of survivals and the various stages of culture to which 19th century scholarship would return,

37. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 9.
38. *Grágás, Konungsbók*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (Odense 1974) [Facsimile of 1852 edition], p. 22, transl. as *Laws of Early Iceland. Grágás, the Codex Regius of Grágás, with Material from other Manuscripts,* ed. and transl. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote & Richard Perkins, University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies 3, 5 (Winnipeg 1980–2000), 1:39. The terms 'black sorcery' and 'black magic' are not literal translations but are intended to sharpen the difference between *galldra eþa gørningar. eþa fiolkýngi*, 'spells or witchcraft or magic' and the more sinister form of magic, *fordæðuskapr*.

and it explains what magic might have been in the world of Christian Scandinavia, but it clearly says very little about how magic would have been conceived before the conversion. But perhaps there we might rely on the core of what scholars have maintained with some consistency, if phrased in different ways, that magic was an 'effort at control' (Leach), the negotiation of 'relationships to beings of Power' (Waxes), or 'the exercise of a preternatural control' (Flint), and generally executed in the context of religion, as Hammond reminds us.

Main Currents in Western Thinking about Magic

This is not the place to rehearse the many words that have been written on theories of magic and witchcraft over the decades, but I do want to highlight what I regard as the key positions which continue to influence contemporary considerations of magic (including several pivotal Nordic contributions, often overlooked outside of Scandinavia itself).

Very briefly, modern scholarly thinking about magic (as opposed to more narrowly theological reflections) begins in the 19th century, with the adherents of evolutionary anthropology – Edward B. Tylor and James Frazer in particular – who profoundly influenced the terms on which almost all subsequent discussions of magic in the West turn. A perspective held by most social evolutionists was that magic shared with religion false speculation about causality. This perspective finds an easy place in the writings of Edward B. Tylor, among the earliest modern Western scholars, and quite possibly the most influential of them, to consider magic in detail, but also outside an overtly religious context, famously remarking, with what one reference work describes as 'occasional hints of the superiority of a 19th century Englishman in judging other cultures',[39] that he regarded magic as belonging 'to the lowest known stages of civilization', being mostly the property of 'the lower races'.[40] In line with his evolutionist views, Tylor developed a theory of survivals in society, an idea that was to have much relevance

39. 'Sir Edward Burnett Tylor' in *Encyclopædia Britannica* at https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-Burnett-Tylor (accessed 20 August 2020).
40. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture. Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London 1871), p. 101. It was not for naught, and perhaps with a degree of irony, that the chapter focusing on Tylor's work in Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists. A History* (Chicago 1968), pp. 187–201, is titled 'The savage folklorists'.

for fields like folklore.[41] As part of this view, Tylor understands magic as being connected to a culture's past and its relation to other groups, and uses such comparisons as the 'Lapps' (Sámi) and Finns, in one instance, and the Catholics and Protestants in Scotland, in another, to demonstrate the degree to which magic reflects earlier stages of a culture's progress.[42] Tylor also reflected on the symbolic and analogic nature of magic, which he generally regarded as rational, if incorrect, and the relationship of magic to religion, especially within the broader evolutionist scheme that framed virtually all of his thinking, ideas similar to those that were taken up in the works of many writers in the decades on either side of the turn of the 20th century (e.g., Andrew Lang). Still, Tylor was not so bold as to suggest that magic and religion were separate stages of an evolutionary pattern: that was an idea that emerged from James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

In that work, Frazer lays out in bold terms the connection between magic and its 'next of kin', science, on the one hand, and magic and religion, on the other, noting that like science, magic is believed to follow certain rules which are understood to be automatic, that is, to work without fail as long as the magician possesses the ability to perform the charm or ritual properly, but in any event, the magician 'supplicates no higher power',[43] as does the religious person. Frazer also asserts the existence of an Age of Magic followed by an Age of Religion,[44] echoing the savagery-barbarian-civilization scheme looking to account for historical developments within cultures.

The French scholar Lucien Lévy-Bruhl viewed magic in sharply different terms than did most in that, in contrast to Tylor, for example, he regarded magic as unintelligible to logical thought. In his best-known works along these lines (e.g., *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* [1910], *La mentalité primitive* [1922]), Lévy-Bruhl juxtaposes his view of the mentality of 'primitive' peoples with the Western tradition of logic.[45]

41. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, p. 63.
42. Ibid., p. 104.
43. Often reedited, enlarged and republished, *The Golden Bough* originally appeared in 1890; I cite this work here in its fully formed 3rd edition, James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion* (London 1915 [1890]), p. 220.
44. Frazer, *The Golden Bough,* pp. 220–243.
45. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures,* Travaux de l'Année sociologique (Paris 1910), transl. as *How Natives Think* (New York 1925);

