

The third Austmarr Network meeting offered a unique meeting place for scholars and a chance to discuss the Viking Age and medieval Baltic area with colleagues from different institutes and countries. The meeting was successful. One has great expectations for the network's future meetings. The fourth meeting is planned to take place in Rzeszów, Poland in 2014. In addition, on the basis of themes and selected papers presented during the three Austmarr Network symposiums, two peer-reviewed publications are in preparation.

### **Conference Report – The 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the Old Norse Folklorists Network: “Encounter with the Otherworld in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*”, Symposium and Workshop**

29<sup>th</sup> November – 1<sup>st</sup> December 2012, Tartu, Estonia

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The Old Norse Folklorists Network, founded in 2011 by Daniel Sävborg (University of Tartu) and Karen Bek-Pedersen (University of Southern Denmark), is a loose circle of scholars associated with the Retrospective Methods Network, dedicated to bringing closer together the fields of Folklore and Old Norse Philology.<sup>1</sup> The latest step taken in this direction was the second meeting of the network, again organized by Bek-Pedersen and Sävborg with the help of Kait Lubja as secretary. The symposium and workshop took place at the Department of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Tartu, Estonia, 29<sup>th</sup> November – 1<sup>st</sup> December 2012.

The organizers stayed true to the already proven and successful format of the first meeting as held back in December 2011. This meant a limited number of keynote lectures interspersed with longer discussions in smaller groups, and – last but not least – numerous coffee breaks to encourage further discussion and individual conversations. The main innovation this time was that the members of the discussion groups rotated more often, while still maintaining a mixture of more experienced and younger scholars, as well as philologists and folklorists, in each separate group. A more significant departure from the first meeting was the fact that while the first workshop was dedicated to more

#### **Works Cited**

- Aalto, Sirpa. 2011. “Conference Report – The Viking Age in Finland Seminars”. *RMN Newsletter* 3: 38–42.
- Kuldkepp, Mart. 2011. “Conference Report – Cultural Exchanges across the Baltic Sea in the Middle Ages Symposium and Workshop: First Meeting of the Austmarr Network”. *RMN Newsletter* 3: 43–44.
- Kuldkepp, Mart. 2012. “Conference Report – Transcultural Contacts in the Circum-Baltic Area: 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the Austmarr Network”. *RMN Newsletter* 5: 65–68.

overarching and abstract questions of continuity, reconstruction and source criticism, this time the focus was squarely on a single, relatively short text, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, usually classified as one of the so-called post-classical sagas of Icelanders.

The four keynote lectures looked at the saga from different perspectives. Annette Lassen (University of Copenhagen) gave a talk on “The Supernatural Motifs in *Bárðar saga* in an Old Norse Context”, focusing on the textual connections of the saga to other Old Norse literary works. Particularly numerous parallels exist with *The Great Saga of Ólafr Tryggvason* and the Melabók version of *Landnámabók*, but the whole list of works that the saga author (probably a cleric) seems to have used is so long that *Bárðar saga* must be regarded as a very learned text indeed. Camilla Asplund-Ingemark (Åbo Akademi) approached the saga as a folklorist in her talk “The Trolls in *Bárðar saga*: Playing with the Conventions of Oral Texts”, discussing some of the basic plots in *Bárðar saga* in light of the Aarne-Thompson-Uther index of folk tale types. She demonstrated convincingly that *Bárðar saga* follows well-known folk tale types, but her conclusion was nevertheless that the saga is a piece of literary art rather than a vehicle for transmission of oral stories. Ralph O'Connor (University of Aberdeen)

gave a presentation on “The Literary Character of *Bárðar saga*”, pointing out the different literary patterns used in different parts of the saga (the “legend pattern” in Iceland and the “Märchen pattern” in distant lands), as well as its characteristically fluid relationship between the spheres of the human and the supernatural. Interestingly enough, the latter can be related to the psychology of the characters, making *Bárðar saga* something of a study in social alienation that gradually causes its protagonist and several other characters to become, over time, less human and more troll-like. Finally, Eldar Heide (University of Bergen) focused on “*Bárðar saga* as a Source for Reconstruction of Pre-Christian Religion”, considering different features and episodes of the saga from the viewpoint of whether they could tell us something about the pre-Christian Nordic religion or whether they should be more accurately regarded as learned or simply imaginative constructions. As is often the case with such problems, the answers must remain inconclusive, but at least some more general features of the pagan religion, such as the association between liminal geography and the otherworld, seem to be apparent in the saga (e.g. in the Raknarr episode).

The keynote lectures were all exceptionally informative and well thought-out, and provided plenty of material for consideration for what was to be the most fruitful part of the two-day event: the group discussions. These took the keynote lectures (and sample questions provided by the organizers) as the starting point, but often ended up somewhere else entirely. During the discussions, much attention was paid to the supernatural elements of the saga, in particular its troll protagonist *Bárðr* and the curious fact that he is referred to as an *áss*, a term normally reserved for divine beings. The relationship between the Christian and possibly pagan elements was also treated in depth and several groups arrived independently at the idea of *Bárðr* as a kind of “pagan saint”, a folk hero of the people of Snæfellsnes, who, as the saga author hints, had been useful in the past, but

was eventually superseded by the real Christian saintliness of Ólafr Tryggvason. Another set of questions touched upon genre problems – whether *Bárðar saga* should be regarded as one of the sagas of Icelanders (for it is mostly set in Iceland), as one of the *fornaldarasögur* (given its interest in supernatural encounters), one of the sagas of kings (with reference to the role of Ólafr Tryggvason and the conversion narrative), or perhaps even something resembling the sagas of bishops, given the Icelandic setting, its high religious overtones and interest in the beliefs and problems of local people. There emerged no real consensus on these issues, but there is no doubt that everyone went home from Tartu with much food for thought.

In short, the fears that there would not be enough to say about *Bárðar saga* to fill two whole days proved unfounded. This was probably the most concentrated scholarly attention that this relatively short text has ever received, and the benefits of such an approach seem to be considerable. Hopefully the feat will be repeated with other, similarly enigmatic narratives. Perhaps other complex questions relating to entire genres or sets of motifs could also be approached in workshop format with useful results.

Although it seemed that the success of the first meeting of the network would be hard to repeat, the second meeting was, in spite of the availability of less funding, admirably successful. The meeting was supported by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. Special thanks are due to Kait Lubja who, in addition to contributing to discussions, made sure that all practical matters went as smoothly as possible.

### Notes

1. For a kind of manifesto for the Austmarr Network, see Sävborg & Bek-Pedersen 2010.

### Works Cited

- Sävborg, Daniel & Karen Bek-Pedersen. 2010. “Old Norse Folklorist Network”. *RMN Newsletter* [1]: 28–31.