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# The Mind's Eye: The Triad of Memory, Space and the Senses in Old Norse Literature

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**Abstract:** This article examines the intimate connection between the senses and memory. The focus lies on vision, which was believed to be one of the main routes of access to memory in medieval culture. Because descriptions of and reflections on memory are evident across genres, examples will be drawn from various corners of the Old Norse textual landscape and reference will be made to sagas, eddic poetry and the *Prose Edda*. Of central importance for the analysis is the image of the mind's eye (*auga hugar*), perhaps the most suitable example of the prominent position of sight for mental storage and processes of recollection. The article also discusses the relationship between literature and memory. It examines how organizational principles similar to those characteristic of 'artificial memory', a type of memory based principally on spatial structures (often architectonic structures) and images (frequently visually striking images) had an impact on the content and structure of Old Norse literature.

This article will direct our attention to intersections between literature and memory; and it will be argued that Old Norse literature engages with memory in various ways and is hugely influenced by this phenomenon. The importance of different types of memory for medieval Nordic culture and literature has become a central matter of concern in recent years. What instigated this renewed interest was the growth of international and interdisciplinary memory studies, a field that has offered new theoretical and methodological frameworks that make it possible to investigate memory (as a phenomenon connected to the individual and to collective groups) in the context of Old Norse literature more systematically than was the case earlier.<sup>1</sup> Memory studies embrace both arts of memory and cultural memory. This is emphasized by Aleida Assmann who has dealt with 'the arts of

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<sup>1</sup> Memory studies can be understood very broadly as covering investigations that deal with functions of memory and the various ways in which cultures remember and represent their pasts. Examples of these studies are many, see, e. g., Roediger and Wertsch 2008; Erll and Nünning 2008;

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memory in general, that, in their plurality and interaction, are responsible for constructing, transforming, observing, and critiquing the cultural memory of a society' (Assmann 2011, xi). According to Assmann, the arts of memory include various methods of preservation and media of memory (writing, images, bodily practices, and places). All of these are crucial for the formation of cultural memory, that is, long-term memory that exceeds the individual and supports group cohesion and collective identities. This article will touch on a very limited area of this wide-ranging topic. It deals with space and the sense of sight – both of which offer access to the arts of memory and cultural memory – and their expressions in Old Norse literature.

## Memory and space

The idea that memory is supported by and negotiated through space is expressed already in the Roman rhetorical tradition. Cicero and Quintilian (among others) described artificial memory, a trained and cultivated memory that uses mentally constructed places (*loci*) and images (*imagines*) (cf. *De Oratore*; *De institutione oratoria*, and *Rhetorica ad Herennium*). Artificial memory, which relies on space and vision, was seen as a cultivation of natural memory (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 206–207), and it was considered as a response to the general inclination of people to connect memory to space.<sup>2</sup> The Roman rhetoricians traced the central principles of artificial memory back to the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos and to a legend about the collapse of the roof of a banquet hall, a catastrophe that buried the people present at the banquet in the ruins. After the tragic event Simonides, based on his recollection of the exact order of how the guests had been seated, could identify the dead bodies. This recollection was understood by the Roman writers to confirm that memory was based on spatial principles (see Glauser 2007). Even if much memory-related activity in the Norse world happened without any direct contact with the artificial memory of the classical world, the impact that classical education had via Christian learning during the medieval period makes such descriptions relevant and pertinent points of comparison for the Norse case. The classical rhetoricians formalized memory within their educational system, but ob-

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Tamm 2013. About memory in the context of Old Norse culture and literature see, e. g., Glauser 2000; Hermann and Mitchell 2013; Bennett 2014; Hermann, Mitchell and Arnórsdóttir 2014.

<sup>2</sup> This generality is supported by modern scholarship's theoretical concern with space; most often, however, recent studies focus not on internal spaces (i.e. the minds of individuals) but on external physical spaces that are shared collectively and function as media of cultural memory, e. g., Nora 1989; Assmann 2005; Assmann 2011.

viously they did not invent the basic principles of artificial memory. The principles described in classical texts have broader implications and are relevant in contexts that can differ from the Classical world in many respects. It may be expected that people of all cultures have trained and refined their memories, even if this effort is not documented in learned treatises. In the Old Norse world, men and women with especially refined memories – skalds, lawmen, saga-men, and, after the introduction of Christianity, the people of the church – would have made an effort to cultivate this mental faculty.