What most observers would recognize as the dominant – but far from unified – approach to magic in the 20th century has come from members of the Structural Functionalist School, a wide-ranging moniker to be sure. Indications of this approach are perhaps earliest seen in the works of those associated with the journal *L'Année Sociologique*, primarily, of course, Émile Durkheim and his student (and nephew), Marcel Mauss, who keyed in on what he took to be the generally more personal, even secretive, nature of magical practices, as opposed to the more public and communal character of religious practices. Writing in collaboration with Henri Hubert, Mauss defines religious and magical activities with regard to their place in a social space, urging a view of magic as that which the society as a whole accepts as magic rather than the possession of any one segment of the society.[46] Importantly, Mauss and Hubert accept the view that there is an important relationship between magic and science, writing: 'La magie se relie aux sciences, de la même façon qu'aux techniques. Elle n'est pas seulement un art pratique, elle est aussi un trésor d'idées. Elle attache une importance extrême à la connaissance [...] en effet, nous avons vu, à maintes reprises, que, pour elle, savoir c'est pouvoir'[47] ('Magic is linked to science in the same way as it is linked to technology. It is not only a practical art, it is also a storehouse of ideas. It attaches great importance to knowledge […] as far as magic is concerned, knowledge is power').[48]

Little wonder then that when Durkheim in 1912 outlines his own views on these issues, they are strikingly similar, albeit even more forcefully stated. Thus, for example, Durkheim argues that there simply is no possibility of religion as such outside of its social dimension, that is, that religion is *une chose éminemment collective* ('an eminently collective thing').[49] In this regard, he pointedly claims as a counterfactual demonstration of the correctness of his position, at least as it

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *La mentalité primitive*, Travaux de l'Année sociologique (Paris 1922), transl. as *Primitive Mentality* (London 1923).

46. Marcel Mauss (en collaboration avec H. Hubert), 'Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie', *L'Année Sociologique* 7 (1902-1903), pp. 1–146, transl. as *A General Theory of Magic* (London 2001).
47. Mauss (avec Hubert), 'Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie', p. 145.
48. Mauss (with Hubert), *A General Theory of Magic*, p. 176.
49. Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totemique en Australie*, Travaux de l'Année sociologique (Paris 1912), p. 51, transl. as *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, transl. Joseph Ward Swain (New York 1965), p. 63.

must have seemed to him in early 20th century France, the fact that, *Il n'existe pas d'Église magique* ('There is no Church of magic').[50] And because magic is directed toward what he terms 'technical and utilitarian ends' (*fins techniques et utilitaires*), it does not spend time worrying about purely speculative issues.[51]

Naturally, as anthropologists increasingly based their discussions on first-hand observations, they brought into the discussion their own socially-situated views of magic. Among the most famous and influential of these was Bronislaw Malinowski, whose perspectives, based on long experience living among the Trobriand Islanders, led him to very different conclusions about the nature and function of magic than someone like Frazer. In his 1925 essay, 'Magic, science, & religion', Malinowski explains in depth his utilitarian view of magic and argues that it is largely to be accounted for as a result of anxiety. He notes, for example, that among the Trobriand Islanders, magic is little used when the Islanders are fishing in a lagoon well-known to them, but it is much more likely to be called on when they are to sail on the open sea. Thus, in situations where danger is present, an undertaking's outcome is uncertain, and confidence in the culture's available technology is less than robust, magic fills a psychological niche.

In line with that position, and addressing magic's relation to religion and science, Malinowski observes that magic is directed toward specific end, and differs in that sense from religion in not being concerned with the worship of spiritual beings. He also juxtaposes what he sees as the short-term tangible goals at which magic is directed (e.g., rain, victory in combat), with religion's concern with long-term, abstract ends. Magical beliefs, spells, and so on, Malinowski writes, fill 'those gaps and breaches left in the ever-imperfect wall of culture which he erects between himself and the besetting temptations and dangers of his destiny'.[52] This function Malinowski sees not merely as a possible source but rather as the essential source of magical belief.

In her entry on magic in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Ruth Benedict addresses these issues by writing:

50. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires*, p. 49; Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, p. 60.
51. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires*, p. 47; Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, p. 57.
52. Bronislaw Malinowski, 'Magic, science and religion', Joseph Needham (ed.), *Science, Religion and Reality* (London 1925), p. 31.

