Catharina Raudvere and Jens Peter Schjødt (eds.)


In autumn 2008, a conference took place at the University of Copenhagen, organized by the historians of religion Catharina Raudvere and Jens Peter Schjødt. The participants of the conference are mostly active within the field of Old Norse (or Scandinavian) religion, but also Old Finnic and Sámi religions. The theme of the conference, “More than Mythology,” implied a broadened discussion of the religions of the early Viking Age, the early Middle Ages, as well as the traditions of the Finns and the Sámi. Recently the contributions were published by the Nordic Academic Press in Lund in the volume More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christan Scandinavian Religions.

The editors, Raudvere and Schjødt, describe in the foreword the current trend to see Old Norse religion as complex, diversified, and stratified with comprehensive rituals, inter-regional connections, societal stratifications and gender issues. This could be accomplished through interdisciplinary cooperation and synthesising applications. This interdisciplinary approach is in line with the scientific mode-two strategy, with multidisciplinary teams, as suggested by Michael Gibbons and other scholars within sociology of science.

The first contributor, Neil Price, brings up the important question about the origin of ritual “performances” in mythical tales. This is a much debated, though urgent, topic. Price points out the diversity among the narratives: though based on oral tradition, they are set in different periods and fixed in texts long after they emerged as narratives. As an archaeologist, Price has a particular interest in Viking Age burials (compare his thesis The Viking Way). He makes a particular analysis of the Arabic author Ibn Fadlān’s account of the Rūs (or Rūsiyyah) at the Volga in the early tenth century. Price compares the text material with the diversity that can be seen within burials. He proposes an “idea of materialized narratives” (p. 39) connected to certain kinship groups. He states that there are certain constructed funerary stories connected to each burial and the ultimate purpose is to demonstrate power. Price has the ambition to combine texts with archaeological material; in this he bridges the gap between historians and archaeologists.

The purpose of Peter Jackson’s paper is to examine, as the title states, “The Merits and Limits of Comparative Philology” (pp. 47–64). Jackson does not go as far as to claim an Indo-European ideology like the idéologie tripartite of Georges Dumézil. The philologists can trace some common ritualistic
features, mainly through etymologies. The generic term of *blot, for example, may indicate a common cultic feature among Germanic tribes. Names of gods and goddesses may have been highly flexible and “developed from clusters of overlapping appellations.” Linguistic and religious traditions are closely related, but linguistics contains a “closed system” and religious traditions have unique features shaped by the surroundings. Jackson, however, seems willing to acknowledge, to some extent, the comparative approach as a tool to investigate sparsely mentioned religious actions in Old Norse sources.

The contribution of Thomas DuBois is the only one to discuss Sámi religion. He explores the diets and sacrificial meat of the Sámi and the Scandinavians. This is certainly an interesting topic and can be seen within recent post-human theories, which position the interaction between human and animal. Just like Jackson, DuBois emphasizes the difference between cultures. There were dissimilarities between the pastoral Scandinavian culture and the nomad Sámi culture, which can be seen within animal symbolism. Certain animals were more tended to than others within symbolism and ritual performances. At the same time some animals, such as the horse, were used by both Scandinavians and the Sámi. However, according to DuBois, due to local traditions, the Scandinavians wished to present themselves as agriculturalists and, the Sámi as hunter-gatherers (p. 90). This view can be problematic. Not all of the Sámi were nomads, with the reindeer as their primary source of food; some were fishermen and huntsmen, as mentioned by DuBois, others were settled farmers or coast dwellers. DuBois also seems to treat the Northern Sámi language as common for all of the Sámi, at least in this essay. In spite of these objections it is a well-written essay with references to regional and interregional interactions, or non-interactions, between the Scandinavians and the Sámi.

The subject of Catharina Raudvere’s essay is “Fictive Rituals in Völuspá,” (pp. 97–118). There is a difference between the context where the myths were written and the context where they were passed down through oral tradition. Raudvere problematizes the concept of religion: it is always abstract, but the historian of religions, within the field of Scandinavian religion, must understand the local attitudes towards religious expressions that contain a worldview. Rituals could have had a continuity embedded in texts such as Völuspá, since for the audience of the time (the medieval readers), it served the purpose of an artistic reminder of the past and of identity. Raudvere touches upon urgent topics, however since Völuspá is central to her text, it would have been beneficial if the author related to previous research. Kurt Schier, for example, has put forward a widely accepted theory of the creation of Völuspá in the hird-environment of the earls of Lade in the late tenth century.