

Odin, Magic, and a Swedish Trial from 1484

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IF WE ARE TO BELIEVE any number of histories, spiritual life in medieval Scandinavia, and especially the conversion to Christianity, is readily summarized: paganism collapsed against Christian conversion efforts in dramatic fashion at a meeting of the Alþing, or when a missionary bore hot iron, or an exiled king had a deep religious experience, or when a pagan revolt was finally overcome, and so on.¹ Or at least that is how learned lore, now as then, has elected to present “the facts” of the Icelandic, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish experiences. Even the smartest and most subtle accounts of the period understandably want to provide their readers with fixed, clear dates, organized around monumental events and thus tend to identify dramatic moments after which the country should be viewed as fully Christian.

But as regards the conversion process and its aftermath, it is vital to keep in mind that the possible conversion of the head of the central authority in each of the emerging protonational polities did not necessarily mean much to the average man, woman, or child in those worlds who had grown up surrounded by entirely different customs, rituals, and semiotic systems. That is not to suggest that they would not soon think of themselves as good, devout Christians, but their habits and references to tradition surely evolved only over time, and not overnight. The constant reminders in the various sections of the law codes,

1. An earlier version of the paper was presented to the conference on “Myth and Memory” at Aarhus University in November 2008. I take this opportunity to thank the organizers and participants for their helpful comments and observations, both at that time and since, as well as Landsarkivet i Vadstena, Stockholms stadsarkiv, and Kungliga Gustav Adolfs Akademien for their help in making the research for this essay possible.

synodal statutes, and penitential handbooks about the need to address *hindrviðni*, *viðskjapilse*, *vantro*, *besvärilse*, and other aspects of lingering non-Christian behavior surely signal this fact. Presumably their many prohibitions were not all born of a supercilious and merely theoretical need to control but also reflected to some degree actual conditions within the various bishoprics.

The question of antiquarian “exceptionalism” is usually attached to Iceland. Thus, when we encounter, for example, an Icelandic charm formula recorded in the early modern era whose invocation of powers calls on an array of forces so vast as to include not only the Christian God, but also Odin, Thor, Frey, and Freyja, and even Satan and Beelzebub,² we react with great interest but not disbelief: we have been trained to regard Iceland as uniquely concerned with the past. But can we accept the possibility that other parts of the Nordic world, such as Sweden, might also have been a world where social memory held a special place—that is, that it too was an *Erinnerungskultur*, to use Jan Assmann’s much-cited phrase?³ In addressing these issues with respect to a particular constellation of late medieval Swedish data points, I employ Assmann’s idea of a “memory culture,”⁴ as well as a concept drawn from the dustbin of the history of ideas, something known as “the superorganic,” one of the boogeymen of modern folkloristics, but an image which may provide us with a useful tool for thinking of our topic here.⁵ Fundamentally, the concept of the superorganic was an

2. “i dinu Mechtigste Naffne Herre Gud Ande wercke[re] Oden Tor frelsere Freg Frege Oper Satan Belsebub” (Lindqvist 72) [in your mightiest name Lord God, Spirit, Fabricator, Odin, Thor, Savior, Freyr, Freyja, Oper, Satan, Beelzebub].

3. This view was by no means original with Assmann, but rather one that has long roots within the social sciences, going back to Emile Durkheim and extending from Frederic Bartlett to Maurice Halbwachs to Fredrik Barth; it holds that remembering is always social in that those semiotic systems with which we are inculcated by our interactions throughout life shape not only what, but how, we remember.

4. I note, however, that I differ sharply with Assmann as regards the amount of agency he accords the abstract notion of “culture,” rather than the individual actors who make it up.

5. The neologism, “superorganic,” was coined by British sociologist Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century, and came to be most frequently associated with the works of Alfred Kroeber (e.g., Kroeber, “The Superorganic”; Kroeber, “Social Psychology”). As the main supporters of the superorganic, Kroeber and his colleagues at the University of California, fellow anthropologist Robert Lowie and cultural geographer Carl O. Sauer, made Berkeley the *de facto* center of this school to such a degree that in the field of cultural geography, the superorganic is sometimes called “The Berkeley School.” Cf. Duncan.

attempt to give expression to the reality of “social life or culture,” the otherwise inarticulable feature of what it means to be human (Kroeber, “Social Psychology” 634).⁶ Thus, its adherents, such as Alfred Kroeber, set the “cultural society of man” against what he terms the “cultureless pseudo-society of the ants and bees” (“Social Psychology” 643).⁷

What Kroeber and his fellow enthusiasts looked to articulate was the difference between the behavior shaped in the animal world by pheromones and the behavior shaped in human society by tradition—that is, the cultural kit inherited by one generation from previous ones, which they tried to express with this idea of the superorganic.

Writing after years in which many disciplines interested in “deep culture” had followed this lead (and it is not difficult to see how such an idea dovetailed all too neatly with such approaches as the so-called Finnish Historical-Geographic School), often to the exclusion of other modes of thinking, one prominent folklorist summarized the frustration many felt with this image of folklore as “collectively shaped, traditional stuff that could wander around the map, fill up collections and archives, reflect culture, and so on” (Bauman 2). Instead, he writes, “my concern has been to go beyond a conception of oral literature as *disembodied superorganic stuff* and to view it contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social, and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning in the conduct of social life” (Bauman 2; emphasis added). I find myself in complete agreement with Bauman about the failings in the ways the concept of the superorganic had come to be used, and after several decades in which the concept has been abandoned (and even ridiculed) I am eager to integrate Bauman’s performance-oriented views with what may still remain useful about the idea of “the superorganic.”⁸ The following comments concerning

6. Here, Kroeber suggests as synonyms “the civilizational or superorganic or, better, superpsychic,” a concept that deals with “social psychology” and “culture history” as distinct from other disciplines such as natural history. See Kroeber, “Social Psychology” 634, 636, and Kroeber, “Order in Civilization” 263.

7. “That the social insects do not learn or acquire knowledge as groups; that they totally lack tradition; that substantially all their activities are inborn and determined by organic heredity, or depend on individual psychic experience acting upon hereditary faculty; in short, that they totally lack any body of ‘superorganic products’ that is carried along from individual to individual and from group to group independent of the nature of these individuals and groups” (Kroeber, “Social Psychology” 643).