> Magic is essentially mechanistic; it is a manipulation of the external world by techniques and formulae that operate automatically. Frazer names it therefore the science of primitive man. Both magic and science are technologies, capable of being summed up in formulae and rules of procedure […] although both magic and science are bodies of techniques, they are techniques directed to the manipulation of two incompatible worlds […].'[53]

Thirty years later, Edmund Leach gets at the nub of this argument by noting: 'The core of the magical act rests on empirically untested belief and is an effort at control – the first aspect distinguishes it from science, the second from religion.[54]

Of course, this view of witchcraft as a logical cultural construct was classically formulated by Evans-Pritchard in his study of Zande magic and witchcraft,[55] a project that specifically looked to refute Lévy-Bruhl's thesis about pre-logical mentality. Although not without critics in recent years,[56] Evans-Pritchard's seminal examination, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, pushed back, in the tradition of Malinowski's earlier rationalist and utilitarian views, against the perspectives held by Tylor, Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl and others about 'primitive man' and his mentalities. In this book, and the earlier articles on which it was based, Evans-Pritchard makes a consistent case for the logic and internal coherence of Zande practices, especially where beliefs inconsistent with Western perspectives are concerned.

Particularly important contributions to this debate have been made by Sri Lankan-born Stanley Tambiah, who declares, for example, an end to 'the Frazerian hangover'.[57] In his *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*, Tambiah details the extent to which many of the discussions of the topic have been dominated by peculiarly Western traditions and their historical attitudes toward such practices. There as well, Tambiah presents his views on two relevant modes of thought, one characterized by its concern with causality and all the related

53. Ruth Benedict, 'Magic', Edwin R. A. Seligman & Alvin Johnson (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York 1937 [1933]), 10:40.
54. Edmund Leach, 'Magic', Julius Gould & William Lester Kolb (eds.), *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (New York 1964), pp. 398.
55. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford 1937).
56. Andreas Heinz, 'Savage thought and thoughtful savages. On the context of the evaluation of logical thought by Lévy-Bruhl and Evans-Pritchard', *Anthropos* 92 (1997), pp. 165–173.
57. Stanley J. Tambiah, 'The magical power of words', *Man* 4 (1968), p. 176.

elements of science, the other with participation, experience in ritual and religious life, although these 'orientations' or 'orderings of reality', as he terms them,[58] are not to be understood as absolute or incompatible. This debate is by no means finished, having served as the red meat for discussions of irrationality which dominated much of the closing decades of the last century.[59]

Modern research on magic has, I believe, been very positively influenced in recent decades by several interconnected strategies, each of which helps us understand the nature of magic, not as a discrete cultural category, but rather as a phenomenon to be viewed in terms of performance, often in the context of a larger social drama. Many scholars (e.g., Clifford Geertz) have helped develop this mode of analysis, but the two seminal figures with respect to magic are, in my view, Victor Turner and Carlo Ginzburg, who in each his own way has contributed very significantly to teaching us how to treat the data concerned with witchcraft and magic, carefully reading into – and out of – the details and facts deeper meanings about the events. In the first instance, we have Turner to thank for asserting a processual mode of analysis in treating cultural phenomena;[60] in the second case, Ginzburg is to be thanked for showing us not only what microhistory can mean, but also how to undertake what might be called the archaeology of thought worlds.[61]

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58. Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*, Henry Lewis Morgan Lectures (Cambridge 1990), p. 105.
59. On the rationality debate, also known as Neo-Tylorianism, there exist many reviews and commentaries: e.g., Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion*; Byron Good, *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience. An Anthropological Perspective*, Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures (Cambridge 1994); Gilbert Lewis, 'Magic, religion and the rationality of belief', T. Ingold (ed.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (London 1994), pp. 563–590; Richard Kieckhefer, 'The specific rationality of medieval magic', *American Historical Review* 99 (1994), pp. 813–836; and L. C. Jarvie & Joseph Agassi, 'Rationality', Alan Barnard & Jonathan Spencer (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (London 2002), pp. 467–470.
60. E.g., Victor Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society. A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (Manchester, England 1957); Victor Turner, 'Witchcraft and sorcery. Taxonomy versus dynamics', *Africa. Journal of the International African Institute* 34:4 (1964), pp. 314–324.
61. E.g., Carlo Ginzburg, *I benandanti. Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento* (Turin 1966), transl. as *The Night Battles. Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, transl. John & Anne Tedeschi (New York 1985); Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500* (Turin 1976), transl. as

Within these international, and largely anglo- and francophone-dominated, 19th and 20th century debates about magic, ideas published in less global languages are easily missed. In that context, I would like to pay particular attention to a few key Nordic studies not well-known outside of Scandinavia itself. These works fully merit such attention, especially as their contributions were significant and influenced the conditions within which their contemporaries operated, including those scholars on whose work all subsequent studies on Nordic charms and other forms of magic depend – Bang, Ohrt, Linderholm et al. The studies I have in mind were often comprehensive, including not only questions about the nature of magic but also such related areas as possession and witchcraft, and especially possible contributing medical and psychiatric factors behind such conditions, a tradition that has recently witnessed substantial renewed interest, not least in the Nordic countries.[62]