## Church Spaces

Old Norse literature reveals that landscapes were mnemonic spaces of crucial importance for the preservation of the past (Glauser 2000, Bennett 2014). Yet architectonic structures can also act as prisms through which memory practices can be understood. Buildings – as arenas for ceremonial gatherings – were crucial for the preservation of cultural memory, and, on a more technical level, they were evoked as a tool for mnemonic purposes. *Jóns saga helga* illustrates how external physical spaces could project the importance of an internal space (i. e. the mind) for memory. Jón Qgmundarson, bishop of Hólar, hires a man to build a new church:

Hann valði þann mann til kirkjugerðarinnar er þá þótti einnhverr hagastr vera. [...] Þat er sagt frá þessum manni at hann var svá næmr, þá er hann var í smíðinni, þá heyrði hann til er prestlingum var kennd íþrótt sú er grammatica heitir, en svá loddi honum þat vel í eyrum af miklum næmleik ok athuga at hann gerðisk inn mesti íþróttamaðr í þess konar námi. (*Biskupa sögur* I, 204)

He chose the man for the church building that was then thought to be the most skilful. [...] It is told of this man that he was so quick at learning that, when he was at his work, he listened to the priestlings being taught the accomplishment which is called *grammatica*, and it stuck so well in his ears, by reason of his great quickness in learning and attention or application, that he became the most accomplished man in this kind of learning (*The Life of S. John the Bishop*, 551).

The passage evokes the idea of the master-builder. While constructing the church, Þóroddr hears nearby teaching sessions and becomes highly skilled in the art of grammar, to such an extent that he becomes one of the most knowledgeable men in this art. Þóroddr is erecting a church, a central site for the preservation and transmission of rituals and narratives that secure the cultural memory of the Christian congregation. At the same time, Þóroddr himself acquires a new skill by incorporating new knowledge into his memory. We can thus envision two parallel crafts: on the one hand, the term master-builder can be understood quite

literally as the man who builds a church. On a more metaphorical level, he is the craftsman of memory architecture. In that case, the physical church building serves as a metaphor for a mnemonic construction in the mind of Þóroddr, a structure that is crucial for storing knowledge that he can recollect later. This example demonstrates the idea that knowledge is gained via sensual perception. In classical and medieval contexts, sight and hearing are often perceived as the most trusted senses, and the senses that are most valuable for knowledge, understanding and cognition. These senses were thought to contrast with touch and taste, senses that require close proximity and which, it was argued, did not offer as clear perception as sight and hearing (Nichols 2008). We note that the senses mediate between Þóroddr and the surrounding world. Hearing, the principle vehicle for learning from instructions, is established as an important asset for knowledge and memory. The ear as a body part is emphasized by the text through the assurance that the lessons ‘stuck so well in his ears’. The use of the Old Norse word *loða*, which implies that something cleaves to, clings to or is stuck to something else (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, 396, cf. Egilsdóttir 2006), gives the impression that the knowledge which Þóroddr perceived is attached firmly to his ear.<sup>3</sup>

## The mind’s eye

Artificial memory, operating with mental images, demonstrates the degree to which memory relied on sight and was visually dependent (e. g., *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 218–221): things that were stored in memory were transformed into striking images that could be accessed and recalled through inner visualization. Regardless of whether knowledge of a thing or a phenomenon came into memory via the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue or the skin, it was eventually transformed into a mental image (e. g. Carruthers 1990, 16–18). The passage from *Jóns saga helga* points to the idea of the inner ear, but, as Ásdís Egilsdóttir has emphasized, ‘neither classical nor medieval tradition regarded an “ear of the mind” equivalent to that of the “eye of the mind”’ (2006, 221), an idea that underscores that inner visualization and mental images are assets of memory and remembering (Hermann 2015). In the stave church homily from the Old Norwegian *Book of Homilies*, the congregation is encouraged to see with the inner eye, the mind’s eye (*hugskots augum*) (*Gamal norsk homiliebok*, 97). The call to resort to the mind’s eye implies that two interrelated mental faculties, thought and memory, are ac-

