

Tommy Kuusela: *“Hallen var lyst i helig frid.” Krig mellan gudar och jättar i en fornnordisk hallmiljö.* Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2017, 270 pp.

Whenever Nordic iron-age culture or mythology is represented one of the most striking images is that of the hall, where important meetings take place between chieftains and their guests, or gods and giants. The theme of the hall in mythology is the central theme of Tommy Kuusela’s doctoral dissertation in the history of religion at the University of Stockholm (2017). The title translates roughly as ‘*Sacred Peace Reigned in the Hall: Strife and Peace between Gods and Giants in Ancient Norse Hall Milieus.*

Kuusela’s dissertation sees the hall milieus presented in pre-Christian Nordic myths as a reflection of the hall culture of the time, meaning both that understanding the hall culture can function as a key to understanding and interpreting myths and that the mythic narratives in hall milieus can expand our view on the hall-culture of the iron age.

The work is not overly heavy on the theoretical side, focusing instead on an in-depth survey of the material. Research history on relevant terms and concepts is introduced as they are presented. Kuusela does not limit himself to studies of Norse mythology and poetry, but utilises historical and archaeological knowledge to present a broader knowledge base of hall culture.

Based on his understanding of hall culture Kuusela constructs

his own methodological tool, the *hall model*. The method is based on analysing mythic narratives in hall milieus against known norms of hall culture, such as maintaining peace in the hall, the hospitality and generosity of the host, and ritual drinking in the hall.

According to the hall model the behaviour of the different gods and giants in hall milieus is measured against the norms and structures of hall etiquette. This brings out characteristics of the gods, or rather underlines what is already known: Odin visits giants’ halls alone and in disguise, using deception and cunning to obtain his goals, whereas Thor usually visits halls openly, in the company of other gods, and is faced with tests of strength and might.

Kuusela leads us through several myths set in hall milieus. In most the protagonist is a god who is visiting the hall of a giant: Odin in the halls of Vaftrudner and Suttung, and Thor in the halls of Hymer, Geirröd, Trym, and Utgårdaloke. A few mythic narratives also play out in the gods’ halls: the giant Hrungrner in Odin’s hall and Loke in Ägir’s hall.

Perhaps the most central theme emerging from this study is the etiquette of non-violence, or *grið*, which was enforced in hall milieus. The host of a hall was expected to be courteous and hospitable to his guests and a guest in turn to behave respectfully, even if the host and guest were rivals. Yet this peace was often broken, both in myth and real

life, as archaeological evidence testifies. Interest in the myths focuses on how and under what circumstances the *grið* is broken.

An interesting result of the hall-model method is that in many cases the gods are portrayed as rather ill-behaved guests, especially Thor, who often breaks the *grið*, whereas the giants are often portrayed as generous and well-behaved, albeit challenging, hosts. According to Kuusela the gods are not to be seen as 'ideal' or the giants as 'monstrous' characters: rather, both gods and giants are seen as peers, forming complex relationships with each other – much like the hall owners of real life.

The title of the dissertation refers to the sacred aspect of the *grið*. It is a shame the study fails to encompass an analysis of how hall culture and especially *grið* relate to the concept of the sacred, especially as this is a study in the history of religion. This might have contributed new insights into the ways in which sacrality was integral to different areas of pre-Christian culture in the North.

In many ways Kuusela's description of hall etiquette and the institution of the hall as a ritualised representative space for meetings prompts questions about similarities between the iron-age halls and the *sal*, the representative room of Nordic farmhouses in later centuries. It especially recalls the Finnish literary classic *Alastalon salissa* by Volter Kilpi (1933). *Alastalon salissa* is an intrinsically detailed description of how a *sal* room in the late

nineteenth century is used for a meeting between farm owners, where the patron tries in highly ritualised ways to impress his visitors and coerce them to support him in the enterprise of building a *barque*. Among the guests are rivals known to the patron, and much of the book focuses on how the tension and enmity between them plays out when bound by the ritualised vernacular etiquette of the *sal* milieu. In light of this it would be interesting to read a history of representational rooms in Nordic vernacular culture.

Nevertheless, the main strength of Kuusela's work is the way in which he anchors myth to practical culture, seeing their co-dependency, instead of studying mythological narratives as if they existed in an independent realm. The halls of the gods and giants reflect the real hall culture, which in turn was given increased meaning by myths. Through mythic poems chieftains could liken themselves to the gods reigning in their halls and rival chieftains as giants.

Another strong feature is the way the study draws out a central theme which has perhaps remained unnoticed because it has been hidden in plain sight. The centrality of the hall motif in eddic poetry had at least never struck me before I acquainted myself with this study.

Kuusela's (Swedish) language is very clear and his style of writing easy to follow. He presents terms and poems in such a manner that very little previous knowledge of prehistoric Nordic culture is re-

quired to understand the content. The main points are repeated quite frequently throughout the dissertation, making it easy to maintain the big picture. This will make Kuusela's book accessible to the lay reader and its interesting and fresh perspective on reading and interpreting the eddic poems should make it appealing even to enthusiasts outside the academic world. An English translation of the full work would certainly be appreciated by a wider international audience.

John Björkman

Åbo Akademi University, Finland

JOHN BJÖRKMAN is a Ph.D. student in Nordic folklore at Åbo Akademi University.
E-mail: john.bjorkman@turku.fi