

JOURNAL *of* NORTHERN STUDIES

Vol. 10 • No. 1 • 2016

Published by Umeå University & The Royal Skyttean Society

Umeå 2016

The *Journal of Northern Studies* is published with support from
The Royal Skytteen Society and Umeå University

© The authors and *Journal of Northern Studies*
ISSN 1654-5915

Cover picture

Sheep bound for mountain pastures in Lyngsalpan [‘The Lyngen
Alps’] in Northern Norway 2014. Photo: Tor Arne Lillevoll.

Design and layout

Lotta Hortéll och Leena Hortéll, Ord & Co i Umeå AB
Fonts: Berling Nova and Futura
Paper: CT+ 300 gr and Pro Design 100 gr

Printed by

UmU-Tryckservice, Umeå University

Contents / Sommaire / Inhalt

Editors & Editorial board	5
---------------------------------	---

Articles / Aufsätze

<i>Tor Arne Lillevoll</i> , Sheep Farmers in the Realm of Læstadius. Science and Religion as Motivating Forces in the Community of Practice in Northern Norway	7
<i>Ketil Lenert Hansen, Asle Høgmo & Eiliv Lund</i> , Value Patterns in Four Dimensions among the Indigenous Sami Population in Norway. A Population-Based Survey	39
<i>Lars Larsson, E. Carina H. Keskitalo & Jenny Åkermark</i> , Climate Change Adaptation and Vulnerability Planning within the Municipal and Regional System. Examples from Northern Sweden	67

Miscellanea: Notes / Notizen

Anna-Leena Siikala (1943–2016) (<i>Karina Lukin</i>).....	91
---	----

Reviews / Comptes rendus / Besprechungen

Kajsa Andersson (ed.), <i>L'Image du Sápmi. Études comparées</i> , vol. 1–3, Örebro: Örebro University 2009–2013 (<i>Hans-Roland Johnsson</i>).....	93
Gerd Braune, <i>Die Arktis. Porträt einer Weltregion</i> , Berlin: Chr. Links Verlag 2016 (<i>Aant Elzinga</i>).....	106
Anita G.J. Buma, Annette J.M. Scheepstra & Richard Bintanja (eds.), <i>Door de kou bevangen. Vijftig jaar Nederlands onderzoek in de poolgebieden</i> , Lelystad: MaRiSuDa Uitgeverij 2016 (<i>Aant Elzinga</i>).....	109
Cornelia Lüdecke, <i>Deutsche in der Antarktis. Expeditionen und Forschungen von Kaiserreich bis heute</i> , Berlin: Chr. Links Verlag 2015 (<i>Aant Elzinga</i>).....	116
Frédérique Rémy, <i>Le monde givré</i> , Paris: Éditions Hermann 2016 (<i>Karin Becker</i>).....	127
Nicolas Meylan, <i>Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland. The Construction of a Discourse of Political Resistance</i> , Turnhout: Brepols 2014 (<i>Olof Sundqvist</i>).....	134
Johan Schimanski & Ulrike Spring, <i>Passagiere des Eises. Polarhelden und arktische Diskurse 1874</i> , Wien: Böhlau Verlag 2015 (<i>Aant Elzinga</i>).....	140
Anna Nilsén, <i>The Gothic Sculpture of Uppsala Cathedral. On Spiritual Guidance and Creative Joy</i> , Turnhout: Brepols 2014 (<i>Margrethe C. Stang</i>).....	153
Instructions to Authors.....	157

Nicolas Meylan, *Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland. The Construction of a Discourse of Political Resistance* (Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia 3), Turnhout: Brepols 2014, ISBN 9782503551576 (hbk.), x + 223 pp.¹

Nicolas Meylan defended his thesis “How to Deal with Kings When You Are a Suet-Lander: Discourses of ‘Magic’ between Norway and Iceland” at the University of Chicago in 2010. Some years ago (2014) he published a book on a topic similar to his thesis. It has the somewhat enigmatic title *Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland*. All familiar with ancient Scandinavian history know that Iceland did not have any kings as long as the so-called “Free State” existed, that is, up to 1262/1264 when Norwegian monarchy took control over all chieftainships on the island. When you read the first pages you get a clearer idea of what the book is about, however. It investigates how magic was used in political discourses in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic texts, especially when Icelanders in a subordinated position had to deal with and oppose a superior and sometimes unjust Norwegian royal power. The narratives in these texts, however, take place in either previous historical periods or in legendary/mythical times.