<sup>3</sup> The idea of attaching or fixing things to a structure, a surface or a body part echoes a widespread memory image (Carruthers 1990, 16–32 and Assmann 2011, 140–146).

tive and work together. In the stave church homily the image of the mind's eye is embedded in a spatial context concerned with the church's architecture. The interior parts of the church, the pillars, the altar, etc. are all to be understood allegorically as a representation of Christendom, as the text describes in great detail. For instance, the four corner posts are equated with the four gospels, since the learning they contain is the strongest support for belief. As Henning Laugerud has noted, the homily can be seen to offer 'fairly specific guidelines for, and a practical use of, the art of memory' (2010, 44). The stave church homily is rhetorically indebted to ekphrasis, i. e. it is a verbal description that recreates a visual object, in its case a building. The purpose is to evoke an image of the visual object in the mind of the listener. The homily thus follows a rhetorical tradition which involves the idea of mental picture-making (Carruthers 2006, 288). The appealing tone in the text supports the argument that the priest is indirectly inviting members of the congregation to paint a picture of the church in their minds, which can, in turn, serve as a mnemonic device. This theological text reveals that the church building was evoked as a mnemonic device, but it adds yet another layer to this practical mnemonic function of church architecture: by gazing at the church's interior through the mind's eye (that is, through thought and memory), the congregation will reach the Holy Ghost's gate of grace (*Gamal norsk homiliebok*, 97). Symbolically speaking, the individual will attain an understanding of God. For the priest and his congregation, resorting to the mind's eye is about more than memory as storage; it is a cognitive process.

## The Hall

Space and memory are interconnected in other literary contexts and other architectonic structures as well. In the Old Norse conceptual world, the hall symbolizes both social and cosmic order and – like church buildings – it projects memory practice. The hall and its interior parts can symbolize the mythological cosmos (Gunnell 2001), which neatly demonstrates that architectonic spaces were evoked as media of cultural memory. A passage in *Laxdæla saga*, which refers to the magnificently decorated Icelandic fire-hall in Hjarðarholt, tells that the wainscots and rafters had images carved on them, but also that it was stately even without these images:

Þat sumar lét Óláfr gera eldhús í Hjarðarholti, meira ok betra en menn hefði fyrr sét. Váru þar markaðar ágætligar sögur á þilviðinum ok svá á ræfrinu; var þat svá vel smíðat, at þá þótti miklu skrautligra, er eigi váru tjöldin uppi. (*Laxdæla saga*, 79)

That summer Olaf had a fire-hall built at Hjärdarholt which was larger and grander than men had ever seen before. On the wood of the gables, and the rafters, decorative tales were carved. It was so well crafted that it was thought more ornamental without the tapestries than with them. (*The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 39–40)

In this case, we can think of two co-existing media of memory; firstly, the images on the wall, which, as we are told later in the chapter (*Laxdæla saga*, 80), were used to perform skaldic ekphrasis, and secondly, the interior architecture of the hall.

That the hall and its interior parts were used as a memory device in the Old Norse world is also exemplified in *Njáls saga* in the depiction of Gunnarr's and Halgerðr's wedding feast (Hermann 2014, 28). References to doors, benches and opposite benches, as well as spatial markers such as next to, on the inside of, at the outer edge of, toward the door, etc. form the background against which the wedding guests are presented: everyone is seated in an orderly fashion inside the hall. The narrator's comment that '[t]here is no report of how the others were seated' (*Njáls saga*, 39); En þá er eigi frá sagt, hversu þórum var skipat (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, 89) confirms the importance of seating arrangements, or spatial anchoring, for recollection. If the guests are not connected to a specific place in a spatial structure, forgetting occurs. This episode has been discussed in connection with a performance in which narrator and audience were concerned with honor and prestige (Lönnroth 1976, 196–197). Yet, at the same time, the description of the gathering at the ceremonial hall demonstrates the relevance of space for memory.

