Across all cultures, myths have been used to explain phenomena and events beyond people’s comprehension. Our focus in research on Scandinavian mythology has, to a large extent, been to describe, uncover, and critically assess these myths, examining the characteristics and acts not only of gods and goddesses, but also of the minor deities found in the poems, sagas, Snorra Edda, and Saxo. All this research is and has been conducted to fathom, as far as possible, the cosmology, the cosmogony, and eschatology—in short, the mythology—of pagan Scandinavia. An early branch of scholarship focused on extracting knowledge of this kind from later collections of folklore. This approach was heavily criticized and placed in the poison cabinet for decades, but seems to have come back into fashion, brought once again into the light by younger scholars who are possibly unaware of the total dismissal of the approach in the 1920s and 30s. Another productive area of the research has been the examination of the cults and rituals among pre-Christian Scandinavians as described and indicated by written sources, iconography, archaeology, and toponymy.

When preparing for this paper I planned to do two things: First, to paint, with broad strokes, the toponymic research history of the study of sacral and cultic place names. The goal here is to provide a broad picture of the current state of research in this field, hopefully revealing how toponymists work and think today. Second, I aimed to look at the myths not descriptively—retelling and analyzing the stories in the written sources—but rather instrumentally. The focus would be on a preliminary exploration of how societies in early
Scandinavia used myths for societal and political purposes. I will not be able to accomplish this task here, but will postpone that analysis for another occasion.

The development of toponymic research can best be described by identifying three notable phases during the last two centuries that took place after the founding of the discipline.

*The Founding Fathers – The Romantic Search for the Soul of the Nation and for the Soul of the People in the Nation, as well as Their Religious Beliefs in Ancient Times*

The historian and philologist Peter Andreas (PA) Munch (b. 1810 d. 1863) had broad interests, and his scholarly production was immense, especially when one considers that he died at the relatively young age of fifty-three. His impact on research and society, and in the nation-building project of a free Norway, was fundamental. He published the still readable *Det norske Folks Historie* (in 8 volumes, 1852-63) and, more related to our concerns here, a handbook of Old Norse Mythology, *Nordens gamle Gude- og Helte-Sagn*, which first appeared in 1840. It was originally written as a supplementary volume to a didactic book on the history of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. As a book for students and as a work of general reference, it has maintained its popularity. The third edition of the mythology book (1922) was prepared by Professor Magnus Olsen, who we will discuss shortly; this edition is still an important read—however with the critical glasses firmly on the nose—for any student working on Pagan Scandinavian religion. This book was translated into English in 1926 as *Norse Mythology. Legends of Gods and Heroes*.

Four more scholars were also of great importance. The German Konrad (von) Maurer produced the particularly important *Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen Stammes zum Christenthume* II (München 1856 pp. 188-238). In Denmark, Henry Petersen’s *Om Nordboernes Gudedyrkelse og Gudetro i Hedenold* (Copenhagen 1876) and Johannes Steenstrup’s *Nogle Undersøgelser om Guders Navne i de nordiske Stedsnavne* (1896) were of great significance. In Sweden, Magnus
Frederik Lundgren published the influential *Språkliga intyg om hednisk gudatro i Sverige* (1878).

Petersen’s book is a remarkable overview of Old Norse cult and mythology, and is still worth reading. Of course it contains many things we do not agree with today and many aspects of Petersen’s discussions we now find uncritical. But reading the book from the standpoint of when it was written in the 1870s, one cannot help but be impressed. Typical of scholarship at the time was a focus on the King, conceptualized as the ultimate cult leader (*Rigets ypperste Hovgode*), who resided at the main communal cult site (*et for hele Riget fælles Hovedoffersted*) (Petersen 1876, 7). Petersen, like Munch, introduces place names as a source for understanding the myths and cultic practices in Denmark. Admittedly his use of toponyms is uncritical for our time, but pioneering for his. Johannes Steenstrup’s article, which I believe is the first systematic analysis of cultic and sacral place names in Scandinavia, is an impressive piece of research for its time, and Steenstrup is able to sift nuggets from Fool’s Gold.