The book covers six chapters: (1) “Theorizing Magic;” (2) “The Vocabulary of Old Norse Magic;” (3) “Magic, Discourse of Invective;” (4) “Magic, Discourse of Power;” (5) “Magic, Kings, and Poetry;” and (6) “Miracles, Saints, and Magic.” In addition to these chapters there is a short conclusion (3–4 pages), a bibliography, and an index. In total, the book consists of 232 pages. In the first chapter Meylan stakes out his position in relation to previous studies on magic in Old Norse contexts, which mostly have been marked by their historical intentions, where synthetic descriptions of the nature of the phenomenon were sought, focusing on its rituals and beliefs (e.g., Dag Strömbäck, Folke Ström, and Clive Tolley). In more recent studies, the actual practice of magic in historical contexts has also been considered, whether in the pagan period or under Christianity (e.g., Neil Price, Catharina Raudvere, and François-Xavier Dillmann). In contrast to these previous attempts, Meylan applies discourse analysis to magic, where the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic texts, including historical or mythical accounts, are read in the context of the contemporary political situation. Magic is thus not investigated in terms of its actual practice; only as a textual phenomenon:

By shifting the focus from accusations of magic (for instance the well-known polemic discourse found throughout Christendom since at least the second century CE) to discourses of magic, one allows for the recognition that subaltern groups, such as medieval Icelanders, could consciously recuperate the dominant faction's (the Norwegian king's) discourse of magic and, at the cost of a number of modifications, turn it on its head in order to construct a subversive anti-royalist discourse. (p. 11)

The analytical category of magic is also discussed in chapter 1, as well as the criticism against previous theories of the concept. Despite this criticism and the awareness of the difficulties inherent in using such a contested term, Meylan applies a concept of magic more commonly found in older scholarship. His definition is inclusive and allows for a wide range of realizations in various Old Norse lexemes, for example, *gandr* and *seiðr* (see p. 18). In the last section of the chapter, the Old Norse sources for magic are presented, such as the Sagas of the Icelanders, Kings' sagas, *fornaldarsögur*, Skaldic and Eddic poetry, *Snorra Edda*, and legal texts.

In my opinion, Meylan's approach is here somewhat surprising. Since he intends to make a discourse analysis he could have chosen to apply only emic concepts, that is terms that could be found in the source materials, and thus avoided the problematic and loaded concept of magic. Several recent studies have focused on the problems impaired with this macro category when used in the history of religions (see e.g. Otto & Stausberg 2013). Meylan defends his terminological use in this way:

“Magic” is a convenient and evocative word which has retained even to this day enough of the connotations found in medieval Scandinavia that there is some degree of agreement between Old Norse discourses of magic and modern-day uses of the term both in scholarly discourses and outside. (p. 18 f.)

Meylan's motivation and defence of the use of the concept of magic in this context is not completely convincing, in my opinion, and occasionally he is forced to extend the meaning of the term in order to include practices and actions, which usually are not related to this category, for instance skaldic poetry (see below).

Relying on his own, inclusive definition, Meylan identifies and discusses the native vocabulary of Old Norse magic in chapter 2 as it appears in the medieval texts. Most of the vernacular lexis of magic in the Sagas, for instance, was significantly influenced by Christian thought and literature, although the narratives in them were set in indigenous

situations in pre-Christian times. The more precise original denotations of the individual terms were often overlooked by the clerics who wrote these texts. These native concepts could also sometimes operate as glosses for Latin terms (e.g. *maleficium*) in Christian literature, such as *Stjórn*.² The traffic between Latin and vernacular languages and cultures thus had consequences.

