

Magic and Memory in the Pre-Modern North

Autumn School, University of Helsinki

25–29 October 2021

Call for Applications

Magic is a nearly ubiquitous theme in surviving Old Norse-Icelandic literature— for example, the Æsir gods as group are called *galdrasmiðir* (magic makers), Óðinn is presented first and foremost as the master magician, the sagas are regularly populated with a variety of people skilled in using magic, missionary kings are said to struggle against such ritual specialists, and so on. Yet, as suggested by its prominence in the provincial and national law codes, in synodal statutes and other ecclesiastical decrees, in early medical treatises, and in a range of historical documents, magic was anything but a ‘mere’ literary theme in the minds of medieval Scandinavians and it was, whatever it was, an issue to be taken seriously.

In fact, the cultural category we call ‘magic’ has always been a difficult and elusive concept, so much so that even defining the term in modern scholarship has been fraught with controversy. Especially in the modern era, one could argue that these problems have their roots in colonialist discourses in which the idea of magic has traditionally been enveloped. In that view, to put it bluntly, when all the fine words and theories are swept aside, ‘magic’ has historically been used deprecatingly to refer to what ‘other peoples’ believe, or even more crudely, ‘what those (*sc.* inferior) people over there believe’.

Yet magic is not only a construct built on issues of spatial and ethnic otherness, but also a concept where temporality matters. And it is perhaps in this element of the magical chronotope that we most often meet magic in the Nordic materials, where these practices are frequently discussed with reference to the pagan past, as survivals from or revivals of heathenism. Typical of these references is the magic worker, Þuríðr, in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, about whom it is said, *Hon hafði verit fjölkunnig mjök ok margkunnig mjök, þá er hon var ung ok menn váru heiðnir; nú þótti sem hon myndi öllu týnt hafa* (She had been very well-informed about magic and skilled in witchcraft when she was young and people were heathen, but by this time it was thought she had lost all that).

This course focuses on magic in medieval and early modern Scandinavia. What sort of role did it play in those worlds? How, for example, did charm magic, ‘the verbal element of vernacular magic practice’, function in the lives of both élites and non-élites from the medieval period to Reformation-era Scandinavia (c. 1100-1600)? What was remembered about, or invented about, the magical traditions of the earlier pre-Christian world and how were these ideas reflected, and deployed, in literature, law, and life? Our exploration of these materials will build on the advances in recent decades in our understanding of magic, as well as on our ability to envision and re-contextualize the performance practices associated with medieval and early modern magic, applying ‘thick description’ to the historical data, and drawing heavily on the so-called ‘ethnography of speaking’, the history of mentalities, and, especially, memory studies.

The Autumn School welcomes applications from across many fields—history, philology, folkloristics, anthropology, ethnology, religious studies, archaeology, art history and other relevant disciplines. The subject of the course, Magic and Memory in the Pre-Modern North, intentionally looks to remove most linguistic, national, and temporal guard rails, and encourages participants to focus on their own special interests through project presentations and discussions. A reading list for preparation in advance of the seminar will be distributed.

The Autumn School is organized with the support of the Thure Gallén Foundation, and hosted by the Centre for Nordic Studies at the University of Helsinki in cooperation with Glossa (the Society for Medieval Studies in Finland). The course is led by Professor Stephen Mitchell (Harvard University) and specialists in relevant fields (e.g., Professor Neil Price in archaeology).

Fifteen students (Ph.D. or Master's level) will be accepted into the course. Students receive 5 ECTS points for attending the course and completing the course assignments. Part of the course will consist of students' project presentations, with comments provided by the teachers and other students. Participants are required to submit an essay (5–7 pages) on a topic based in their ongoing research.

Applicants are invited to send a cover letter and one-page project abstract to the coordinator, Anita Geritz, by 31 May 2021. The organizers can provide a travel grant from €100 to €400; to apply, include in your application the reason for applying for the grant, as well as an estimate of travel expenses.

Course safety & COVID-19

The organizers hope that in October 2021 conditions will be safe to organize this course at the University of Helsinki. However, if the situation does not permit safe international travel and face-to-face teaching the course will be postponed. In this event all applicants will be informed, and accepted applicants can confirm to reserve a place in the postponed course.

For further information, please contact the coordinator or Prof. Stephen Mitchell.

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