Perhaps foremost among these figures is Alfred Lehmann (1858–1921), Denmark's first professor of psychology. He had worked in Wilhelm Wundt's laboratory in Leipzig and took the lessons of experimental psychology home with him, where in 1886 he established Copenhagen University's 'Psykofysisk Laboratorium'. It is noteworthy that one of the principle results of Lehmann's research into this curiously mixed world of physics, psychology, and folklore, especially as seen from our own more atomistic and territorially-bounded academic disciplines, was his masterful two-volume work, *Overtro og trolddom fra det ældste tider til vore dager* ('Magic and Witchcraft from Ancient Times to Our Times').[63] Not only does it trace belief in magic and witchcraft from the earliest human societies to modern times, but it looks to explain such beliefs among contemporaries in empirical, scientific terms.

The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller, transl. John and Anne Tedeschi (New York 1992).

62. E.g., the important work of Jesper Sørensen, *A Cognitive Theory of Magic* (Lanham MD 2007). On the application of cognitive sciences to the study of magic more broadly, see Edward Bever, 'Current trends in the application of cognitive science to magic', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 7:1 (2012), pp. 3–18.

63. Alfred Lehmann, *Overtro og trolddom fra de ældste tider til vore dage* (Copenhagen 1893). Originally published in 1893 and republished in a *2. helt omarbejdede og stærkt forøgede udgave* ('completely revised and greatly enhanced 2nd edition') in 1920, Lehmann's study seems never to have appeared in English, although there have been translations into German, Russian, Swedish, and other languages.

In using such penetrating if speculative theories to explain the 'irrationality' of the witch hunts as medical conditions, Lehmann was working within a tradition established by the pre-eminent neurologist of his time, Jean-Martin Charcot. For Charcot, the causes of the great witch hunts of the early modern era, and especially some of the more celebrated outbreaks, such as the one in the early 17th century in the French city of Loudon, were most intimately tied to that period's inability to understand what he termed 'hystero-epilepsy'. The ideas of Charcot and his colleagues at Saltpêtrière – the little hysteria, hysterohypnosis, and so on – are thoroughly covered in Lehmann's second edition, as are such 'hot button' issues as suggestion and spiritualism.[64]

Lehmann's Swedish contemporary, Bror Gadelius (1862–1938), a physician and psychiatrist, is perhaps best remembered today as the author of the first psychiatry textbook in the Nordic world, the multivolume *Det mänskliga själslivet i belysning av sinnessjukläkarens erfarenheter* ('Human Mental Life in the Light of the Experiences of a Doctor for the Mentally Ill').[65] Yet his published works are readily seen by modern scholars as the products of a humanist, or certainly someone with humanist instincts – publications on such topics as demonic possession; spiritualism, mysticism, religious excess, and mental illness; fantasy and poetic inspiration; and, especially, Gadelius's many explorations of the world of witchcraft and magic, exemplified by his *Tro och öfvertro i gångna tider* ('Belief and Superstition in Bygone Eras').[66] Despite that impressive research profile, Gadelius's industrious ransacking of the archival materials has seemingly, with only rare exceptions, all but disappeared from the memory of historians, folklorists, literary scholars and others who might have been expected to be curious about his carefully considered (and elegantly wrought) contributions.[67]

64. Cf. Jesper Vaczy Kragh, 'Mellem religion og videnskab. Spiritismen i 1800- og 1900-tallet', *Scandia. Tidskrift för historisk forskning* 68:1 (2002), pp. 53–76, and Jesper Vaczy Kragh, 'Overtro og trolddom', *Fortid og Nutid* 90:3 (2003), pp. 163–185.
65. Bror Gadelius, *Det mänskliga själslivet i belysning av sinnessjukläkarens erfarenhet* (Stockholm 1921). I employ the phrase 'mental life' as a cover term for Swedish *själsliv*, lit. 'soul's life', a compound that can imply intellectual life, spiritual life and/or emotional life.
66. Bror Gadelius, *Tro och öfvertro i gångna tider* (Stockholm 1912–1913).
67. One happy exception is Stefan Isaksson, *Skånska spöken. Gastar och gengångare i bondesamhällets folktro* (Stockholm 2007), p. 23, who cites Gadelius admiringly, noting how very modern is his perspective on text, context and the human condition.

With sober and informed discussions of such subject areas as 'religion and hysteria', 'the devil', 'religion and mental illness', 'belief in demons and possession', and 'Pactum cum diabolo', *Tro och öfvertro i gångna tider* is the sort of scientific and cultural historical work that one can even today read for its insights and comprehensive understanding of its historical subject matter.

