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The Aarhus Mythology Conference in Uppsala, 15-16
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The Aarhus Mythology conference is so called due to its beginnings at Aarhus University, Denmark, under Jens Peter Schjødt. It was held in Aarhus in 2006, 2007, and 2008, after which it has taken to travelling to various locations, including Aberdeen, Reykjavík, and Harvard. It is traditional within this conference for the speakers to be personally invited: there is never a publicly available Call for Papers. The conference is grounded within the field of the History of Religion, heavily drawing on Mythology and Folklore Studies, and has a different theme each year. This year the conference was held in Uppsala with co-operation between the Institute for Language and Folklore Arkivcentrum and the Mid-Sweden University's Study of Religion department. This year the theme of the conference was 'The Feminine in Old Norse Mythology and Folklore.'

It is of course incredibly important that a conference of this calibre acknowledges the role concepts of gender play within Old Norse mythology, but this conference also demonstrated the key work that is lacking from this field on a broader level. Papers covered a variety of topics, such as goddesses in early Germanic mythology, gender relations derived from evidence from *Snorra Edda*, the role of archaeology in understanding burial practices as ritual, and of course the now-infamous Birka grave Bj. 581 was a frequent topic of discussion.

A number of papers particularly piqued my interest. For example, Merrill Kaplan noted the way teaching of Old Norse mythology and religion is often grounded foremost in the *Snorra Edda* account, and then takes a variety of other sources as supporting evidence. Using the idea of Óðinn and the female mythical beings said to be Odinic in nature as a case study, Kaplan turned this notion on

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its head, and began with the (often unnamed) female mythical beings. By tracing how they express certain qualities also seen in Óðinn's portrayal in *Snorra Edda*, Kaplan argues that, rather than the feminine beings being Odinic, Óðinn may himself be expressing feminine characteristics. This interesting approach reminds us to interrogate the narratives we often take for granted, and how a new perspective can shed a new light on an old topic.

The variety of papers presented at this conference demonstrated the huge range of possible approaches to studying gender. Some papers took case studies exploring the lives of women, such as Karen Bek Pedersen's paper on 'Guðrún Ósvifrsdóttir and Cailleach Beare,' while other papers explored ideas of queerness and the feminine implications of 'badly performed' masculinity, such as Kendra Wilson's paper, 'Seiðr and Ergi noch einmal.' Other approaches included Judy Quinn's 'Time and the Feminine in Old Norse Mythology,' exploring the way the feminine experience of time within mythology is less bound to the physical body than the masculine experience of time. Also interesting was Rudolf Simek's discussion of 'The Late Roman Iron Age Germanic Cult of the Matronae,' which identified three goddesses recurring under many names in sources from the second to fifth centuries, who appear to be the earliest known Germanic deities.

In addition to papers using textual sources to discuss the History of Religion there were also papers addressing the more nebulous folkloric material. In particular, Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir analysed spinning deities in Icelandic variants of the folkloric motif ATU 500, and Eila Stepanova and Frog used folkloric traditions of lamentation to shed light on ritualised lament in pre-Christian Scandinavia. There was also a strong focus on archaeology, with Leszek Gardela exploring the implications of female burials containing miniature weapons. Charlotte Hedenstierna Jonson reflected on the now-famed Birka burial Bj. 581, her experience of the explosion of attention, and her interpretation of the burial. Instead of a traditionally academic presentation, Hedenstierna Jonson instead spoke personally about the reasons for her initial interpretation and why that has stayed the same: no matter the opinions of those present, it was an eye-opening insight into the way this particular project

progressed. Anne-Sofie Gräslund also carefully discussed ‘The Problem of Sex Determination of Archaeological Grave Finds,’ taking a variety of issues surrounding queer interpretations and the interpretations of burial goods into consideration. The connections made between these papers and approaches demonstrated the importance of greater discussion surrounding gender studies within this field.

However, I would like to take stock of the shortcomings that were evident at this conference. Unfortunately, it became clear that many speakers had no grounding in the research history of gender studies, and at no point in the conference was the concept of the ‘feminine’ identified, defined, or debated—a regrettable oversight at a conference that otherwise cared deeply about the use of terminology. Jens Peter Schjødt’s abstract did propose to take a semantic approach to gender categories, but this was not present in the paper itself. Although it is understandable that papers change in the time between writing the abstract and presenting the paper, this was still a disappointing development within the broader context of the conference.

Despite this lack of grounding in a field so essential to the theme of the conference, I cannot fault the organisers’ work. Tommy Kuusela and Maths Bartell had clearly worked tirelessly to ensure a fantastic two days filled with interesting discussions and a friendly social environment. The interdisciplinarity of the conference allowed for lively and varied discussions that opened new perspectives.

The Aarhus Mythology conference will take place again next autumn, hosted by the University of Bergen, on the theme of methodology. I look forward to seeing the papers that develop on this topic, and hope that papers from the 2018 conference are developed into publications to allow those unable to attend to read more work on gender within History of Religion.