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II: 47 Religion and Gender

1 Introduction

In his seminal work, *Moses the Egyptian*, Jan Assmann (1997, 9) proposes and practices a new discipline that he calls ‘mnemohistory’, which he defines as being “concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as remembered [... and as a study which] surveys the storylines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of the reading of the past”. Assmann’s preferred case study focuses on the memory of Moses and how he has been portrayed and remembered in Western culture. He coined the term ‘figure of memory’ to describe “a person, historical or fictional, who lives in tradition, in myths, legends, pictures, works of history or fiction, whose sayings are quoted, whose tomb, if known, is visited, who may even receive a kind of cult” (Assmann 2014, 61). Unnr *djúpúðga* or Auðr *djúpauðga* Ketilsdóttir [Unn the Deep-Minded or Aud the Deeply Wealthy] can serve as an example of such a figure of memory for Icelanders. She is remembered in Old Norse literature generally in two ways: on the one hand, she is the ‘heathen’ founding mother of a dynasty that spreads its reach from the Orkney Islands to the Dalir region in West Iceland in *Laxdæla saga*; on the other hand, she is a devout Christian settler in *Landnámabók*. This case study aims at providing the cultural background of these two competing memories of Auðr and highlighting relevant examples of utilised mnemotechnics – such as the earliest historiographical and literary texts, popular literature like *rímur* [Icelandic narrative poems]; cultural performances including prayers, processions, religious rites and ceremonies; as well as nonlinguistic media like monuments and the Icelandic landscape itself.

2 Case study: The curious case of Auðr/ Unnr *djúp(a)úðga*

The ‘heathen’ Unnr and the Christian Auðr

Just as Assmann distinguished between Moses the Hebrew and Moses the Egyptian (Assmann 1997, 12), so can one distinguish between the ‘heathen’ Unnr and the Christian Auðr. As in the case of Moses, in the Icelandic traditions on Unnr/Auðr there is a strict hierarchy between center and periphery. Her story as told

in the various redactions of *Landnámabók* [the book of settlements] (Ch. S95–S110, Ch. H82–H84) is canonical and authoritative, while *Laxdæla saga* [saga of the people of Laxardal] (Ch. 1–7) represents an alternative version of the memory of Auðr (called Unnr here), which is often considered false. The ‘heathen’ Unnr belongs to a sort of ‘counter-memory’, a term coined by Assmann to describe “a memory that puts elements to the fore that are, or tend to be, forgotten in the official memory” (Assmann 1997, 12). He continues, “If it becomes codified in the form of a traditional story or even in a work of written historiography, counter-memory corresponds to [...] ‘counterhistory’” (12). The ‘heathen’ Unnr of *Laxdæla* is a representative example of counterhistory. When *Laxdæla* and *Landnámabók* are read together, they explicitly contradict each other: the first states that Auðr was buried in a heathen-style burial (*Laxdæla*, Ch. 7) while the second says that she was laid to rest according to a seemingly Christian burial custom (*Landnámabók*, Ch. S110). As a figure of memory, Unnr/Auðr indicates the existence of countercurrents in Old Icelandic tradition.

Of all the *Íslendingasögur* [sagas of Icelanders], *Laxdæla* is unique in its in-depth portrayals and foregrounding of female characters (Kellogg 1973, 254; Helga Kress 1980a, 1980b; Henriksen 1981, 9). In particular, the anonymous author presents a multifaceted foremother figure in Auðr – called Unnr here – a matriarch who contrasts with the female protagonists in *Laxdæla* and with representations of herself in other written sources. Imitating the structure of the *Prologue* to the *Prose Edda*, Auðr’s journey to and settlement in Iceland (*Laxdæla saga*, Ch. 4–7) parallels that of Óðinn (Odin) (*Edda – Prologue*, Ch. 10–11). Auðr is compared to Norse mythological figures and is depicted as a matriarch ‘in heathen style’ (see also Baldur Hafstað 2007). The *Laxdæla* author represents and mediates the memory of Auðr in a way that rings with literary echoes and overlays from Snorri Sturluson’s mythological text, *Prose Edda*, while at the same time, it represents an alternative version of the memory of Auðr.

A few decades later, Sturla Þórðarson, too, depicts Auðr in his redaction of *Landnámabók*. Like its corresponding passage in *Laxdæla*, it is composed around Auðr’s migration to and settlement in Iceland, but its depiction of her differs in some respects from the matriarch figure in *Laxdæla*’s representation. *Landnámabók*’s narrative differs in that Auðr is remembered as a woman practising Christian rituals. The text reads as follows: “Hon hafði bœnahald sitt á Krosshólum; þar lét hon reisa krossa, því at hon var skírð ok vel trúuð” (*Landnámabók*, Ch. S97, H84) [“She used to say prayers at Kross Hills; she had crosses erected there, for she’d been baptized and was a devout Christian” (*The Book of Settlements*, Ch. 97)]. Moreover, the description of Auðr’s funeral practice is a subject of curiosity. The text emphasizes that: “[Hon] var grafin í flœðarmáli, sem hon hafði fyrir sagt, því at hon vild eigi liggja í óvígðri moldu, er hon var skírð” (*Landnámabók*, Ch. S110)