8. I have also addressed this question in Mitchell, “DGF 526,” and Mitchell, “Transvection and the Calumniated Wife.”

the apparent continuity of certain Odinic traits in Swedish popular and learned tradition thus argue that there may be more in common between an intelligent interpretation of the superorganic (i.e. along the lines suggested by Bauman's comments) and the idea of social memory within an *Erinnerungskultur* than most contemporary ethnographers and folklorists have been inclined to acknowledge.

THE DATA

1484 was an influential year in the history of European witchcraft, for it was in this year that Pope Innocent VIII issued the papal bull called *Summis desiderantes*, a text that was to become famous to posterity when it was subsequently incorporated as the preface to the witch-hunting handbook, *Malleus maleficarum* (see Institoris and Sprenger). The pope's defense and endorsement of his German inquisitors, for such was the nature of *Summis desiderantes*, has been interpreted in a variety of ways but certainly one undebateable conclusion to draw from it is that the proclamation signals an increased concern about witchcraft and other diabolical activities in northern Europe. It is thus in keeping with a growing transnational concern about commerce with the devil, that in that same year, 1484, a trial for theft and apostasy took place in Stockholm. The entry reads as follows:

Jn profesto beatorum apostolorum Symonis et Jude tha kendes Ragvald Odinskarl, ath han stuleth tesse kirkioner: fförst Skiäptvna kirkio tva resar ok sidan Invaria tesse kirkione ena resa: Markim, Orkasta ok Walentvna. Thermeth kendes han och, ath han hade tänth Odhanom j vij (7) aar ok ath Joan Land hade warith meth honom j raadh oc daath ok sälskap, tha forscripna kirkior staaos. (Almquist, Hildebrand, et al., II: 66–7)

(27 October, Ragvald Odinskarl confessed that he had pilfered these churches: first, Skepptuna church twice and then these churches once: Markim, Orkesta and Vallentuna. Moreover, he confessed that he had served Odin for seven years and that Joan Land had been his accomplice in the planning and commission of the acts, when the aforementioned churches had been robbed.)

Posterity bequeaths to us no more details of what happens to Ragvald but the fate of his companion, Joan Landh, is mirrored in the pages of the *tänkeböcker* for some months more. On 7 March, the following entry appears:

Joan Landh

Eodem die sporde fogodin Benct Karlsson j borgamestarenes och radzsins nerwaro tesse eptescriffne gode men till: fforst Nic. Helsing j Bergby, Eric Olsson j Wkklesta, Olaff Nilsson j Kinsta, Olaff Person j Wkklesta, Pedher Siggasson j Löghammar, Mattis j Saxta, Nic. j Hwsaby, Pedher Eriksson j Tadhem, Laurens j Öresta, Haquon j Lundby, Joan j Lingh, Hanis j Husaby, Laurens j Wiffwelsöo en tüdh, axnan tüdh, tridie tüdh til, om än the vildo wäria Joan Land ellir fällan fore timffnadin, ath han ecke war j raadh, daath ellir sälskap ath stüala Walentwna, Orkosta, Markkieme och Skiäptwna kirkior meth Raguald Odinskarll. Tha swarade the alle forscripne oc huardere besymerliga for sik, athe engalunda wilia ellir kunnna wäria forscripna Joan Land fore the sakiene. (Almquist, Hildebrand, et al. II: 79)

(On the same day, the sheriff, Benct Karlsson, asked in the presence of the mayor and the council the following good men: first Nic. Helsing of Bergby, Eric Olsson of Äckelsta, Olaff Nilsson of Kimsta, Olaff Person of Äckelsta, Pedher Eriksson of Lövhavra, Mattis of Saxta, Nic. of Husby, Pedher Eriksson of Tadem, Laurens of Öresta, Haquon of Lundby, Joan of Ling, Hanis of Husby, Laurens of Vivelsta once,⁹ twice and yet a third time, if they would defend Joan Land or the case [against him] for theft, that he had not been an accomplice in the planning and commission of the pilfering of Vallentuna, Orkesta, Markim and Skepptuna churches with Raguald Odinskarll. Then all the aforementioned answered, each specifically for himself, that none of them desired to or could defend the aforementioned Joan Land against the charges.)

A week later, on 14 March 1485, the records ominously state:

Joan Land

Eodem die badh Joan Land ffogodin Benct Karlsson, borgamestarene ok radet, athe skulda wnna honom, thet han motte worde bödell. (Almquist, Hildebrand, et al. II: 81)

(On the same day, Joan Land asked of the sheriff, Benct Karlsson, the mayor and the council, to grant him mercy although he was [instead] to be executed.)

Church thefts were among the most serious crimes known to late medieval society and are frequently mentioned as especially dread-

9. These men thus overwhelmingly come from the areas where the thefts are said to have occurred. The towns represented in the list break down as follows: from Skepptuna socken: Ling, Lövhavra, and Äckelsta; from Skånela socken: Kimsta and Tadem; and from Markim socken: Bergby, Husby, Lundby, Saxta, Vivelsta, and Öresta.

ful in various normative documents. An illuminating example of this concern is the Danish case in 1471 of a man (Iver), who is tried for the crime and is said to have pulled out a hoarded communion wafer at his trial, apparently in the hope that the ritual of eating it publicly would help him, a belief that failed him utterly, as not only was he burned at the stake, but his hands were cut off first.¹⁰ Indeed, the Ragvald case might be regarded as more or less mundane if it were not for the curious mention of the Old Norse deity, Odin, at the trial. What are we to make of this point?

Previous scholarship has quickly dismissed this reference to Odin with the explanation that it is a sort of “loan shift”; that is, that what is “really” being referred to here is the satanic figure constructed by late medieval Christianity, whose image so often adorns the walls of Swedish churches, especially well-illustrated in Uppland, but outfitted now with the name of the native deity who had supposedly not figured in Nordic spiritual life for centuries.¹¹ Certainly this view is plausible: after all, there are other court cases in late fifteenth-century Sweden where diabolism would appear to be the most obvious answer (e.g., the trial of Jenis forköpare in 1478).¹² Let us accept, at least momentarily, this “diabolical” explanation and imagine what it tells us, bearing in mind that the entry is brief and should not be overtaxed by our fantasies.