Hans Hildebrand (1898–1903, 6), the National Antiquarian in Sweden during the latter part of the nineteenth century, developed the idea that names, such as *Härnevi*, actually contained in the first element the name of a pagan god or goddess. In the case of *Härnevi*, for instance, he hypothesizes a goddess *Härn*, a proposal that was taken up by Magnus Olsen (1908) in modified form.1 Olsen connected the name with ON *Horn*. This type of information concerning gods and goddesses both known and unknown from the Old Norse literature, appeared again and again in the scholarship during the decades around the turn of the twentieth century.

**Phase One: The Uncritical and Merry – ‘Everything-Seems-Possible’ – Phase**

During these years scholars believed that they could reconstruct the existence of numerous gods and goddesses from place names as well as identify various cult sites. So, for example, Erik Noreen proposed that the name *Kåvö* (OSw *Quadowi*) in Närke contained the words *kvadha* ‘resin’ and *vi* ‘cult site’, explaining it as a site where a fertility cult had taken place (Noreen 1914). Decomposed in this manner, Noreen took the name to suggest that the cultic
participants had offered ‘resin’ (kåda) to a fertility god or goddess, and used, as supporting evidence, archaeological finds of obviously offered cakes of resin from the Bronze Age (sic!), while also describing the importance of resin in folk culture and folk medicine (cf. Edlund 2012, 63).

Oscar Lundberg (1913) proposed that the name Vrinnevid (OSw Wrindawi) was related to the Old Icelandic name of a goddess, Rindr, whom he proposed was a fertility goddess. Furthermore, he proposed that it was also related to the word rind ‘ivy’, found in Gotlandic dialects, allowing him to connect the name to ivy which, in German and English folklore, is on some level related to fertility. Consequently, Lundberg proposed that this goddess Vrind was made of or represented by ivy, and who had a cult at this vi or ‘cult site’.

This phase in toponymic scholarship is epitomized by two scholars, Magnus Olsen and Elias Wessén who are, without doubt, two of our most philologically sound but also imaginative and creative scholars. The former, the successor to Sophus Bugge in the chair in ‘Gammalnorsk og islandsk språk og litteratur’, was also an utterly daring (some would say uncritical) scholar. The latter, Wessén, was Professor of Scandinavian languages (nordiska språk) in Stockholm, with a crackling dry personality. He was a fellow of the Swedish Academy, in chair sixteen, for thirty-four years. Both were unbelievably productive, and both laid the foundations for future research in several fields. Olsen, for example, laid the groundwork for future scholarship in Norwegian runology by publishing the Norwegian runic corpus, with one volume dedicated to inscriptions in the older futhark, and five volumes to inscriptions in the younger futhark. He wrote the still most readable and influential book in Norwegian toponymy, Ættegård og helligdom. Norske stedsnavn sosialt og religionshistorisk belyst (1926), translated into English as Farms and fanes of ancient Norway (1928). This work is still cited by scholars in toponymy, philology, archaeology and the history of religions as if it were state-of-the-art, and then criticized for being wrong and obsolete. This criticism is absolutely astonishing since the book is nearly one hundred years old, and Olsen wrote it within the theoretical frameworks of the disciplines
current at the time in which he worked. At the time of its publication, it was an absolute sensation given its deep knowledge of sources, its overarching scope, and its theoretical rigor. By way of analogy, one cannot seriously compare a Model-T Ford with a modern Ferrari or Lamborghini, any more than one can compare Olsen’s early work with contemporary scholarship. But this is what some scholars do today. I find this critique utterly unfair. Olsen’s doctoral thesis, *Hedenske kultminder i norske stedsnavne* (1915), was more extensive yet uncritical. In it, he collects and discusses all the sacral and cultic place names he was able to find in Norway. This is still an important work, but one has to use it cautiously.5