Moreover, intersections between memory and space are found in the *Prose Edda*. This is the case, firstly, in the part called *Gylfaginning*, namely in its frame story. The mythological wisdom that is revealed to the disguised Gylfi is imbedded in an elaborate architectonic structure: Gylfi enters a hall, crosses a doorway and sees numerous apartments and thrones (*Gylfaginning*, 7–9). As is well known, at the end of *Gylfaginning* the hall which Gylfi had entered earlier suddenly disappears, adding substance to the name *gylfaginning*, that is, delusion or tricking (ibid. 54). Gylfi perceives the disappearance of the hall aurally – it is accompanied by a loud noise, and the explosive volume of the sound adds to the intensity of the illusion. This tricking of Gylfi's senses – of what he saw and what he heard – expresses the uncertainty and illusory character of sensory perception (Glauser 2009, 300). Gylfi's next action is to go home to his kingdom and tell of the events he had seen and heard:

Gengr hann þá leið sína braut ok kemr heim í ríki sitt ok segir þau tíðindi er hann hefir sét ok heyrð. Ok eptir honum sagði hverr maðr þórum þessar sögur. (*Gylfaginning*, 54)

Then he went off on his way and came back to his kingdom and told of the events he had seen and heard about. And from his account these stories passed from one person to another. (*Edda. Snorri Sturluson*, 57).

This act in which Gylfi shares his newly acquired wisdom presupposes an act of restoration that can be understood as an imaginative construction in his mind of what had disappeared. The text itself seems to suggest that in this act, the hall functions as a store house for Gylfi's knowledge or, in more comprehensive terms, it constitutes a mnemonic space that he can enter in his mind. When he arrives back in his kingdom, the knowledge that was revealed in the hall exists only in Gylfi's mind. The disappearance of the narrative's purported physical world acquaints the audience with the unreliability of the senses and warns against trusting knowledge perceived through the senses (Glauser 2009), but at the same time it reflects on the risk of forgetting. When knowledge is retained inside one individual only, when it is not shared, it is not transferred to a culture's long-term memory and will die with the individual. However, Gylfi manages to secure his (illusory) knowledge a position in cultural memory. This framework reflects on transmission from person to person, from generation to generation. Precisely at the point in *Gylfaginning's* frame story where Gylfi tells of the events, that is, communicates them to others, there is an intertextual emphasis which is exemplary for the *Prose Edda* as a whole, a book that – which becomes explicit in a passage in the part called *Skáldskaparmál* (*Skáldskaparmál*, 5) – was written to prevent oblivion and to keep future generations of poets informed about mythology, thus facilitating skaldic poetry's continued existence in cultural memory (Mitchell forthcoming).

The framework of *Skáldskaparmál* also epitomizes space as a resource for memory. The mythological banquet in Ásgarðr, where wisdom-conversations take place between Ægir and the Æsir, might offer a glimpse at imagined halls used as mnemonic devices among those performing and transmitting, that is, remembering, the narratives. Or it demonstrates the importance of the hall as a figure of memory that is significant for the organization of knowledge.

Ok um kveldit er drekka skyldi, þá lét Óðinn bera inn í höllina sverð, ok váru svá björt at þar af lýsti, ok var ekki haft ljós annat meðan við drykkju var setit. Þá gengu Æsir at gildi sínu ok settusk í hásæti tólf Æsir, þeir er dómendr skyldu vera ok svá váru nefndir: Þórr, Njörðr, Freyr, Týr, Heimdallr, Bragi, Viðarr, Váli, Ullr, Hœnir, Forseti, Loki; slíkt sama Ásynjur: Frigg, Freyja, Gefjun, Iðunn, Gerðr, Sigyn, Fulla, Nanna. [...] Næsti maðr Ægi sat Bragi, ok áttusk þeir við drykkju ok orðaskipti. (*Skáldskaparmál*, 1)

And in the evening when they were about to start the drinking, Odin had swords brought into the hall and they were so bright that light shone from them, and no other light was used while they sat drinking. Then the Æsir instituted their banquet and twelve Æsir who were to be judges took their places in their thrones and their names are as follows: Thor, Niord, Freyr, Tyr, Heimdall, Bragi, Vidar, Vali, Ull, Hænir, Forseti, Loki, similarly the Asyniur, Frigg,

Freyia, Gefiun, Idunn, Gerd, Sigyn, Fulla, Nanna. [...] The person sitting next to Ægir was Bragi; (*Edda. Snorri Sturluson*, 59).