There are some things about the entry that everyone can agree on, principally, of course, the fact that to some people in late medieval Stockholm the name “Odin” obviously meant something. This point is not as trivial as it may sound. First of all, let us take stock of the fact that we

10. Pontoppidan II: 653–4.

11. E.g., Brilioth who writes, “Vi höra också om människor, som uppsagt den korsfäste tro och lydnad och i stället givit sig i djävulens tjänst; mörkrets furste uppträder då under Odins namn, ett tecken på att den äldre medeltidens föreställning om de gamle gudarna som demoner ej helt utdött. Så berättas det om en kyrkotjuv Ragvald Odinskarl” (779) [We also hear of individuals who abandon Christian belief and instead give themselves over to the service of the devil; the prince of darkness appears under Odin’s name, an indication that the older medieval conception of the old gods as demons had not completely died out. Thus it is told about the church-thief Ragvald Odinskarl].

12. “Jenis forköpare. Eodem die vitnade Laurens tymberman, ath han hörde, thet Jenis forköpare sagde til eth beläte, crucifixum malath vppa ena taffla, som hängde vppa väggenä: jach haffuer länge tiänth tik, nw affsigx jak tik och tagher tienisth aff fänddonom” (Almqvist, Hildebrand, et al. 148) [Jenis the trader. On the same day, Laurens the carpenter testified that he heard what Jenis the trader said to an image, a crucifix painted up on a picture, which hung up on the wall: I have long served you, now I renounce you and serve the devil].

are not dealing with some hamlet in a remote mountain valley where the rule of “preservation on the periphery” might apply. This is late fifteenth-century Stockholm, Sweden’s urbane, cosmopolitan center of trade and politics, a place with extensive foreign contacts. And, importantly, it is a city with a significant ecclesiastical center developing on Riddarholm. It was there in the previous year (1483), for example, that Johan Schnell’s press in the Franciscan cloister (*gråmunkeholmens kloster*) produced the first printed book in Sweden: *Dyalogus creaturarum optime moralizatus*. Estimates about the demographics of the city underscore this point, putting the city’s population in the later Middle Ages to between 6,000 and 10,000 inhabitants (Schück 142). Working within the highest reaches of the city’s judicial system, members of the cultural elite actively invested meaning in the idea that this thief “had served” [hade tjänth] Odin. Mindful of Diane Purkiss’s work on seventeenth-century English court trials and the degree to which in her view we see in witchcraft confessions a dialogue, a sort of negotiated text, or extemporized performance, based on shared ideologies and a shared language of witchcraft between accused and accuser, “discourses which encoded a body of knowledge of witchcraft and bewitchment,” (Purkiss 74–5), we should consider the implications of her argument for our understanding of this trial in seeing it as a communication event. What would it have meant for someone in fifteenth-century Stockholm to say that he worshipped Odin? How would this information have been understood? Was Odin-as-cipher-for-the-devil actually widespread in fifteenth-century Sweden? If, indeed, substituting the name of the pagan god for the Christian devil was well-known, the implications for us are great. And if it was not, then why does the scribe use it? Why not simply record whatever term was “actually” used in the confession, and just write the devil or Satan or *hin onde* or the like? Surely such names were better known at that time than the name of a pagan god long since abandoned. So, why an accusation about Odin at the close of the Middle Ages?

Of course, one possibility to be weighed is that we simply have it all wrong, that is, that there is no connection between the name of this man and the Nordic god. Something along these lines is argued by John Koussgård Sørensen, who notes in convincing fashion that all other Nordic names ending in *-kar* have clear and understandable adjectival meanings. Starting with this fact, he suggests that the name originally may have been an adjective, **ōthinkār*, meaning “har tilbøjelig for raseri, galskab” (Sørensen 116) [inclined to rage or madness]. In other

words, although he accepts that the ultimate etymon of the name may be the same Germanic root from which Odin's name derives, he does not believe that the god really has had anything to do with the name. His argument is convincing, yet we should note that Sørensen is focused on a diachronic philological process, the development of a name over time. We, on the other hand, are not concerned with the history of the name as a component of historical anthroponymics but rather as part of a system of signs in late medieval Sweden, in other words, how the name was understood and used by speakers in the fifteenth century.

Synchronically then—that is, in our cultural moment, the late 1400s—we must understand the name as being unambiguously interpreted as that of someone who worshipped, or was somehow subject to, Odin. First of all, we have the testimony of the statement that this Ragvald has served Odin for seven years, to which I shall return shortly. Secondly, the form of the name we have is not *Óðinkárr*, *Oðhenkarl*, or the like, but quite clearly a form using the genitive, Odin-s-karl. This form may even be a neologism, reverse engineered, as it were, from familiarity with the more traditional name with which Sørensen is concerned. The folk-etymology which has apparently changed the ending to *-karl* “man,” and so on is not unique here and has parallels from as far back as the eleventh century,¹³ but no other example shows the genitive

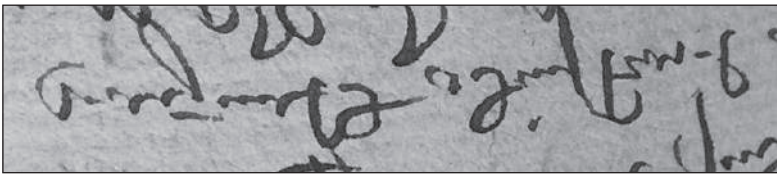


Figure 1. “Ragvald Odinskarl,” Stockholm stadsarkiv, Tänkeböcker series, volume 3: 1484–1488, page 38

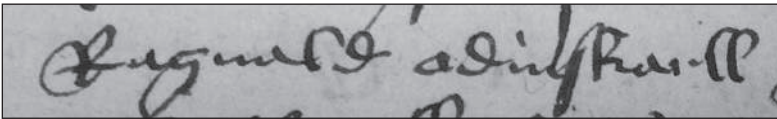


Figure 2. “Ragvald Odinskarll,” Stockholm stadsarkiv, Tänkeböcker series, volume 3: 1484–1488, page 58