For certain names in Norway and Sweden beginning with *Elg*- and *Äll-*, Olsen came up with a most ingenious, and admittedly hazardous, explanation. He saw here the reminiscence of a male pair of gods, to be compared with the *Alci* who, according to Tacitus’s *Germania* (chap. 43), were a pair of twin male gods amongst the *Nab(a)rvali*, a Germanic tribe. According to Tacitus, their worship took place in a cultic grove, led by a female cult leader (or at least a cult leader dressed in a female outfit, which is the actual wording). The main argument used by Olsen was the place name *Elgjartún*, attested approximately a dozen times in Norway, which he combines with the Latin *alcis*. Here, the Latin stem was *alk-*, which, according to Grimm’s Law or the First Germanic sound shift, would result in PGmc *alh-*. Olsen has to assume that Verner’s Law was in operation here, resulting in a further sound shift to *alg-*. In principle, this derivation is not at all astonishing. Olsen then assumed a feminine *i*-stem, *algi*, resulting with *i*-umlaut in ON *elgr f.*, with a genitive in the singular *elgjar*. Both Sophus Bugge and Magnus Olsen thought that this reconstructed word (*elgr f.*) from a linguistic point of view was a close relative to the reconstructed word *al*, which in turn goes back to a PGmc *alb-*, found in Gothic as *alhs* ‘temple’ (Feist 1939, 36; Hellquist 1948, 10)). This word is obviously found in several Scandinavian place names, which can then be placed in a sacral or cultic context, such as *Ullerål, Gutnal, Fröjel* etc.6

Already in an early article discussing the name *Njarðarlog* (1905), Olsen developed the tenacious idea of a cultic name pair. From the
names Njarðarlog and Tysnes he believes he can identify a pair of interconnected deities: the goddess (sic) Njord and the god Tyr. He develops this idea later on in the article Haernavi (1908), where he suggests a pair of names, one a male and one a female deity, which were to be seen in context as a linked combination: Haern and Þórr, Freyr and Freyja, Ullr and Niærår etc. Olsen sees here an example of a fertility cult in the landscape, with name pairs found close to one another (within a couple of kilometers), where two deities had been worshipped together. How this combined fertility cult may have been practiced over these distances, no one has been able to explain—at least not yet.

Elias Wessén had an even greater publication list, laying the foundations for Swedish runology, producing several volumes in the series Sveriges runinskrifter. He also contributed to legal history by translating and commenting all of the Swedish medieval laws, and to etymology by publishing an etymological dictionary for the Swedish language. He also wrote several grammars for Old Swedish and Old Norse. For our purposes here, he authored several early works on pagan religion, particularly emphasizing toponymic evidence. Foremost among these works are Forntida gudsdyrkan i Östergötland 1-2 (1921-22), Minnen av forntida gudsdyrkan i Mellan-Sveriges ortnamn (1923) and Studier till Sveriges hedna mytologi och fornhistoria (1924).

Wessén worked in the same vein as Magnus Olsen. He thought, for example, that he could identify certain cult sites in the landscape based on name elements such as sked, skede, skeid, and lek, leik. He found the name Hästskede particularly important, suggesting that these sites had been ones used not only for games and horse races, but also potentially as sites for the sacrificial slaughter and offering of horses. He adopted and further developed Olsen’s idea of the godly name pair, with a male and a female deity worshipped in combination.

At this same time, Hugo Jungner wrote his doctoral thesis, Gudinnan Frigg och Als härad (1922), in which he extended these speculative analyses and combinations, going one step further than Wessén, and analyzing the sacral and cultic place names of
Västergötland. The book was more or less immediately placed in the toponymic poison cabinet, thanks to some devastating reviews. In particular, rejection of the work by an up-and-coming young scholar in Lund, who later on would make a name of himself, namely Jöran Sahlgren, was a considerable blow. Sahlgren in contrast was to dramatically change the discourse in Scandinavian toponymy, particularly in regards to sacral and cultic names.

Phase Two: Hypercritical Reaction – The Clean-Up Phase

With his review of Jungner’s thesis, Sahlgren had started a clean-up operation in the discipline. This clean-up had begun somewhat earlier with his critical examination of the *vi*-names; in that work, Sahlgren aimed to show that many of these names were not cultic, but denoted forests, based on the OSw *vipir*. He singled out three scholars for criticism: Jungner, Olsen and Wessén. The most programmatic criticism came in 1950 in his article, *Hednisk gudalära och nordiska ortnamn. Kritiska inlägg* (The study of the pagan gods and Scandinavian place names. A critical contribution).