The situation, depicting the conversation in the hall, reveals some important characteristics of inner memory spaces: orderly arrangement and clear visibility (e. g. Yates 1974, 7–8). Like the guests at Gunnarr's and Hallgerðr's wedding in *Njáls saga*, the gods and goddesses are assigned a particular place (e. g., Bragi next to Ægir) and each one of them is seated on a specific throne (*hásæti*). On a more abstract level, thrones – separate compartments – may function as 'memory boxes' capable of ordering units of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the hall is illuminated. This is a stark reminder that localities that are imagined in memory should be well illuminated by light in perfect measure, so that the location can be seen clearly with the inner eye (e. g. Carruthers 1990, 22; Yates 1974, 17).

## Vision, space, memory

The stave church homily brings both vision and space in contact with the mind, that is, with thought and memory, and a similar principle occurs in eddic poetry, as well. That eddic poems deriving from oral tradition hone in on similar memory principles might imply that the kernel of the ideas inherent in artificial memory – that could have been brought to the North in the centuries after the introduction of Christianity – was in some form or other already embedded in pre-Christian tradition. *Grímnismál* can serve as an example. In this poem Óðinn demonstrates his solid knowledge of arcane wisdom and a number of mythological themes, all of which are encapsulated in an inner vision tightly anchored in spatial structures. These are most often architectonic spaces but can also be landscapes and natural topographies. When listing the divine halls that he sees, Óðinn refers to several distinct architectonic features: roofs, rafters, benches, doors, seats, daises or apartments. He also describes the form of the halls, their height and size (they are, for example, high-timbered) and he lists their material qualities, like timber and spear-shafts. Finally, he mentions their interior decoration: silver, gold, and shields. All of these features support a conjuring of these spaces in the mind. Óðinn's vision is initiated by starvation and heat (sts. 1 and 2), and it has – amongst other interpretations – been considered a reflection of shamanistic ritual. It may also be asked if it could epitomize memory because of its spatial

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<sup>4</sup> About 'memory boxes' as a common expression of memory see Assmann 2011, 101–107; Carruthers 1990, 33–45.



and visual context. In this interpretation, what Óðinn reveals to Geirrøðr is his memory architecture. In this mental topography, features like Valhall's doors and Bilskirnir's daises emphasize the spatial, and spacious, character of this architecture:

(23) Fimm hundruð dura  
ok um fjórum tögum,  
svá hygg ek at Valhøllu vera;

(24) Fimm hundruð gólfa  
ok um fjórum tögum,  
svá hygg ek Bilskirni með bugum; (*Eddukvæði*, 372)

(23) Five hundred doors and forty  
I think there are in Valhall;

(24) Five hundred daises and forty,  
so I think Bilskirnir has in all, (*The Poetic Edda*, 51)

The descriptions of the buildings give the location depth and an almost three-dimensional character. They portray a locale where each of the daises points to yet another space, potentially providing a new mnemonic location, and thus pointing to a new cluster of themes. Or, as John Lindow has recently written about *Grímnismál*: the places call up the myths (Lindow 2014, 52). Each hall and each dais can be considered a mnemonic counterpart to what in a (later) book culture would have taken the form of a chapter or new section.

Besides these architectonic topographies, *Grímnismál* also offers a glimpse at another template or cognitive model, one that encompasses the cosmology, namely Yggdrasill.

(35) Askr Yggdrasils  
drýgir erfiði  
meira en menn viti:  
hjørtr bítr ofan,  
en á hliðu fúnar,  
skerðir Níðhoggr neðan. (*Eddukvæði*, 375)

(35) Yggdrasill's ash suffers agony  
more than men know:  
a stag nibbles it from above, but at its side it's decaying,  
and Nidhogg rends it beneath (*The Poetic Edda*, 53)

