# Table of Contents

**Stefka G. Eriksen, Karen Langsholt Holmqvist, and Bjørn Bandlien, eds.,**
*Approaches to the Medieval Self: Representations and Conceptualisations of the Self in the Textual and Material Culture of Western Scandinavia, c. 800–1500* **(Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020). Print, viii + 339 pp., €89,95, ISBN: 9783110655551.**

*Review*

In recent decades, academia has witnessed a continuing outpour of scholarship that can be roughly divided into two streams. The First (re)examines, problematises, and analyses concepts that have been thought of as postmodern constructions. The second stream focuses on theories and methodological frameworks and does not always separate itself from the first. Older theories are re-examined and re-assessed, while theories from other disciplines are adopted and adapted to medieval resources.

More often than not, a piece of research work incorporates both streams, and the subject of this review, *Approaches to the Medieval Self*, is such an example. Consisting of 16 papers (introduction and conclusion included), this collaborative volume examines on the one hand a group of diverse, creatively assembled sources from which one may get a glimpse of a concept of self in a medieval Scandinavian context; on the other hand, it applies a set of different yet correlative theories to these source materials. As a result, the volume is highly experimental in its nature; as its title suggests, it does not seek to (re)define the self but 'aims to engage with the current discussions and investigate how the various definitions and approaches to the self may complement each other' (p. 2). In other words, the volume strives at the *how* rather than the *what*.

That having been said, the reader cannot possibly fail to extract at least some characteristics of the self. In the following, I will structure this review giving an overview of the volume and summarising what, I as a reader, have been made aware of, when it comes to the self in medieval Scandinavia.

To begin with, the self is constantly changing, yet without having impaired the continuity of the individual's sense of identity and personhood. Though shaped by past experience and anticipation of the future, the self is very much a thing of the present; what it is at any given moment depends on the individual's actions and decisions, which in turn depend first on the person's cognitive processes. In other words, it is both a private and a communal matter. Several papers of the volume examine approaches to the self primarily on the individual level. These include first Eriksen and Turner's 'Cognitive Approaches to Old Norse Literature', which, having re-assessed and borrowed from the cognitive sciences, examines the possible creative processes behind different genres of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. One very interesting and useful concept here is that of stories and blending; it concerns how the human brain makes sense of the world by creating narratives and processes the information it receives through analogies and disanalogies. The example Eriksen and Turner used to demonstrate these processes and their role in narrative-making concerns the genres such as the Old Norse-Icelandic sagas written centuries after Iceland and Norway had been Christianised—a result of the blending of the pre-Christian myths and the Christian mindset. This particular blending is picked up in Tulinius's article, 'The Medieval Subject and the Saga Hero', and applied to close readings of two sagas of Icelanders, *Hrafns saga Svenbjarnarsonar* and *Egils saga*. In particular, introducing the concepts of *habitus* and social norms, he examines how the two sagas shows different degrees of blending Christian and non-Christian elements. Literary texts here have become manifestations of the self of a given society, reflecting its complexity and multifariousness.

In the following paper 'The Precarious Self', Steen examines how King Sverrir of *Sverris saga* utilises blending and narrative-making to adopt and adapt his 'self' to a variety of circumstances, so as to successfully navigate through the turbulent political events surrounding his accession to the throne and to stabilise his position as King of Norway. Eriksen returns yet again with not only the cognitive sciences but also the principles of multimodal communication and interpretation, only that this

time she focuses on the 'selves' of medieval scribes and readers of medieval manuscripts. Using two *Njáls saga* manuscripts as example and particularly focusing on the rubrics and initials, Eriksen demonstrates how the scribes' and the readers' meaning-making might impact on the layout of the manuscript itself. In doing so, her article also functions as an important reminder that, while working on medieval texts, one deals with multiple selves: not just those of the characters and the authors, but the readers also play a role in the shaping of the story.

The individual, however, is but one side of the story; the sense of self is also largely shaped by the individual's social, cultural, and physical surroundings. Shaw, for instance, in his paper 'The Networked Historical Self, Traveling Version', views the self as 'a function of networks of ideas, things, animals, and bodies' (p. 21) and examines the ongoing change of the self as the individual moves between the familiar and the foreign. Then, in a series of papers in the second half of the volume, innovative sources are examined as potential gateways to medieval Scandinavian self: both utilising archaeological evidence, Naumann in 'Food, Everyday Practice, and the Self in Medieval Oslo' and Croix in 'Identifying "Occasions" of the Self in Viking-Age Scandinavia' examine two human activities that are both private and communal: eating and weaving. The former reads food and food preparation as a social practice that provokes a 'multitude of actions, emotions, and meanings' (p. 213), from which a sense of self could be drawn. The latter introduces the gender aspect into the discussion by examining specific architectural spaces associated to textile production, a craft dominated by women belonging to a variety of social classes. Bonde and Holmqvist on the other hand decentres the self and, with the help of the practice theory, put nonhuman objects to the fore. In Bonde's 'Searching for the Self in Danish Twelfth-Century Churches', the narrative/meaning-making process is analysed against a blending of the human subjects (in this case, participants in Mass), the ritual of Mass itself, and the round arch of the church building. Comparing two groups of graffiti found respectively in Maeshowe, a Neolithic cairn, and in Nidaros Cathedral,

Holmqvist analyses how different aspects of the self may surface according to the individual's changing physical environment and company.

In addition to their innovative approaches, the last four titles also showcase the richness of the resources available to us so as to uncover the concept of the self. These are further expanded by contributions by Bandlien, Nordby, Diesen, and Bauer, who investigate seals, oath-swearing (in law codes), children's experience in hagiography and accounts of miracles, and tenement names. Together, they give a glimpse of a treasure hoard of historical sources that would allow future scholars of various academic background opportunities to pursue and further the inquiry, to arrive at a more or less complete picture of the medieval self.

However, just as treasure hoards are always guarded by dragons and monsters alike, it could be dangerous to approach these sources without caution. The self, as mentioned, is as multi-layered as it is dynamic; it may involve a complicated group of both human and nonhuman factors intricately tied to each other. In the process of blending, compressing, and decompressing these factors, the self may be lost in its multiplicity and inconstancy. Johannsson's contribution, 'The Selfish Skald', warns us of precisely this danger. Tracing the textual transmission of *Egils saga* and focusing on the poem *Sonatorrek*, he problematises any attempt at finding a literary self of Egill, for the saga/poem as we know is a product of much later era and a combined effort of both scribes and readers (cf. Eriksen's paper on the *Njálla*).

Overall, faithful to the title and the editors' promise in the introductory chapter, the volume does deliver multiple approaches to the medieval self as could be extracted from a diverse group of sources. Its experimental nature decides that the majority of the articles, inevitably, devote a disproportionate space to theories and literature review, making the final analysis part (which in many cases takes only 2 to 3 pages out of 10) seem somewhat underwhelming. The reader is left with a strong desire to know more, which is in fact a bright side and a very positive result indeed. Although, many of these papers are only preliminary in nature and due to the

limitation of space can only offer an overview, they do promise the coming of many individual research projects, which I for one very much look forwards to.

Minjie Su

Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main