Before we discuss the article, it is productive to spend some time pondering why Sahlgren was the one who started this obviously necessary clean-up operation. At the same time in Lund there was another young very active Docent, the folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow.7 von Sydow was fiercely engaged in chiseling out a discipline for himself, *Folkloristik* (Folklore). Consequently, his actions were drastic and his polemic was sharp: he did not shy away from calling a stance by a venerated Professor as stupidity or idiocy. Describing the pugnacious, young von Sydow, Alan Dundes has both eloquently and mildly written: “Von Sydow had the reputation of being a contentious personality, and he engaged in heated polemics with various individuals during his career” (1999, 139). von Sydow was obviously a close friend of Sahlgren and I imagine that von Sydow’s polemic nature made an impact on Sahlgren. Sahlgren’s article on *mytosofo* should probably be seen in this context (Sahlgren 1923a).

In an early article from 1923 and in a later article from 1950, Sahlgren dismisses proposals such as Noreen’s resin-cult site,
Quadovi, and Lundberg’s fertility goddess Vrind etc.\textsuperscript{8} Instead he offers profane explanations for all these names: Quadovi, ‘the forest where they took resin from’, and Vrinheid, ‘the forest where there was ivy’ (Sahlgren 1923b, Sahlgren 1950).

Concerning Magnus Olsen’s ingenious and thought-provoking combination and etymological exercise regarding the names in Elgjar-, Älle-, Sahlgren’s verdict was swift and harsh: The etymology was invalid, and the analysis of the medieval name forms are mis- or rather over-interpreted. The sound, and most obvious, explanation was that the fist element in all these names was elk, ON elgr. The names Elgjartún should be interpreted as ‘enclosure or catch device for moose, and names such as Ällevi as ‘moose forest’.

Concerning Wessén’s leik and skeid-names, Sahlgren’s verdict is even harsher. He starts his evaluation of the theory by writing (Sahlgren 1950, 4):

Wesséns lärda utredning... verkar fängslande och till att börja med bestickande. Den reser sig som ett forntida stavbyggt temple högt over vardagslivets id. Men om hörnstavarna murkna, skall hela templet falla.

[Wessén’s learned investigation... seems compelling and initially plausible. It rises like an ancient stave-built temple high over everyday life struggle. But if the corner staves are rotten, the whole temple will fall.]

Of course Sahlgren identifies the rotten corner staves. The Hästskede names, he concludes, have the meaning ‘border or neck of land where horses are’, the leik-names are to be understood as places where forest birds, especially wood-grouse (tjäder), play during early spring. The name Lekvall, Leikvoll, was the third rotten stave. According to Sahlgren, the name meant ‘places where the Nordic youth used to play, wrestle’ etc. And finally, the fourth and last rotten corner in Wessén’s ‘stave-built temple’ was something Sahlgren condescendingly called the Kilometer Method (kilometermetoden). “With the help of this method”, Sahlgren banters, “you can prove practically any place-name hypothesis” (Med hjälp
av denna metod kan man för övrigt bevisa praktiskt taget vilken ortnamnshypotes som helst).

The end of Sahlgren’s critical review of the field is devastating (Sahlgren 1950, 20):

Min granskning av de fyra hörnstavarna ha visat att tre äro helt murkna och att den återstående dvs. Lekvall ej har dimensioner, som behövs för ett Ullstempel. Den duger emellertid till timmer i en lekstuga, där ungdomen driver sina profana danser och lekar.

[My review of the four corner staves have shown that three are completely rotten and that the remaining, ie. Lekvall, does not have the necessary dimensions for an Ullr's temple. It is good enough, however, for timber in a play house, where young people pursue their secular dances and games.]