If our attention is turned away from the content, that is, the cosmological information provided by Óðinn, and we look instead at the form and function of Yggdrasill, which Anders Andrén has called a figure of thought (Andrén 2014, 67), it is fair to say that it conjures up a clear visual picture. It is organized in an orderly fash-

ion, has a top, a bottom and sides, and is symmetric in shape. The tree thus offers a genuine table of content, a valuable mnemonic tool, both for the one presenting the vision and for the audience. Memory architectures and templates have a practical function (Carruthers 2006, 288–290, Carruthers 1998, 16–24). They make it possible to display matters in an orderly manner, to store and retrieve things and phenomena in memory. Geirrøðr, the student in this wisdom session, should, one feels, evoke architectures and templates comparable to those Óðinn uses in order to be able to store and process in his mind the knowledge he hears. In similar fashion, the congregation listening to the stave church homily should resort to the inner eye while listening to the priest to make sure what was heard could be organized and subsequently stored in and recollected from their minds. As Mary Carruthers has emphasized, such structures can generally be expected to have been shaped individually, yet to also have passed through the imaginations of many people (*ibid.*). However, Geirrøðr, who does not recognize that he is listening to his foster-father, is not receptive to the wisdom he hears and so transmission fails. Óðinn is aware of this problem and comments on Geirrøðr's lack of attention:

(52) Fjöld ek þér sagða,  
en þú fátt um mant, (*Eddukvæði*, 378)

(52) Much I told you but little you remember; (*The Poetic Edda*, 56)

His inability to absorb the knowledge he perceives aurally, to invoke imaginary architectures and templates, becomes crucial for Geirrøðr's situation: he cannot keep his kingship. Geirrøðr dies and the next generation, his son Agnarr, who, in contrast to his father, is alert, inherits the kingdom.

The poem touches on the importance of liquid knowledge (Quinn 2010) and memory-enhancing drink (Heslop 2014). It emphasizes the importance of the mouth, the tongue and the sense of taste for knowledge and memory, a widespread theme in Old Norse literature. On the one hand, *Grímnismál* interprets the intake of liquids as a trigger for thought and memory – Óðinn is offered a drink before his vision (st. 3). On the other hand, it points to the negative results of absorbing liquids, which may indicate a difference between a divine and a human act of drinking. Geirrøðr's drinking implies a deprivation of the senses and inattentiveness (st. 51), which becomes crucial for him: knowledge is gained via the senses and when the senses are disturbed, when the inner eyes are blinded, the consequence may be fatal. Another component of Óðinn's vision which underlines the poem's preoccupation with memory, or more specifically with recollection, is the reference to the two ravens, Huginn and Muninn. In the ravens' connection with Óðinn we see the most distinct vernacular expression

of the two collaborating resources of the mind, thought and memory (Mitchell forthcoming, with references):

(20) Huginn ok Muninn  
 fljúga hverjan dag  
 jörmungrund yfir;  
 óumk ek of Hugin  
 at hann aprt né komit,  
 þó sjámk meirr um Munin. (*Eddukvæði*, 372)

(20) Hugin and Munin fly every day  
 over the vast-stretching world;  
 I fear for Hugin that he will not come back,  
 yet I tremble more for Munin. (*The Poetic Edda*, 51)

This reference to Huginn and Muninn shows that Óðinn is aware of the risk of forgetting, or of losing his mind: Óðinn fears that Huginn (thought) will not come back, yet he is trembling because he also fears that Muninn (memory) will not return (Hermann 2014). His fear is expressed on two interrelated levels: fear of his own personal dementia and apprehension of his inability to handle the required arts of memory, which – with regards to his function as the god of wisdom – would be identical to amnesia at a cultural level. In *Grímnismál*, art of memory and cultural memory interact. The vision reveals Óðinn's memory; it lays open the devices of Óðinn's art of memory, i. e. topographies and templates. Moreover, Óðinn's vision is *about* the cultural memory that this god so passionately strives to preserve and transmit. Through Geirrøðr's inability to perceive, process, and remember the wisdom revealed to him through the invocation of mnemonic devices the poem reflects on the uncertainty of cultural memory. It raises the possibility that the arts that can secure long-term memory will not persist.

