Old Norse Studies and Collective Memory: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT: This special issue of *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies / Études scandinaves au Canada* is the result of a number of sessions organized by guest editors Yoav Tirosh and Simon Nygaard for the 2018 International Medieval Congress (IMC) at Leeds and supported by the Memory and the Pre-Modern North network. This introduction serves to contextualize the study of collective memory within the field of Old Norse as well as introduce some of the key theoretical concepts discussed in the issue. The formation and transmission of collective memory in pre-literate and literate societies are explained, with an eye towards the cognitive elements at play. Finally, the issue's articles are discussed, as is the logic of the compilation. This special issue hopes to expand the already thriving field of collective memory studies in Old Norse, building upon the work already done and offering new directions forward.

RÉSUMÉ : Ce numéro spécial d'*Études scandinaves au Canada / Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* est le résultat d'un certain nombre de sessions organisées par les rédacteurs invités Yoav Tirosh et Simon Nygaard pour le Congrès international d'études sur le Moyen-Âge (International Medieval Congress ou ICM) de 2018 à Leeds et soutenu par le réseau Memory and the Pre-Modern North (Mémoire et Nord prémoderne). Cette introduction sert à contextualiser l'étude de la mémoire collective dans le domaine du vieux norrois, ainsi qu'à présenter certains des concepts théoriques clés discutés dans le numéro. La formation et la transmission de la mémoire collective au sein des sociétés préalphabétisées et alphabétisées sont expliquées, en mettant l'accent sur les éléments cognitifs en jeu. Enfin, les articles du numéro sont discutés, ainsi que la logique de leur compilation. Ce numéro spécial espère élargir le champ déjà florissant des études de la mémoire collective en vieux norrois, en s'appuyant sur les travaux déjà réalisés et en proposant de nouvelles orientations.

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This special issue is a result of a number of Old Norse sessions focused on collective memory organized by the editors Simon Nygaard and Yoav Tirosh for the 2018 International Medieval Congress (IMC) at Leeds University (when non-virtual conferences were still a thing). The selection of the papers for the sessions was carried out by Simon and Yoav with the support of the *Memory & the Pre-Modern North* network's organizing members. The network also sponsored the sessions and in one of the sessions two of the network's founding members, Pernille Hermann and Jürg Glauser, presented the work process behind the *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, which was to be published later that year. The 2018 congress itself had memory as its special thematic strand, and the sessions were well attended and offered some fascinating debates. Following the congress, it was decided to gather the papers presented for publication and add some additional texts through a call for papers. While not all of the presented papers found their way into this issue, we believe the wide scope of topics and time periods discussed at the IMC sessions is well reflected in the selection of articles in this volume.

The introduction of the study of collective memory by scholars such as Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell has found a firm foothold in the field of Old Norse studies, manifest in the aforementioned *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies* edited by these scholars,[1] notable for its vastness in length and theme. While New Historicism, Material Philology, and even classical textual criticism addressed the questions of how, what, and why memory was preserved, and History of Religion almost by definition deals with myths and rituals concerning a remembered past (Nygaard and Schjødt 71), memory studies and particularly the theory of collective memory provides a constructive framework for these debates that allows us to think about and with memory employing an unprecedented scope. The oral traditions that originated the stories and the written medium that preserves them allow for a varied interplay between the different layers of time and memory represented in the Old Norse texts. This dual nature of the works—textual and containing traits of orality at the same time—also allows us to trace different stages in the process of remembering, either focussing on the origination of these texts, their preservation, or their renegotiation in various eras.

When dealing with the culture (literature, law, material remains, religion, etc.) of a past society, memory studies thus provides a fruitful approach since it is concerned with transmission and preservation of cultural matter, especially at a collective level. As has been noted by many scholars of memory, chief among these Maurice Halbwachs (1980 [1950], 1992 [1952]) and subsequently Jan and Aleida Assmann, collective memory is essential to a group since it provides the group with its identity. In pre-literate societies the only place to store and preserve this collective memory is the human mind, or individual memory, since the use

of external memory storage (like writing) is not an option,[2] while in societies with writing, collective memory is utilized in other ways. There, the application of what Aleida Assmann distinguished as canon and archive helps to foreground the memories that a society wishes to promote and that which a society wishes to (possibly temporarily) forget. These perspectives on the relevance of collective memory in pre-literate and literate societies will be treated briefly. First, the interplay between individual and collective memory will be touched upon.