13. Cf. Knudsen, Kristensen and Hornby: “En meget gammel Sideform er *Othinkarl* der forkommer paa Mønter fra 11. Aarh. og i Domesday Book 1085...” (II: 1056–57) [A very old parallel form is *Othinkarl* which is attested on coins from the eleventh century and in the Domesday Book 1085].

form of Odin's name. There can be little doubt that even if the form intended by the actors whose words and thoughts have been captured by the medieval scribes, that is, even if the form from which our name historically derives, was indeed *Odhenkarl* or the like, the name has been reinterpreted, i.e. folk-etymologized to *Odinskarl* (also *Odinskarll*), in such a way as to assert positively a relation to the god. In other words, our document evinces an active and meaningful knowledge of some sort of the god Odin in fifteenth-century Sweden. Underscoring this point and providing further evidence for it, is the curious, and for us, very significant, existence of a third reference to Ragvald: in the margin of the original 1484 case, someone has written *Rag* (i.e., Rag[uald]), under which a different hand has written *Odens Ragwal*.

I think this seemingly casual little bit of marginalia really proves the point: whatever one may think of the question of *Odinskarl* versus *Odhenkarl*, it is clear that “*Odens Ragwal*” has nothing at all to do with

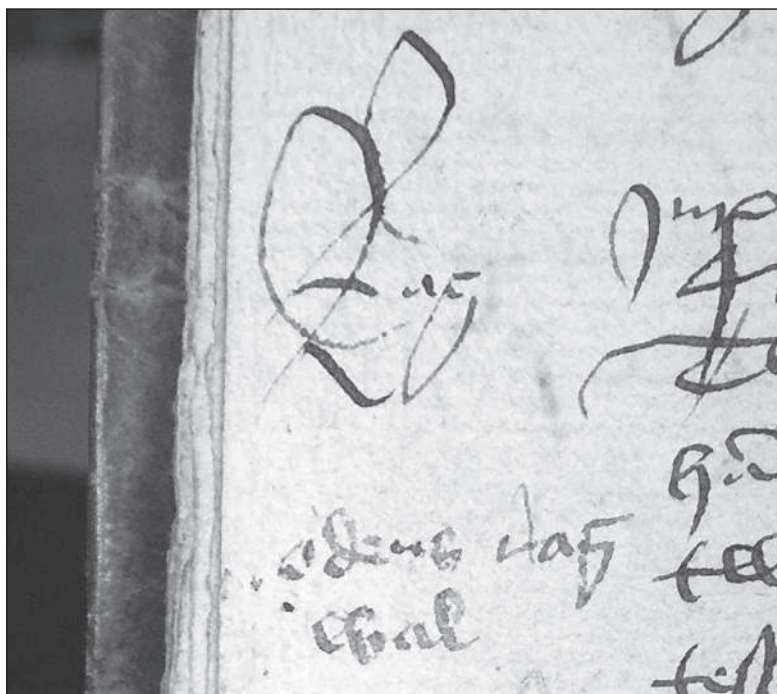


Figure 3. “I margen: Rag[uald]; därunder har senare av en annan hand tillskrivits: *Odens Ragwal*,” Almquist, Hildebrand, et al. II: 67.

the *Öðinkärr* name complex.¹⁴ All three of these name forms point in the same direction: some residents of late fifteenth-century Stockholm knew enough about Odin not only to name him in the context of a trial concerned mainly with church theft, but also to articulate his name in meaningful and new ways. *Odinskarl* and *Odens Ragwal* have little to do with *anthroponymica suecana* as we normally understand the term. Something else is going on.¹⁵

Importantly, the case of Ragvald Odinskarl is not an isolated one: eight years later, another man comes before the Stockholm authorities with what appear to be similar crimes and a similar connection to the old heathen god. On 13 June 1492, Erick Claousson is sentenced to burn at the stake for apostasy, where again the accusation holds that it is Odin who is being worshipped:

Som brendes.

Samma dach j war herre oc hoffuitzmans nerwaren Erick Claousson, Hans Perssons tienere j Wermdoo, födder j Wendelle sokn, widerkendes, ath han hade Gudj widersacht ok allt hans helga selscap jx reser om jx torsdaga afttana om kirkiagarden ansylis ok widerthagit dyeffuolen Oden fore peninga schull. Ffrämdehis kendis han haffue stolit sin egen hosbonde aff och vndandolt bade peninga och solffen en godh deel, som han hade vpboxit aff hans landboor och vndandolde, fföre huilkenne zacher han wort dömpder til eldhen for then högxta zachen, som han Gudj ok war schapere gjorde j moth och sina saliga siel. Och the andra twa zacher fördrogæ hanom til pynan, som war hiwilit och repith, pie memorie. (Almquist, Hildebrand, et al. 3: 18)

(Burned

The same day in the presence of our master and commander stood Erick Claousson, Hans Persson's servant from Värmdö, born in Vendel parish, and took back [his confession] that he had renounced God and all his holy company [on] 9 trips on 9 Thursday evenings, [going] withershins in the cemetery, and surrendered himself to the devil Odin for the sake of money.¹⁶ Further he admitted that he had stolen and concealed from

14. One may also certainly wonder, why there is a second hand at all? Why was it necessary for someone to specify *Odens Ragwald*?

15. Typically, one might expect additional factors to be at work in heightening tensions. Cf. *Vadstena klostets minnesbok* for 1484 on this point, which records that in that year plague devastated Stockholm.

