



Book Review

Frederik Wallenstein: *Muntlighet och minne. Sagatraditionen, kulturhistorien och det kulturella minnets blinda fläck*. Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 2023, 367 pp.

Historians of religion have long used the Icelandic sagas as sources for knowledge of pre-Christian Nordic religion. However, in recent decades this has increasingly been questioned. Especially problematic according to the critical voices is the gap of 200–300 years between the pre-Christian era and when the sagas were written. The sagas were not only written later but by people with a different religion and worldview. Can Christian authors, with a learned classical education, really give us a correct picture of the pagan Norsemen, their belief, and rituals after a purely oral transmission over several centuries? Leading Old Norse scholars such as the philologist Annette Lassen and the historian Henrik Janson have answered this question with a resounding *No*.

Today's historians of religion often note the problem of the time gap, but they usually draw no deeper conclusions about it and rarely discuss principles with other disciplines' critical scholars. Jens Peter Schjødt and Olof Sundqvist are scholars who mention the potential problems without fundamentally breaking with the discipline's traditional practice. This unfortunately divides Old Norse studies into two groups, both with great scholars,

which communicate remarkably little with each other.

Frederik Wallenstein's *Muntlighet och minne. Sagatraditionen, kulturhistorien och det kulturella minnets blinda fläck* (2023) is, however, an example of a work within the history of religion which clearly acknowledges the problems, notes their fundamental consequences, wrestles with them in a theoretically conscious way, and not least attempts to present new ideas, both regarding scholarly principles and old research questions concerning pre-Christian religion.

Wallenstein's premise is the currently leading theoretical fashion within Old Norse research, *memory studies* – about collective 'memories' of various kinds – and primarily the concepts and models of Jan and Aleida Assmann. In this he is far from alone. In 2018 the gigantic *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies* (ed. Jürg Glauser et al.) was published, containing 103 contributions adopting precisely this approach, presented on 1188 pages. That volume's editors made the fashionable character clear of Old Norse studies clear in their introduction, claiming a 'memory turn'.

Central within this theory is the distinction between *communicative* and *cultural memory*. The former is a kind of memory existing in everyday communication, which has yet to be culturally fixed or materialized, with a temporal horizon of only 80–100 years or three to four

interacting generations. The latter, which has been most scholars' main focus, concerns historical or mythical time; it is institutional and relatively fixed, transmitted and interpreted by specialists and institutions. Wallenstein notes that oral tradition, according to the model, belongs almost entirely to *communicative memory* and its survival over only a few generations. *Cultural memory*, meanwhile, depends at least primarily on literacy and written texts. Aleida Assmann's distinction between *functional* ('Funktionsgedächtnis') and *storage memory* ('Speichergedächtnis') points in the same direction: oral and literate cultures differ in their cores, and only a literate culture can *store* inactive memory that has become non-useful and lacks relevance for the present time, but which can be reactivated much later and given a new meaning; in oral cultures it is claimed such storage is impossible, as everything that has become irrelevant or non-useful ceases to be transmitted and is thus gone forever.

Wallenstein accepts the basic concepts – *cultural* and *storage memory*, and so on – and is strongly inspired by the Assmanns. Yet he criticizes their view of the oral prose tradition. He notes that such tradition has no real place in their system, and it cannot explain it. His own conclusion is that the processes of oral collective memory transmission are largely the same as in written transmission. Oral tradition can also show traces of processes which strictly fulfil the criteria of *cultural*

memory. The depth of memory in oral tradition far exceeds the three to four generations represented by *communicative memory* in the Assmanns' model. Oral tradition can also store inactive memories and revive them after a long time. At these points Wallenstein attempts to improve the Assmanns' model and adjust it to work for the oral prose tradition too. This improvement of the theoretical model is one of the book's main aims. His tool in this objective is the Icelandic saga literature.

The Icelandic sagas, or at least most of them, are indeed prose works with an oral background (though scholars dispute its kind and extent). They treat events that are supposed to have taken place several hundred years earlier, usually in pre-Christian times.

Wallenstein focuses on a few selected cases, discussing them thoroughly. In an episode in the *Völsunga saga* Sigmundur and his son Sinfjötli roam the woods as robbers and find two men sleeping in a hut with wolfskins beside them; the saga says they have been stuck in the skins for ten days but have now been released. Sigmundur and Sinfjötli don the skins themselves and cannot get out of them. They live as wolves for some time and speak with wolf voices; only after Sigmundur has bitten his son in the throat and saved his life with a herb given by a raven do they escape the wolfskins and burn them. The saga's explicit claim is that evil magic underlies all this. Yet Wallenstein refers to (quite

old) research which argues that the saga author has misunderstood the entire episode, and that it was originally a depiction of an initiation ritual: a young warrior's initiation by a master, including liminal conditions, a ritual death, and rebirth (pp. 127–130). Wallenstein accepts this interpretation, placing the episode in Aleida Assmann's model. In Wallenstein's view we see here *storage memory* at work in oral tradition: through the oral tradition, inactive cultural memory layers have been preserved without their original relevance or being understood by the transmitters. Wallenstein uses some other cases as arguments for the same point – for example, an episode in the *Kormáks saga*, when a person wears a bearskin and mask when challenging a warrior; the saga explains this by the challenger's wish not to be recognized by his opponent, but twentieth-century scholars have interpreted it as a ritual whose original meaning and relevance was lost during oral transmission and misunderstood by the saga author (p. 133). As these episodes and details 'belonged to the story', Wallenstein claims, they were transmitted orally over centuries, though without their original meaning.