["She was buried at the high water mark as she'd ordered, because having been baptized, she didn't wish to lie in unconsecrated earth" (*The Book of Settlements*, Ch 110)]. As Stefán Karlsson (1976, 481–488) argued, while not a Christian burial practice, the concept of the water washing on the shore mentioned in the passage on Auðr's burial seems to be drawn from and inspired by a sermon in the *Homíliubók*, which teaches us that all the water in the world is consecrated when John the Baptist baptised Jesus in the river Jordan. Thus *Landnámabók* ascribes to being "grafa í flæðarmáli" [bury at the flood-mark] a metaphoric function that prefigures Christian baptism and purification. *Landnámabók* (with its implicit reference to the sermon *Apparitio domini* [the Epiphany]) supports the canonisation of the memory of Auðr, but also becomes a carrier of cultural memory, in the sense that it supports "the cultural memory of a European textual culture" (Hermann 2013, 338). As illustrated above, this version was not unchallenged.

From the middle of the eighteenth century, authors – who are familiar with both representations – make a composite image of Unnr/Auðr, either through unifying characteristics of both figures or by supplanting the earliest known image with the next. In 1769, Eiríkur Bjarnason utilises the second option in his *Laxdælarímur*, presenting the burial "í flæðarmáli" [at the flood-mark] as superior to the pagan ship burial in *Laxdæla saga*.

NB Annað segja fræði fróð,
framar þessu trúanleg,
þar sem mættust fjara og flóð,
frúin býði að jarða sig.

Einninn fá svo yrki tjáð,
er oss birta sannleikinn,
helga skírn hún hafði þáð,
hér því girntist legstaðinn. (*Laxdælarímur* 1769, 28)

[Wise tales tell another story, / more reliable than this [i.e. *Laxdæla saga*]; / [that] were the shore and the flood meet, / the lady asked to be buried. // Also the work [i.e. *Landnámabók*] tells, / that shows us the truth; /that she had received holy baptism, / therefore wished for a grave there. (author's translation)]

This note indicates that the poet used the *Landnáma*-text as a controlling device for how to think about the past. The literary memory of the Christian Auðr is preserved and further honoured through *Ein bæen Auðar diúpauðgu* [A prayer of Auðr The Deeply Wealthy], a prayer copied down by Jón Jónsson *langur* in 1828, which he claimed was "að vitni Ara prest f[róða]" [as witnessed by the priest Ari the Wise] (1828, 10v; *Ein bæen Auðar diúpauðgu*, 355). The prayer was recited in a memorial ceremony in June 2010 at the cross monument, raised in 1965 at Krosshólaborg, to commemorate Auðr (Óskar Ingi Ingason 2010). Acts of commemoration, such

as the previously mentioned example, also help to retain and transform collective memory. The memorial cross, unveiled in 1965 for the millennial of Auðr's settlement in Iceland and her conversion to Christianity (Jón Bjarnason 1965, 382–383 and 388; Janet Ingibergsson 1965, 388) is an example of such a site of memory, or what Pierre Nora called *lieux de mémoire* and defined as “vestiges, the ultimate embodiments of a commemorative consciousness” (1996, 6). The memorial has a quotation from *Landnámabók* that says, “Hon hafði bænahald sitt á Krosshólum. Þar let hon reisa krossa því at hon var skirð ok vel trúuð” (Óskar Ingi Ingason 2010) [She held her prayers at Krosshólar. There she had crosses erected because she was baptized and a true believer (author's translation)]. Commemorative rites for the 1965 millennial anniversary of her settlement, like those “Auðarganga” and “helgiganga” [procession for Auðr and saint's procession] held in honour of Auðr in June 2010 and 2013 – a procession starting from Krosshólaborg, over “Auðartóftir” [the ruins or homestead of Auðr] to the church of Hvammur (Þórdís Valsdóttir 2010, 26; Magnús Magnússon 2013, 13), are intentionally produced to serve the purpose of remembering Auðr as a Christian settler. These cultural performances – prayers, rites and ceremonies, which can be classified under religion and ritual – support the authoritative version of the past. The collective memory stored in the *Landnáma*-text has come to suppress the counter-memory preserved in *Laxdæla* over time.

The story of Unnr/Auðr provides a valuable case study for the way in which memories are formed and shaped from the thirteenth century onwards in Iceland. These medieval narratives provide new and different perspectives on the past and, in this way, form official collective memories and oppositional memories. The challenge posed by the counter-history, as recorded in *Laxdæla*, is met by an upsurge in religious commemorative activities. It is in this struggle between these two competing representations of Auðr that one representation becomes the dominant memory while the other becomes the counter-memory.

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