This interplay between individual (autobiographical) memory and collective memory seems to be integral to the process of transmission and preservation of tradition. Therefore, it seems necessary not only to understand how memory functions and is transmitted in a societal context but also on a cognitive-psychological level. Memory, in general, is a neurological process that is important to human behaviour. Memory here is equated with *declarative memory*, which consists of information that can be consciously stored and retrieved as opposed to the unconscious processes at work in *nondeclarative memory* (Squire). The types of memory relevant to our understanding of collective memory, *episodic* and *semantic memory*, are the main constituents of *declarative memory*. The episodic type of individual memory is interesting to our understanding of its operation in pre-literate contexts since episodic memory is used for storing personal experiences of events and episodes from the past in order to inform the present as well as to assist us in predicting our expectations of the future[3]—in short, for creating the identity of an individual by recalling past events and episodes (Boyer 3–4). However, an individual's memory does not exist in a vacuum unaffected by the social and cultural setting of which the individual is part. Within a specific cultural setting, the process of recalling important past events is therefore not arbitrary; it follows certain culturally defined norms. One of the more widespread models of explaining this process, especially when it comes to events and the interplay between individual memory and collective, cultural forms, is called *script theory* (Berntsen and Bohn; Berntsen and Rubin). Cultural scripts rely largely on *semantic memory* (McRae and Jones), which consists of our accumulated knowledge of the world and is mainly informed by things other than our own experiences (that is, for instance, a ritual itself rather than our experience of any particular ritual). A script is a culturally dependent "general knowledge structure that organizes the way that we think about a recurrent event" (Berntsen and Bohn 64). The scripts tell us what typically happens in certain situations, like restaurant visits, rituals like burials and weddings, or indeed visiting a stranger's farm in medieval Iceland and thus what to expect in a given situation. Scripts are created collectively through culture as ways in which collective memory shapes the individual's semantic memory of certain events. This happens despite what an individual's episodic memory of a given event might be (Berntsen and Bohn 64; Berntsen and Rubin). The specific, individual, episodic memory is often "overwritten" by the group's collective version of the event—what in pre-literate

contexts has been called structural amnesia (Goody and Watt 30). From this cognitive-psychological angle, the individual in a pre-literate society who experiences, for instance, a recitation of law or poetry, relies heavily on prior experiences and cultural scripts when recalling it.

Following J. Assmann, it can be argued that the memory of a pre-literate society can be classified into the two following types: 1. Individual memory, which may be viewed as an embodied storehouse, that is, memory kept in the minds of, for instance, trained specialists; 2. Collective memory, which is social and shared within the group (Hermann 2020). As indicated above, however, there is a large degree of interplay between these two categories. J. Assmann speaks of both communicative and cultural memory as being essentially collective (J. Assmann 2010). This relevance of especially cultural memory for cultural matters, such as Old Norse religion, myth, and law, can be seen in the characterizations of memory given by J. Assmann. Accordingly, "communicative memory comprises memories related to the recent past" (J. Assmann 2011, 36), which are thought to span "80-100 years" or "3–4 interacting generations" (J. Assmann 2010, 117). Cultural memory, by contrast, consists of "mythical history, events in absolute past" that reach back in the "mythical primordial time," and are "mediated in ... icons, dances, rituals, and performances of various kinds" by "specialized carriers of memory" using "classical or otherwise formalized languages" (J. Assmann 2010, 117). In pre-literate societies, cultural memory consists of knowledge that is needed to secure the durability and coherence of the group (J. Assmann 2006, 24). According to J. Assmann, this cultural memory of the group is then mediated and transmitted by *memory specialists* from their (declarative) memories to the group through modes of repetition. Without the presence of writing in a society, ritualized behaviour becomes the principal mode of formally transmitting cultural memory in such a pre-literate setting (J. Assmann 2006, 39–40). Indeed, it has been argued that oral societies are founded upon the principle of ritual coherence and immanence, or "the idea of the need to maintain the world" (J. Assmann 2006, 126), so if the rituals are not performed correctly it is believed that the world will suffer and eventually come to an end. Stability in transmission is thus paramount for the perceived durability of the group (J. Assmann 2011, 26). Thus, because of the idea of immanence and the group's wish for durability, rituals, both religious and non-religions ones, can be viewed as structured, relatively stable, formal media for cultural memory in pre-literate contexts (J. Assmann 2010; Nygaard and Schjødt).[4]