It might, however, be stressed that the observation of these episodes and details as blind (unmotivated by context) and therefore probably reflecting earlier, more comprehensible, versions is by no means new; on the contrary it has long been the standard view among

scholars (regarding these and many other obscure saga episodes). Nor are the interpretations of the two episodes as rituals new, and Wallenstein does not claim this. He correctly refers to these previous scholars. It should also be noted that the two episodes' specific interpretation as rituals is not at all generally accepted by scholars. The identification of obscure passages in the sagas as initiation rituals is fashionable only in the history of religion, while it is viewed sceptically by scholars from all other disciplines. Naturally, however, as most scholars agree that several obscure saga episodes contain details which originally had a now lost meaning, we can admit that Wallenstein's idea of stored inactive memory in the oral tradition is at least partly justified.

As we have seen, Wallenstein's own contribution in these cases is not to present new interpretations of obscure passages or any kind of well-founded new knowledge of them. His own contribution is indeed only to put new labels, borrowed from the Assmanns, on some old (and quite questionable) hypotheses of other scholars. The purpose of this in the book as a whole is to argue for a slight revision of some other scholars' theoretical model. The obscure passages' interpretation is a *tool* for him, not in any way claimed new knowledge of them.

The book also contains another extensive part consisting of investigations of some specific conceptions of the soul. Here, too, most of the observations and interpretations

are borrowed from other scholars, but Wallenstein is clearly more independent in this chapter than in the previous part. Some analyses are truly original, and the conclusions new.

Using a stanza about the creation of man in *Völuspá* as the starting point, Wallenstein identifies three aspects of the soul: *önd*, representing the breath, the most basic animating principle; *óðr*, representing the higher intellect and thus the distinctive human feature; and *lá*, representing blood and the warmth and colours of life (p. 223). Based on this, Wallenstein interprets both some obscure nose rituals (p. 235) and the medieval Norse view of revenants – who lack *óðr* and *lá*, but still have *önd* (pp. 233–236). Wallenstein concludes that this conception of the soul is pre-Christian but was nevertheless still a living view at the time when the sagas were written (p. 239, 246). In this part of the book Wallenstein's analyses and conclusions seem generally convincing and highly interesting. In the following sub-chapter Wallenstein analyses the idea of 'free souls' in Old Norse texts, the idea that the soul can leave the body. Again, Wallenstein can convincingly show that this view was pre-Christian but still alive when the sagas were written (pp. 258–263).

In short, this part of the book differs fundamentally from the previous one. Here, the sagas are not tools for revising a theory, but material that is analysed and from which new conclusions are drawn. Here, he

does not claim a fossilized memory that has lost its original meaning but a long unbroken continuity from pre-Christian times.

Generally, Wallenstein's dissertation is a stimulating work. One must admire his independent and constructive approach to the most fashionable theory in today's Old Norse studies – it is clearly superior to all the 103 contributions to the recent *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*. In all his analyses he demonstrates a sharp and truly scientific intellect combined with an impressive knowledge of both sources and previous research. His analyses and results in the investigation of Norse conceptions of the soul are convincing and partly new.

The book's problem is its unclear overall character. It falls into one almost purely theoretical part on the Assmanns' *cultural memory* model and a completely traditional empirical part on Norse conceptions of the soul – and these parts have remarkably little contact with each other. In the investigation of soul conceptions, the Assmannian notions and model, discussed so extensively in the theoretical part, play a very small role and indeed seem superfluous for the analyses and results. In the theoretical part Wallenstein uses passages from the sagas to 'correct' the Assmanns' model instead of using the theory to shed new light on the saga cases. It often seems he regards notions such as *cultural* and *storage memory* as phenomena with an 'objective' existence (similar to, for example,

mushrooms, grandmothers, steam turbines, and so on). He seems to view his work as a way of giving the notions their (objectively) correct description – instead of viewing them as more or less functional tools for making new observations, asking new questions and attaining valid new knowledge of the sagas and Old Norse traditions.

However, one should not exaggerate this problem. Wallenstein is aware of the different character of the different parts of the book, and he does indeed contribute many valuable analyses regarding both theory and the sagas. This is an important work with strong scholarly qualities. An English translation is to be recommended, as it would give the book the role in international research it deserves.

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