16. Cf. the case of hustrv Birgitte halta Martens who admits that she has walked withershins around a cemetery three times (“... jach haffuer iij resar gangit ansylis om kirkiogarden,...” [Almquist, Hildebrand, et al. 333]) [I have three times gone withershins around the churchyard]. It should be noted that the supplement to Söderwall specifically cites the use of *widerthagit* here and glosses it with “underkasta sig, överlämna sig åt (ngn)” (Söderwall and Ljunggren [Suppl.] 1059) [submit, surrender oneself to (someone)].

his own master both money and a good amount of silver, which he had had conveyed by his tenants and hidden. For these reasons, he was condemned to the fire—the greatest reason being that he sinned against our Lord and Creator and his [own] eternal soul. And the other two things condemned him to torture, which were the wheel and the rope [i.e. hanging]. *Pie memorie.*)

Naturally, we should be reluctant to draw any hasty conclusions from this curiously similar instance of Odin worship in the same region at about the same time. As, for example, Ólína Þorvarðardóttir has shown in the case of Magnús Björnsson (103–4 *et passim*), or as the case of Matthew Hopkins in Essex famously demonstrates, a solitary firebrand demonologist-witchhunter can single-handedly stir up a lot of trouble and significantly cloud small data sets.¹⁷ Moreover, it is certainly not outside the realm of possibility that what we see in these two trials is the assertion, or re-assertion, of elite understandings of pre-Christian gods. A survey of the materials suggests that Odin is typically referred to in Old Swedish texts in one of two ways: as the (often-Euhemerized) god worshipped by pagan Swedes and, frequently in combination with this point, as the explanation for the name of the weekday. Typical of the first type, for example, “Sankt Philips saga” (part of *Fornsvenska legendariet* in Codex Bureanus) records,

Philippus predicape tiughu ar .i. sithia. som nu callar suerike. fra ostarlandom ok tel orasund ¶ heþne gripu han vm sibe ok drogbo tel monstar .i. opsalom. ok cuskabo han tel at ofra marti som sueiar calla open. (Stephens and Dahlgren I: 199)

(Philippus preached for twenty years i “sithia” which is now called Sweden, from the eastern lands to Öresund. The heathens captured him at last and took him to the temple in Uppsala and coerced him into making sacrifices to Mars, whom the Swedes call Odin.)

Nor was it lost on medieval Swedish writers that the names of certain weekdays—Wednesday and Thursday in particular—were a legacy of their pre-Christian religion. Thus, the translator-author of the same Old Swedish legendary points out that the names of the days still in

17. On the fifteenth-century inquisitors for Dacia, essentially the entire Nordic region, see Bandlien and Knutsen, and for the inquisitor during the 1480s and 1490s, Knut Jönsson, see also Collijn.

use in Sweden are those called after pagan gods like Odin and Thor.¹⁸ A fourteenth-century Swedish exegete also exhibits profound familiarity with this thinking, when he analyzes the names of the weekdays against the background of the Roman Pantheon and such secondary sources as the planets, writing about the naming of Wednesday,

Fempta dagh kalladho hedlme romara diem mercurij/ oc ware fedber odhinsdagb/ aff enom hedhnom konunge oc het odhin/ thy at the dyrkadho han fore gudh/ thy at han war waldoghaster herrra i landom i gambлом ewom.
(Klemming, *Svenska medeltidens Bibel-arbeten* I: 68)

(The fifth day the heathen Romans called *diem mercurii* and our forefathers [called it] Odin's day after a heathen king called Odin because they worshipped him as a god as he was the most powerful noble in the land in ancient times.)

Nor did this view flag as time passed, as the mid-fifteenth-century *Pro-saiska krönikan* repeats all of these perspectives (Klemming, *Småstycken på fornsvenska* 219–40), as did scholars into the early modern period, such as Olavus Petri (Petri II).

That medieval Swedish clerical culture deeply feared human traffic with such diabolical and demonic figures as Odin goes without saying—all European traditions did—and the ecclesiastical literature of the Swedish fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is peppered with warning examples of such interactions, everything from canonization documents to sermons to moralizing parables like those in *Sielinna throst*.¹⁹ Often these didactic materials belong to the church's international collection of edifying literature, but there are also synodal statutes and penitentials that perhaps suggest a closer connection with local tradition, as we shall explore momentarily. But if to some extent we are able to track Odin's post-conversion Odyssey within, and as expressed by, Sweden's elite clerical sub-culture, what can we say about how his image was retained

18. "Sua som manghe andre daghar som æn haua namn af heþnom afgubum ok þo cristna dyrkt som opens daghar ok þors daghar ..." (Stephens and Dahlgren I: 61) [Thus with many other days which still bear the names of heathen gods despite Christian worship like Odin's day (i.e., Wednesday) and Thor's day (i.e., Thursday)].

19. E.g., Lundén 178–81; Henning 226–7. Late medieval Swedish texts, such as the Linköping statutes and the Skara penitential, routinely condemn those who invoke demons (...et quosunque demones invocantes...; Demones inuocans pro futuris vel quocumquemodo). See Gummerus XVI, and Reuter Dahl 81.

in the broader world? Here we are especially prey to the whims of an uneven fate as regards what has been observed, produced, and preserved, but we do have an example from medieval Norway (N B241) which sheds important light on our situation.

This runestick is an extraordinary example of charm magic in the late fourteenth century, in this instance looking to discover the name of a thief. The text also demonstrates that a pagan god could continue to have vitality but in a new setting, as the carver-sorcerer invokes not Christian powers in the first instance, but Odin (*ek særi þik, Óðinn*).²⁰ On the other hand, the broader Christian cultural framework is apparent when the text calls the old god “the greatest among devils” (*mestr fjánda*) and invokes Christianity as part of the charm as well (*fyr kristni*). The full text, it has been suggested, reads, “I invoke you, Óðinn, with (heathenism), the greatest among devils. Agree to it. Tell me the name of the man who stole. For Christianity. Tell me now (your) evil deed. One I scorn, (the second) I scorn. Tell me, Óðinn. Now (multitudes of devils?) are called forth with all (heathenism). You shall now acquire/raise for me the name of the one who stole. (Amen).”²¹

Readily noticeable, of course, is the degree to which this charm shows a complete disregard for religious orthodoxy, mixing together concepts and deities drawn from both paganism and Christianity. In its so-called designation of adjuvant powers,²² the Icelandic “fart charm” noted earlier likewise invokes a host of powerful spirits, Judeo-Christian, learned, pagan and so on, at its conclusion. Although not so extensive, the Bergen charm displays a similar disposition toward eclecticism. That this is so should neither surprise nor perturb us: just as in the case of New World syncretic faiths like Santaria and Vodoun, religions based on West African traditions of Orisha worship with heavy doses

20. This and other uses of the pagan gods in runic inscriptions from Bergen are addressed in Knirk.

21. “Jeg maner deg, Odin, med (hedendom), den største blant djevlene. Gå med på det. Si meg navnet til den mann som stjal. For kristendom. Si meg nå (din) udåd. Ett håner jeg, (det andre) håner jeg. Si meg, Odin! Nå er (mengder av djevler?) manet fram med all (hedendom). Du skal nå skaffe/odde meg navnet til den som stjal. (Amen.)” (Elmevik and Peterson 1993–).