In general, Gadelius's judgments point toward broadly evolutionist thinking about magic and superstition, but it is also a perspective tempered by a studied appreciation he makes that his views are less about alterity, 'the other', as we might say today, than about himself and his contemporaries. Gadelius opens *Tro och öfvertro i gångna tider* with a thoughtful discussion of 'belief and knowledge' (*tro och vetande*), and how one moves through life from the former to the latter; nearly six hundred pages later, he closes the second volume by noting that we should be grateful that the dark times that gave rise to the witch hysterias are gone. He is, however, careful to note that the superstitious element (*öfvertrons element*) lives on to the extent that the devil continues to be presented as real, and that such views have not melted away in the light of modern knowledge, as he writes, *som en snögubbe i vårsolen* (like a snowman in spring sunshine).[68]

In the century or so since Lehmann and Gadelius, the explosion in the range and vitality of scholarship on Nordic magic and witchcraft has been nothing short of sensational, with scholars from all the Nordic countries expanding the scope of research to include, to take a notable example, the influence of adjacent communities, the Sámi in particular, in the Middle Ages,[69] as well as the fate of the same communities during the witchcraft persecutions of the early modern era.[70] Other research areas concerned with Nordic magic have included probing examinations of magical beings, supernatural agency, and worldviews;

68. Gadelius, *Tro och öfvertro,* 2:296–297.
69. E.g., Dag Strömbäck, *Sejd. Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria*, Nordiska Texter och Undersökningar 5 (Stockholm 1935); Neil S. Price, *The Viking Way. Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, 2nd ed., fully revised and expanded (Oxford 2019). Discussion of such a connection has been discussed since the early 1800s; see the survey in Stefanie von Schnurbein, 'Shamanism in the old norse tradition. A theory between ideological camps', *History of Religions* 43:2 (2003), pp. 116–138, as well as Price, *The Viking Way,* pp. 330–344.
70. E.g., Rune Blix Hagen, 'Female witches and Sami sorcerers in the witch-trials of Arctic Norway (1593–1695)', *Arv. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 62 (2006), pp. 123–142.

the relationship of magic to science and other forms of knowledge; the early modern witchcraft persecutions and trials; alterity and otherness; and changing attitudes toward magic in the law, all of which have been vigorously pursued in recent decades.[71]

Memory, Magic and the Medieval North in Practice

Let us then consider all these matters collectively and prospectively, and contemplate what new vistas combining them can offer us, especially what we can discover about magic in the medieval North as it was learned, as it was taught, as it was remembered, as it was responded to, and as it was memorialized in our key textual resources, the legal and literary materials in particular. Toward that end, I will mention briefly, but – I hope – suggestively, a few perspectives and examples.[72]

We might begin by reflecting on how Nordic magical traditions maintained themselves over time. Here we should consider that the role of memory (in the sense of recollection, that is, as *memoria verborum*, 'rote memory') as a component of learning was of great significance. Stored and retrieved expertise in an area like charm magic appears to have played a special part in curating traditional knowledge. We can reasonably assume that as members of their communities, everyone in varying degrees witnessed, heard, and absorbed magical world views, as well as specific elements of magical traditions, as they observed the practices of older generations. Surely most individuals would remain passive tradition bearers, while a few others would engage in special efforts in order to achieve 'enskilment' in magical lore and practices,[73] becoming active tradition bearers.[74]

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71. I note that a great many Nordic scholars of magic and witchcraft have famously contributed to international discussions on these matters, in addition to older generations (e.g., Dag Strömbäck, Ronald Grambo, Bengt Ankarloo), a very robust group of contemporary scholars (e.g., Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, Ane Ohrvik, Bente Alver, Gunnar W. Knutsen, Laura Stark, Catharina Raudvere, Linda Oja, Ulrika Wolf-Knuts, Fredrik Skott, Marko Nenonen) has contributed mightily to these discussions.
72. I have explored several of these cases in depth elsewhere. In general, I refer readers to the summaries and reviews in Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, as well as the articles cited below.
73. Cf. Gísli Pálsson, 'Enskilment at sea', *Man* ns 29:4 (1994), pp. 901–27, and the excellent review in Geoffrey Gowlland, 'The sociality of enskilment', *Ethnos* 84:3 (2019), pp. 508–24.
74. See Carl von Sydow, 'Om traditionsspridning', *Scandia. Tidskrift för historisk forskning* 5 (1932), pp. 321–44.

