

Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, eds. 2018.
Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches.
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The culture of the pre-modern North is intimately connected to memory in many ways. The extant sources preserve various reflections of what was deemed important to be remembered, how these subjects were remembered, what sorts of values and anxieties were connected to memory and its constant counterpart, forgetting, and, just as importantly, how writers and their intended audiences could conceptualize memory. Considering the culture's preoccupation with memory evident in the sources, it is natural for the research of this culture to become preoccupied with memory as well. While the students of the pre-modern North could hardly help but be aware of the great significance of memory for Nordic culture throughout scholarly history, it is in the recent decades that memory studies in the sense conceptualized by such scholars as Jan and Aleida Assmann have become a widely spread and highly productive strand in the field. The *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, is both a product of this development and a way to evaluate it, to map the achievements and limitations of the memory studies approach to the period and its culture.

The volume comes in the wake of a number of smaller-scale publications released by the members of the Memory and the Pre-Modern North Network, such as *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture* (2014) or the special issue of the *Scandinavian Studies* journal (2013) on memory and remembering. However, the *Handbook* differs from the previous published volumes, monographs, and other forums used to discuss memory in the pre-modern North through its sheer scale—in regards to the topics covered, the experts involved, and the groups of readers who can benefit from the book—as well as through the highly systematic approach bringing together various subfields, methodologies, and types of sources. Despite its scale and thoroughness, the *Handbook* explicitly does not aim at becoming the last word about memory in the pre-modern North. Instead, the editors and contributors set out to produce a state-of-the-art cross-section of the field that ensures communication across disciplinary, national, and even generational boundaries. Not closing the conversation about memory, but promoting and facilitating it, in the years to come the monumental result of this project is certain to become a go-to guide both for experienced specialists and for newcomers in the field.

The *Handbook* is divided into two volumes: the much larger first volume contains articles on various forms and aspects of memory, while the second volume supplements the discussion through a structured collection of quotes

and translations from primary sources. The first volume comprises a hundred chapters illuminating various aspects of memory in pre-modern Nordic culture, as well as its reception in the more modern times and various approaches to its study. The volume is divided into two parts, the first one titled “Disciplines, Traditions and Perspectives,” and the second, larger one containing a staggering array of “Case Studies.”

On the whole, we can see the thirty chapters comprising Part I on “Disciplines, Traditions and Perspectives” as a guide to the rest of the volume. First of all, it provides context, connecting the theoretical discussions and concrete examples from the studies of the pre-modern North to the traditions and concepts existing outside the field. In doing so, the ensemble of authors who have worked on the first thirty chapters provides those from outside the field with a number of guided and relatable ways in, while those specializing primarily on the Nordic material are invited to look outside their immediate field of studies. Three of the chapters in this part of the volume written by its editors can serve as examples of such contextualization. In the chapter on “Mythology,” Pernille Hermann invokes Emily Lyle’s discussion of Indo-European mythological structures in order to discuss the “multi-media environment” of various internal and external memory devices in which the Old Norse mythology existed (82). Further, Hermann combines the ideas of Gerd Wolfgang Weber and Jan Assmann to lay a foundation for understanding the “historical-mythical” relationship of the medieval Icelanders towards the past, the approach “qualified by its claim of truth” (84). In the chapter on “Orality and Oral Theory,” Stephen A. Mitchell gives a brief overview of the latter while contextualizing the debates between *Buchprosa*- and *Freiprosa*-advocates and the implications of oral or written origins of the sagas for Norwegian nationalism. Jürg Glauser, in his treatment of “Literary Studies,” makes productive use of Renate Lachmann’s influential distinction of three types of relationships between memory and literature, namely “memory in literature,” “memory of literature,” and “literature as a medium of memory” (cited on 231) and provides illustrations from the Old Norse sources for a brief, but nuanced, discussion of these relationships.

Another feature of the volume evident already in the first thirty chapters is the inclusion of a wide variety of approaches and points of view. On the one hand, we see excellent chapters on the disciplines that have had a pride of place in popular and specialized books on the pre-modern North (or on all things Viking) for many years. Overviews of such disciplines from the fresh perspective of memory studies are provided, for instance, by Simon Nygaard and Jens Peter Schjødt for the “History of Religion,” by Anders André for “Archaeology,” by Stefan Brink on “Law,” by Mats Malm for “Runology,” and by Bjørn Bandlien for “History.” On the other hand, some of the more recent or even niche approaches that have been gaining traction in the field of pre-modern Norse studies in the more recent decades are represented in equally accessible and engaging chapters:

for example, those on “Material Philology” by Lena Rohrbach, “Trauma Studies” by Torfi H. Tulinius, “Translation Studies” by Maximiliano Bampi, and “Environmental Humanities” by Reinhard Hennig. Likewise, in Part II, which is comprised of diverse case studies, we find up-to-date treatments of such traditional subjects as “Manuscripts” by Lukas Rösli, “Skalds” by Russell Poole, and “Genealogies” by Úlfar Bragason, alongside the more recently popular but influential themes, such as “Emotions” by Caroline Larrington or “Diaspora” by Judith Jesch. There is place for both the much-needed succinct overviews of broad subjects, for example “Orality” by Gísli Sigurðsson, “Hagiography” by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, or “Origins” by Else Mundal, and for discussions of more narrow and sometimes innovatively formulated topics, such as “Skin” by Sarah Künzler, “Icelanders Abroad” by Yoav Tirosh, or “Pilgrimage – Gotland” by Tracey Sands.

Whether tending more to the general or to the specific, the authors of all these and other chapters in the volume are acutely aware of the world outside each of the individual approaches, creating a diverse interconnected and interdisciplinary landscape of memory in the pre-modern North. As the chapters of approximately equal length not only embrace the variety of approaches and types of material, but also focus on concepts and trends of various scope, this imaginary landscape is endowed with a fascinating level of detail. It seems that the *Handbook* can provide inspiration and guidance to anyone interested in any aspect of pre-modern Nordic memory studies, no matter how broad or narrow a question we might ask it. At the same time, the diversity of the elements included in the volume accounts for a structure that is neither rigid nor exactly traditional, with topics echoing across various units, some titles and themes resurfacing in several places. For instance, in Part I we find a chapter on “Performance Studies” by Terry Gunnell, explaining and illustrating the application of this discipline’s tools and concepts to Old Norse material. In Part II, a whole subsection deals with various modes of “Performing Commemoration,” from “Ritual Lament” discussed by Richard Harris and “Memorial Toasts” by Lars Lönnroth—to “Women and Remembrance Practices” by Agnes Arnórsdóttir, “Chain Dancing” by Tóta Árnadóttir, and “Neo-Paganism” by Mathias Nordvig. Similarly, the chapters on reception and popular culture at the end of Part I, as well as those on history and on museology, can lay the ground for our understanding of the numerous chapters on national perspectives and nationalized memories at the end of Part II, to which we will return shortly. Combined with the sheer amount of information included in the volume, a reader might take some time to get used to navigating its structure. Here, the index provided at the end will be of tremendous help, but so will a careful study of the multilevel internal organization of the volume. The subsections of Part I guide us from “Culture and Communication,” through “Material Culture,” to “Philology” and “Aesthetics and Communication,” through “Constructing the Past,” and on to the cultures and disciplines “In-Dialogue” with the Nordic past. The Case Studies of Part II are also arranged according to topics,

as indicated by the almost poetically sounding fourpartite division of this part into subsections on “Media,” “Space,” “Action,” and “Power.” A habitual user of the *Handbook* will soon learn to take the cues of such fluid thematic arrangements and very likely become fascinated by its elegance.

Viewing the structure of the volume more broadly may also allow us to determine some of the wider issues and themes that loom particularly large in the minds of contributors and editors, and in the field as a whole. For this brief overview, highlighting one such especially prominent and important strand will have to suffice. Namely, the role of memory in its various forms not only within the sources extant from pre-modern times but also in the interplay between “their” past and “our” present appears to be among the most prominent themes of the volume as a whole, as far as distinctions of this sort are possible in a project of such broad scope and ambition. Viewing the structure of the volume more broadly may also allow us to determine some of the wider issues and themes that loom particularly large in the minds of contributors and editors, and in the field as a whole. For this brief overview, highlighting one such especially prominent and important strand will have to suffice. Namely, the role of memory in its various forms not only within the sources extant from pre-modern times but also in the interplay between “their” past and “our” present appears to be among the most prominent themes of the volume as a whole, as far as distinctions of this sort are possible in a project of such broad scope and ambition.