22. I borrow this phrase from Edina Bozóky’s “nomination des puissances adjuvantes” (38).

of Catholicism and other forms of Christianity mixed in, nothing so much matters as the concept of power and tapping into that power. How do these non-Swedish Nordic charms and diasporic African religions inform our views about our late fifteenth-century trials?

In the case of the Swedish trials of 1484 and 1492, it is possible, of course, that the perspective of the authorities reflected in the *tänkeböcker* is nothing more than the ecclesiastical view that he is the chief of devils (cf. Lassen) but to those at the other end of the power structure, the poor, the miserable, the avaricious, while Odin may obviously be conceived as a chief of devils (cf. *mestr fjända*), he was *also* understood as a potential source of power, and thus, of wealth and other forms of happiness. Certainly, it is unlikely that there would have existed some sort of secret heathen cult group that gathered together to worship Odin on Thursday nights in late fifteenth-century Sweden, but what does seem entirely plausible, indeed, likely even, is that Odin continued to be regarded as an important potential source of power within Nordic traditions of charm magic, a force to be called upon in certain circumstances.

What further evidence exists for such a claim of continuity and social memory in Swedish tradition? In addition to the materials already adduced, we can, in fact, track a continued Odinic presence in Swedish folk traditions over many centuries.²³ Early collections of Swedish oral traditions, as imperfect as some of them may be by modern standards, demonstrate that Odin continued to be named in a variety of well-documented practices and beliefs in relatively modern times.²⁴ Some of these beliefs have to do with agricultural practices, such as the famous *julkärve* “Christmas sheaf,” but a number of them significantly involve wealth, both its loss and its acquisition.

Important testimony to the belief that Odin controls affluence was recorded within a half century of our court cases by Olavus Petri

23. E.g., as when he is called on in the ballad, “Stolt Herr Alf,” recorded in two seventeenth-century manuscripts (1679–81), with the words, “Hielp nu Oden Asagrim” [help now Odin Asagrim (leader of the Æsir?)] (Arwidsson I: 11). On the complex background of “Stolt Herr Alf,” and the literature related to it, see Mitchell, “Scandinavian Balladry.”

24. The case for Odin in modern folklore has been made in, for example, Celandier, “Julkärve och Odinskult” (see, however, the generally negative assessment in de Vries, *Contributions to the Study of Orbin*), and much material was published in nineteenth-century collections, the best-known of which is surely Hyltén-Cavallius, whose book was originally published in 1864.

in “En Swensk Cröneka,” a text usually dated to the late 1530s. After noting that Odin was a great sorcerer held to be a god and that he was worshipped in the belief that he would help them in war, Olavus writes, “Men lijkare är thet at the haffua dyrkat honom för rijkedomar skul, at the skulle få godz och peninga noogh, Och ther aff pläghar man än nw seya, *at the tiena Odhenom, som monga peningar och rijkedomar sammanslagga*” (Petri IV:11, emphasis added) [But it is more probable that they worshipped him for the sake of riches, that they should gain wealth and money, and that’s why people still say *that they serve Odin who amass a lot of money and riches*]. In addition to its relative antiquity, of course, this comment is also striking both because of the idea that Odin exercises influence over wealth (and may therefore be appealed to for it) *and* because of the phrase *tiena Odhenom* “serve Odin,” the same term used in the trial of Ragvald Odenskarl, who is said to have *tiänth Odhanom* “served Odin” for seven years, in addition to having stolen from a number of churches. Adding weight to this idea, in the case of Erick Claesson, the record specifically states that he has forsaken Christianity and surrendered himself to “the devil Odin *for the sake of money*” [fore *peninga* schull], language that is echoed in Olavus’s comment that Odin was worshipped *för rijkedomar skul* “for the sake of riches,” that is, in order to acquire wealth.

We see something of what those activities might have been like in a court case from Småland a century later (1632), in which a man named Jöns is advised to give himself up to Odin (*giff tigh Odhan i våldh*) in order to acquire wealth.²⁵ To do this, he is told to go to a cross-roads on a Thursday night, surrender himself to Odin or the devil (*Om en Torsdagz affton giffwa tigh Odhan eller Fanen i våldh*), and cry out three times, after which Odin would come out and give him money. Jöns does not follow this advice himself, but is willing to pass it along to another man, Christman i Svenhult, who is told to go to a crossroads and cry out, “Odin come, Odin come, Odin

25. The case—which actually involves a third party who had in turn been instructed by Jöns—was heard on 6 February 1632 in the Uppvidinge district (Kronobergs län). See Uppvidinge häradsrätts arkiv A Ia, Domböcker och protokoll vid ordinarie ting, volym 2; cited in Hyltén-Cavallius I: 218–9. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Claes Westling, Landsarkivet i Vadstena, for his helpfulness in providing me with copies of these documents.

come, and give me money. I want to serve you” (*Ode kom, Ode kom, Ode kom, och gif migh Pengar, Jagh will sättia tigh Tiänst*). Christman tries this once, but on the second occasion falls so ill that he cannot continue. The location of the charm to a crossroads differs from the fifteenth-century court cases but remains very much in line with northern traditions involving magic and the Otherworld. The other elements, on the other hand, seem largely in line with what we might expect given the testimony of the trials.