Grágás, the medieval Icelandic law code, is quite particular about passing on this form of cultural knowledge, prohibiting, as we have seen (above), the use of spells, witchcraft, and lesser forms of magic, and specifically noting an injunction against teaching such practices: 'he uses magic if he utters or teaches (*eþa kennir*) someone else'.[75] Evidence that individuals did indeed learn specific charms appears in several legal proceedings from the Nordic Middle Ages. In perhaps the most famous historical example of medieval Nordic magic in action, the early 14th century case of Ragnhildr tregagás in Bergen, we have a reference to such practice. It is a complicated story of spurned love and concludes with the accused woman admitting that she has worked an elaborate curse, involving both physical and verbal elements, against her former lover, a charm she had learned from someone named Solli Sukk (*'Jtem interrogata respondit quod hujusmodi incantationes hereticas in juventute a Solla dicto Sukk didicit quas in hoc casu practicavit'*).[76] It is notable that Ragnhildr specifies that the charm is one she has learned much earlier, in her youth (*in juventute*).

Two 15th-century Swedish cases, Birgittha Andirssadotthir in 1471 and Margit halffstop in 1490,[77] likewise maintain that spells concerned with 'love' (that is, charm magic variously intended to stimulate or to stifle sexual desire) had been taught to the women. But whereas Ragnhildr had learned her charm as a young person, seemingly without at that time any particular use in mind, the later cases suggest more occasion-specific contexts for the instruction.

Although the number of historical cases is slight, by contrast, curated magical instruction is often referred to in medieval Nordic texts. Among the best-known literary examples of such practices are the oft-cited cases of Gunnhildr learning magic from the Sámi in *Haralds saga Hárfagra*, Gunnlaugr's desire to learn magic from Geirríðr in *Eyrbyggia saga*, and Busli's offer to teach Bósi magic in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*.[78] These and similar cases often present very specific and even

75. *Laws of Early Iceland,* 1:39; *Grágás,* p. 22.
76. *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, ed. C. R. Unger & H. J. Huitfeldt (Christiania 1847–), No. 93.
77. On these cases, see Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, pp. 58-59 and 172.
78. For these and other examples, see Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Charm workers', Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann & Stephen A. Mitchell (eds.), *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies. Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Berlin 2018), 1:654–659.

detailed images of learning magic (that is, of the context, not the content), whereas any number of other texts (e.g., *Þiðreks saga*) offer much more generalized images of acquiring magic.[79] The early instruction of Bárðr in *Bárðar saga* offers a typical example of this more general type: in the saga, a cave dweller (*bergbúi*) named Dofri instructs the eponymous hero over ten years in combat and other arts, including *galdra ok forneskju, svá at bæði var hann forspár ok margvíss* ('magic and witchcraft, so that he had foresight and was "learned in many things"', a euphemism for being a specialist in magic).[80]

Supported by the testimony of legal and other non-literary texts, the prospects for plumbing the depths of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, one of medieval Europe's most notable cultural achievements, in the analysis of magic and memory is very promising. In fact, the possibilities there for close examination of magic from a memory studies perspective are vast, from the old pagan god, Óðinn, the master of magic, in the mythological materials (along with a number of other mythological magical actors, like Skírnir in *For Scírnis*) and in later folklore, to a host of magical practitioners in the Icelandic sagas, some of the best-known of whom include figures like Þuríðr in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, Þrándr in *Færeyinga saga,* Egill in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar,* Þórdís in *Kormáks saga,* Kotkell in *Laxdæla saga,* and Eyvindr kelda in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.

In addition to the cohesive stories about magic we often see in the sagas, there are as well more fragmentary stories of magic and memory. By way of example, I will briefly mention here the chain of evidence linking the production and protection of wealth in the North centering on the pagan god Óðinn/Odin (or that name in any event), stretching from the earliest recorded materials we have from northern Europe right up to modern times.[81] One necessarily wonder about the

79. See my comments in Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Magic as acquired art and the ethnographic value of the sagas', Margaret Clunies-Ross (ed.), *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, The Viking Collection. Studies in Northern Civilization 14 (Viborg 2003), pp. 132–52.

80. *Bárðar saga,* in *Harðar saga; Bárðar saga* […], ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Íslenzk fornrit 13 (Reykjavík, 1991), p. 103.

81. See Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Odin, magic and a Swedish trial from 1484', *Scandinavian Studies* 81:3 (2009), pp. 263–286; Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Faith and knowledge in Nordic charm magic', Karoline Kjesrud & Mikael Males (eds.), *Faith and Knowledge in Late Medieval Scandinavia* (Turnhout 2020), pp. 193–211.

sorts of memory functions that have been at work in relaying this stable relationship from one generation to the next over such a long period. How were charms and beliefs centered on this figure maintained as cultural memory, if that is indeed the case, over the centuries? What role has been played in this remarkable story of intergenerational and highly selective syncretism by such features of magical technology, so to speak, as the *historiola*? Are there external phenomena we do not normally consider – such as visual or auditory cues – that reinforce such beliefs? And what sort of relationships account for the reticulated appearances of this belief complex in both quotidian and elite contexts? And why do such traditions maintain themselves in certain areas – in this case, mainly the Swedish provinces of Småland, Sörmland and Uppland – and seem to disappear, or go unrecorded in any event, elsewhere?[82]