## Involuntary memory

The examples above deal with a type of memory that is deliberately activated and controlled: space and the sense of (inner) sight are brought together in systematic recollection. Another type of memory is relevant as well, namely involuntary memory. The example most widely used to illustrate involuntary memory and its connection to the senses is Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927). For the character in this novel, the taste of a Madeleine brings forth an overwhelming set of memories that had previously been unknown to him. These memories occur suddenly and in an unsystematic way and affect him tremendously. In this particular case, taste triggers memory, but all of the senses can potentially make an

otherwise latent memory manifest. An episode in *Njáls saga*, which has attracted the attention of many scholars (most recently e. g. Hamer 2014; Wolf 2014), illustrates the relationship between the senses (sight) and involuntary memory. It is the moment when Gunnarr realizes that he cannot leave Iceland:

Þeir ríða fram at Markarfljóti, þá drap hestr Gunnars foeti, ok stókk hann ór sððlinum. Honum varð litit upp til hliðarinnar ok bæjarins at Hlíðarenda ok mælti: ‘Fögr er hliðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfögr sýnzkt, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim aptr ok fara hvergi (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, 182)

They rode toward the Markarfljot river, and just then Gunnarr's horse slipped, and he sprang from the saddle. He happened to be facing the hillside and the farm at Hlidarendi, and he spoke: “So lovely is the hillside that it has never before seemed to me as lovely as now, with its pale fields and mown meadows; and I will ride back home, and not go anywhere at all”. (*Njal's Saga*, 86).

Because he will find himself in mortal danger if he stays, Gunnarr rides towards the coast to reach the ship that can take him away. However, when the horse slips Gunnarr turns around and stands facing the farm and the hillside. The sight of these places activates his memory, which is formed by his attachment to this specific place and based on past experiences in this place. His reaction is very emotional and he is deeply affected by the sight: the fields and meadows have never before looked so lovely to him. Precisely at this moment, the meadows and fields that constitute the space he crosses become a place to him, a place to which he feels emotionally attached, the *heim* to which he decides to return. Involuntary memories, triggered by senses, can bring to the mind both traumatic and nostalgic pasts. This particular situation describes a moment of nostalgia.

It appears then that the senses can raise and stir up unexpected and sudden emotions from the depths of memory, just as they can be evoked deliberately and used instrumentally in arts of memory. And – as suggested in *Gylfaginning's* frame story – they can create illusory memory-phantasms. Corresponding to the idea that the eye was considered one of the most privileged sensory organs, this article has been focussing mostly on vision, mainly in contexts where space is relevant for memory as well. However, the ranking of the senses which favors sight was contested and debated throughout the medieval period and beyond (Ong 1991; Synnott 1991). As hinted at above, Old Norse literature shows that the mouth as a body part, pointing to the sense of taste, is highly relevant for intellectual faculties of thought and memory.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> More thorough studies on the interplay between memory and the senses may reveal variations in the sense-hierarchy – and they may provide a better insight into the sensory dimension of Old Norse literature, see Glauser 2014, 6–7; cf. Classen 1997.

## Closing remarks

What do these reflections on points of intersection between memory and Old Norse literature imply? Do such contemplations about how memory functioned in the medieval period cast new light on Old Norse literature and do they illuminate some of its unexplored dimensions? Across genres, much of Old Norse literature is preoccupied with issues of memory, a perspective that corresponds to the proposition that the medieval Norse world had a strong and persistent cultural memory. More specifically, memory as a theme is incorporated in the literature, as the comments concerning *Gylfaginning* and *Grímnismál* demonstrated. The memory practices implied by persons in the narrated worlds indicate a concern with, and an interest in, this phenomenon in the environment that produced the narratives and poems. Moreover, the literature provides us with an insight into the arts of memory, such as the imaginary topographies and templates that were evoked as continuously new experiences and indebted to individual contexts by those who were in charge of preservation and transmission, and also by their audiences. Examinations of arts of memory are not only interesting from the perspective of preservation and transmission, but also from a literary perspective. In the *Art of Memory* (1966) Frances A. Yates suggested that the arts of memory and their imagery influenced visual art as well as literature (1974, 91). Yates' study dealt with Greco-Roman arts of memory, but her observation can and should be understood in the broadest sense possible. It points to the fact that methods and tools of memory did not only exist as a means of mental storage invisible to others except for the individuals who had trained and cultivated their memories, but it also affected the content, themes and structures of literature. This idea would to some extent explain the spatial and visual concerns in Old Norse literature. One implication of this finding is inseparable from the key question of what some of the texts actually represent. It points to the possibility that they represent phenomena of memory, recollection and reminding rather than historical realities or fiction. It is atypical that memory directly mirrors objective realities, even if they may be inspired by them. Reading these texts in the context of memory thus emphasizes that memory-dependent literature is likely to be highly creative and dynamic.

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