A very similar set of beliefs, perhaps even closer in some ways to the fifteenth-century trials, is reflected in Petter Rudebeck’s lengthy description from 1693, again from Småland,²⁶ of how those want to become wealthy invite Odin as a guest (“den som ville bliva rik bjöd offentligt Oden till gäst..”), and that he always comes on Thursday nights, every *ninth* Thursday night, *as is said*.²⁷ Rudebeck’s specification that belief in Odin’s ability to assist in providing riches is one that is widely held (“som sagt er”) underscores the popular nature of the superstition, which he further supports by pointing out that Odin makes such visits even today, and that there exist fantastically rich farmers in the area—he mentions three by name—who have been thus

26. Petter Rudebeck’s *Forna Rijdghiöta eller Smäländske Antiquiteter med dess Tillhörige Kopparstycken och alle der hoos passerade Historier utur mörkret Upsökte igenfundne afritade och Sammanskrefne aff Petter Rudebeck Anno 1693* is one of the more remarkable documents of the Swedish seventeenth century, given some of its ideas, such as the location of Troy to Småland, but his ethnographic and folkloric observations and reports have been widely used for more than a century (e.g., Hyltén-Cavallius). Rudbeck’s obvious familiarity with, and interest in, the newly rediscovered Icelandic materials—witness his knowledge of the eddas, for example—complicates his testimony. When, for example, he begins this section of his work by describing the important special relationship between Odin and the fortunes and worldly desires of men—“...allt vad man sig till lycka och medgång här i världen önska ville..” (Liljenroth and Liljenroth 294) [everything one might wish for with respect to fortune and prosperity in this world]—it is difficult to know whether such a view is only what Rudbeck infers from the medieval materials, his stated frame of reference, or also subsumes in some degree the living traditions to which he subsequently addresses himself.

27. “Oden kom, som sagt är, alltid om torsdagsnatten farandes och gästade hos sådana bönder, som sedan, av hans penningar uppfylta, kallades rika. Och som han hade många att gästa, kunde han intet oftare komma till var av sina värdar, än var nionde torsdagsnatt...” (Liljenroth and Liljenroth 294) [Odin came, as is said, travelling always on Thursday nights and stayed with such farmers, who subsequently, possessed of his monies, were called rich. And as he had so many to visit, he could not come more often to each of his hosts than every ninth Thursday night].

diabolically supplied with largess.²⁸ But such is the transitory nature of assistance of this sort that all three now wander from farm to farm begging. This late seventeenth-century presentation of the belief system so obviously connected to our fifteenth-century trials has accreted a number of elements connected elsewhere with diabolical traditions and paganism, such as association with the color black. Odin is said to arrive with a vanguard of two big black dogs and two, sometimes only one, large servants on black horses, himself in a large coach drawn by black horses, all with eyes that burned like fire. Also apparent is the association with the motif of “The Wild Hunt” (E501 *die wilde Jagd*),²⁹ as the procession occasionally leaves the road, travelling over stones, mountains and valleys, rattling the coach as if thunder rumbled (“... så att vagnen skallrade, som hade nästan tordön kört”), so fast indeed that horseshoes are periodically thrown which can be seen later in the landscape.³⁰ The emphasis on trafficking with Odin on Thursday nights, specifically, a ninth Thursday night, in the interest of gaining riches is, of course, precisely what Erick Claesson is accused of in 1492, and it is difficult to escape the impression that this temporal stricture was an important component of the charm magic associated with Odin.

A story recorded in the 1980s in Vist parish in Östergötland demonstrates the continuity of certain elements of our materials within Swedish folk tradition, underscoring at the same time how they are transformed and kept modern. The story, recorded by a man born in 1926, tells of an early nineteenth-century crofter from the area who was an avid hunter. Meeting with little success, he contacted a practi-

28. “Således gästar han än i dag...” (Liljenroth and Liljenroth 295) [Thus he visits still today].

29. Historically, the association between the so-called “Wild Hunt” and Odin has been problematic (e.g., Höfler), and often rejected (e.g., de Vries, “Wodan und die Wilde Jagd”). An enduring study of this tale type, especially in the context of specifically Scandinavian evidence, is Celander, “Oskoreien och besläktade föreställningar.”

30. Rudbeck closes this account by saying that to those who claim to have looked through keyholes and seen Odin he appears like something straight from one of the more graphic church murals in Sweden, a figure with horns that stretch up to the roof and a tongue hanging down to his chest, whereas those entertaining him see only a big, thick, corpulent back-clad man. Hyltén-Cavallius is most surely correct when he writes shortly after noting this case, “I hela denna folktro blanda sig, på ett vidunderligt sätt, äldre hedniska föreställningar med yngre idéer och sedvänjor ur medeltiden och den nyare tiden” (220) [Throughout all this folk belief, older heathen concepts are mingled, in a fantastic manner, with younger ideas and customs from the Middle Ages and more modern times].

tioner of the black arts who recommended that the man should make a contract with the devil in order to improve his luck in hunting. Thus far, this story follows a pattern well-known in Sweden since at least the thirteenth century from the legend of Theophilus and the *pactum cum diabolo* (see Mitchell, “Pactum cum diabolo”), but it is the advice she then gives which attracts our attention: in order to make the right contact, *the man should should go to the church on seven Thursdays in a row and go withershins around it*. According to the story, on the seventh night, the man loses his soul, but in exchange becomes a successful hunter.³¹ Much has changed in the 500 years between the fifteenth-century trials in Stockholm and this modern tale, including all mention of an association with the pagan god Odin,³² but the nub of the cases—going on successive Thursday nights to a church and walking withshins around