Writing in a pre-modern society, where literacy is held by only a small segment of the cultural elite, renders authors and scribes as specialized memory agents. But unlike with oral traditions, what is written down can be stored and even allowed to be "forgotten." Aleida Assmann distinguishes between two states of remembering: canon and archive. Canon constitutes the body of "texts, places, persons, artefacts and myths" that are actively used by a society to shape its

culture (A. Assmann 100). Archive, unlike canon, is the cultural production that, rather than being actively used, is "situated halfway between the canon and forgetting" (A. Assmann 102). The canon is that which is immediately available to a society, while the archive remains in the backlogs of a society, ready to be at hand when it is needed through the mediation of the bureaucrat and librarian memory specialists (Tirosh). A more recent case example where a "forgotten" item has been retrieved for the relevant use of society is the Spanish Flu. A relatively underdiscussed pandemic framed by the two dramatic World Wars (e.g. Hirst xxxv), its memory has been more and more frequently invoked as a precursor to the COVID-19 health crisis.[5] In the Old Norse literary world, the archive was of two kinds: the memory storage that was transmitted orally, as discussed above, and the body of already written-down texts. But both forms of storage have an accompanying clause; they are susceptible to loss and consequently oblivion, made apparent in the Great Fire of 1728 in Copenhagen and the burning down of a significant part of Árni Magnússon's medieval Icelandic manuscript collection. Those finding solace in the digitization efforts of the last decades would do well to remember that digital data is not imperishable and is susceptible to loss, whether it be due to human error, computer malfunction, or intentional sabotage (Saffady 185–88).

The individuals who are responsible for the transmission of cultural memory in both pre-literate and literate societies, the memory specialists, have an integral function. They are in possession of a large amount of *embodied, latent* knowledge of the group's collective memory, like its religion, law, genealogies, stories, and mythology. For this knowledge to become cultural memory, it has to become *mediated* (in, for instance, ritual or manuscript form) and *actualized* for the group (J. Assmann 2010, 117). By actualization we mean that the collective memory is made present, relevant, and available for the group. In the words of the Danish literature and memory scholar Pernille Hermann, "due to its social and communicative components, cultural memory is not thought to be something that is inside individuals; rather, it exists between individuals" (Hermann 2009, 288). Thus, this actualization is crucial to the transmission process of cultural memory, since it could be argued that the memory does not become *cultural* until it is actualized.

In this volume we have opted for Halbwach's "collective" rather than the Assmanns's "cultural" memory as our organizing framework, because of the limiting nature of the division between cultural and communicative memory. The *Íslendingasögur* (Early Sagas of Icelanders) certainly constitute founding narratives along the lines discussed by J. Assmann (Glauser 2000; Hermann 2010). But these narratives represent a past that goes back two to four centuries from their writing down, rather than the "absolute past" mentioned by J. Assmann. The saga-adjacent text *Íslendingabók*, for example, states that one of its sources was Þuríðr, the daughter of the saga character appearing in many a text, Snorri