This damning indictment was written by the only Professor in Place-Name studies (in the world) at the time and the director of the Place-Name Archive and hence by far the most influential scholar in the field in Scandinavia. The punch line was a real knock-out blow; the opponents, i.e. Elias Wessén, Magnus Olsen and anyone cultivating the field of sacral and cultic place names, was flat on the mat for the full ten count. It was impossible to get up after such a knockout punch. And this was also the result. The field of research—which Sahlgren had given the pejorative and by theology infested epithet mytosophi (mythosophy)—was put to rest. It lay fallow for more than thirty years. No sound scholar and certainly no one with aspirations of becoming an academic place-name scholar, touched this contaminated field of research for decades.

It is interesting to note that some scholars have recently worked in this same vein, while others still believe it is important to minimize the damage (especially younger) scholars cause when analyzing these types of names. In Iceland, the former director of Örnenaisongunn, Professor Þórhallur Vilmundarson, took, one could argue, as his toponymic mission to show that there are no—or utterly few—theophoric names in Iceland. All the proposed names
of this kind have better, profane explanations, according to Þórhallur. He has even taken his method to Scandinavia proper, desacrilizing many of the place names there. Þórhallur made an effortless clean-up operation, but one gets the impression that sometimes the new profane meanings look somewhat far-fetched, and that this clean-up operation has become more of a mission than a balanced analysis. His Norwegian counterpart, Eivind Vågslid (1963–84), tried in the same way to desacralize most Norwegian place names.

The most important scholar today working in this tradition is Professor Lennart Elmevik in Uppsala. He has, for example, dismissed the idea that the goddess Freyja can be found in Scandinavian place-names, and has de-sacralized several especially Swedish place names, which had been given a theophoric, sacral or cultic interpretation in earlier research. In some cases Elmevik is probably right, but sometimes one gets the impression that contemporary colleagues think Elmevik is going perhaps a bit too far with his clean-up efforts. The future will tell.

In a way we are faced here with a clash of theoretical stances or starting-points. Elmevik once stated, with a sigh of relief, after being able to, in his opinion, desacralize a supposed cultic or sacral place name, in this case dismissing the goddess Frigg in a place name Friggeråker, that his operation had lifted a the heavy burden from the shoulders of the toponymists. They no longer were responsible for defending something that had been used as a witness to pagan Scandinavian religion. Elmevik (1995, 74) writes:

Ortnamnsforskningen påtar sig ett stort ansvar om den inför vetenskaper som betjänar sig av dess resultat, i föreliggande fall i främsta rummet religionshistorien, ställer sig som garant för att Friggeråker vittnar om Friggkult.

[Toponymy assumes a huge responsibility if, for subjects which are served by its results, in the present case primarily history of religions, it stands as guarantor for Friggeråker as a witness to a cult of Frigg.]
Life obviously felt easier if one could transfer an assumed sacral name to the profane sphere. Such a stance mirrors a theoretical position where one tries to establish facts or a solid foundation upon which to build research. Such a position is, of course, a totally acceptable position one to take, whereas someone like Magnus Olsen, discussing the same place name, Friggeråker, can be said to be an advocate for a likewise totally acceptable but more assaying theoretical position. Olsen (1915, 207) in a cautious way assumes: “hvis dette, som det synes rimeligt, er sammensat med gudindenavnet Frigg” [if this, which seems reasonable, is compounded with the name of the goddess Frigg].

Phase Three: The Balanced (?), Middle-of-the-Road Phase

No one dared to touch this field of research for more than thirty years. The toponymists found safer grounds to cultivate during this period. However, one scholar, who had achieved great insights into the field already during the early 1940s, and had built up knowledge unsurpassed by earlier and later scholars, was Professor Lars Hellberg in Uppsala. Already in 1942, he had realized that the cultic and sacral place names had to be seen in a social and societal context. Taken in that light, the toponyms became a vital aspect of the theoretical model he developed. He labeled this model Den förhistoriska Sveastaten (The prehistoric Svea-State). In the 1970s and 1980s, he was aware of the fact that this position was not only controversial but also out-of-touch with the current research agenda of most of his colleagues. It was, in a way, set in a theoretical framework that was in fashion in the 1930s and 40s. Consequently, he never presented the entire theory in print; rather he gave some hints in articles and in fairly obscure Festschriften. A more consistent glimpse of his theory was presented in a local history of the town of Kalmar in 1979; and also in a duplicated paper for a Norna conference in 1975. These papers provided a skeleton of his theory. Today, the research discourse is starting to catch up to Hellberg’s theories, and we are now able to recognize how important his model was, even though it was dressed in obsolete clothes.
Lars Hellberg was the first to finally end the deadlock in the field of sacral toponymy. As a retired Professor, he dared, in 1986, to publish his paper, *Hedendomens spår i uppländska ortnamn* (Traces of heathendom in Upplandic place names). This work opened the floodgates and ushered in a new interest in the field. Within a relatively short period, the paper was followed by a Nordic conference *Sakrale Navne* (Sacral names) in 1990. Hellberg had been irritated by a new exhibition at the Historical Museum (Historiska museet) in Stockholm in 1983, *Myter* (Myths), which had become a public success. He criticized the exhibition texts and the glaring lack of contributions from disciplines other than Archaeology. Most irritating for him was the fact that:

Expositionens rambeskrivningar gav ingen övertygande undervisning om att hednisk tro och kult en gång var en levande kraft i det svenska samhället. Att vi i Sverige har mängder av ortnamn som vittnar härom nämndes ingetades. De kultiska ortnamnen och deras i sin detaljrikedom helt unika information hade utställningen aldeles glömt bort eller också medvetet ställt åt sidan. Man måste fråga sig hur detta kunde vara möjligt (Hellberg 1986, 46).

[The exposition’s descriptions of its framework provided no convincing teaching that paganism and cult were once living forces in Swedish society. Nowhere was it mentioned that we in Sweden have lots of place names that testify to this. The exhibition had either forgotten to mention, or deliberately set aside, the cultic place names and their wealth of detailed, unique information. You have to wonder how this could be possible.]

Hellberg gives the answer by, in short, retelling the research history that I have described above, how the study of sacral and cultic place names had become a ‘dangerous’ field in which to venture after Jöran Sahlgren’s programmatic criticism.

This tragic situation obviously forced Lars Hellberg to finally speak out. He did this by giving an exposé of the sacral and cultic place names from the province of Uppland in Sweden, presenting
his knowledge, chiseled out over decades more or less in secret, discussing cultic names in *vi, *vé and *va, *åker and *aker, *barg and *borg, *eke and *al, theophoric place names containing the major gods and goddesses. He finally dared to present, in an academic journal, his elaborate theory on the prehistoric Svea state, where the sacral and cultic place names played a vital part. His theory included not only cultic and theophoric names, but also names containing the terminology of pagan cult leaders (or cult priests as he calls them), such a *vivil and *lytir. He also identified their residential farms, which he identified with the element bolstafr. He even dared to bring up the contested cultic name-pairs with which Olsen and Wessén had experimented, and that Sahlgren had so sharply dismissed. For Hellberg, these name-pairs indicated prehistoric, administrative districts that had a common cult and served a political purpose. Hellberg’s article is an eloquent evocation for the restart of research in this field. He was not to be let down.

During the 1990s articles started to appear by scholars such as Jørn Sandnes, John Kousgård Sørensen, Thorsten Andersson, Bente Holmberg and myself. This new revival was crowned by Per Vikstrand’s doctoral thesis, Gudarnas platser. Förkristna sakrala ortnamn i Mälarlandskapen. This study provides an excellent and balanced analysis, and offers a new update on the status of the field for us to work from.

Looking to the Future

Today we find incredible interest in the sacral and cultic placename material, an interest emanating mainly from the field of archaeology. Consequently, we have remarkable material that we dare address again. After the last two decades of transformation in the discipline, we can share this interest with neighboring disciplines. Archaeologists now dig up fascinating finds at sites with names such as Lunda, Ullevi, Uppåkra, Götavi etc. Modern archaeology has revealed new information, which makes yesterday’s truths look less obvious than once believed.