31. The story, “Torpare Franssons levnadsöde,” posted at the website for Wist hembygdsförening remarks: “Det fanns i början av 1800 talet en torpare vid Stavsborg, ett torp tillhörande Stavsäter, han hette Fransson. Den här mannen var en ivrig jägare. Emellertid så ville inte den där riktiga jaktlyckan följa med på hans turer till skogen, så köttgrytorna stod för det mesta tomma. Fransson kontaktade då en ‘svartkonstkäring’ för att få bot för detta. Käringen rekommenderade Fransson att ett kontrakt med djävulen vore den bästa åtgärden för att förbättra jaktlyckan. Om Fransson sju torsdagar i följd, på natten, gick ner till kyrkan och där gick ett varv runt kyrkan, motsols, så skulle han få den rätta kontakten. Enligt legenden så behövde han inte gå den långa vägen fram till kyrkan mer än sex gånger. Den sjunde natten lär han ha mött ‘hornper’ vid Spökstenen eller möjligen vid Filbacken. Fransson lät sin själ för tappas vid det här mötet, i stället blev han en framgångsrik jägare” (Sjöberth) [At the beginning of the 1800s, there was a crofter at Stavsborg, a croft belonging to Stavsäter, named Fransson. This man was a keen hunter. However he didn’t have much hunting luck in his trips to the forest, so the stewpots mostly stood empty. Fransson contacted a crone familiar with the “black arts” to get a cure for it. If Fransson, seven Thursdays in a row, at night, went down to the church and there went around the church, withershins, then he would make the right contact. According to the legend, he did not need to make the long trip to the church more than six times. On the seventh night he met “Old Nick” at Spökstenen (literally “the ghost stone”) or possibly at Filbacken. Fransson allowed his soul to be lost at this meeting, (and) in exchange he became a successful hunter]. The tale concludes with a warning to avoid strangers at these locations, especially if he has a tail.

32. Cf. Hyltén-Cavallius: “Samma föreställnings-sätt, om Oden såsom gifvare af rikedom, har i Wärend varit gängse ifrån äldsta tider, om det än i den yngre foktron alltmera öfverföres på djefvulen eller Satan, med hvilken personer i sednare tid gjort pakt och lofvat honom tjenst, för att vinna penningar och rikedom” (I: 218) [The same way of looking at things, of Odin as a provider of riches, has been current in Wärend from the earliest times, albeit in more recent folk belief, (the belief) is increasingly transferred to the devil or Satan, with whom persons in more recent times have made pacts and promised service in order to win money and riches].

it—is entirely paralleled by the contemporary oral tradition, a pattern that can be traced in virtually every century that separates them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

These examples provide a compelling interpretive framework for understanding our late fifteenth-century trials. And they suggest that we see the materials from late medieval Stockholm in very particular ways. Now I suppose one might suggest that the medieval and modern materials are unrelated, that is, that the more recent items are mere modern inventions that just happen to mirror in important ways our trial materials, but I would think “Ockham’s razor,” that is, the law of parsimony, demands that we consider the easier alternative, i.e. that we see in such traditions as the formulation that “*the tiena Odhenom, som många peningar och rikedomar sammanslagga*” [they serve Odin who amass a lot of money and riches] are the result of inherited beliefs about Odin’s continued ability to influence the material quality of one’s life.

But how and why would this be the case? After all, Sweden had in some sense been Christian since the time of Olaf Skötkonung, or since the late eleventh century at any rate. And even if such an official view can be challenged, why would people continue to practice such rituals, given the terrifying pressure to conform brought about by fear of the Inquisition? In his important interpretation of magic in the viking world, Neil Price repeatedly asks a fundamentally similar question: why would a man living in one of the most homophobic cultures the world has known willingly expose himself to accusations of effimancy and *ergi* through the practice of *seiðr*? An abbreviated version of his considered answer is that the trade-off with respect to power was perceived to make such behavior worthwhile. A similar explanation would account for why in our cases, in the midst of a quickening witchcraft pandemic in the fifteenth-century, there would continue to be those willing to risk their lives by invoking this seemingly forgotten god.

The basic human desire to acquire riches, to escape hunger and poverty, surely explains why these events took place, and perhaps especially the foolhardy indifference toward the authorities both Ragvald Odenskarl and Eric Claesson show, but are there lessons to be drawn from these late medieval Swedish trials about the broader implications of these behaviors as regards Old Norse myths, social memory,

the superorganic as cultural construct and so on? Some tentative conclusions may be drawn: for example, that Odin's name is invoked in rituals in late medieval and early modern Sweden for the purpose of acquiring wealth is almost surely to be envisioned as an example of the superorganic, that is, traditional matter that has survived over the generations as part of Swedish charm magic, passed from one cohort of practitioners to the next. But we cannot regard such a practice as "disembodied superorganic stuff," but rather must also contemplate the very real importance of the magic's performed character, performed not only in the most fundamental sense of the term, as part of a spoken and enacted ritual, but also in the sense that the enactment or realization of such a ritual itself had meaning for those who practiced it. In other words, to follow Bauman's lead, we must consider the many factors that give such behavior meaning.³³

The behaviors reflected in the trials (and in subsequent texts) were anything but empty gestures, rituals devoid of faith or hope, mere mechanical recitations of oral formulae. What such magic as that invoking Odin offered was its purported ability to provide a conduit to power. And although such rituals may have been born of desperation, it was their very traditionalism that gave them meaning. To use the memorable formulation of John Miles Foley, two key elements come together in such acts, what he terms "the enabling event of performance" and "the enabling referent of tradition" (Foley 208). It seems to me that we should regard "the enabling event of performance" in line with Assmann's notion of the *Erinnerungskultur*'s unconscious yet ongoing desire to demonstrate its continuity by the cyclical production of social acts that underscore this trait.³⁴ But the semiotic system for such acts, what Foley terms "the enabling referent of tradition," is the reality of superorganic matter within Nordic tradition, specifically the idea of Odin as a source of power—whether or not fifteenth-century, or seventeenth-century, practitioners of this kind of magic were aware of

33. Cf. Bauman's desire "to view it contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social, and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning in the conduct of social life" (2).

34. Cf. the following characterization of Jan Assmann's views as "the way a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics, its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity and maintain their traditions" (Smelser and Baltes I: 612–3).

his pagan role or not. Indeed, folklorists have long noted the frequent presence of *hapax legomena* in charms, and we can easily envision a parallel here: Odin's name may have lost its "original" meaning (itself a contentious idea) for many of those who used it in later centuries.

Whether or not Ragvald Odenskarl or Erick Claesson would have had the slightest clue that there existed a connection between the power they attempted to tap into at the close of the Middle Ages and the figure modern scholarship has recovered (or constructed) from the *eddas*, the *formaldarsögur* and so on is highly problematic. But what they did possess was a memory, socially constructed, of possible empowerment and enrichment through "the devil Odin" (*dyeffuolen Oden*), curiously superannuated testimony to the power of myth and memory in that outlying Old Norse world that is medieval Sweden.

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