

Medieval Scandinavian Studies—Whence, Where to, Why

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Abstract: Medieval Scandinavian Studies started emerging as a discipline in the 19th century, at a time when Old Norse literature had become an important source both for the reconstruction of an alleged Germanic worldview, and the substantiation of national political claims. Scholars in the early 20th century consolidated this view, and thereby even coined public ideas of a Germanic past that became influential in the reception of the Middle Ages in general. To the present day, the popular fascination with these Middle Ages thus is strongly informed by Old Norse sources, and a wealth of recent adaptations seem to perpetuate this view. However, the same sources, as well as earlier scholarship, are used by extremist groups to substantiate populist and racist claims. Scholars in Medieval Scandinavian Studies find themselves at the intersection of these conflicting and yet connected spheres of appropriation. Their task to take a stance in this situation is all the more challenging as the international field struggles with cutbacks of budgets, study programs, and institutes. The present special issue seeks to bring together current opinions on this ambivalent state.

Keywords: Scandinavian Studies; Old Norse Studies; Medieval Studies; Medievalism Studies; history of scholarship; Reception History; populism



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1. The Humanities—On the Knife's Edge?

Wenn eine Wissenschaft als Ganzes auf die Dauer nichts hervorbringt, was befruchtend auf andere Wissenschaften und auf das Leben der Nation und der Menschheit wirkt, scheint mir das ein untrügliches Zeugnis dafür, dass entweder der Gegenstand, mit dem sie sich beschäftigt, die Mühe nicht lohnt, oder dass ihr Betrieb ein verkehrter ist. (Paul 1897, p. 4 f.)

If a discipline, at large, does not yield anything that fruitfully impacts other disciplines as well as the life of the nation and mankind, then this seems to me an unmistakable sign that either the subject it deals with is not worth the effort, or that its doing is wrong.

125 years have passed since the German philologist Hermann Paul brought to mind thus the importance of being aware of the societal task of scholarship. Whereas Paul's affinity for the national dimension of this scholarship seems typical for his time, he was far-sighted enough to acknowledge the significance of both its intercultural and interdisciplinary dimension:

Wer es mit der Geschichte der deutschen Literatur und der deutschen Kultur überhaupt Ernst nimmt, der stösst dabei auf die mannigfaltigsten fremden Einflüsse, die er zu verfolgen genötigt ist [. . .]. Ich möchte nicht hinausgreifen über das, was der deutschen Philologie im engsten Sinne zufällt, da für andere Zweige der Kultur sich zum Teil schon selbständige Wissenschaften ausgebildet haben. Doch kann ich nicht unterlassen, darauf hinzuweisen, wie sehr diese Wissenschaften zu ihrem Gedeihen eine enge Fühlung mit der Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft nötig haben. (Paul 1897, p. 21)

If one is serious about the history of German literature and German culture, then one must acknowledge manifold foreign influences, which one has to follow up

[. . .]. I do not want to reach beyond what falls to German philology in a narrow sense, as distinct disciplines have partly started to develop for other cultural branches already. However, I cannot refrain from mentioning how much these disciplines need close contact to linguistics and literary studies in order to thrive.

Paul's unambiguous statement was part of his public speech "Die Bedeutung der deutschen Philologie für das Leben der Gegenwart" (the significance of German philology for life today) on behalf of the Academy in Munich (for the discussion of philology at the time, see [Turner 2014](#)). Few scholars would deny that this claim from the late 19th century still holds true today. Thus, any attempt to trace the current debate on the importance of humanistic scholarship is confronted with long-standing questions. It has become a requirement for scholarship to be interdisciplinary and intercultural in various subdisciplines, not least in order to attract funding. The surrounding discussion has yielded such a vast amount of publications that it has become impossible to follow the debate in all its details. At the same time, there still prevails a certain vagueness regarding how exactly theoretical aspirations ought to be converted into scholarly practice.

A few pointed examples from this paper's field of interest have to suffice in the given context. We might bring to mind the Soviet-American scholar Wassily Leontief who, as early as 1948, introduced his "Note on the Pluralistic Interpretation of History and the Problem of Interdisciplinary Cooperation" with the claim that the "problem of the relationship between various disciplines" was "quite old" ([Leontief 1948](#), p. 617); however, he concluded his paper with the remarkable statement:

One of the most serious errors committed by some of the contemporary proponents of the doctrine of unity of science and many promoters of inter-disciplinary cooperation is that they forget that the ideal age is not yet here. Far from being members of a well-integrated family of sciences, the individual disciplines still retain for the most part their sovereignty. ([Leontief 1948](#), p. 624)

Four decades later, in 1986, the US-American historians T.C.R. Horn and Harry Ritter provided what they called "a historiographical review" of "interdisciplinary history" in 20th-century scholarship, stating:

It appears that one of the most noteworthy things about professional historical studies in the twentieth century has been their gradual tendency to become increasingly comprehensive in scope and more experimental and eclectic in conception and method. The changes which have already occurred, and seem likely to continue to occur, have been based largely on historians' use of concepts and techniques developed by scholars in other disciplines. [. . .] At the outset, however, it must be admitted that these changes in orientation [. . .] have thus far deeply affected the thinking and scholarly output of only a minority of historians. ([Horn and Ritter 1986](#), p. 427)

