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Fast Goes the Fleeting Time: The Miscellaneous Concepts of Time in Different Old Norse Genres and their Causes

The Ph.D. thesis consists of three main parts. The first one (chapters 1-3) deals with methodology, sources and history of research. Worth of interest is especially the chapter 1 that classifies the possible approaches to the problem of time in Old Norse literature (into “physical”, “literary” and “sociological approach) and “clearly shows the preferences of the candidate. She decides basically for literary approach, i.e. the narratological analysis of time in the texts which are usually labelled as a „fiction“ today. However, the sociological approach is taken as a necessary complementary to the literary one: it is stressed that whatever time concepts may have been used in the texts, they had to meet the expectations of the audience and they had to fit its ideology.

The second part and the main body of the thesis (chapters 4-12) is devoted to systematic analysis of the dating systems and narrative time in selected groups of Old Norse texts. The chosen sources are the Poetic Edda, Snorri’s Edda, legendary sagas, Icelandic family sagas, kings’ sagas, bishop’s sagas, *Rímbeĝla*, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*. These sources are again grouped into three groups, in accordance with the character of time concept found in them: texts with traces of domestic time concept (Eddic Poetry, Snorri’s Edda, legendary sagas, Icelandic family sagas), the texts in which the medieval Christian time concept prevails (*Rímbeĝla*, *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók*) and the texts where the two different time concepts merge (kings’ sagas, bishops’ sagas). The candidate sees two basic phenomena behind the evolution: Christianisation (and the related internalisation) of Scandinavian elites (leading to use of AD and AM dating systems) and feudalisation of the Scandinavian society (leading to use of absolute intrinsic dating).

The third concluding part of the thesis (chapter 13) is devoted to concluding summary and discussion. It sums up the most important differences between the time reckoning and narrative times in different groups of Old Norse texts and sketches the probable evolution. It touches the question of the multiplicity of time concepts the people were living in.

The whole thesis is permeated with interesting observations on the function of dating and narratological functions of time in different groups of Old Norse texts. It is impossible to discuss all of them, in following I am going to describe only the issues that I consider most important or in some way problematic:

Fuzzy borders: The analysis of the book gives clearly to recognize that for many Old Norse texts, the blending of domestic time concept and Christian continental time concept was typical and so the division of the texts in the above mentioned groups is necessarily a tricky business. But once the necessary evil of classification is started with, it should be kept on earnestly and the sources treated in a uniform way. It is, for example, slightly confusing, when we read (in the table on page 28) that *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* can be characterized by „combinations of foreign dating systems with domestic ones“, nevertheless their analysis is inserted under the heading *Foreign time reckoning arrives in the North*. All the more when we learn that the AD or AM dating system is used rather sparsely in both works and its occurrences were based on very specific motivations (p. 122-3, 127, 129-131).

Traces of domestic time perceptions: searching for autochthonous time concept in Old Norse works is obviously a dangerous undertaking, since all Old Norse texts analysed in the thesis were either created or at least written down in Christian period. However, the interpretation via traditional Norse time perception gives the thesis strong, useful and in most cases persuasive tool: when we find in a traditional group of texts (a group whose origin must have predate the written texts) a time expression or a temporal concept foreign to contemporary Christian ideas, their explanation through domestic, pre-Christian tradition seems to be the most logical and consequent one.

Narratology, Perception and Dating: In the last decades, many persuasive evidence was presented with intention to prove much more intimate contact of literature and life in Middle Ages than we are used to today. However, the theoreticians and historians of literature keep on observing all attempts to deduce about reality from what we call “fiction” with suspicion and scepticism. That is why I find extremely interesting the chapters analysing dating habits in the letters collected in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* and *Diplomatarium Islandicum*. First, because its results show that in the process of production of the letters, the social position of the sender (author) and addressee (audience) were taken in account. Second, because they are to a certain degree in accordance with the dating methods used in corresponding “fictional” texts (kings’ sagas and bishops’ sagas at least): the texts of fictional character obviously shared some features related to the concept of time with non-fictional texts and the representation of time in these texts obviously reached over the narrow limits of narratology, if we understand it as a purely literary phenomenon. Thus we can well suppose that the way time was depicted in a given saga corresponded to the time-concept of its author as well as to the time-concept of its presumed audience in some degree. Third, we see that next to the “conflicting social groups” (kings, aristocracy, church), there were the “conflicting concepts of time”. The power over time was obviously a strong argument in the struggles between kings, church and other social groups.

Conclusion:

The work meets all the formal standards customarily required of a doctoral dissertation. The argumentation and conclusions are clear, the history of scholarship sufficient, the command of source texts and scholarly literature eminent.

In respect to its content, my opinion is that the thesis represents a well-done portion of philological scholarship and that it describes precisely the time concept(s) standing behind different groups of Old Norse text. I am well aware that the thesis touches awkward subjects (relation between reality and literature, the problem of Christian and pre-Christian layers in the Old Norse literature) and that its conclusions are sometimes in discord with prevailing opinions of the last decades. In spite of this, I would like to stress the thesis' phenomenological honesty: instead of plethora of presuppositions concerning the relation between Old Norse and continental Christian literature, it starts with careful analysis of the texts and seeks unbiased explanation of its results. I warmly recommend the thesis for the viva.

Questions for discussion:

- *Question of genre:* One can hardly overlook that the division of texts in groups corresponds to so-called genres of Old Norse literature (with small modification in case of kings' sagas and *fornaldarsögur*). However, the existence of genres in the older strata of Old Norse literature was fiercely debated issue in previous years (Lars Lönnroth, Joseph Harris, Theodore Andersson etc.). Can the analysis of the time conception in different Old Norse works contribute to this debate and how?
- *Question of social background:* The presumption of the specific audience forming a background for each of the analysed genres is crucial for the thesis. It is clear that in the situation of Old Norse culture of the Viking Age and Scandinavian Middle Ages, the existence of an audience was necessary condition for survival of any genre. But the presumption of a specific audience with specific expectations and a set of ideological concepts (time, for example) is a different case. Is it possible to bring some evidence for the statement that Old Norse texts in fact had to meet the expectations of the audience?

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