These Odinic charms have a lengthy and recognizable history over a millennium or more, but occasionally, we appear to be in a very different position, with medieval texts which themselves seem to contain faint and distant echoes of past beliefs, as when the 13th century *Äldre Västgötalagen* (Older Law of Västergötland) states that among the felonious, actionable insults about a woman is to say of her that she has engaged in one of a number of socially unacceptable behaviors:

> § 5. Þættæ aru vkvæþins orþ kono. Iak sa at þu reet a quiggrindu löfharæþ. ok i trols ham þa alt var iamrift nat ok daghér. kallar hanæ kunna firigæræ kono ællær. ko. þæt ær. vkuaþins ord. kallær kono hortutu. þæt ær vkuaþins ord. kallar kono haua at faþur sin ællær strukit hava barn sit fra sær allær hava myrt sit barn. þættæ æru firnær orþ. § 6. All þassi synda mal skal fyrst uiþ præst sin talæ ok eigh braþæ vp *mæþ* awund ællær vrez […].'[83]
>
> (§ 5. These are the slanderous words about a woman. 'I saw that you rode the "witch-ride" [lit. on the pen-gate], with your hair loose, and in a witch's shape, "caught" between night and day' [= twilight? equinox?]. [If it is] said of her that she is able to destroy a woman or cow, these are slanderous words. [If it is] said of a woman that she is a harlot [*hortuta*], these are slanderous words. [If it is] said of a woman that she has [had intercourse with] her father, or has aborted her child, or has murdered her child, these are words of abomination. § 6. All these sins should first be discussed with the priest and not flare up in rancorousness or rage […].)

82. Cf. Mitchell, 'Odin, magic and a Swedish trial from 1484'; Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Notes on *historiolas*, referentiality and time in Nordic magical traditions', Frog (ed.), Folklore and Old Norse Mythology (Helsinki forthcoming).

83. *Äldre Västgötalagen*, in *Corpus iuris sueo-gotorum antiqui. Samling af Sweriges gamla lagar*, ed. Hans Samuel Collin & Carl Johan Schlyter (Stockholm 1827), p. 38.

Whether a criminal reference of this sort is to be taken at face value (whatever that would mean in this instance), or as a mere phantasm reflecting the views of elite authorities, or as an important part of a much larger supernatural memory puzzle has not been easy for scholarship to assess, but I believe we are increasingly poised to solve such questions in the coming years.

This passage has, of course, been much discussed over the decades: virtually every word and phrase in the text has been carefully examined: *reet* ('rode'); *quiggrindu* ('pen-gate'); *lösharæþ* ('loose-haired'); *i trols ham* ('in the form of a "troll"'); *þa alt var iamrift nat ok daghér* ('when all was even [between] night and day'), have all been scrutinized for the many ways in which these and other terms and concepts in this and related passages connect to broader Germanic witchcraft beliefs.[84] Over the years, succeeding theoretical frameworks have offered insightful readings (e.g., philological, gender- and performance-oriented approaches) and helped us understand this remarkable text – I have every confidence that 'memory studies' will similarly help us tease apart and comprehend the many threads of this complicated and intriguing passage.

Among the best-known of all magical episodes from the medieval North is the one involving the story of Þorbjǫrg lítilvǫlva ('little sibyl') in *Eiríks saga rauða*.[85] In this richly detailed description of a *seiðr* ceremony taking place in Greenland, Gúðriðr admits that her foster-mother, Halldís, had taught her a particular kind of song in Iceland to be used in a form of magic ritual. When Þorbjǫrg 'little sibyl' is ready to begin her soothsaying ceremony, Guðríðr's memory of this song-type serves Þorbjǫrg's needs well, and Guðríðr goes on to perform the songs to Þorbjǫrg's complete satisfaction.

It is a scene that has been written about often and visited in depth by many fine scholars (i.a., Dag Strömbäck, François-Xavier Dillmann, Catherine Raudvere, Neil Price, Clive Tolley), and I mention it here

84. Cf. the literature reviews in *Svenska Landskapslagar* V. *Äldre Västgötalagen, Yngre Västgötalagen, Smålandslagen kyrkobalk och Bjärkörätten*, ed. Åke Holmbäck & Elias Wessén, 2nd edition (Stockholm 1979), pp. xi–xxxvii, and Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, pp. 150–152.