Another two decades later, reviewing his engagement as managing editor of the interdisciplinary *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* since the late 1960s, the German scholar Heinrich Beck warned that humanistic disciplines were losing contact with each other as well as losing track of the larger picture: "Den Disziplinen droht in der Praxis, daß sie die ‚Fühlungnahme‘ verspielen; mit wachsender disziplinärer Spezialisierung wächst die Gefahr, den Überblick zu verlieren" ([Beck 2004](#), p. 642); he referred to cooperation between the fields of archaeology, history, and philology in particular. As recently as 2020, the Australian medievalist Margret Clunies Ross soberly pointed out "one of the problems of interdisciplinarity" in her own decades-long experience:

When a scholar from one discipline [. . .] borrows an idea or some data from the repertoire of another, how does the borrower evaluate the significance of the idea or data borrowed [. . .]? [. . .] it often happens that the borrowed data is made to bear a far heavier or more definite weight than it would have in its parent discipline. The constraints and qualifications upon interpretations that is

has there are often not observed and may not be understood. (Clunies Ross 2020, p. 121)

Whereas these few examples from different time periods should not be overrated, it is interesting to note their similarity in being critical regarding the success of interdisciplinary cooperation. It seems quite safe to claim that what has been called “risky interdisciplinarity” (Wertheimer 2003, p. 134)—i.e., acknowledging the limitations of one’s own discipline and thus the potential preeminence of another, without selling oneself short—often is far from realization in scholarly practice still. Contrary to the claim that the humanities had already been in the middle of an “interdisciplinary turn” for decades (Condee 2016, p. 12), it has even been suggested that historical scholarship was rather coined by a “zunehmend gestörtes Selbstbewusstsein” (increasingly troubled self-awareness), resulting in “wachsenden und atemloseren methodischen Kapriolen” (Düwel 2004, p. 650, growing and increasingly breathless methodological caprioles)—including concepts such as interculturality—in order to find answers to the sword-of-Damocles question of ‘relevance’. This statement by the German medievalist Klaus Düwel might be slightly exaggerated (cf., however, the famous ‘Haug-Graevenitz dispute’, see Fischer 2007; see also Wyss 2003; Classen 2021b), but for some time now a significant number of scholars in the humanities have called attention to the precarious state of their respective field. One cannot but notice that many such statements envision a rather dystopic future for larger parts of humanistic scholarship.

As indicated above, the sentiment of losing track of the larger picture, and of having lost significance for the here and now seems particularly palpable in those branches that primarily deal with products of the human mind from the distant past, which would require interdisciplinary engagement all the more. For several generations, a noteworthy number of scholars have pointed out the alleged lack of willingness of both decision makers and the general public to consider their efforts worthwhile on a larger scale. In 1974, the German historian Jürgen Kocka introduced his paper “Wozu noch Geschichte?” (why still history?) with the remark: “Seit einigen Jahren fühlt sich die Historikerzunft in der Defensive” (Kocka 1974, p. 2; for the last couple of years, the community of historians has felt the need to be defensive), and traced this mood back at least to the 1950s. The abovementioned examples suggest that this mood in the field of historical scholarship is even older, but at the same time has prevailed well into the 21st century. In 2014, to give a recent example, the US-based medievalist Albrecht Classen, in his introductory paper to the *Humanities* special issue *The Challenge of the Humanities, Past, Present, and Future*, stated in a similar mood:

Soon enough history as a school subject, at least a history extending prior to 1989 or 1945, might no longer be offered, becoming another victim of the ever-growing corporatization of our education system that seems to prefer future customers as its ‘end-products’ instead of cultured and informed individuals. (Classen 2014, p. 2)

At the same time, the US-American literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht called the official proposal at Stanford University to turn German Studies into a minor of Computer Science the “Beginn eines freundlichen Endes der Geisteswissenschaften” (Gumbrecht 2013; beginning of a kind ending of humanities); Stanford ranks among the world’s top universities in the field of humanities, and the proposal thus carried special weight. As far as I can see, German Studies at Stanford are still a major in 2022, and thus Gumbrecht’s rather dystopic vision has not come true yet, and it might even be called a prime example of what the German philosopher Jürgen Mittelstraß once called the “Lust am Untergang” of the humanities (Mittelstraß 2007; joy of doom), similar to the US-American historian Benjamin Schmidt, who in 2013 claimed: “Humanists obviously get great pleasure from describing themselves on the knife’s edge” (Schmidt 2013). Significantly, however, only a few years later, in 2018, Schmidt reviewed his earlier assessment of the significance of the humanities in the US:

Five years ago, I argued that the humanities were still near long-term norms in their number of majors. But since then, I've been watching the numbers from the Department of Education, and every year, things look worse. Almost every humanities field has seen a rapid drop in majors: History is down about 45 percent from its 2007 peak, while the number of English majors has fallen by nearly half since the late 1990s. (Schmidt 2018)

Without a doubt, the sentiment that historical scholarship is under threat of losing its place both in academia and society is strong today. And despite all criticism regarding scholars' penchant for defeatism, recent years have proven that this threat is far from being just a mood. In fact, it has become the reality at a considerable number of universities in Europe and the US, with study programs in historical scholarship being condensed, institutes losing their administrative autonomy or even being closed down, and tenure-track position becoming rare (see below).

