

Editorial

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Sagas and Space – Thinking Space in Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavia

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The following four articles are based on plenary lectures delivered at The Sixteenth International Saga Conference, held at the Universities of Zurich and Basel (Switzerland) from 9th–15th August 2015. The previous Saga Conference, which took place in 2012 in Aarhus (Denmark), had addressed “Sagas and the Use of the Past”. As a complementary topic, the conference held in Zurich and Basel in 2015 opted to discuss medieval conceptions of the other important category of human thought: space. The organisers felt that selecting this theme reflected the growing general interest among cultural studies and philological disciplines in the inter-relatedness of space, place and location (see e. g. Günzel 2010, 2013). In this respect, the Sixteenth International Saga Conference marked a decisive point in the field by enabling medieval Scandinavian Studies to participate in its own “spatial turn”. Several dozen papers delivered at this conference specifically addressed spatialised modes of thinking in Old Norse-Icelandic culture by examining ideas which generated various categories of space in Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia.

It should come as no surprise that such distinctly spatial(ised) ways of thinking have come down to us in various manifestations through specific and more general media from the pre-modern period onwards. For one, there is literacy. It may be argued that a spatial dimension is always inherent in writing through its graphic appearance on a surface. Regardless of whether it appears as incised in a rune stone, is written on parchment or paper in medieval manuscripts, or accessible electronically on the screen of a digital device, the temporal constituent of writing is always also connected to a spatial component. This graphic materiality, as one may call this phenomenon, has recently become a distinct focus of analysis in runology and codicology. Additional surveys in these areas could certainly add interesting insights in the tenets that govern the principles of writing and picto-

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rial representations such as, for example, the significance of the layout of specific media (see e. g. Kiening/Stercken 2008).

In addition, other disciplines could also contribute innovative questions and conclusions to such topics. To cite an example from the Old Norse mythological corpus: the Prose Edda outlines how the world was created when two primeval spaces with different energies – the hot *Múspelheimr* (Realm of Fire) and the cold *Niflheimr* (Mist World) – met in the empty space that is *Ginnungagap* (Mighty Gap). The topology and topography of the Eddas is a topic which has enjoyed – and benefitted from – renewed attention in recent years (Løkka 2010, Rösli 2015). On the other hand, Icelandic historicising texts from the thirteenth century, such as the Book of Icelanders (*Íslendingabók*) and the Book of Settlement (*Landnámabók*), as well as countless Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), narrate the discovery and colonization of Iceland. In these sources, Iceland is regularly described as a *terra nova*, a new and empty land, and the subsequent establishment of new social space(s) is an important subject matter in these narratives. The Icelandic Sagas of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are frequently concerned with narratives that recount the time of colonization and are an integral part of Icelandic cultural memory (see Wamhoff 2016). It is remarkable that while in these sagas memory is always clearly connected to a temporal dimension, at times it may appear equally connected to spatial ideas. In these instances, memory performs as a chronotope and is closely linked to the Icelandic landscape. Classical theories of memory perceive of places (*loci*) as one of the most important instruments for the formation of memory (and memories) and the literature of the Icelandic Middle Ages contains an abundance of examples reflecting this dictum (see Glauser 2000, Hermann et al. 2014). The connection between space and text, tangible to this day, is also reflected in the numerous monuments from the nineteenth and twentieth-century which commemorate important historic events such as battles. A particularly fitting example to outline the relationship between landscape and tradition in the Nordic countries is the location of the battle of Stiklestad in Norway. The well-known site marks the death of King St. Olaf (Óláfr Haraldsson hinn helgi, 995–1030) and numerous monuments have been erected over the centuries to reflect (changing) commemorative practices.

The realistic tone of the Sagas of Icelanders vividly describes some very noteworthy examples which outline the importance of nature in and for narrative actions. In line with classical topology, literary texts may also employ (among other ideas) the two spatial categories of the pleasant place (*locus amoenus*) and the (contrasting) frightful place (*locus terribilis*). In Old Norse-Icelandic literature, it is especially the translated and original Riddarasögur that describe pleasant places such as enclosed gardens (*hortus conclusus*), and these are often of considerable importance in the narrative. These places are grounded in a long literary tradi-

tion and through these depictions it may become clear how intensely they are connected to the senses and emotions and hence also to corporeal aspects. Both Eddas and a large number of sagas reveal an astonishing range of examples in which a particular place evokes pleasant or unpleasant emotions, or even cases in which the space itself is defined by such emotions. For instance, The Saga of the People of Eyrr (*Eyrbyggja saga*, a Saga of Icelanders) prominently expounds the motif of the revenant. Within this narrative context, the text develops an underlying structure in which “bad places” are noticeably connected with the appearance of maleficent revenants, or a saga may even opt to define such places *through* the revenants.

Recent research has also addressed the manifold relations between texts and the pictorial representations associated with them. Questions about the connection between portrayals of mythological, heroic, historical, feudal or geographic spaces and landscape(s) in written narratives and oral transmission from the Viking Age and the medieval period to more pictorial media such as reliefs on picture stones, runic inscriptions, woodcarvings, paintings in illuminated manuscripts etc. in view of the treatment of spaces have been addressed by various Scandinavian scholars (see Liepe 2009).

Medieval cosmographies and medieval/early modern cartographies produced a wealth of remarkable texts and maps in and about the North. These appear to be closely associated with the above-mentioned mythological narratives illustrating the creation (see Simek 1990, Kedwards 2014).

The complex and multifaceted connections between archaeological artefacts and written texts have generated substantial interest in recent times, especially in relation to aspects of spatiality (see e. g. Andrén 1998, 2014). So far, the most influential and perhaps even the most significant study of geo-poetics in Old Norse culture has been presented by Emily Lethbridge in her blog describing her journeys to well-known saga-steads in Iceland. Equally stimulating results are evident from her project of the interactive saga map (Lethbridge 2015a,b,c).

Many of the points raised above, as well as various other aspects, are considered in the following four articles. Torfi H. Tulinius' contribution, “‘Á Kálfskinni’: Sagas and Space of Literature”, employs an extensive literary survey (which also includes literary-sociological aspects) to demonstrate how rewarding considering the relationship between space and time can be in the study of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Judith Jesch discusses specific medial structures extant in the oldest Nordic poetry and their productive reception over the centuries in her contribution, entitled “Runes and Verse: The Medialities of Early Scandinavian Poetry”. In “The Mind's Eye: The Triad of Memory, Space and the Senses in Old Norse Literature”, Pernille Hermann describes the interrelatedness between space and the senses and the latter's importance for the construction and recollection of

memory in texts of the Nordic Middle Ages. In the fourth contribution, “Mythical and Metaphorical Landscapes in Skaldic Poetry”, Edith Marold shows that, in contrast to what a superficial survey would suggest, the corpus of Skaldic Poetry contains a considerable number of revealing depictions and interpretations of nature and landscape which can fruitfully be connected to memory discours(es).

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