85. *Eiríks saga rauða*, in *Eyrbyggia saga. Brands þáttr ǫrva. Eiríks saga rauða. Grœnlendinga saga. Grœnlendinga þáttr*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk Fornrit 4 (Reykjavík 1957 [1935]), pp. 193–237.

less from the perspective of its possible ethnographic and documentary qualities, and more from a memory standpoint. Certain important facts about these songs are apparent: they seem to represent a special kind of knowledge with limited distribution, since none of the other women know them; their use apparently required that they be sung by someone other than the main practitioner (since otherwise Þorbjǫrg, who would presumably have known them, might just as well have sung them herself); they are understood to be gender-restricted, since only women are presented as having familiarity with them and to be capable of providing them for the seiðr ceremony; and they are teachable cultural goods (*kenndi … mér*) meant to be passed on, perhaps only within special relationships (*fóstra mín*).

But importantly, although the singing of these pagan songs is generally understood by modern scholarship to underscore Guðríðr's piety and deep Christian faith, that does not seem to be the entire story: after all, Guðríðr is rather easily, perhaps even suspiciously so, convinced by her host to assist in this pre-Christian performance. Bearing in mind that Guðríðr has recently arrived on distant Greenland and that she will soon, as audiences surely knew, travel to the edge of the world, to Vínland, readers sense the evocative ubi sunt quality in the comment by Guðríðr, that these songs had been taught to her by her stepmother back in what must have seemed from her perspective to be safe and secure Iceland (*en þó kenndi Halldís, fóstra mín, mér á Íslandi þat kvæði, er hon kallaði Varðlokur*).

It seems to me that this ritual, whatever its other elements, is also a performance where memory plays a central role. As I have written elsewhere,

> Guðríðr's singing of such songs, seen within the framework of the tiny 10th century famine-plagued Greenlandic colony at Herjólfsnes reflected in the saga, can also be understood to be a special kind of performance, a performance of things past, of a world far away, of nostalgia, of memories. By singing these special songs, she connects, not only, as presented in the saga, with the spirit world, but, through the *seiðr*'s ritual form and her singing, with the memory of the world and the people these colonists living on the edge of the world had left behind them.[86]

86. Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Memory, mediality, and the "performative turn". Recontextualizing remembering in medieval Scandinavia', *Scandinavian Studies* 85:3 (2013), p. 296.

Scenes like this one, especially with their very detailed information, tell us much, but they also raise many questions of importance: If, as in this case, several centuries have passed between the time of the events being described (whether they actually occurred or not) and the existing texts, how would such memories of past practices have been preserved?[87] Can such descriptions be trusted? What sort of source value do they possess, especially as regards the period of transition from a mainly pagan to a mainly Christian society? And how much of what may have been preserved in these texts might be genuine? And how do we decide among such data what might be a pure literary invention and what might be an embellishment of a genuine tradition? And, importantly, how do we tell?

These are all important and difficult, but not impossible, questions to address, and we are perhaps better situated today to address such problems than ever before. Our traditional disciplinary lines of inquiry and interpretation – archaeology, history of religion, ethnography, philology, and so on – have all contributed to our understanding of such scenes, and I would argue that more complete consideration of memory and memory studies provides us with a further important pathway into these texts.

As these necessarily brief remarks suggest, a substantial body of critical literature on both memory studies and magic, especially Nordic magic, currently exists, although only in recent years have the two fields been studied together in a substantive way. We see in these historical and literary examples the division between memory's relation to magical techniques learned, on the one hand, within an individual's lifetime, so-called communicative memory,[88] and, on the other hand, the much deeper manifestation of memory, so-called cultural memory,

87. François-Xavier Dillmann, *Les magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne. Études sur la représentation de la magie islandaise et de ses agents dans les sources littéraires norroises*, Acta Academiae Regiae Gustavi Adolphi 92 (Uppsala 2006), p. 293, very plausibly notes, for example, that some of the details might have survived within Guðríðr's family as 'récits oraux qui auront été transmis de génération en génération' (oral stories that have been passed on from generation to generation).

88. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*; 'Collective memory and cultural identity', *New German Critique* 65 (1995), pp. 125–133.

common associations and characteristics continuing across many centuries, the 'ethnocultural substratum'.[89]

If nothing else, I hope it is clear that there are a number of extraordinary opportunities for shedding additional light on the very significant body of data that has been felicitously bequeathed to us from the pre-modern North. By no means do I intend such a suggestion to gainsay the fine work on Nordic magical traditions that has been hitherto carried out, but rather that I believe by reassessing the evidence from a memory studies perspective, we will be able to supplement and broaden our understanding of this seminal component of daily, as well as marked religious, life in the Nordic Middle Ages, a thought world we are beginning to penetrate meaningfully.

89. In addition to Harvilahti, *The Holy Mountain*, and Frog, 'Ethnocultural substratum', see Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Notes on *historiolas*, referentiality and time in Nordic magical traditions'.