2. Medieval Scandinavian Studies—A Brief Introduction

Medieval Studies might be called an especially delicate cluster of scholarship in this respect. This field is in the strange position of dealing with very popular topics, on the one hand, but encountering difficulties to keep its profession running, on the other hand. Let it suffice in the given context to add one more example, the book *Vergleichende mediävistische Kulturwissenschaft* (Comparative Medieval Cultural Studies) by the German medievalist Fritz Peter Knapp, which as recently as 2020 sought to serve as "a guide to the cultural unity of Europe a thousand years ago", but at the same time suggest a "lost cultural unity in Europe". Obviously, the book's intention was to take a stance even on recent developments in Western society, politics, and scholarship, which, to the author, appear as a history of loss. Significantly, Knapp's concise journey between peaks of medieval literature, and the development of Medieval Literary Studies, concluded with the defeatist claim that the days of importance of both medieval literature and its investigation were over:

So wird denn dieser wissenschaftliche Essay zu guter Letzt doch so etwas wie ein Nach-ruf auf die im Titel des vorliegenden Büchleins formulierte Idee, die als wissenschaftliches Fach kaum eine Vergangenheit und noch weniger eine Zukunft hat. (Knapp 2020, p. 94)

From this point of view, in the end, my scholarly essay becomes a sort of an obituary on the idea formulated in the title of this little book, an idea that has hardly had a past, and even less so a future as an academic discipline.

As outlined above, this claim appears as the culmination of a long-standing pessimism of scholars in historical subjects regarding the value of their efforts both in and beyond the so-called ivory tower of academia. However, whereas a similar sentiment can be found in various fields of scholarship today, it seems particularly skewed in Medieval Studies: 'the Middle Ages' have been of popular interest for decades, and there is no sign of any decline of this enthusiasm. Medieval literature has inspired a wealth of historical novels and comic adaptations, as well as extremely successful adaptations in Hollywood movies, HBO and Netflix series, and all sorts of video games in recent years. How come that a topic that is so ubiquitous and fascinating to the public seems not to go hand in hand with the appreciation of scholarly efforts to make this medieval past available to the present in the first place? Are there ways in which scholars in the field can benefit from this outright importance of the Middle Ages to the present? And how are scholars supposed to react to the fact that this general interest even entails the "real danger that a popular enthusiasm for medievalism may obscure the distinction between the 'real' Middle Ages and modern fantasy, whether the latter is considered dangerous or merely diverting" (Jones et al. 2020, p. 3)?

This is the point where Medieval Scandinavian Studies take center stage. A large share of the popular fascination with the Middle Ages is namely focused on medieval Scandinavian and Icelandic literature in particular, i.e., written narratives from the 13th century onwards, which often deal with (fictitious) events from heathen times some centuries

earlier. The professional research into these texts, which have survived in a comparatively large number of manuscripts to the present day, can be traced back to the 16th century:

In 1500, the Nordic countries were on the outskirts of European civilization, much more so than in the Middle Ages. For most Nordic countries, the sixteenth century marks a transition period that is more abrupt and clear than in most other European countries where there is a strong continuity with the past, culturally, politically, and especially scholarly. Politically, the sixteenth century represents a significant change in the Nordic countries. (Hovdhaugen et al. 2000, p. 17 f.; see Clunies Ross 2018)

Ever since then, philological-historical scholarship has had a political dimension to it, and the study of Northern languages served this purpose, too, in discovering dependences, relationships, and peculiarities of Nordic regions from the early Middle Ages onwards (see Gunnlaugsson and Glad 2022). This growing interest eventually culminated in the formal establishment of the discipline of Medieval Scandinavian Studies (under various names) as of the 19th century, as well as the establishment of learned societies, such as the *Viking Society for Northern Research* (in 1892). In connection with the thriving field of “Germanische Altertumskunde” (Old Germanic Studies), the research into medieval Nordic languages and texts increased in significance for the reconstruction of a sort of common ‘Germanic heritage’ that allegedly encompassed large parts of Europe; in 2005, the German medievalist Klaus Böldl summarized this view thus: “Die altnordischen Überlieferungen konservieren ein vorbildhaftes germanisch-altdeutsches Wesen, das in der Gegenwart in Schwundstufen noch volkskundlich zu erfassen ist” (Böldl 2005a, p. 98, Old Norse lore preserves an exemplary Germanic/Old German essence, graspable rudimentarily through folklore studies still today; see Beck et al. 2004).

Famous names are linked to these efforts, for example the Swiss medievalist Andreas Heusler, who in 1894 accepted the chair in Nordic philology at the university of Berlin. Heusler became one of the most influential scholars in 20th-century Germanic Studies, and he was a strong proponent of acknowledging Old Norse literature as superior example of ‘Old Germanic culture’, in the sense of a culture largely unaffected by classical or Christian influences (see Beck 1998; Glauser and Zernack 2005). In the second edition of his seminal book, *Die altgermanische Dichtung* (Heusler 1941, Old Germanic literature), he added three chapters on Old Norse saga literature, and established this literature as particularly important in reconstructing a genuine Germanic worldview. Heusler’s stance was only part of a larger scholarly attitude in the early 20th century, which comprised other humanistic disciplines such as archaeology, and eventually influenced Nazi ideologies. This discussion is too vast and complex to be taken up here. Let it suffice to say that eminent scholars at the time shared a similar view to Heusler, not only in Germany. On the one hand, then, it does not come as a surprise that some of the most rigid scholarly arguments against anything ‘Germanic’ in Old Norse mythology were put forth in the 1950s and 60s (see, e.g., Baetke 1950; Holtsmark 1964). On the other hand, into the second half of the 20th century, a noteworthy number of medievalists were quite willing to follow ideas coined by dominant figures of the 1930s and 40s, the more so as earlier studies (among them Heusler’s abovementioned book) often kept being reprinted mostly unaltered (see, e.g., Zernack 2005; Mees 2006; Mohnike 2010; van Nahl 2015).