goði, and Gellir Þorkelsson, the son of *Laxdæla saga*'s Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir; the saga heroes and heroines were therefore both of the relatively recent past, and yet constituted the founding mothers and fathers of their culture, whose precedent and behaviour functioned as a lesson and inspiration.[6] J. Assmann's categorization of cultural and communicative memory therefore does not neatly align with the Icelandic situation, and we prefer to adopt the broader and more easily applicable term of collective memory instead. Taken together, the process of transmission and remediation of the stories, characters, and concepts discussed in Old Norse research speaks to what Astrid Erll has termed *travelling memories*. It is always important to remember that these memories meant different things to different people at different times. As Erll points out, "Mnemonic constellations may look static and bounded when scholars select for their research, as they tend to do, manageable sections of reality (temporal, spatial, or social ones), but they become fuzzy as soon as the perspective is widened" (Erll 14). The research offered in the following articles often approaches memory through localized and particular case studies; but taken together they paint a constantly shifting and constantly renegotiated past.[7]

This special issue is organized by the same impulse described above; the move from memory that was understood and transmitted orally to a written-based transmission was far from a smooth one (Glauser 2007; Ranković), particularly in the Icelandic case where the process of oral performance persisted well into the nineteenth century (Driscoll 38–46). We have opted for a chronological progression of the material, with the acknowledged caveat that the time periods discussed often intersect and merge into one another; very few literary genres, especially in the pre-modern age, could be considered truly isolated from their neighbours: rune stones feed into oral tales that feed into sagas that feed into rímur that feed into rewritings of sagas. The volume thus starts with Jonas Koesling's article about early Scandinavian rune stones written in the Elder *fuþark*, which readdresses the inscriptions' function traditionally argued to be related to burial customs and offers a broader interpretation suggesting that these early runic inscriptions were crucial to the creation and maintaining of collective memory in Early Iron Age Scandinavia. The volume then turns to the provocative question that lies behind Andrea Maraschi's article: Could myths such as that of the Fimbulvetr have served as a method of circumventing cultural amnesia? By analyzing the impact of the 536 CE dust veil event, Maraschi shows how myths could be used to mitigate the far-reaching and cyclical effects of devastating natural disasters. Deniz Cem Gülen's article continues this theme of forgetting and moves the debate forward in time to the Danish royalty of the eleventh century. King Haraldr II's reign remains a relative historical mystery and is even erased from some important narratives. Gülen examines different reasonings behind this erasure, weighing the arguments of religious change, textual transmission, and narrative coherence as potential explanations.

The next two articles move on to focus on the memory specialists of Iceland, who saw their roles shift in times of religious and cultural change. First is Ann Sheffield's article concerning the memory of heathen women, where she addresses the diachronic element involved in remembering the Icelandic heathen past. Collective memory requires a transition, a present that is different from the past. When heathen female figures feature in texts that take place in a time too close for comfort, the Icelandic authors made sure to distance themselves from their sentiments. These women as well as their transgressive knowledge were to stay in the past, where they were thought to belong. Simon Nygaard's article then shifts the question from "why" to "how," and analyzes the operation of the early Icelandic *lǫgsǫgumenn*, the lawspeakers who committed the law to their memory and guided the Icelandic legal system. Rather than viewing the legal and religious spheres as separate systems, Nygaard suggests that in pre-conversion Iceland these Weberian value spheres were closely intertwined and that both spheres thus were part of the pre-conversion *lǫgsǫgumaðr*'s domain.

Staying in the relationship between past and present in the *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of the Early Icelanders), William Biel's article uses the concept of "object rhetoric" as a tool to understand the representations offered. Biel suggests that through objects, different past values are negotiated, highlighted, and prioritized in the saga narrative, the weapons discussed functioning as carriers of memory and meaning. Like Sheffield (and Gülen's discounted explanation for Haraldr II's erasure), Biel shows an Icelandic discomfort with a pagan past and a complex relationship with the court in light of the spreading Norwegian influence in the thirteenth century. Santiago Barreiro's article continues this line of enquiry focused on objects, looking at the function of gift exchange in creating collective memory. In this article, which applies the theory of collective memory in a critical manner, Maurice Halbwachs's cultural milieu takes centre stage; Barreiro applies the theory in a qualified manner and the result is humbling to scholars dealing with the topic.