The issue of nationalism, national identities, and national agendas invoking various elements of the pre-modern Nordic heritage is taken up repeatedly throughout the *Handbook*, for instance in the chapter on “Folklore Studies” mentioned above, and shortly after that by Silje Opdahl Mathiesen in the chapter on “Museology,” which includes a discussion of the phenomenon of Viking ship museums and the controversial representation of the Viking Age in the Historical Museum in Oslo. Within the first part of the volume, various aspects of the treatment of the past and the implicit bias within such treatments are taken up, for instance, in the chapters on “Neighbouring Disciplines”: “Anglo-Saxon Studies” by Antonina Harbus, “Celtic Studies” by Sarah Künzler, and “Sámi Studies” by Thomas A. DuBois, as well as in the chapters on “Reception Studies” by Margaret Clunies Ross, “Popular Culture” by Jón Karl Helgason, and on “Contemporary Popular Culture” by Laurent Di Filippo. Part II of the volume closes with twenty-five chapters that have “Power” as a common denominator. Of these, five deal more generally with origins and beginnings, the following ten with “National Memories” of the past in Scandinavia, as well as Baltic and Northern Atlantic areas, and the final ten treat the phenomena of the nations outside these areas “Envisioning the Northern Past” for themselves. These subsections are important not only because of their acute relevance to modern research and modern culture and by virtue of representing excellent treatments of the often sensitive topics, but they are also valuable because they provide succinct, up-to-date, and, as far

as humanly possible, unbiased accounts of the sources previously not easily (if at all) accessible in English. This is particularly true of the chapters on “Faroese Perspectives” by Malan Marnersdóttir, “Greenlandic Perspectives” by Kirsten Thisted, and the two chapters on Russian perspectives by Ulrich Schmid and Barbora Davidková respectively. The chapters on cultures of the Nordic area and the separate treatments of two key figures, the Danish Grundtvig and the Swedish Rudbeck, provide a welcome assistance to the readers who cannot access the sources in Nordic languages directly.

The examples from primary sources collected in the second volume of the *Handbook* provide additional illustrations for the discussions collected in the first volume and at the same time further reinforce the diversified approach of the *Handbook* as a whole. A variety of genres and source-types is represented: from sagas to treatises on poetry and poetics, from theological works to runic inscriptions. The volume starts out by discussing the literary genres or forms that can be seen as forms of memory in themselves—such as the Eddic poem *Völuspá* (The Prophecy of the Seeress)—before moving to the imagery conceptualizing memory within medieval texts—such as the birds of memory and forgetting—and to the reflections on memory by medieval writers often expressed in prologues and colophons. The role of memory in the sources is thus approached and illustrated on different levels, including genre, linguistic and literary imagery, and self-conscious reflection.

Among the examples one can find the ones that are widely known and cited (both within the discussion of cultural memory in the pre-modern North and more generally), such as the comments on the sources of *Íslendingabók* (The Book of Icelanders) and *Heimskringla*, attributed to Ári Þorgilsson and Snorri Sturluson, respectively, or such famous runic inscriptions as the ones on the Rök and Jelling stones. Other examples picked by the editorial team are less widely cited and may well become interesting discoveries for the readers. This latter group includes, for instance, the quotations from *Þiðreks saga af Bern* (The Saga of Thidrek of Bern) and *Gautreks saga* (The saga of Gautrekr). By necessity, the examples collected here cannot—and do not—claim to be exhaustive (for instance, it appears that more examples could be found in both translated and indigenous *riddarasögur* (romances), as well as the so-called “post-classical” *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders)). However, these examples certainly are representative of the corpus and provide a good starting point for anyone wishing to explore the treatment and role of memory in the primary sources. Experts well-versed in studies of pre-modern Nordic literature and culture would find it a handy compendium to consult; for those of us venturing outside of our immediate field of expertise it can provide a guide to the less familiar genres and a convenient map of possible contrasts and parallels between different types of sources. Last but not least, it serves as a brilliant introduction to the sources seen from a specific point of view that can be used both by the aspiring students of Old Norse literature and culture

and by the specialists coming from other fields with initial interest in cultural memory rather than in the specific culture per se.

The final feature of the *Handbook* that is important to note is the stunning array of contributors brought together by this project. In addition to maintaining a high academic standard, the *Handbook* also stands out as one of the best recent examples of diversity in scholarship. Many of the scholars who have contributed to the volume have decades of experience and an illustrious track record, and it is refreshing to see that alongside their excellent contributions there are numerous equally competent articles by early career researchers and scholars who have yet to become household names. Diverse disciplinary and national backgrounds, as well as different genders and authors at various career stages, appear to be represented equally. This makes the volume not only a valuable overview of the various research topics connected to memory in the pre-modern North, but also a “Who’s Who” guide to many of the competent specialists in the various aspects of this vast field. All in all, this is an excellent book, whether you would like to start or maintain your acquaintance with the field, to find inspiration for your own research, to fill in the gaps, or to refresh your memory on the familiar topics.

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