In the long run, the fundamental (now largely outdated) assumption that medieval Iceland had been a retreat for a genuine ‘Germanism’ even entailed that a major part of the popular fascination (or nostalgia as it has recently been called) with the Middle Ages has been focused on Old Norse literature in particular. As recent scholarship has pointed out, this popular reception has a long history, too, and did not simply collapse after the end of World War II, as is sometimes assumed, but rather continued in various respects (see, e.g., Oberkrome 2007; Puschner and Großmann 2009; Zernack and Schulz 2019; Schuppener 2021). The same seems to hold true for the general interest in ‘the North’ even beyond its medieval past (see Brunner 2019; Henningsen 2021). The question how ideas of this North have changed (or not changed) throughout the 20th century, and which

part individual scholars, authors, institutes, or political attitudes played in this process, is still in need of further research, although the last years have seen attempts to shed light on specific aspects (see Bödl and Kauko 2005; von See 2006; Halink 2019). In any case, the fascination with the North is going strong among the public today, which not only has discovered the Northern countries as a favorite travel destination, but, as mentioned above, also continues to be captivated by the unmatched wealth of Old Norse literature. Given this abundance of vivid mythological and heroic narratives that have been translated into various modern languages, it hardly comes as a surprise that in the minds of many laymen, ideas of a 'heroic past' in medieval Europe are informed by this literature (see Schulz 2011; Quinn and Cipolla 2016; Helgason 2017). This includes popular subtopics such as the Vikings or runes, but even the followers of various types of neopagan religions are often constructing their specific belief systems around information passed down in Old Norse texts and archaeological findings from Scandinavia and Iceland (see von Schnurbein 2016; Nordvig 2018).

From this point of view, the above-posed questions regarding how to react to the ambivalent status of medieval lore in current society appears as particularly relevant to the field of Medieval Scandinavian Studies (see van Nahl 2020). Undoubtedly, the majority of Old Norse enthusiasts are engaged in their preoccupation in a peaceful and likeable way, even if a good deal of this revival could be called a sort of distortion from the current scholarly point of view. Again, this is not a new insight: in 1992, for example, on occasion of a symposium with the descriptive title "Viking revaluation", the Old English scholar Christine Fell stated:

The image of the North is coming through a fairly slight range of skaldic and Eddic poetry, and of course through mixtures of fact and nonsense on runes, on mythology, on 'barbarian' customs from widely read secondary syntheses [. . .]. Genuine historical and editorial work is going on alongside these extravagances, but popular image either lags far behind scholarship, or uses scholarship for its own fantasies. (Fell 1992, p. 93)

Thirty years later, Fell's evaluation still holds true. Problematically, this appropriation not only embraces harmless nostalgia but even the misuse of Old Norse texts in extremist, particularly right-wing, ideology. Even more problematically, these forms of reception are not separate spheres, but seem to be connected, as the British historian Gregers Forssling recently suggested:

Our popular interest in Nordic culture through the media of entertainment can, therefore, be viewed with ambivalence both as a benign nostalgic escape from the disorienting pace of our 'liquid modern' culture and as the idealised, romanticised cultural basis for contemporary fragments of Nordicism. [. . .] It has also created a popular idealisation of Old Norse culture that bears many characteristics of the foundations of cultural Nordicism of the nineteenth century through its appeal to those seeking a mythologised home of racial beauty and predominance. (Forssling 2020, p. 223)

Despite its long history, this problem seems to have become more visible and thus, arguably, menacing in recent years, and it even appears to be mutually entangled with the "continuing trend towards nationalist thought [. . .] evident in the percentage of votes won by right-wing parties across Europe in their recent general election" (Forssling 2020, p. 227; see Hutton 2017; Höfig 2020). There are many reasons for this development, which, for its part, is only one strand of more general trends, which are beyond the scope of the present paper. In any case, in 2022, it seems relatively safe to claim that one of the reasons for the increasing visibility of right-wing ideology—including the more apparent misuse of Old Norse lore—is the safe space created by social media platforms and messenger services to share distorted information at a fingertip, with little risk of being held accountable (for the broader discussion, see Elliot 2017). The problem of ideologically-charged fake news is a challenge to various fields of academia, and has been researched increasingly in recent

years. However, this challenge to medievalists today (including Medievalism Studies; see [Utz 2017](#); [Wollenberg 2018](#); [Fugelso 2020](#); [Fugelso 2021](#)) becomes even more intricate given the fact that by far not everything that is proposed by extremist groups is simply fake, but, as indicated above, is rather informed by earlier scholarship which by now is often available freely online or in cheap reprints. As the US-American medievalist Matthew Gabriele recently stressed with regards to the misuse of the medieval past:

Extremists often actually have their facts right and [. . .] there's a weight of scholarship—usually but not always from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with its attendant racism, sexism, and Christian supremacism—they use to justify their odious conclusions. ([Gabriele 2021](#))

In the light of extremist groups' fascination with the North, Medieval Scandinavian Studies are particularly pressed to take up position in between the broad fascination with the topic, and its misuse. Yet, many professionals in the field still seem somewhat undecided how to possibly take a public stance against such misuse, on the one hand, and benefit from the general interest in their objects of study, on the other hand. In the light of the dynamical nature of popular opinion, arguably the more so in digital times, this undecidedness is both understandable and critical at the same time.