While reception and collective memory are separate fields with distinct traditions, they often intersect due to their preoccupation with interactions between past and present. The focal point of Old Norse studies is the Middle Ages, but the importance of reception and its relevance to our times is illustrated in the volume's two final articles.[8] Sofie Vanherpen's article looks at the uses of the figure of Auðr djúpauðga/Unnr djúpúðga in late 18th- and early nineteenth-century Icelandic literature, and it again illustrates the Icelandic preference of Christian interpretations of their ancestors. Like many other articles in the volume, Vanherpen discusses the erasure and negotiation in interpretations of the past that are involved in the process of creating collective memory. The issue's final article by Vanessa K. Iacocca discusses the Icelandic national poet from the early nineteenth century: Jónas Hallgrímsson and his use of the *Íslendingasögur* in his poetry. Creating a full circle with the issue's opening article

about rune stones by Jonas Koesling, the creation of cultural memory through the importance of space and place is exemplified in Iacocca's article. The article makes the importance of collective memory in the formation of identity clear, as the past is used in framing the struggles of the present.

We have also included a review article and two book reviews to better position the volume in its present academic context. Rather than simply review the books, the authors were asked to contextualize them in their relevance for the field of Old Norse collective memory studies. In a review article, Lukas Rösli discusses the *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* edited by Anna Lisa Tota and Trever Hagen (2015), Ron Eyerman's *Memory, Trauma, and Identity* (2019), as well as Juri Lotman's *Culture, Memory and History: Essays in Cultural Semiotics* (2019). Rösli's review highlights the possibilities and disadvantages of these texts in general, and their usefulness to the scholar of Old Norse literature. This is followed by Anna Solovyeva's review of the *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches* edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell (2018), which, as mentioned earlier, represents the crowning achievement of the *Memory and the Pre-Modern North* network. Finally, Sarah Künzler reviews *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* edited by Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (2017), which offers a critical toolkit for approaching saga literature.

Following the impressive work achieved in the study of collective memory in Old Norse scholarship until now, this special issue wishes to point to the applicability of the theory to a wide array of studies and time periods, as well as different kinds of theoretical engagements. The research into memory in the pre-modern North and its period of reception are happily not exhausted, and we hope that the articles and book reviews presented here will help to further the ongoing discussion. In a time when our research is being appropriated and distorted by extreme political groups that lay claim to Nordic heritage and culture, it is important to try to offer an alternative narrative to these problematic interpretations.[9] Through this scholarship, a new collective memory of the pre-modern North is advanced, one that is hopefully free of notions of exceptionalism and cultural superiority. By connecting the dots between wider theories applied in other fields and the field of Old Norse, we can suggest that Scandinavian literature and history are in fact inseparable from the contemporary world, and from the operating logic of humanity as a whole.

NOTES

1. Further works and publications of the research network *Memory & the Pre-Modern North include Memory and Remembering* (Hermann and Mitchell) and Minni *and* Muninn (Hermann, Mitchell, and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir).

2. In Viking Age North Europe, runic writing did exist as a somewhat limited tool for external memory storage. See further Harris; Jesch (1998, 2005); and Koesling in this issue.
3. An important lens through which to view this process is that of predictive coding (see Schjoedt and Andersen). A recent state-of-the-art may be found in Schjoedt.
4. See also Nygaard in this issue.
5. See also Lethbridge's notes in this issue's foreword.
6. See also Vanherpen in this issue.
7. For a broad application of collective memory in the remembered and unremembered presence of the Vikings see Ellis.
8. As well as recent publications such as the two seminal volumes on research and reception in the *Pre-Christian Religions of the North* series (Clunies Ross 2018a, 2018b).
9. For analyses of the Viking Age and Old Norse literature from decentralized and postcolonial perspectives, see Otaño Gracia; Crocker; and Price. For a Queer Studies perspective on pre-Christian Nordic religion see, e.g., Jefford Franks.

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