Take the case of Noreen’s Kåvö, OSw Quadovi. According to Noreen, it was to be understood as a place for some type of ‘resin
cult’, through association with an assumed resin cult during the Bronze Age as well as the importance of resin in folk culture and folk medicine. He became a sitting duck for Sahlgren when the latter went hunting. In Sahlgren’s polemic writings, Noreen’s stance was described as so incredibly naïve and out of touch with historic and archaeological reality that Noreen became a laughing stock. Sahlgren was hailed as a solid academic hero (especially by himself). This case is still used as a warning example, illustrating just how bad things can turn out if you do not have the proper linguistic and contextual knowledge, as well as a sound, critical mind. Yet I wonder what Sahlgren would say if he were to be confronted with the new results from the recent excavation of an obvious cult site at Lunda in Sörmland. The site is most compelling and thought-provoking. Along with its name Lunda, there are several phases of an obvious prestigious hall building, and finds of gold-plated silver figurines, the physical attributes of which cannot be described in a text aimed at sensitive people or family gatherings. Most important in this connection is a hillock with trees (obviously the old lund ‘grove’) that had been sprinkled by thousands of small beads or drops of resin, obviously for some cultic purpose. Should this presage a nervous little twitch in the corner of his eye, or perhaps even press him to reassess his position and soften his criticism of Noreen? Probably not. But this case shows us that a portion of humility is always useful when working with this type of elusive material.

The criticism Sahlgren aimed at Magnus Olsen—or rather the criticism with which he ridiculed him—which at that time appeared to be both obvious and devastating, namely that regarding the Elgjartún etc. names, is again worth revaluing. At the time, no one undertook either a landscape or historical contextual analysis of the names. As a result, no one looked at how these names were found in a landscape setting. It is easy to see that these names are found in central locations in ancient settlement districts (bygder), such as Elgetun in Eidsberg, Akershus; Elton in Vestre Toten, Oppland; Elton in Nordre Land, Oppland; and Elton in Nannestad, Romerike. Neither Sahlgren, nor any other scholar at that time, asked themselves: why would there be ‘enclosures for moose’ or even ‘traps’ (fenced-in pits), or other catch devices for moose in these
geographic locations? Are we aware of any enclosures or traps for moose in the center of settlements at any time in Scandinavian history or prehistory? Personally, I have never read about, heard of, or seen anything of that sort. Or do we know of moose being fenced in and kept in enclosures in settlements? Not to my knowledge. Someone should have raised that question. No one did. So, do I think that Magnus Olsen was right? Well, I do not know. The lesson for me is rather not to take anything for granted, to work contextually within the discipline of toponymy and to have an open mind when we are working with this kind of long-gone, complex material.

The archaeological activities during the last three decades have produced so much new material in this field, which must be seen in an Old Norse cultic and mythological context, that it is necessary to reassess old ideas and to challenge the “obvious truths” of disciplinary orthodoxy. It also shows that it is advisable to approach this field with humility, with an open-mind and with an interdisciplinary approach. The real problem that confronts us today is that there are essentially no active researchers working in toponymy. But I will spare you my reader the reason for this.

Notes

1 Inge Særheim has summarized the different suggestions explaining the first element in the name Härnevi, which has oscillated from being a goddess, to a profane object, back to a deity again, this time a god (2012, 183 and 192).

2 Of course, Jöran Sahlgen dismissed this interpretation by Lundberg and instead proposed a profane *Vrindavī ‘the ivy forest’. Later research has been less dogmatic, without taking a definite position (see Moberg 1965, 63; Vikstrand 2001, 91; Edlund 2012, 63).

3 Later renamed ‘Norrøn Filologi’ in Oslo, from 1908.
4 For some reason, he was always looked upon as a rather unreliable scholar by my former teachers in Uppsala. Why I have never understood.

5 I have discussed this work in my article in the Festschrift to Margaret Clunies Ross (Brink 2007).


7 Perhaps best known today for being the father of the Hollywood actor Max von Sydow.

8 In Swedish we have the vivid expression *lustmord* (murder of passion) to describe this type of polemic.

9 Þórhallur published most of these analyses in his own journal *Grímnir*; see also Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1992.

10 See the long list of publications by Elmevik on these issues at: http://katalog.uu.se/empInfo/?languageId=1&id=XX518.

11 This important excavation, led by Gunnar Andersson, has seen many interesting publications, e.g. G. Andersson 2006 and G. Andersson 2008.