To be sure, as mentioned above, in recent years, a growing number of scholars have sought to become clearer about the whence and whereto of their scholarship in its societal and political dimensions. However, so far, this welcome engagement is often limited to individuals or small groups of like-minded scholars, a limitation that not least holds true for the present special issue. Moreover, many (temporary) results are buried in expensive books or scholarly journals behind pay walls, and even university libraries are often far from providing access to all these publications. In this respect, the publication of the present issue in open access, and without charging the contributors any fee, seems more than timely. The more so because the display of ongoing research, and the publication of results in less-traditional media still is hardly encouraged by the evaluation system at universities (whose working principles are regularly under criticism, however). Not least the engagement of (often younger) scholars to reach out to the public via, for example, Facebook groups, Twitter pages, or personal blogs often goes rather unnoticed by policymakers at universities, arguably entailing the diminishment of this type of scholarship even among colleagues from the same field or neighboring fields.

There are other formal issues that seem to add to a certain state of disorientation in Medieval Scandinavian Studies, too, from the absorption of formerly rather autonomous institutes into larger administrative modules, arguably decreasing the visibility of smaller subsections, to the cutdown of grants, permanent positions, or even whole institutions. A selection of comments on the state of historical scholarship at universities has already been given in the first section of this paper, so let's turn to a few more examples from the field of Scandinavian Studies in particular. A decade ago, on occasion of the 100th anniversary of the *Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study* (SASS), the society's former president, Jason Lavery, not only pointed out growing challenges in sustaining the significance of Scandinavian languages in a 'globalized' world, but also addressed the problem of financing both the society and its journal in the future:

Our society, the vanguard organization for Scandinavian Studies in the United States, is facing internal challenges that, if left unmet, will make it difficult for us to make the case for our field in the future. Our biggest task is to find a new sustainable basis for financing our journal, *Scandinavian Studies*. ([Lavery 2011](#), p. 305)

Five years later, in 2016, the society's former president, Margaret Hayford O'Leary, even called for "financial support of SASS through gifts and bequests" ([Hayford O'Leary 2016](#), p. 481). At about the same time, in 2018, the University of Copenhagen, Denmark's oldest university, decided to stop teaching Old Danish and Old Norse as well as Modern Icelandic and Faroese, a decision that was met with consternation by scholars in the field: "I expect that I will not need to convince you either that this is unconscionable or

that managerialism in Higher Education is to blame”, as the Denmark-based medievalist Richard Cole (2018) put it. As recently as 2021, to give yet another example, the University of Göttingen, Germany, intended to close their Institute of Scandinavian Studies in order to compensate for expenses due to Covid-19; at the same time, the Institute of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Tübingen made similar threats to itself public. Only the united protests of international scholars prevented these closures for the time being. The threat continues, however, and the actual cutback or even abandonment of chairs and institutes for Scandinavian Studies demonstrate how real this threat is (see, e.g., van Nahl 2013; Garton 2017; as well as several papers in this special issue). A threat that seems all the more significant in the recent case at the University of Göttingen, as this university is famously connected to two of the founding fathers of German(ic) Studies in the 19th century, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, who put emphasis on the importance of Old Norse literature for the reconstruction of a common Germanic heritage.

With all that said, it is open to further discussion on which of the indicated tasks to focus first (can they even be separated?), and in which ways. In 1997, at the dawn of the new millennium, Margaret Clunies Ross reviewed the history of scholarship in Medieval Scandinavian Studies from its earliest beginnings. Her intention was to argue for a “new profile of Old Norse Saga literature” for “twentieth-century people”. Bringing to mind once again the challenge to justify the existence of a field “not obviously well adapted to improving a nation’s economic performance”—somewhat similar to Hermann Paul’s concerns one hundred years earlier—she framed a collective starting point thus:

Disciplines such as Medieval Studies [. . .] are highly vulnerable to cuts and even extinction by financially embarrassed university administrators. Such circumstances, combined with the millennial spirit that is upon us, lead to serious navel-gazing, and we practitioners of the discipline are bound to ask ourselves whether we have got it right so far and, if so (or, indeed, even if not), where we will be taking the discipline from here. (Clunies Ross 1997, p. 443 f.)

A few years later, the German medievalist Stefanie Gropper (then Würth) suggested a similar direction by arguing for the close rereading of scholarly literature from the 20th century, in the sense of approaching this literature as primary sources (see Würth 2005, p. 230). The present collection of papers sees itself rather optimistically as a fresh attempt in this spirit to reconsider old and new challenges in the history of our scholarship. As mentioned above, being published in open access free of charge, this special issue takes a small step towards the broader awareness of current problems and possibilities in Medieval Scandinavian Studies. Almost needless to say, the collected papers can provide nothing more than a hopefully stimulating assessment of certain aspects of the current situation. It openly acknowledges that it is based upon the individual professional backgrounds and personal experiences of its contributors, including this introduction. Whereas this might be called a shortcoming, at the same time it appears as one way to reach down to individual cases, and in this way might be more likely to provoke replies.