Meylan discusses several indigenous concepts relevant to the study, such as *trolldómr*, ‘magic;’ *vitki*, ‘wizard;’ and the adjectives *fjolkunnigr* ‘skilled in magic’ (related to the noun *fjolkyngr*, ‘witchcraft’) and *margkunnigr*, literally, ‘much-knowing’ or ‘skilled in magic.’ The use of such terms in the medieval period was often to show that the persons related to them possessed extraordinary power. We rarely understand nuances of magic by means of this terminology, even if terms such as *galdr* and *seiðr* can give more information. Meylan concludes that beyond documenting the emic vocabulary of magic, his overview suggests

that the lexis of magic as preserved in texts of the Christian era, in its interchangeability and somewhat vague semantics [...] was not centrally concerned with providing exact descriptions of actual techniques, representations, and agents. To fully make sense of the representations that these words convey requires the study of their connotations, which in turn presupposes a discursive context of use. (p. 47)

Consequently, his following chapters focus on the various ways these words were used in the context of the Icelandic relations with the kings of Norway.

Chapter 3 discusses accusation and condemnatory discourses, where magic is used as an explanation of different types of shortcomings, ignominious failures, and defeats on the royal side. These kinds of explanations were used by those who controlled the text production and apparently had vested interests in the Norwegian royal institution. The text producers were in this case viewed as religious individuals (i.e., Christians), while those who applied “magic” in order to do harm to royal power (i.e., the ones in a lesser position) were viewed as anti-religious, and their knowledge and practice were perceived as evil. To say that someone is a *seiðmaðr* in such discourses of magic was thus considered to be an insult and something very disgraceful. Examples of such discourses of magic are found in, for instance, the account about King Haraldr and his fiancé, the Finnish sorceress Snæfriðr, who completely bewitched him (see *Haralds saga hárfagra*, in *Heimskringla* I). Magic is in such contexts associated with disorder, chaos, female beings, illegal ac-

tions, paganism, and foreigners (e.g., *Finnar*, giants). It is thus something antisocial and used in order to produce chaos in a well-functioning and ordered society (sometimes represented by the king).

Chapter 4 presents the opposite discourses, namely, where magic is explained as a positive power and filled with efficacy, what the author calls “power-oriented discourses.” In these discourses magic is explained as a powerful instrument, totally dissociated from any moral considerations and condemnation. One example of such a discourse of magic appears in *Rauðúlfs þáttur*, which is a short story that forms part of the fourteenth-century version of the *Greater Saga of St. Olaf*. A rich and powerful farmer (*bóndi*) called Rauðúlfr invites St. Óláfr to a banquet. During the evening the king finds out that the farmer is both knowledgeable and eloquent; he can even provide information of things that have not yet happened (a skill usually associated with Óðinn). Two solutions present themselves to the king; either the man is a prophet (*spámaðr*) or he practises magic and can be regarded as a *fjólkyngismaðr*. The king decides that it cannot be magic since the man is a good Christian. Rauðúlfr has a third option; he states that his knowledge comes from careful observation of natural phenomena, such as dreams and astrology. St. Óláfr’s insistence on obtaining this extraordinary knowledge (later in the story) indicates that “magic” was, in this context, seen as something positive. This type of power-oriented discourses of magic is, however, usually related to *forn siðr*, “the old (heathen) custom,” that is, something that took place in a temporal distance or in a pre-Christian (mythic) context. The temporal distance removes the actors from Christian condemnation (see p. 107). Examples of such discourses of magic may be found in *Eddic Poetry*, *Snorra Edda*, and *Ynglinga saga*, where magic is often linked to power, knowledge, and powerful characters such as Óðinn. Magic may thus be perceived as something good, and supportive of righteous kings, in certain contexts.