In the following subchapter, a selection of snapshots in this sense is briefly introduced. These perspectives were suggested to the contributors with a few keywords and were intended as potential starting points for individual assessment. It was up to the contributors, however, to decide on their specific topic and approach, challenging them to bring their own ideas, opinions, and experiences to the volume.

3. Perspectives

3.1. The National and Linguistic Dimension

The sentiment among medievalists regarding the (loss of) significance of their professional preoccupation has always had a national aspect to it. As outlined above, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, many scholars considered their research into medieval lore relevant for fostering ‘the nation’ as an integral part of life. Old Norse language and literature were scrutinized to shed light on the historical formation of Scandinavia (including territorial claims) as well as to reconstruct an Old Germanic culture which could be used for

political purposes, too. As indicated, 1945, then, did not mean a clear divide in this history of scholarship and reception, and several leading figures of the post-war era had either been directly involved in the scholarship of the 1930s and 40s, or were under the ambivalent influence of scholars from that time. However, as of the second half of the 20th century, medievalists have tried increasingly to overcome ideologically charged questions by turning to theories and methods from other fields. The adaptation of structuralist ideas in particular allowed for the borrowing from the fields of anthropology and sociology, among others. Interdisciplinary and international communication thus became more important but also more challenging at the same time.

Some comments on interdisciplinarity have already been given, so let's briefly turn to the linguistic dimension. Strictly speaking, this discussion has roots in the 19th century (see [Dodge 1887](#); [Egge 1888](#)), but it intensified towards the end of the 20th century. In the decades after World War II, with international ties in humanistic scholarship evolving, English became increasingly dominant, arguably at the expense of other languages. In 2011, reviewing the development in Scandinavian Studies from the US-American point of view, Jason Lavery stated:

Back when most of us were students, one had to study a foreign language in excess of any graduation requirements in order to study abroad. Now universities in Scandinavia and throughout the world are offering whole degree programs in English. [. . .] On another front, our colleagues in the humanities and social sciences in Scandinavia are under increasing pressure to publish in English. Some now question if their publications are judged more on the basis of language used rather than scholarly content. ([Lavery 2011](#), p. 303; cf. [Gage 1971](#))

As early as 1984, the German medievalist Gerd Wolfgang Weber even envisioned the end of Medieval Scandinavian Studies due to the decline of language skills among scholars and students: with a sort of 'bastardised English' supposedly becoming a lingua franca, Weber saw not only the discipline itself, but also the general wealth of differing opinions in scholarship in danger ([Weber 1984](#), p. 32). As a matter of fact, the discipline has not perished due to the decrease of language proficiency as predicted by Weber (see [van Nahl 2013](#)). However, at many institutes for Scandinavian Studies, language programs in particular have been condensed in recent years, despite scholars claiming the futility of researching Old Norse literature without sound knowledge of both medieval and modern Nordic languages as well as European languages other than English. As Stefanie Gropper stressed in 2015, the question of whether a non-English-language text could still reach an international scholarly audience has become „leider keine akademische, sondern eine wissenschaftsgeschichtlich und wissenschaftspolitisch höchst relevante Frage“ ([Gropper 2015](#), p. 240; unfortunately not academic, but a highly relevant question with regards to the history and politics of scholarship). The decision of the University of Copenhagen in 2018 to no longer offer classes in Old Norse and modern Icelandic has already been mentioned. More examples could be added, such as the department of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Bonn (as part of German Studies), which until a few years ago employed readers in Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish (as well as Finnish)—in 2022, only the Swedish lectorship is still in existence.

Whereas this linguistic dimension—in between learned wishfulness, practical demands, and administrative decisions—has been troubling scholars for decades, another 'national' trait of Medieval Scandinavian Studies recently seems to have reemerged: the tendency to confine research to one's own country, straightway contradictory to any lip service regarding interculturality. As recently as 2016, to give two examples, both a Danish ([Münster-Swendsen et al. 2016](#)) and a Norwegian ([Eriksen 2016](#)) collective volume gathered the results of two research projects on intellectual culture in medieval Scandinavia. Significantly, whereas the Danish book confined its concept of Scandinavia primarily to Denmark, the Norwegian volume limited Scandinavia mostly to Norway. In both cases, funding seems to have been the main reason behind these peculiar decisions, with the Danish project having been dependent on a grant by the *Danish Council for Independent*

Research, and the Norwegian project having been funded by the *Norwegian Research Council*. Interestingly enough, the editor of the Danish volume later criticised the Norwegian book for its narrow focus: “it is a shame to discover that the volume seems to reconfirm old dichotomies and uphold a traditional ‘national’ focus” (Münster-Swendsen 2018, p. 204; see Mortensen 2017).

This recent rebuke brings to mind that there exist long-standing controversies even between the Scandinavian countries themselves (see van Gerven 2022). Throughout the 20th century, a core issue of this debate had been the question of whether Icelandic manuscripts in Denmark ought to be returned to Iceland or not. In 2011, the Icelandic historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson suggested that the heated discussion had finally come to an end: “In the academic community, all seems to be quiet now on both fronts, as the manuscript debates ended with the final division of the Arnarnagæan Collection and problems concerning the ‘ownership’ of the medieval literature have been laid to rest” (Hálfðanarson 2011, p. 68). However, only in 2021, the old dispute surfaced again, and both scholars and newspapers in Denmark, Iceland, and Norway quickly took it on, without coming to a consensus. The Danish author Suzanne Brøgger recently stressed the particularly ambivalent political dimension of this renewed struggle with regards to the mentioned cutbacks at Danish universities: “Det er skandaløst, at oldnordisk underprioriteres, og stillinger nedlægges, når vi samtidig nægter at give de islandske sagaer tilbage til Island, når de beder om dem” (interview in Therkildsen 2022; it is scandalous that Old Norse is neglected and positions are abandoned, whereas at the same time we deny to give the Icelandic sagas back to the Icelanders when they ask for them). Clearly, the vision of true collaboration of international scholars and institutes in the field of Medieval Scandinavian Studies is still hindered by long-standing thinking within traditional borders.

3.2. *The Disciplinary and Institutional Dimension*

This brings to mind another issue touched upon above. Scandinavian Studies as a university discipline emerged as of the 19th century, and their focus back then was often on medieval languages and literature in particular, with the idea being that the research into Old Norse could substantially add to the solving of challenges imposed by nationalistic politics. Today, the notion ‘Scandinavian Studies’ comprises several branches, and different universities in different countries have different focus areas, and even different understandings of what the notion means in theory and practice (see Hilson 2009). This division has its own history, with aspects being variably important in different countries, but without a doubt, the decades after World War II were decisive for this development. With the end of the Third Reich, the concept ‘Germanic’ started to become problematic, and despite never having been outright abandoned, today, it is part of the history of scholarship rather than ongoing scholarship itself (see Beck 1986; most recently Brather et al. 2021).

This increasing discrediting of earlier attempts at reconstructing a comprehensive Germanic culture furthered the perception of Scandinavia and Iceland as distinct geographical and cultural areas, and thus of (Medieval) Scandinavian Studies as a discipline in its own right. However, as indicated, this development in the post-war decades is tied to decisions and figures at individual universities rather than being a uniform motion (see the exemplary discussion in Bödl 2005b). To be sure, well-known organizations such as the *International Association for Scandinavian Studies* (IASS) were founded in Europe as of the 1960s, the first *International Saga Conference* took place in Edinburgh in 1971, and at a noteworthy number of universities, the 1970s and 80s generally witnessed an increase in academic personnel in the field, as well as the expansion of the teaching of Nordic languages, for example. Still, it is difficult to reconstruct an overarching history of the discipline in these decades. Arguably, towards the end of the 20th century, Scandinavian Studies, their medieval branch in particular, had been brought into a strangely ambivalent situation, which still persists today. On the one hand, the field has sought to be perceived as a discipline with equal rights such as, for example, Medieval German Studies, Medieval English Studies, or Classical Studies. On the other hand, being a comparatively small

academic discipline, Medieval Scandinavian Studies have often continued to lead their existence as a sort of departmental adjunct to more dominant neighboring disciplines, entailing the danger of being marginalized in the university system. Particularly in recent years, with cost-cutting measures having become a core issue at many universities, the autonomy of several institutes of Scandinavian Studies has been overturned.

The sentiment of scholars in the field sitting on the fence has arguably further impacted disciplinary awareness. A decade ago, in 2013, a special issue of the recognized *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* was published on occasion of the journal's 40th anniversary; without putting too much emphasis on this example, it is interesting to note that among over forty contributions on literary and linguistic scholarship, only a single paper dealt with Scandinavian Studies (see [van Nahl 2013](#)), and one author in addition mentioned the discipline in passing, asking, however, the significant question:

Wann haben zuletzt Niederlandistik, Anglistik und Skandinavistik mit der Germanistik ihre Ergebnisse ausgetauscht, kategorial diskutiert und zusammengeführt—geschweige denn Germanistik und Romanistik oder Afrikanistik, Slavistik, Finnougristik und Turkologie etc.? ([Redder 2013](#), p. 159)

When was the last time that Dutch Studies, English Studies, and Scandinavian Studies did exchange their results with German Studies, did discuss and join them categorically—let alone German Studies and Romance Studies or African Studies, Slavic Studies, Finno-Ugrian Studies, Turkish Studies, and so forth?

To be sure, in the same issue, the German philologist Ralf Schnell stated that so far there had been no “ernsthafte[. . .] Konflikte” (serious conflicts) due to this co-existence “in einem institutionell lockeren Verbund” (in a loosely institutional cluster); however, he detected a “schleichende Entwertung der Mediävistik” ([Schnell 2013](#), p. 184; subtle devalorization of Medieval Studies). As mentioned above, despite the popularity of buzzwords such as interdisciplinarity and interculturality, in practice, such cooperation is often still tentative, and the stolidity of university structures certainly has a hand in this ongoing situation. Thus, whereas the administrative consolidation of smaller disciplines into clusters implies certain advantages such as adding weight to the broader field (see [Scheel 2021](#)), at the same time, it seems to require all the more what above has been called risky interdisciplinarity, i.e., the willingness of all participants to regularly reevaluate their individual stand, and to acknowledge strengths of other participants.