Chapter 5 focuses on the subversive role of magic in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century texts about powerless Icelanders dealing with superior and unjust Norwegian rulers, especially in narratives where the Icelanders use a category close to magic as a weapon, namely, poetry. This discourse of magic is discussed mainly in three texts, namely, *Snorra Edda*, *Egils saga*, and *Þorleifs þáttur jarlaskálds*. This chapter also includes a historical account of Norway and Iceland in the early thirteenth century, when King Hákon Hákonarson became a real threat to the Free State, that is, the historical context of the Icelandic literary production. Much of the ideological dimensions of for example, *Egils saga* can be explained from this political situation. In this saga, magic and the skill

of poetry are attributed to the tenth-century Icelandic hero Egill and are used as powerful instruments in his dealing with the unjust Norwegian royal power, that is, King Eiríkr blóðøx and Queen Gunnhildr. Thirteenth-century Icelandic “readers” could probably equate the content of the saga with the contemporary political situation and feel encouraged in their struggle against the Norwegian royal power.

In chapter 6, the subversive discourse of magic is linked with Christian literature from the fourteenth century, especially in one manuscript of *Jóns saga Helga*. An intertextual reading of this saga and the Eddic texts suggests that St. Jón used a kind of magic, which usually is associated with Óðinn. This magic is presented in such a way that the Christian message could not be mistaken (Jón actually condemns magic). On a political level, the reader could recognize Jón as a powerless Icelander using “magic” against one of the most unjust and intractable kings Norway had ever known, King Magnús berfœtr.

Meylan’s book is well-written and the argumentation is very clear. Besides the terminological problems (see above), there are only a few arguments that seem somewhat speculative, for example the idea that Snorri’s mythic account in *Gylfaginning*, where Gefjun plows Zealand out of Sweden, should be read “as a trope for the foundation of Iceland out of Norway” (p. 143). According to Meylan, the frame narrative describes a royal expedition made by Gylfi to Ásgarðr, the home of Gefjun’s people (i.e., the gods) and of those who hold poetic knowledge. For medieval readers, Meylan suggests, the Æsir and Ásgarðr represented the Icelanders and Iceland, while the mythical Gylfi was identified with King Hákon Hákonarson. The Æsir (i.e., the Icelanders) use visual illusions (*sjónhverfingar*), rhetoric, and poetry as a subaltern power to defeat King Gylfi (i.e., King Hákon) (pp. 143–144). Even if we cannot rule out this interpretation, it is, in my opinion, not completely convincing and even somewhat farfetched. There is nothing substantial in Snorri’s text supporting this reading. Snorri states explicitly by quoting Bragi’s skaldic stanza that it was in connection to the creation of Zealand in Denmark that this event took place. This action had nothing to do with Norway and Iceland. Neither does Meylan delve into the question whether the Gefjun episode was part of Snorri’s original text. It does not appear in one branch of the manuscripts and may have been added by a later scribe (see Lindow 2001: 136). This is actually not a great problem, since the versions including this narrative, regardless of authorship, may have played the political role for the readers suggested by Meylan. However, I have some problems with Meylan’s assumption that Egill’s poetry should be seen as a magical weapon in his battle with the royal power.

Meylan's use of the concept "magic" is in this context too inclusive and does not lead to any analytic utility.

Anyhow, in my opinion, Meylan's book offers an important contribution to the history of religions and the study of magic in Norse contexts. Since few scholars working in this field of research discuss the nature of the medieval texts thoroughly, the focus on their ideological content and meaning for the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century readers is quite innovative. The method of using discourse analysis is also quite fruitful in this context, since, for instance, it unmaskes the problems and limits of historical and essentialist interpretations. Meylan has no doubt provided new perspectives, thoughtful reflections, and insights into the topic of magic and kingship in medieval Icelandic literature.

NOTES

- ¹ Similar versions of this review have previously been published in *Numen* 63 (2016), pp. 355–358 and in *Chaos* 65 (2016), pp. 217–227.
- ² *Stjórn* is the Old Norse translation of the Bible, or, more correctly expressed, the medieval Icelandic paraphrase of the beginning of the Old Testament down to the end of the Second Book of the Kings.

REFERENCES

- Lindow, J. (2001). *Norse Mythology. A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO.
- Otto, B.-C. & Stausberg, M. (2013). "General Introduction," in *Defining Magic. A Reader*, eds. B.-C. Otto & M. Stausberg, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 1–13.

Olof Sundqvist

Dept. of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies
 Stockholm University
 Sweden
 olof.sundqvist@rel.su.se