3.3. Reception

Such collaboration has been recognized as crucial not least in taking and maintaining a clear stance regarding the misuse of Old Norse lore. However, the term ‘reception’ comprises various types of appropriation of the past, some of which, as outlined above, can be quite ambivalent or even outright opposing when compared. The popular fascination with Old Norse literature and language has been going strong for decades, and has arguably even increased in recent times due to successful adaptations in movies and more. At the same time, as mentioned before, the visibility of motifs taken from medieval Northern literary and archaeological sources in populist and extremist groups seems to have increased, too. One of the most recent examples is the US-American Trump supporter Jacob Chansley, who during the storm of the Capitol in early 2021 proudly showed tattoos inspired by Old Norse mythology. Almost immediately after the incident, attempts by reporters to interpret these symbols were all over the media, many of which, particularly in the beginning, were factoid at best. In an interview with *National Geographic*, Matthew Gabriele later commented on rightwing extremists’ usage of (alleged) Viking-age symbols (downgraded in the headline to “hate symbols”):

None of those guys want to go live in a longhouse or anything like that. But they want that kind of imagery. [. . .] They’re hoping that either other observers will get it and they’ll agree. Or if they don’t agree and if there’s consequences, they

can just shrug it off like, ‘Oh, I’m just referencing history’ or something like that. (interview in [Romey 2021](#))

In the abovementioned case, the connection of Old Norse-inspired imagery with rightwing populism and extremism is obvious, and thus an ugly reminder to specialists in Medieval Scandinavian Studies that their objects of study are unfortunately anchored in the white supremacy milieu, too (see also [Lundström and Teitelbaum 2017](#)). However, the “man in Viking garb” (as *Bloomberg News* wrongly labeled the intruder) even serves as an unwished-for example that the long-standing popularity of Old Norse culture does not necessarily go hand in hand with generally increased knowledge of the scholarly facts. A number of recent publications that shed light on different facets of this problem have been mentioned above, and even beyond printed statements, many specialists in the field are certainly taking a clear stance in their teaching, in public lectures, and in interviews. Even a quick *Google* search results in an impressive number of newspaper articles, university news, and blog entries that cite scholars in their warning against the contemporary misuse of ‘Vikings’, ‘runes’, and ‘ragnarök’, to mention just a few keywords. However, the task to gather and eventually unite these efforts—across disciplinary, national, linguistic, and media borders—in order to confront extremist appropriation in a publicly substantial way, is still far from realization.

Last but not least, despite this situation, one should not forget that the term ‘reception’ also denotes all kinds of positive appropriation, even beyond individual nostalgia or revivals, and beyond action-packed TV series. Rather, one could mention the recent trend in scholarship to pay closer attention to the human dimension of characters in medieval literature: no longer do they appear as straightforward heroes governed by fate, and older attempts at simple classification are now being abandoned in favor of psychological perspectives. Characters in medieval literature are now cast as a sort of prototype for human hopes and anxieties, for values in communication and acting, which still have something to say to us today (see, e.g., [Classen 2020](#); [Classen 2021a](#); [Sauckel 2021](#)). Unsurprisingly, the outstanding wealth of vernacular prose narratives in medieval Iceland have been perceived as particularly promising objects for this type of approach even beyond the narrow borders of the field.

4. Postscript

While this special issue has been in planning and development, noteworthy publications have appeared that propose their own ways of dealing with the posed questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ in Medieval Studies. One example is the conference volume *Past and Future: Medieval Studies Today*, with the editors in the preface invoking “a bright future” of the field ([Hoenen and Engel 2021](#), p. vii), but at the same time acknowledging the challenge of determining the significance of medieval culture for a globalized present. With the Eurocentric aspect of core concepts such as ‘Middle Ages’ becoming visible, recently, it has even been claimed that “reflecting on the ‘state of the field’” was nothing but “well-intentioned ruminations”, bound to “violent models of scholarship, pedagogy, and community outreach that maintain a core of whiteness and white supremacy” ([Rambaran-Olm et al. 2020](#), p. 361; see [Andrews and Beechy 2020](#)). The “relative decline in importance of the United States and Europe in the world” ([Lavery 2011](#), p. 303) had already been a topic on occasion of the 100th anniversary of the SASS: “For us this should be a great opportunity to globalize our field, but so far the process of globalization in American universities often has been a zero-sum game at the cost of many fields, including Scandinavian studies” ([Lavery 2011](#), p. 303). Obviously, the broader field of Medieval Studies is somewhere in between a state of flux and a deadlock, with no foreseeable outcome, and the subfield of Medieval Scandinavian Studies continues to feel particularly threatened in this process; only in late 2021, the German medievalists Andreas Schmidt and Daniela Hahn put it thus:

As a scholar of Old Norse literature it is not unusual to have to defend oneself from questions about the value of one’s research. As a member of an arts faculty, it is therefore easy to feel ‘unwanted’, both within the university as an institutional

body and in light of the apparent political disinterest in the work that one does one's best to produce. (Schmidt and Hahn 2021, p. 7)

Clearly, certain aspects of this long-standing situation are under continuous debate and development, whereas others seem to have become gridlocked or abandoned for the time being. Continuous 'snapshots' of this status quo can hardly be dismissed as rudiments of an overcome way of humanistic thinking. The less so in a discipline such as Medieval Scandinavian Studies, with proliferating roots and outgrowths that span two centuries. The contributors to this special issue at least seem to all agree that individual assessments and opinions have still some merit, can still serve as starting points for further engagement, and might thus even add some missing pieces to the aim of transborder collaboration in a challenged society. There is no room for complacency, but neither any need to throw in the towel.

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